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Article

Cultural Heritage and Ecological Dignity: Tensions Between Preservation and Development in the Series Extraordinary Attorney Woo (2022)

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ABSTRACT
The article examines how episodes 7 and 8 of the South Korean series Extraordinary Attorney Woo (2022) represent conflicts among infrastructure development, the protection of culturally significant natural elements, and community interests. It aims to identify the legal problems mobilized by the narrative and to discuss its potential as an object of critical reflection in Brazilian legal education. It adopts a qualitative, exploratory, bibliographic, and documentary approach, through thematic analysis of two purposively selected episodes and a legal-contextual approximation with Brazilian and international normative sources. The comparison considers the protected object, the subjects involved, community participation, protective instruments, and risks to decision-making integrity, without presupposing equivalence between the South Korean and Brazilian legal systems. The results indicate that the fiction makes it possible to problematize the articulation between ecological and cultural values and to make explicit the relevance of transparent and legally controllable administrative procedures. Brazilian legislation offers parameters for the debate, but its application to real situations depends on specific circumstances and evidence. It is concluded that the episodes constitute potentially useful teaching material for interdisciplinary discussion; their effectiveness in learning, as well as the frequency of obstacles to heritage protection in Brazil, was not empirically assessed.
Keywords: Audiovisual narratives; Legal education; Socio-environmental conflicts; Landscape protection; Legal-contextual analysis.

Introduction

The relationship between the protection of cultural heritage and environmental preservation raises legal questions that go beyond the simplifying opposition between economic growth and conservation. Infrastructure works may present collective benefits and, simultaneously, produce environmental, landscape, and symbolic losses for directly affected communities. The analysis of these tensions requires recognizing the plurality of the interests involved and examining the ways in which the law structures their assessment, public participation, and control (Pelegrini, 2006; Brasil, 1988).

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In Brazilian law, Articles 216 and 225 of the Constitution of the Republic establish specific parameters for the protection of cultural heritage and of an ecologically balanced environment. Understanding their articulation requires distinguishing the ecological dimension of human dignity, the debate on the dignity of non-human life, and environmental justice, which are related but not equivalent concepts (Sarlet; Fensterseifer, 2007; Burger et al., 2022).

The South Korean series Extraordinary Attorney Woo (2022) offers a narrative particularly suited to the discussion of these issues. In episodes 7 and 8, titled The Story of Sodeok-dong I and II, the fictional community mobilizes against a highway whose construction threatens the integrity of the village and an ancient tree of collective significance (Yoo, 2022a; 2022b). The conflict makes it possible to examine how elements of the landscape can aggregate environmental, historical, and identity values, without turning fiction into evidence of real-world events or institutions.

The research problem is: how can the conflicts represented in these episodes be analyzed in light of categories of Brazilian environmental law and cultural heritage protection, while preserving the differences between the respective legal contexts? The general objective is to interpret the narrative as material for legal problematization. The specific objectives are: to identify the core conflicts of the episodes; to delimit the legal concepts employed; to relate themes of the plot to Brazilian norms and international documents; and to indicate possibilities and limits of its pedagogical use. It is not intended to assess the effectiveness of Brazilian public policies or to measure learning gains resulting from the use of the series.

Methodology

The research is qualitative and exploratory, based on the analysis of an audiovisual work, a narrative literature review, and documentary examination of legal sources. The audiovisual corpus was purposively defined: episodes 7 and 8 of the first season of Extraordinary Attorney Woo were chosen because they form a continuous and relatively delimited narrative arc, in which the construction of a highway is set against the protection of a tree associated with local memory. The unit of analysis is not South Korean legislation, but the situations, justifications, and conflicts that the fiction presents.

The analytical procedure comprised four operations: (a) description of the legally relevant events of the two episodes; (b) identification of recurring themes and their organization into previously delimited categories; (c) comparison of each category with the selected bibliography and with Brazilian normative provisions and international documents; and (d) recording of the limits of the approximation, especially when the plot uses procedures or institutions whose South Korean regulation was not investigated. The thematic organization was inspired by the general guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006), and the treatment of normative sources as documents followed the logic described by Bowen (2009). This is a textual and documentary interpretation, not an observation of real institutional practices.

Five categories of analysis were used: (1) characterization of the threatened asset and its ecological-cultural value; (2) identification of the interests and actors involved in the decision about the project; (3) residents' participation, publicity of information, and the administration's justifications; (4) modalities of legal protection and consequences of the administrative decision; and (5) risks of conflict of interest and issues of institutional integrity. For each category, a distinction was made between: the event represented in the fiction, the abstract legal problem raised, and the Brazilian norm that could serve as an analytical parameter.

The selection of literature and legal documents was guided by thematic relevance, through searches directed by combinations of expressions such as "cultural heritage," "ecological dimension of dignity," "environmental justice," "tombamento" (heritage listing), "popular legal culture," and "audiovisual legal education." Priority was given to identifiable academic texts published in recognizable journals or by recognizable publishers and to primary sources available on institutional portals, especially the Constitution and federal laws, IPHAN, the UN, and UNESCO. As inclusion criteria, direct correspondence with at least one analytical category, identification of the author or responsible institution, and the possibility of bibliographic verification were required. Materials without verifiable provenance, news items not necessary for the analysis, and texts on foreign norms incapable of supporting a precise legal comparison were excluded. The review was neither systematic nor intended to exhaust the scientific production.

The approach is legal-contextual and thematic, and not a study of comparative law in the strict sense: the fictional facts are placed in dialogue with problems that may also arise in Brazil, but no Brazilian rule is presented as applicable to the case narrated in South Korea. No court records, South Korean legal texts, data on the frequency of corruption, indicators of normative implementation, or student testimonies were collected.

Consequently, the conclusions are limited to the interpretive coherence of the analysis, the identification of relevant Brazilian legal instruments, and the theoretical possibility of didactic use of the work; they do not authorize causal claims or empirical generalizations.

Cultural heritage, ecological dignity, and environmental justice

Ecological dimension of human dignity and dignity of life in general

The dignity of the human person, a foundation of the Federative Republic of Brazil (Art. 1, III, of the Constitution), is a legal category aimed at protecting the person and their fundamental conditions of existence. Its ecological dimension concerns the relevance of environmental conditions for the enjoyment of rights, for health, and for a life compatible with human dignity. From this perspective, environmental protection is not merely an economic instrument, but a condition for the realization of fundamental rights (Brasil, 1988; Sarlet; Fensterseifer, 2007).

The dignity of life in general designates a distinct discussion: the ethical and legal consideration of non-human life and of nature for their own value, without reducing them to their usefulness for people or collectivities. Sarlet and Fensterseifer (2007) expressly discuss both issues, which does not mean that they are identical concepts or that they necessarily produce the same legal effects. In this article, the expression "ecological dignity" is used only as a concise formulation of the environmental dimension of human dignity, without asserting automatic equivalence with the dignity of non-human life.

Environmental justice and cultural heritage protection

Environmental justice, in turn, constitutes a distributive and participatory framework: it asks who bears the impacts of decisions about the environment, who receives their benefits, and who can participate in their formulation. The debate systematized by Bullard (1993) emphasizes inequalities in exposure to environmental harm; the proposal of eco-cultural indicators by Burger et al. (2022) reinforces that natural resources and cultural practices may require integrated assessment. Environmental justice, therefore, is not synonymous with human dignity or heritage protection, although it may guide their joint interpretation.

Article 216 of the Brazilian Constitution defines as cultural heritage the material and immaterial assets bearing reference to the identity, action, and memory of the groups that formed society. Examples include urban ensembles and sites of historical, landscape, ecological, and scientific value. Paragraph 1 of the same article provides for instruments such as inventories, registries, surveillance, and tombamento (heritage listing), with the collaboration of the community, while Article 225 establishes the duty to defend and preserve the environment for present and future generations (Brasil, 1988). These provisions do not automatically render any culturally appreciated natural element listed; concrete protection depends on the legal classification and the applicable procedures.

The integration between culture and nature is not merely conceptual. Pelegrini (2006) demonstrates the relevance of preservationist practices for the recognition of plural identities in Latin America. In Brazil, the consequences of the collapse of the Fundão dam for the Krenak people and their relationship with the Doce River, studied by Urquiza and Rocha (2019), exemplify how environmental degradation can affect ways of life and cultural references linked to the territory. This real case is not equivalent to the South Korean plot in terms of causes, agents, or legal solutions; its relevance here is exclusively thematic.

The sodeok-dong episodes and their approximation to Brazilian law

The narrative conflict between infrastructure and community identity

The series Extraordinary Attorney Woo (Uma Advogada Extraordinária), released in 2022, follows the professional work of attorney Woo Young-woo. The episodes The Story of Sodeok-dong I and II present the project of a road planned to cut through the fictional village of Sodeok-dong, with repercussions for the community and for a tree of significant local symbolic value. The residents seek legal assistance to challenge the urban planning solution represented in the plot (Yoo, 2022a; 2022b).

The construction of the highway represents, in the narrative, an infrastructure objective associated with public and economic interests. The residents' resistance exposes the possibility that a decision formally oriented toward development may disregard local effects on the landscape, community ties, and collective memory. The objections raised by the defense, among them the discussion of alternative routes and the administrative status

of the tree, make it possible to address issues of proportionality, the reasoning of decisions, and heritage protection, without this amounting to a technical examination of the project's feasibility.

In the outcome, the institutional recognition of the tree's value plays a decisive role in the fictional resolution of the dispute. The story associates the protection of the natural element with the continuity of the village's collective identity and presents heritage recognition as a legal response to the narrated threat (Yoo, 2022b). The description of this outcome belongs to the universe of the work: there is no basis for automatically transposing its administrative or procedural effects to the Brazilian system.

Thematic correspondences and legal limits of the comparison

The Brazilian parameter most directly related to the protection of the tree as a community reference is the combination of Articles 216 and 225 of the Constitution with the instruments for the protection of cultural and environmental assets. Decree-Law No. 25/1937 regulates federal tombamento (heritage listing) and encompasses, in its framework, assets and landscapes endowed with protected value. IPHAN clarifies that listing depends on an administrative recognition procedure; it does not arise automatically from the emotional relevance of an asset to the community (Brasil, 1937; IPHAN, [s. d.]).

The set of Brazilian mechanisms is broader than tombamento. Depending on the case, administrative preservation instruments, environmental licensing, and collective judicial protection may be relevant. Law No. 7,347/1985, for example, provides for public civil actions to establish liability for damage to the environment and to assets and rights of artistic, aesthetic, historical, tourist, and landscape value. Law No. 6,938/1981 organizes the National Environmental Policy and offers general parameters for preventing damage and controlling potentially degrading activities (Brasil, 1981; 1985). The indication of these instruments does not presuppose that all of them are applicable indiscriminately, since their application requires specific jurisdiction, requirements, and evidence.

At the international level, the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972) establishes its own regime, linked to assets of outstanding universal value; it should not, therefore, be interpreted as an instrument that automatically confers international protection on the fictional tree. The 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, particularly its Principle 10, provides a framework of access to information, participation, and environmental justice. The Declaration is a declaratory instrument of principles and is not to be confused with a treaty that, by itself, establishes identical procedural rights in all countries (UNESCO, 1972; ONU, 1992).

Heritage preservation also need not be treated as an absolute opposition to development. Cardoso et al. (2011) analyze the potential of investment in cultural heritage for local socioeconomic development, a perspective that recommends assessing alternatives and the distributive effects of each project, without anticipating a universal solution.

The difference in context is a central limitation. The series represents institutions, procedures, and characters' choices in a fictional South Korean setting; Brazilian constitutional and statutory provisions have their own assumptions and effects. The connection proposed in this work is an analogy of problems — loss of landscape, dispute over project alternatives, social participation, and cultural recognition —, not an assertion of normative, institutional, or jurisprudential identity between Brazil and South Korea.

Chart 1 – Legal-contextual approximation matrix

Narrated situation	Brazilian parameter used	Limit of the inference
Tree associated with the community's memory	CF/1988, Art. 216; tombamento and other forms of protection	Symbolic value does not imply automatic listing.

Road with environmental and community effects	CF/1988, Art. 225; Law No. 6,938/1981	The concrete legality of the fictional project is not assessed.
Difficulty of participation and information	Rio Declaration (1992), Principle 10; Law No. 12,527/2011, in Brazil	South Korean participatory regulation was not compared.
Suspicions of favoritism and decision-making conflicts	Principles of impersonality and morality; administrative and judicial control	The narrative does not prove corruption in real institutions.
Potential of the case for discussing legal decisions	Friedman (2015); Sarat, Silbey, and Umphrey (2019)	There is no measurement of learning or didactic testing.

Source: analytical elaboration based on Yoo (2022a; 2022b) and the legal and bibliographic sources indicated.

Institutional integrity and allegations of corruption: scope of the analysis

The script also suggests suspicions of favoritism, administrative omissions, and a possible conflict of interest in the processing of the project, mobilizing dramatic elements linked to the integrity of public officials. These situations can be interpreted as an invitation to discuss the institutional conditions necessary for the defense of assets of collective interest. However, the fictional representation of questionable conduct does not demonstrate the occurrence of crimes, the existence of structural corruption in a given country, or the frequency of illegal practices in Brazilian environmental administration (Yoo, 2022a; 2022b).

The distinction between episodic, systemic, institutional, and structural corruption requires precision. Mazon, Labruna, and Issa (2023) propose a conceptual reflection on these modalities, offering a repertoire for problematizing incentive structures and repeated conduct. The narrative makes it possible to formulate hypotheses and questions regarding transparency, control of private interests, and decision-making impartiality, but it does not provide empirical data to classify Brazilian public administration as structurally corrupt or to identify corruption as one of its main environmental obstacles.

In Brazilian law, there are concrete normative grounds for discussing preventive measures. Article 37 of the Constitution establishes, among others, the principles of legality, impersonality, morality, and publicity; Law No. 12,527/2011 regulates access to public information; Article 216, Paragraph 1, provides for community collaboration; and Law No. 7,347/1985 provides an instrument of collective protection when its requirements are met. The Public Prosecutor's Office, cultural heritage agencies, and audit courts exercise distinct oversight and control powers, to be analyzed according to the scope of action of each institution (Brasil, 1988; 1985; 2011; IPHAN, [s. d.]).

Based on these parameters, it is argued, as an argumentative proposition of this article, that greater transparency, social participation, and institutional control can favor well-founded decisions about cultural and environmental assets. This proposition is not the result of a statistical assessment of public policies: it is a legal-normative conclusion supported by the guarantees and instruments examined. Likewise, the mention of risks of favoritism should not be taken as a concrete imputation of wrongdoing to Brazilian authorities or entities.

Possibilities and limits of pedagogical use

Popular legal culture comprises, among other manifestations, the ways in which society represents the law, its professionals, and its institutions. Friedman (2015) describes the dialogue between legal culture and popular culture, while the collection edited by Sarat, Silbey, and Umphrey (2019) demonstrates the academic interest of audiovisual representations of trials. These contributions legitimize the critical examination of fictional productions as an object of study, without turning them into faithful accounts of the procedural experience.

In the episodes analyzed, the presence of a culturally relevant tree, the challenge to a highway's route, and the debate on institutional action make it possible to organize a teaching activity articulating constitutional law, environmental law, cultural heritage protection, and public ethics. A consistent didactic proposal may ask students to identify the facts of the narrative, delimit the relevant Brazilian norms, point out evidentiary gaps, formulate possible legal alternatives, and make explicit which elements cannot be transposed from South Korea to Brazil. The analysis would be all the more rigorous the greater the distinction among description of the fiction, normative reconstruction, and critical assessment.

In the Brazilian context, Gitahy, Alves, and Ebaid (2023) discuss the use of digital information and communication technologies in student protagonism. This discussion supports the relevance of exploring audiovisual media as a teaching resource, but does not prove that the episodes selected here generate, by themselves, measurable changes in environmental awareness or improvements in academic performance. Verifying these effects would require a specific empirical design, with definition of participants, assessment criteria, and procedures for analyzing the results.

For this reason, the pedagogical result of this study is a proposition of applicability, not an assessment of effectiveness. The potential didactic usefulness lies mainly in its capacity to produce legally relevant questions: when does a natural asset form part of cultural heritage? How should the costs of a project and the non-economic values affected be considered? What procedural guarantees allow residents' participation? What elements characterize a conflict of interest, and what evidence would be necessary to attribute responsibility?

Final Considerations

The analysis of episodes 7 and 8 of Extraordinary Attorney Woo shows, at the narrative level, a conflict between an infrastructure project and the protection of a natural element associated with collective memory. In light of the Brazilian legal system, Articles 216 and 225 of the Constitution, the instruments of heritage and environmental protection, and the parameters of participation and control offer useful references for examining this type of tension.

It is concluded that the series has potential as an object of interdisciplinary discussion in legal education, provided that the comparison is presented as a thematic approximation and not as equivalence between the legal systems of South Korea and Brazil. The issues of institutional integrity represented in the plot may also support debate on transparency and control, but do not allow the conclusion that corruption is one of the main obstacles to Brazilian heritage protection.

The scope of the research is interpretive and documentary. No data were produced on the effectiveness of laws, the incidence of corruption, or the effects of the series on learning. Future investigations may test didactic proposals with students and analyze real administrative or judicial cases, through specific empirical protocols.

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