

Interrogation of Gender Identity:
Aesthetic Consumption of Korean Television Dramas by
Young Women in China

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Introduction

On December 18, 2013, leading South Korean network Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS) released the first episode of a new Korean¹ television drama titled *My Love from the Star*, and millions of Chinese viewers tuned in to watch it online. After the final episode of the 21-episode drama was released, the drama had billions of hits on various Chinese online video streaming websites.²

Although *My Love from the Star* was not broadcast on Chinese television unlike some other Korean dramas had been, the drama spread among young viewers through video streaming websites like wildfire. The names of Jun Ji Hyun and Kim Soo Hyun, the drama's leading actors, became household names among young Chinese people.³ Kim Soo Hyun was at the top of China's "Today's Actor" chart on Baidu, the largest Chinese search engine, during the run of the series.⁴ Newspapers reported how *My Love from the Star* was a topic of discussion at the ongoing China's National People's Congress, where the country's leaders meet annually to talk over legislative issues, and at a committee meeting of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), China's political advisory body. Political leaders discussed, debated, and "lamented" over why China was unable to produce

¹ The Korean television shows discussed in this thesis refer to South Korean television dramas. When "Korea" or "Korean" is used, it refers to South Korea.

² Statistics on the precise number of online views for *My Love from the Star* on Chinese online platforms, including articles both shortly after the drama ended and articles written some period after, vary greatly, between 2.5 billion and 14.5 billion views. See Lee, Sun-young, "China Media Sees Lessons in Korean TV Dramas." *Korea Herald*, February 21, 2014; Lin, Lilian. "Korean TV Show Sparks Chicken and Beer Craze in China." *Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2014; and "[Newsmaker] 'My Love' Signals K-Drama Revival." *The Korea Herald*, March 10, 2014. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140310001393>.

³ "China Media Sees Lessons in Korean TV Dramas." *Korea Herald*, February 21, 2014.

⁴ Ock, Hyun-ju. "What Makes Kim Soo-Hyun so Popular in China?" *The Korea Herald*, January 22, 2014.

a television show as popular as *My Love From the Star*.⁵ Media outlets in China, Korea, and even the U.S. and others mused over “China’s Love Affair With Irresistible Korean TV.”⁶

My Love from the Star is just one example of the exploding popularity of Korean dramas among young women in China. The appearance of Korean television dramas among some of the top hit foreign shows on the Chinese television scene was one component of the unprecedented phenomenon of the boom in Korean cultural products that has taken China, along with the rest of the world, by storm. The Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, began in the mid-1990s and since then the global popularity of Korean popular music, film, and television shows has spiraled upwards and resulted in a massive outflow of Korean culture to many other countries, some of which include China, Japan, Southeast Asian countries, and more recently as far as Latin America, Africa and the Middle East.⁷ Korean television dramas have been saluted as a “major driving force” of the Korean Wave, comprising 90% of Korea’s broadcast exports.⁸

Prior to the 1990s, Korean popular cultural products went largely unrecognized by international consumers. During the 1990s, Korea's popular culture markets and television industries opened up to global forces that transformed Korean cultural products into modern, high quality, competitive goods.⁹ The growth of Korea’s cultural industries during these years has also been attributed to efforts by the Korean government to intentionally

⁵ Ock, Hyun-ju. “Why Can’t China Make ‘My Love from Star’?” *The Korea Herald*, March 10, 2014. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140310000556>; and Wan, William. “Chinese Officials Debate Why China Can’t Make a Soap Opera as Good as South Korea’s.” *The Washington Post*, March 7, 2014.

⁶ Qin, Amy. “China’s Love Affair With Irresistible Korean TV.” *The New York Times*, July 20, 2015.

⁷ “Korean Wave.” Korea.net: The Official Website of the Republic of Korea.

⁸ Kim, Youna, ed. *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*. Routledge, 2013.

⁹ Shim, Doobo. “Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia.” *Media, Culture & Society* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 38; and Yang, Jonghoe. “The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia: A Comparison of Chinese, Japanese, and Taiwanese Audiences Who Watch Korean TV Dramas.” *Development and Society* 21, no. 1 (June 2012): 136.

cultivate the cultural industry for socio-economic and political reasons as the nation was rebuilt after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis.¹⁰ The Korean Wave has been explicitly written about as a phenomenon in itself; Korea as the source of cultural production and outflows is unprecedented in Asia's long history.¹¹ The "unfamiliar spotlight on a culture once colonized or overshadowed for centuries by powerful countries"¹² has produced varied reactions from the countries that have been on the receiving end of *Hallyu* cultural transmissions.

As the Korean Wave swept over the world, China quickly emerged as the largest market in Asia for Korean popular cultural products. Since the birth of *Hallyu*, the entry of Korean dramas into the Chinese market has been immensely successful, and Chinese audiences have demonstrated and continue to display an "overwhelming demand" for the shows.¹³ One study concluded that Chinese viewers watch Korean dramas "the most"¹⁴ out of the three East Asian countries.¹⁵ Surveys indicate that Chinese viewers appear to watch Korean dramas considerably more than domestically produced dramas.¹⁶

Even after the Chinese government issued a new set of policies that restricted the

¹⁰ For example, see Chua, Beng Huat. "Conceptualizing an East Asian Popular Culture." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5, no. 2 (August 1, 2004): 200–221. doi:10.1080/1464937042000236711; and Hong, Euny. "Soap, Sparkle and Pop." *The Economist*, August 9, 2014. <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21611039-how-really-uncool-country-became-tastemaker-asia-soap-sparkle-and-pop>.

¹¹ Chua, "Conceptualizing an East Asian Popular Culture," 736–55; and Kim, Youna. "The Rising East Asia 'Wave'; Korean Media Go Global." In *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-Flow*, 2006.

¹² Kim, Youna "The Rising East Asia 'Wave,'" 2006.

¹³ Lee, Sue Jin. "The Korean Wave: The Seoul of Asia." *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2011).

¹⁴ Jonghoe Yang's study asked participants to rate themselves on how often they watched Korean dramas. The options provided were often, sometimes, seldom, and not at all. Out of the Chinese sample, 11.1% view Korean dramas often, 28.8% sometimes, 28.8% seldom, and 31.3% do not watch at all. From this data, Yang assumes that around 40% of Chinese people are fans of Korean dramas (Yang, "The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia," 103–47.)

¹⁵ Yang, "The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia," 103–47.

¹⁶ Kim, Youna "The Rising East Asia 'Wave,'" 2006: 127; and Yang, "The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia," 103–47.

broadcast of foreign-made television programs on Chinese television in February 2012 that caused television producers to dismay in fear that Chinese audiences would be driven away, Chinese consumption of Korean dramas remained unabated.¹⁷ Chinese viewers continued to consume foreign shows, especially Korean dramas, by means of online and mobile platforms, as evidenced by consumption of *My Love from the Star* and many other Korean dramas that have been released since the new regulations. Statistics found on the Chinese video streaming site Youku.com¹⁸ in early 2015 indicated that the Korean dramas generally had significantly much higher total view counts than television shows from the U.S., Japan, England, and other non-Chinese speaking countries.¹⁹

In scholarship on the popularity of Korean dramas in East Asia, Korean dramas are recognized especially for their followings in Japan, Taiwan and China. In a broad look at Korean drama consumption across East Asian countries, one discovers that the demographics of audiences are not the same across borders. Jonghoe Yang's study explicitly addresses the issue of the overlooking of demographics that often arises in scholarship on the popularity of Korean dramas in other countries. His study draws upon data from the 2008 East Asian Social Survey (EASS), a national-scale sample survey that is conducted regularly in China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. The "Culture and Globalization in East Asia" section of the questionnaire asked participants questions regarding their "consumption of foreign cultural products, cultural values and tastes, social distance and

¹⁷ Jacobs, Andrew. "China Limits Foreign-Made TV Programs." *NY Times*, February 14, 2012, Asia Pacific sec.

¹⁸ "Youku 优酷." Video Streaming Site. *Youku 优酷*, n.d. <http://tv.youku.com>.

¹⁹ Youku.com offers dramas from mainland China, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, the U.S., Britain, and Thailand, and shows total numbers of view counts for individual TV shows by country. According to Youku.com in Spring 2015, the highest-ranking (for views) Korean drama has 1.3 billion views, while the highest-ranking American show only has 400 million views.

social networks, attitudes toward globalization.”²⁰ Using the EASS as his main source of data, Yang analyzes responses to determine the true nature of the audiences of Korean dramas in China, Taiwan, and Japan.

A reliable pattern in the typical gender of Korean drama audiences throughout China, Taiwan, and Japan has been established in scholarship. There are more female audiences of Korean dramas than male audiences in all three countries. However, while the gender of consumers is uniform across East Asian countries, patterns in the ages of audiences vary. In Taiwan, studies have found that the main audiences that watch Korean dramas are females of all ages; in other words, there is no clear age pattern in viewers of Korean dramas.²¹ In Japan, there is a notable trend in the audiences of Korean dramas, who are primarily middle-aged women in their 50s to 60s. This is a recognized pattern has been directly addressed and explored in scholarship, which will also be considered in later sections.²² However, unlike in Taiwan and Japan, Yang’s study found that in China, the main audiences of Korean dramas are younger, most often between the ages of 18-29.²³

Given the popularity of Korean television dramas among various age groups in many other countries, one would expect to see a similar pattern of consumption across different ages in China. Instead, we see high levels of consumption of Korean dramas by a very specific demographic even after restrictions on foreign television shows were

²⁰ Yang, “The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia,” 113.

²¹ Ibid., 128.

²² For examples of works on Japan that discuss Japan’s middle-aged viewers of Korean dramas other than Yang’s article, see also Kim, Do Kyun, Arvind Singhal, Toru Hanaki, Jennifer Dunn, Ketan Chitnis, and Min Wha Han. “Television Drama, Narrative Engagement and Audience Buying Behavior The Effects of Winter Sonata in Japan.” *International Communication Gazette* 71, no. 7 (November 1, 2009): 595–611; and Mori, Yoshitaka. “Winter Sonata and Cultural Practices of Active Fans in Japan: Considering Middle-Aged Women as Cultural Agents.” In *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*. Hong Kong University Press, 2008.

²³ Yang, “The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia,” 133.

implemented in China. Why do young Chinese females consume Korean dramas at such high levels?

I argue that young Chinese women's heavy consumption of Korean dramas that portray a particular aesthetic of self and familial resolution may be explained by a need to redress contemporary psychological issues related to gendered self-identity. I posit that the identity formation processes of this particular demographic of Chinese females has been distinctly shaped by changes in family dynamics that stem from the social and political restructuring in China of the 1980s, particularly the one-child policy. Thus, this thesis will explore how the phenomenon of remarkable consumption of Korean dramas by young females in China may be understood as an implicit interrogation of gendered identity.

Literature Review

In this thesis I argue that the consumption patterns of Korean dramas by young Chinese women may be understood as related to conditions surrounding identity formation processes of this particular demographic of Chinese females that were strongly influenced by massive changes in family dynamics that arose from the series of social and economic reforms that took place in China during the 1980s. Thus, this section will review the literature related to how the impact of structural changes in China on family dynamics shaped the subjectivities of young Chinese women, allowing us to read the phenomenon of Korean drama consumption as an interrogation of gender identity. First, I will examine how scholars have utilized cultural explanations to understand Korean drama consumption in China, as well as the specific gaps in those explanations that I hope to fill. Second, I will explore scholarship that has already been written on the gendered nature of Korean drama consumption in various East Asian countries. Third, I will look at the contributions of policy changes in the late 1970s and 1980s to shifts in family dynamics, and how processes of female identity formation was altered due to those shifts. Next, I will explore the depth of the specific impact the one-child policy had on female gender identity. Finally, I will consider how the gendered consumption of Korean dramas by young Chinese females may suggest a psychological desire to integrate a new paradigm of gender identity.

I. Cultural Explanations for Korean Drama Consumption in China

In the following section I review the scholarship that employs cultural explanations in an attempt to elucidate the popularity of Korean dramas in China. In examination of the cross-border cultural flows of Korean dramas to China, scholars deem assessments of

processes of reception to be an essential dimension to understanding the popularity of Korean dramas in receiving countries.²⁴ A frequently cited explanation for the success of Korean dramas in East Asian countries that attempts to bridge the often overlooked inherent conditions between sending and receiving countries is the “cultural proximity theory,” which posits that “culture flows more easily between culturally similar countries than between culturally different ones.”²⁵ Scholars eagerly attribute the consumption of Korean dramas in “Confucian East Asia”²⁶ to the affirmation of classical Confucian values such as harmony, morality, and respect for family and kinship ties that are frequently found within Korean dramas.²⁷ *Jewel in the Palace* (2004)²⁸ is one such Korean drama whose extreme success in China has been attributed by scholars to the similar cultural and aesthetic tastes displayed in the representations of cuisine and herbal medicine, as well as the incorporation of Confucian values.²⁹ However, while it may be possible to identify parallels between certain aspects of Korean dramas and Chinese values or elements that appear to hint at cultural resemblances, the cultural proximity theory does not explain why these values appeal especially to the particular age demographic among Chinese viewers.

²⁴ Yang, “The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia,” 109.

²⁵ Yang, “The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia,” 110. For examples, see Rebel, Marionette. “Korean Wave in China: On the Newsstand.” *Korean Wave in China*, June 5, 2012; and Lee, “The Korean Wave: The Seoul of Asia.”

²⁶ Chua, “Conceptualizing an East Asian Popular Culture,” 736–55.

²⁷ Yang, “The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia,” 103–47.

²⁸ This year included with television drama title refers to the year that the drama was released in China, which is typically slightly behind Korean airdates, as foreign dramas have to go through measures to secure broadcasting and licensing rights before they are released in China.

²⁹ For example, see Kim, Sujeong. “Interpreting Transnational Cultural Practices.” *Cultural Studies* 23, no. 5–6 (September 1, 2009): 736–55. doi:10.1080/09502380903132348; Kwon, Ji-youn. “A New Facet to K-Food: Court Cuisine.” *Koreatimes*; and Leung, Lisa. “Mediating Nationalism and Modernity: The Transnationalization of Korean Dramas on Chinese (Satellite) TV.” In *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*, 53–69. Hong Kong University Press, HKU, 2008.

Another possible explanation that has circulated widely in Chinese newspapers³⁰ is the notion that Chinese viewers consume Korean cultural products as a reaffirmation of their own cultural superiority. Chinese political leaders such as Wang Qishan, a senior leader in the Chinese Communist Party, have made public statements that reflect an attempt to gain some degree of control over the phenomenon of the Korean Wave in China by promoting the view that in reality, “the core and soul of the Korean [soap] opera is a sublimation of Chinese traditional culture. [Koreans] use TV dramas to disseminate traditional Chinese culture.”³¹ However, this argument also fails to account for the specifics of gender and age of the Chinese audiences in consideration. From the examples that I have encountered, the individuals that assert China’s cultural superiority over Korean dramas and accuse Korean drama fans in China for cultural betrayal, and criticize the dramas themselves for “stealing” Chinese culture,³² are predominantly male.³³ The male characteristic of this explanation raises the question of whether this assessment of the source of the popularity of Korean dramas truly reflects the primarily female phenomenon of Korean drama consumption in China.

Hybridization, understood as the mixing of local and global influences, is another concept that scholars have invoked as key to explaining the popularity of Korean cultural products abroad.³⁴ Frequently proposed by scholars to explain the popularity of Korean

³⁰ I accessed news articles on this subject that had been translated from Chinese into English.

³¹ Wee, Darren. “China’s Anti-Graft Tsar Has Something to Confess: ‘I Watch Popular Korean TV Dramas.’” *South China Morning Post*.

³² Leung, “Mediating Nationalism and Modernity,” 53–69.

³³ In addition to Communist Party leader Wang Qishan, male Chinese drama producer Zhang Kuo Li, and Hong Kong – Hollywood actor Jackie Chan have also been outspoken in their condemnation of Korean dramas and encouragement of audiences to “resist” (Leung, “Mediating Nationalism and Modernity,” 65–66).

³⁴ For example, see “Hallyu (Korean Wave).” South Korean Government. *Korea.net Gateway to Korea*, n.d; and Shim, “Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia,” 25–44; and Yang, “The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia,” 103–47.

popular music, films, online games, and television dramas, hybridity is often evoked as an identifying feature of *Hallyu*. Scholars understand hybridity as the blend of cultures, which displays traits of a local culture as well as global influences. Korean ballads are one such example of “cultural mixing,” “characterized by mellow sounds and amorous lyrics influenced by Western styles such as easy listening and American folk music.”³⁵

In *Hallyu* products, the “local” culture of hybridity is often implicitly regarded as equivalent to traditional Korean culture, associated with certain “norms, customs, taste, needs and traditions”³⁶ that exhibit “pure” Korean culture untainted by foreign influences. Others offer alternative understandings, such as Solee Shin and Lanu Kim who base their interpretation of the “local” side of Korean pop music simply in the fact that the products originated in contemporary Korea, despite that others claim that K-pop is intrinsically “foreign.”³⁷ The “global” or “modern” elements of Korean cultural products are often equated with Western popular culture in scholarship. In the late 1980s until the mid-1990s, after the liberalization of the Korean media industry and the introduction of cable television and satellite, Korean cultural product industries began to emulate characteristics found in American cultural products. Thus began the “appropriation of cultural globalization”³⁸ of the Korean Wave.³⁹

Scholars critically examine the role of hybridity as the “mixing of cultures” within *Hallyu* cultural products in various ways. One view references the hybridity of the Korean

³⁵ Shim, “Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia,” 25–44.

³⁶ Ryoo, Woongjae. “Globalization, or the Logic of Cultural Hybridization: The Case of the Korean Wave.” *Asian Journal of Communication* 19, no. 2 (2009): 142.

³⁷ Shin, Solee, and Lanu Kim. “Organizing K-Pop: Emergence and Market Making of Large Korean Entertainment Houses, 1980–2010.” *East Asia* 30, no. 4 (2013): 255–72.

³⁸ Jin, Dal Yong. “Hybridization of Korean Popular Culture: Films and Online Gaming.” In *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, 148–64. Routledge, 2013.

³⁹ Shim, “Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia,” 25–44.

Wave as a post-colonial critique, while others view the emergence of hybridity as a way to “appropriate and articulate global popular cultural forms to express their local sentiment, tradition and culture,”⁴⁰ or “sustain local identities”⁴¹ within the context of an increasingly globalized, interconnected world. Whether critical of the new hybrid forms of Korean cultural products or not, scholars often attribute the wild success and popularity of Korean cultural products at least in part to their hybrid nature. Doboo Shim cites the example of Korean pop music artist Seo Taiji and Boys, and their creative use of the blend of genres such as rap, soul rock and roll, techno, punk, hardcore, and the Korean *ppongjjak* musical genre to appeal to audiences.⁴²

Scholars have also suggested that the dual nature of hybrid forms lends themselves to wider audiences in many countries⁴³ – those who look for more “modern” or Westernized shows, and those who prefer shows that demonstrate culturally familiar values and traditions.⁴⁴ Some assert that through watching Korean dramas, certain audiences fulfill their desires to watch “modern” television series and simultaneously stay within cultural comfort zones.⁴⁵ Hybridity in this view functions to bridge modernity and traditional aesthetic values such as those seen in *Jewel in the Palace*, as discussed above. However, as we have seen above in other explanations for the popularity of the Korean Wave, the concept of hybridity as it has been discussed with regard to drama consumption

⁴⁰ Ryoo, “Globalization, or the Logic of Cultural Hybridization,” 142.

⁴¹ Shim, “Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia,” 39.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴³ Kim, Youna “The Rising East Asia ‘Wave,’” 2006: 127.

⁴⁴ Scholarship on the popularity of Korean dramas in Japan often uses this theory to explain that Japanese audiences – generally made up of mainly older women in their 50s-60s – like the dramas for the familiar traditional values.

⁴⁵ Yang, “The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia,” 103–47; and Shim, “Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia,” 25–44.

does not account for the demographic issues that have been identified as a feature of Chinese consumption. In other words, scholarship has not yet explained the specific appeal of hybridity found in Korean dramas to the audience of young Chinese women.

The hybridity of Korean dramas has been associated with terms such as “impurity” to describe the local cultures that contain traces of foreign influences, but scholar Dal Yong Jin’s exploration of hybridity in cultural products of the Korean Wave suggests that we view the phenomenon as not simply a blend of two cultures, but rather as the formation of a new, third culture.⁴⁶ Jin examines the processes that go into the production of Korean cultural products, specifically film and online games, to qualify the hybridity of these two genres. Woongjae Ryoo likewise asserts that hybridization does not fuse different elements into a “culturally faceless whole,” but rather leads to the birth of new forms.⁴⁷ Ryoo explores the “hybridization of culture” as the interaction and negotiation of local cultural agents and actors with global forms, who use the global influences “as resources through which [to] construct their own cultural spaces.”⁴⁸ I would like to employ this understanding to engage in a deeper examination of hybridity as the creation of a “third space” to examine new identities forged by the hybrid nature of Korean dramas in China.

In his examination of the possibility of the creation of a third culture within Korean cultural products, Jin cites Homi Bhabha’s understanding of hybridity as “an interpretive and reflective mode in which assumptions of identity are interrogated.”⁴⁹ Bhabha’s theory allows a different vantage point from which to view the consumption of hybrid Korean dramas as an implicit gesture to interrogate of a certain kind of identity. Others have

⁴⁶ Jin, “Hybridization of Korean Popular Culture,” 148–64.

⁴⁷ Ryoo, “Globalization, or the Logic of Cultural Hybridization,” 143.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Jin, “Hybridization of Korean Popular Culture,” 150.

employed Bhabha's idea of "third space" as one approach to globalization, which integrates power relations between the center and periphery in a post-colonial context. These scholars see hybridity as subversive, a challenge to the domination of Western popular cultural through acting as sites of resistance.⁵⁰ However, I will not attempt to situate the consumption of Korean dramas by young Chinese women within the view of Korean dramas as vehicle to challenge post-colonialism. Bhabha's theory can instead be used to understand Korean drama consumption through the view that hybridity "unsettles all the stable identities," and the process of hybridization may thus be understood to offer "a possible release from the singular identities that are constructed when class, race or gender are seen as primary or exclusive categories of cultural analysis."⁵¹ In other words, hybridity within Korean dramas may be a site where dominant social ideas about identity can be challenged.

In addition to understanding Korean television dramas themselves as a space for an interrogation of identity, I suggest that Bhabha's theory may also be applied to the consumption of Korean dramas in other countries as well. Through this view, the consumption of Korean dramas as a hybrid cultural product by Chinese women can be interpreted as a type of interrogation in itself. I would like to take Bhabha's concept of hybridity further in its application to Korean drama consumption in China and argue that a specific type of identity – gender identity – is being interrogated through the hybrid nature of Korean television dramas.

⁵⁰ Jin, "Hybridization of Korean Popular Culture," 148–64; and Jin, Dal Yong, and Kyong Yoon. "The Social Mediascape of Transnational Korean Pop Culture: Hallyu 2.0 as Spreadable Media Practice." *New Media & Society*, October 16, 2014.

⁵¹ Ryoo, "Globalization, or the Logic of Cultural Hybridization," 143.

II. Scholarship on the Gendered Nature of Korean Drama Consumption in East Asia

In this section I have identified the scholarship that specifically addresses and makes use of the idea that the particular demographic characteristics of Korean drama audiences in East Asia may be investigated further to explain distinctions in consumption patterns. As was iterated above, an observation of Korean drama consumption in East Asia demonstrates that the demographics of audiences vary. Unlike the consistent pattern of female consumption across several East Asian nations, the ages of audiences vary in different countries. In this section I will examine scholarly writings that investigate the essential features of gendered consumption of Korean dramas in other East Asian countries to elucidate existing links that scholars have already drawn between gender identity and Korean dramas.

In scholarship on Korean drama viewers in Japan and Taiwan, there are other works that have proposed the idea that gender identity plays a role in the popularity of Korean dramas abroad. This is particularly true of scholarship on Japanese audiences. In literature on Korean dramas in Japan, there is recurring discussion on two characteristics of Japanese consumption: the demographic of middle-aged women, and the specific drama *Winter Sonata* (2004).⁵²

A commonly cited factor to explain the appeal of *Winter Sonata* in Japan is a sense of nostalgia of middle-aged Japanese women for the “social and cultural atmosphere”⁵³ that can often be found within the narratives of Korean dramas that reminds older Japanese women of their past. Several scholars posit that the consumption of *Winter Sonata* positions Japanese middle-aged women as active “cultural agents” in their engagement

⁵² This date refers to the year that *Winter Sonata* aired in Japan.

⁵³ Mori, “Winter Sonata and Cultural Practices of Active Fans in Japan.”

with Korean drama narratives⁵⁴ who reproduce their own new narratives of identity regarding Japan's history of colonialism.⁵⁵ These new narratives are gendered in that they are produced by women's actions of watching of Korean dramas, rather than the more standard narratives constructed from a "male governmental perspective."⁵⁶ New "everyday practices of culture," including watching Korean dramas, consuming drama-related products, and increased interest and tourism to Korea allows these middle-aged Japanese women to forge new transnational identities and narratives that deviate from long-standing Japanese perspectives towards Korea that can be traced back to the colonial era.

One notable article written by Fang-chih Irene Yang that is very relevant to this thesis explores the links between Korean dramas and the formation of gender and class identities in Taiwan. Yang evaluates how new discourses of femininity intersect with discourses of television to shape the Korean drama viewing experiences of Taiwanese women of different classes, also a feature of the phenomenon of female consumption of Korean dramas that is frequently neglected. Fang-chih Irene Yang conducted interviews in Taiwan and asked questions about television preferences to try and understand why women are drawn to Korean dramas. Through reading the interpretations of Korean drama fans, she concluded that there is a consistent division in perspectives of Korean dramas from women of different classes. She contends that Taiwanese women of different classes watch Korean dramas because they relate to different aspects of the drama. For example, in describing a favorite Korean drama, one working class woman emphasized the female protagonist's admirable "sweet and warm" filial relationship with her mother-in-law,

⁵⁴ Kim et al, "Television Drama, Narrative Engagement and Audience Buying Behavior The Effects of Winter Sonata in Japan."

⁵⁵ Mori, "Winter Sonata and Cultural Practices of Active Fans in Japan."

⁵⁶ Ibid., 139.

which Yang interprets as this woman's identification with themes of domesticity.⁵⁷ This method of analysis reveals differences in women's experiences of watching Korean dramas determined by class, which suggests that audiences' demographic backgrounds indeed play a crucial role in explaining the appeal of Korean dramas to Taiwanese women.

It is useful to understand the explanations that have already been explored by scholars on the gendered nature of Korean drama consumption on a broader scale in East Asia. As we have seen in this section, there exists some scholarship that has explored the role of gender identity to provide an explanation for the popularity of Korean dramas, such as we have seen for Japanese and Taiwanese female viewers; however, there is little that similarly explores the phenomenon in China. Much in the same way that Irene Yang studies the aspects of Korean dramas that resonate with particular class demographics of women viewers in Taiwan, I intend to investigate the specific characteristics of Korean dramas that may explain the particular age group of female Chinese viewers. While I will not go so far as to claim that young Chinese women are active agents in identity formation such as Mori does regarding Japanese audiences, I will explore how watching Korean dramas serves as an implicit interrogation of gender identity in China.

III. Relationship Between Shifts in Family Dynamics in the 1980s and Gender Identity Formation

In recent decades, China experienced a series of pivotal historical changes that are essential in tracing the shifts in family dynamics that will be used to explain the context that shaped patterns of identity formation for young Chinese women. Beginning with the

⁵⁷ Yang, Fang-Chih Irene. "Engaging with Korean Dramas: Discourses of Gender, Media, and Class Formation in Taiwan." *Asian Journal of Communication* 18, no. 1 (2008): 70.

establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, followed by the Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward, the adoption of new economic reforms and the open-door policy, and finally, the one-child policy, China's economy and society have undergone several significant shifts that have transformed everyday life. In this section I will examine some of these structural changes that occurred in China with a focus on the events beginning in the late 1970s and continued into the 1980s, and survey their effects on family and gender values.

In the late 1970s alone, China underwent a multitude of historic changes. In 1978 the state began an economic modernization program that would continue into the 1980s that aimed to raise the standard of living, encourage economic growth, and restore legitimacy to the Chinese Communist Party after the Cultural Revolution. The 'open-door' policy opened up China's economy to the outside world. The economic reforms and opening-up policies that were enacted during this period stimulated urbanization and industrialization and changed China on multiple fronts. The new economic reforms made the individual household the unit of production, which had wide effects on daily life.⁵⁸ Yang Hu and Jacqueline Scott stress the fact that while the reform and opening-up policies were intended to transform the entire nation, as many other policies that have been enacted in China, the new policies were unevenly implemented throughout provinces.⁵⁹ In the 1980s, key geographical positions – coastal areas, big cities, municipalities, and provincial capitals – were prioritized for development. These were mainly urban areas.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Bailey, Paul John. *Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century China*. Gender and History (Palgrave Macmillan (Firm)). Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012: 129.

⁵⁹ Hu, Yang, and Jacqueline Scott. "Family and Gender Values in China Generational, Geographic, and Gender Differences." *Journal of Family Issues*, April 7, 2014: 6.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Hu and Scott cite others' work that asserts how the reforms "affected many spheres of life, ranging from education, language, media and cultural activity to the consumption of daily commodities."⁶¹ This is a central postulation of Hu and Scott's work: specific events and policies in China's recent history have had different effects on men and women of different generations and geographic locations and thus, there exists "considerable diversity in the way that generations, geographic regions, and gender help structure the distinctive family and gender values associated with patrilineal beliefs, filial piety, and gender roles."⁶² Acknowledgement of the unevenness of implementation and enforcement of new policies throughout China during this period is important to examine the particular environmental factors that influenced women of the particular demographic under consideration – females residing in urban areas of the age group born after the policy shifts of the late 1970s and 1980s.

One area regarding the shifts that accompanied the reform policies that encourages exploration is the economic changes that resulted from the one-child policy, specifically the new material consumption patterns of both single children and their parents created by the new trend of many single child households in urban China. Deborah Davis and Julia S. Sensenbrenner describe how the one-child policy brought about a consumer revolution through the emergence of "China's first real generation of consumers."⁶³ The explosion in the number of single children without siblings to compete with or parents with one child to spend money on led to an increase in the consumption of material goods such as food, clothing, and toys, both on the part of children and parents buying for their children.

⁶¹ Hu and Scott, "Family and Gender Values in China," 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶³ Davis, Deborah, and Julia S. Sensenbrenner. *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*. Studies on China. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

However, in Davis and Sensenbrenner's data comparison of the costs of routine and discretionary expenditures for children and adults in Shanghai families, they found that parents spent heavily both on themselves and their children.⁶⁴ Thus, these specific types of new material consumption patterns may not necessarily be indicative of a shift in psychological changes in parent-child relations, but may only reflect a change in general household family spending tendencies that proceeded from the new material culture that accompanied the contemporary geopolitical context of household prosperity. I would like to more closely examine the idea that there exist particular consumption patterns that have been provoked by the one-child policy and reflect growing pains in the expansion of young females' social aspirations as single children.

Bernadine W.L. Chee analyzes the relationship between eating patterns of single Chinese children and the one-child policy, and links the relationship to psychological repercussions of the policy.⁶⁵ Chee suggests that these eating patterns reveal increased levels of stress that originate from the magnified pressure on this new generation of single children that resulted directly from the one-child policy.⁶⁶ Chee's household interviews with children in Beijing primary schools and their parents on the topic of food focus on the identification and analysis of the "personal factors" that contributed to the children's psychological pressures,⁶⁷ and makes several conclusions regarding the escalating pressures felt by children and their resultant eating patterns. Historical designs in family dynamics alongside the one-child policy influenced parents' decisions to indulge their

⁶⁴ Davis and Sensenbrenner, *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, 62.

⁶⁵ Jing, Jun. *Feeding China's Little Emperors: Food, Children, and Social Change*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 51.

children in food consumption but also contributed to an increased amount of psychological pressure on children from parents to succeed academically. “The very elements contributing to material pleasure for these single children, for instance in snack consumption, caused these children to suffer pressure in school.”⁶⁸ Chee concludes that in regards to food consumption, single urban children’s material pleasures were often intertwined with social and academic pressures.

Chee’s research is informed by the ideas of various anthropological studies that contend, “food consumption in particular has been shown to serve as a symbol or code, describing certain human relationships, such as inclusion and exclusion, high and low, and intimacy and distance.”⁶⁹ She also cites Sidney Mintz’s analysis of eating as closely associated with memories, character formation, and conscious experience.⁷⁰ Chee makes an interesting point that the very techniques employed in the marketing of foods towards children produces anxiety for children in social relations with peers and parents.⁷¹ While this study reveals an uncomfortable psychological feeling that Chinese children experience as a result of the one-child policy that is valuable in discussion of the policy, her analysis is not specific to gender. I will take her findings further and analyze the presence of gender-specific psychological effects located within a desire to consume that pertains to the one-child policy.

In addition to the economic shifts that followed the many political reforms of the late 1970s and 1980s, social change during this period is also an important force that shapes gendered identity that must be taken into consideration. Much of the scholarship

⁶⁸ Jing, *Feeding China’s Little Emperors*, 63-64.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

that surveys the reordering of family patterns during the reform and opening up era focuses on how traditional Chinese family values gradually came to reflect Western influences. Scholars fixate on the shift away from the Confucian traits of filial piety and patrilineality that are widely accepted as traditionally central to the social system of Chinese families. These scholars draw a connection between the new foreign influences that result from China's opening-up policies and some of the new family practices, such as smaller families, a decrease in coresidence, lower marriage rates, and rising divorce rates.⁷² Daniel Shek also claims that some of the positive, new "Western family values" that have steadily replaced traditional Chinese values can be found in the lower parental expectations for children to care for elderly parents, more lenient parenting behavior, and the egalitarian gender roles in marriages that are found today.⁷³

However, there are various other scholars who question this type of family research that approaches the Chinese family in the aggregate, and instead contend that these historical events and changes in China cannot fully explain shifts in family dynamics. While filial piety remained highly valued within families and societies throughout the era of change even since the 1950s, Hu and Scott found that different social groups' value on patrilineality waxed and waned during tumultuous historical events, which led to their conclusion that the "demise of traditional views in one dimension of family and gender values does not imply a similar questioning of traditional values in other dimensions."⁷⁴

These varied shifts in family patterns also coincided with the resurgence of Confucian gender roles for women within the family. The principle of the "virtuous wife

⁷² Hu and Scott, "Family and Gender Values in China," 20.

⁷³ Shek, Daniel T. L. "Chinese Family Research Puzzles, Progress, Paradigms, and Policy Implications." *Journal of Family Issues* 27, no. 3 (March 1, 2006): 278.

⁷⁴ Hu and Scott, "Family and Gender Values in China," 15, 21.

and good mother” was revived during this time, and women’s skills were delegated to housework. “Women [of the Reform era] were more likely to be held uniquely responsible for marriage, family, and children than in the Maoist period, while the home was being redefined as a crucially important place.”⁷⁵ The return of strengthened Confucian gender roles during the reform era also gave rise to the transformation of family dynamics.

Scholarship that discusses how the worth of females was fashioned during this era of economic and social change, especially in tandem with shifts in family patterns, is not in consensus. There are quite a few scholars who evaluate new roles for women within the context of new feminist movements that were introduced to Chinese thought as a consequence the reform era. Scholars argue that the exposure to Western ideals and foreign cultures produced by the open-door policies contributed to an increased awareness of women’s equality issues in China, which spurred positive shifts in women’s family roles.⁷⁶ Hu and Scott describe how “feminist thought became more influential, and the importance of economic independence and individualism entered the discourse of gender dynamics,”⁷⁷ enabled by the opening up reforms.

Ellen Efron Pimentel’s work challenges these views of new feminist thought, and provides a more detailed examination that carefully traces the sequence of shifts in gender behavior and attitudes across three crucial periods of recent Chinese history since 1949 and clarifies the specific characteristics of each cohort’s gender ideology. She investigates the early Maoist period, the Cultural Revolution, and the reform era of the late 1970s.

Rather than draw links between Western influences from the opening up reforms and the

⁷⁵ Pimentel, Ellen Efron. “Gender Ideology, Household Behavior, and Backlash in Urban China.” *Journal of Family Issues* 27, no. 3 (March 1, 2006): 345.

⁷⁶ Shek, “Chinese Family Research,” 278.

⁷⁷ Hu and Scott. “Family and Gender Values in China.”

changes in family and gender values as other scholars do, Pimentel examines the writings of the three periods to expose the contemporary expectations and roles of women. Her findings show that rather than promote feminism, “writers during the reform period placed greater emphasis on the innate characteristics that make men and women good at different things.”⁷⁸ Rather, regard for females as inherently inferior to males resurfaced. According to Pimentel, an earlier focus on women’s issues that arose during the Maoist period was “cast aside as a petty disregard for national interests”⁷⁹ during the reform era, and expectations for continued progress toward gender equality were lowered. The fight for gender equality was assigned to women, who were expected to improve on their own natural deficiencies if they wanted to ameliorate gender inequality in China.

The incongruence in scholarship regarding how Chinese women were valued during the reform era of the 1970s and 1980s invites closer examination. The conflict in views about the appropriate roles for females reveals a gap that suggests a certain ambivalence towards the worth of females distinct from the views towards women prior to the economic and social reforms. I propose that the one-child policy may be useful to redress this gap in scholarship and explain the contours of the forces that shaped this generation of women in China and spurred a desire to interrogate gender identity.

IV. The Effects of the One-Child Policy on Female Gender Identity

Chinese families were profoundly transformed by the one-child policy, enacted in 1980 as a move by the government to rein in population numbers and stimulate economic development. In addition to an examination of the one-child policy in regards to how

⁷⁸ Pimentel, “Gender Ideology, Household Behavior, and Backlash in Urban China,” 344.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Chinese families were influenced, a closer look at the policy is necessary to understand the context within which young women fashioned ideas about gendered self-identity.

Scholarship on the psychological effects of the one-child policy mostly concerns the emergence of the “little emperor” phenomenon, or the effect of China’s many single children who are increasingly spoiled.⁸⁰ The one-child policy has produced a new generation of single children without siblings to divide parents’ and grandparents’ attention and resources. As a result, some link the enactment of the one-child policy to the development of more self-centered personalities and behavior in single children today. Some scholars view the phenomenon as primarily affecting male children,⁸¹ owing to the traditional preference for males that continues to persist in Chinese culture today: “As the preferred gender, boys seem to have developed a strong sense of entitlement.”⁸²

Vanessa Fong and others view the “little emperor” phenomenon as having an effect on the personality traits and behavior of both single male and single female children. Through interviews conducted with children in Dalian city, China, Fong concludes that as a result of the absence of other siblings to divide parents’ resources “every singleton, male or female, talented or not, aspired to elite status”⁸³ and demonstrated stronger senses of entitlement⁸⁴ than ever seen before in older generations.⁸⁵ The conclusion of Fong and

⁸⁰ For example, see Lau, Sing. *Growing Up the Chinese Way: Chinese Child and Adolescent Development*. Chinese University Press, 1996.

⁸¹ The behavioral issues and personality traits of young boys produced by the “little emperor” effect are often discussed in reference to anticipated personalities in a political context and implications for China’s future.

⁸² “China: From the Inside; China’s Future with Fewer Females.” *PBS*, January 3, 2007, <http://www.pbs.org/kqed/chinainside/women/population.html>.

⁸³ Fong, Vanessa L. *Only Hope : Coming of Age under China’s One-Child Policy*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2004: 180.

⁸⁴ Other scholars critique the notion that China’s new generation of single children are necessarily spoiled, and argue that these children are instead taking part in new lifestyles that reflect a modern era of affluence that affects Chinese both young and old.

others that all single children bear traces of the social impact of the one-child policy is sound, but questions still remain in regards to how the constraints imposed by persistent parental gender preferences intersect with the expansion of social aspirations for females.

Scholarship on how daughters are affected by the one-child policy often focuses on the development of females' status within society and improved educational opportunities. The cultural preference for male offspring is well established in scholarship as a deep-rooted trait of Chinese society;⁸⁶ however, more recent scholarship proposes that the status of females and the economic opportunities for females, especially in terms of access to education, have improved considerably because of the one-child policy, particularly in urban areas of China.⁸⁷ Parents' view of daughters as valuing less economically than sons has its origins in the patrilineal custom that called for daughters to leave their parents' household upon marriage. Vanessa Fong contends that urban daughters in China have thus benefitted from the one-child policy, as a consequence of the decline of patrilineal traditions. Single daughters now face much less competition for parents' resources and educational aspirations that were often typically reserved for the male children of the family. Fong argues that in this way, the one-child policy has served to empower females, evidenced by the increased parental attention towards daughters and resources provided for their education.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ See also Tsui, Ming, and Lynne Rich. "The Only Child and Educational Opportunity for Girls in Urban China." *Gender & Society* 16, no. 1 (February 1, 2002): 74–92. doi:10.1177/0891243202016001005.

⁸⁶ Hewlett, Barry S. *Father-Child Relations: Cultural and Biosocial Contexts*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011.

⁸⁷ For example, see Tsui and Rich, "The Only Child and Educational Opportunity for Girls in Urban China," 74–92; Veeck, Ann, Laura Flurry, and Naihua Jiang. "Equal Dreams: The One Child Policy and the Consumption of Education in Urban China." *Consumption Markets & Culture* 6, no. 1 (2003): 81–94; and Fong, Vanessa L. "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters." *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 4 (December 1, 2002): 1098–1109.

⁸⁸ Fong, "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters," 1098–1109.

Other scholars also draw attention to the changed roles of daughters within the family.⁸⁹ Francine Deutsch's study on the effects of the one-child policy on filial piety and patrilineality in China delves into changes in family dynamics. In the same way as Fong, Deutsch's argument differs from the standard criticisms of the one-child policy in her belief that the policy may challenge China's traditional patrilineal notions instead of sustain discrimination against females. A study by Lucy Yu et al. shows that parents' expectations for daughters to do nothing more than get married, be a housewife, and leave the household⁹⁰ have been altered as daughters, nowadays often the only child, increasingly take on the role of caring for aging parents.⁹¹ Deutsch argues that when a daughter is the only child there to support parents, she is viewed as worth more economically and parents therefore now generally may value daughters more than was done previously.⁹²

These arguments are driven by the assumption that the one-child policy provides a positive framework for contemporary female gender identity. Fong and others implicitly and explicitly discuss the shift in female identity as a favorable trend, and suggest that this new access to education and changed value in the family translate to a new empowered, positive identity for females. However, the consumption of Korean dramas suggests the possibility that perhaps it is the very promise of transformation and empowerment that is the root of a new kind of anxiety for young females.

⁸⁹ Yu, Lucy C., Yanju Yu, and Phyllis Kernoff Mansfield. "Gender and Changes in Support of Parents in China: Implications for the One-Child Policy." *Gender and Society* 4, no. 1 (1990): 83–89.

⁹⁰ Wang, Wendy. "Son Preference and Educational Opportunities of Children in China— 'I Wish You Were a Boy!'" *Gender Issues* 22, no. 2 (June 1, 2005): 3–30.

⁹¹ Yu et al, "Gender and Changes in Support of Parents in China," 83–89.

⁹² Deutsch, Francine M. "Filial Piety, Patrilineality, and China's One-Child Policy." *Journal of Family Issues* 27, no. 3 (March 1, 2006): 370.

As Harriet Evans articulates, “empirically quantifiable changes in social practice – in education, employment and mobility, and marriage and divorce, for example – are not synonymous with subjective change in individuals’ assumptions about what it means to be and behave as a woman or a man.”⁹³ Gendered differences in parents’ expectations for their child’s education persist even while some couples may have given birth to a daughter and chosen to support and educate her regardless of her sex. Fengshu Liu’s study demonstrates that while parents of single children hold equally high standards for both males and females, they still tend to have “gender-stereotypic expectations” for their sons and daughters’ development of masculinity and femininity.⁹⁴ Liu asserts that gender specific expectations for girls have “been extended rather than fundamentally changed” by the one-child policy, while expectations for boys remain generally the same:

Whereas a male is still assessed mainly by his talent, a female is not only still judged by her appearance, but also by her talent. Thus, the daughter is expected to integrate both masculine and feminine characteristics, combine both inner and outer beauty, and perform both expressive and instrumental functions.⁹⁵

Liu argues that it is these gendered parental expectations that guide daughters’ thinking and behavior at an unconscious level to follow “the prescribed division between the sexes.”⁹⁶

Deutsch’s study even calls into question the claim to gender equality in education opportunities; one of her particular interview questions revealed that when given the choice to support educational goals for their son or daughter, parents still choose to

⁹³ Evans, Harriet. *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008: 14.

⁹⁴ Liu, Fengshu. “Boys as Only-children and Girls as Only-children—parental Gendered Expectations of the Only-child in the Nuclear Chinese Family in Present-day China.” *Gender and Education* 18, no. 5 (2006): 501.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

encourage and financially support sons over daughters. More specifically, daughters of the survey that did not have any brothers were encouraged to “widen their horizons’ by nontraditional pursuits, such as going abroad or working in a big company.”⁹⁷ Conversely, the daughters who were pressured to “conform to traditional norms,” such as get married before age 30, return to their hometown and get married, or get a more “peaceful job” all had brothers. Deutsch summarizes, “Parents who discouraged nontraditional gender behavior prioritized their daughters’ future family roles over their potential achievements.”⁹⁸

Generally speaking, in comparison to the status and expectations of Chinese women in the past, women in modern China do receive an elevated status in society and increased opportunities for education from being single children. However, I suggest the possibility that it is these new ideas about an economically empowered female identity, alongside the persistent parental preference for males that emerges in more subtle ways that create blockages of young women successfully coming to terms with the frameworks of contemporary gendered self-fashioning.

V. Gendered Consumption of Korean Dramas as Indicative of a Desire to Integrate a New Paradigm of Gendered Identity

In order to understand Chinese women’s gendered consumption of Korean dramas as the enactment of the desire to actualize a new paradigm of gender identity formation, we must unravel the role of the one-child policy as the central organizing principle in young Chinese women’s gender identity formation. Christopher Bollas’ theory of the

⁹⁷ Deutsch, " Filial Piety, Patrilineality, and China’s One-Child Policy," 380.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

transformational object allows us to examine the historical framework behind this phenomenon and make sense of how these forces have affected consumption patterns. In this section I will consider Bollas' theories of transformational object seeking and its application to young Chinese women born after the enactment of the one-child policy.

Bollas' theory can first be used to examine the historical dimension that influenced the particular psychosocial condition of the young Chinese women in question. The root component to Bollas' theory is the impact of the relationship between a mother and infant on the development of the infant's subjectivity. It is important to clarify that the "mother" referenced here is not necessarily the biological mother of the infant, and instead may be more generally construed as a "handling environment" in which the child first experiences care. The infant experiences this environment as a sequence of transformations through the mother's rituals of feeding, diapering, soothing, playing and sleeping, which constitute the infant's very first transformations: hunger becomes fullness and anger becomes contentment.⁹⁹ The rhythm of these primary transformations establishes a particular idiom of care that is used to handle and care for the infant. Mothers thus constitute the infants "total environment."

I submit that the one-child policy acted as an external force on the "total environment" that shaped Chinese daughters through the effect that deeply embedded parental preferences for male children were repressed. This social repression of cultural gender preferences led to the creation of an environment for Chinese parents within which discourse on the deeply ingrained cultural gender preferences for males was no longer practical. Government propaganda on the one-child policy promoted the equal value of

⁹⁹ Bollas, Christopher. *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987: 13, 33.

sons and daughters, which made parents unable to express the deeply entrenched cultural preference for male children.

Consequently, Chinese society witnessed a shift in the care and handling of daughters after the implementation of the one-child policy. As a result of the new official promotion of the equality of male and female children alongside the strict enforcement of the one-child policy, especially in urban areas, many Chinese families began to raise single daughters. Daughters now received more attention, financial support, and recognition for supporting parents in this new era. However, there still exist traces of the male preference embedded throughout Chinese society that signal an ambivalence of parents towards the value of daughters.

The ambivalence that characterizes the routine way of handling daughters is exemplified in the story of a Chinese family that Vanessa Fong recounts in her article on China's daughters. After a young girl achieved exceptionally high scores on her college entrance exam, which allowed her to attend a top university of her choice, "her father beamed at her with tears in his eyes and said, 'I was wrong to have wanted a son.'"¹⁰⁰ These ambivalent intentions of parents born out of socially repressed gender preferences for their children are unveiled and transmitted to single daughters through the idiom of care used to handle the child from infancy throughout their early lives. It is this "total environment" characterized by the one-child policy that led to the formation and emergence of unspoken but nonetheless traceable differences in the way parents treated females and males. The parents' "idiom of care," is imprinted on their progeny.

¹⁰⁰ Fong, "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters," 1098-1109.

Through Bollas' framework, the ambivalent idiom of care that was used to raise Chinese girls can be understood as an influential force in the child's early experiences of self-transformation. The idiom of care, through constant repetition, shapes the structure of the child's ego, so that traces of the idiom are constitutive of the subject's very "grammar of being." Scholarship that has pointed to "gaps" in the childcare of single Chinese children¹⁰¹ suggest that the idiom of care that was used to handle and care for children who were born into the total environment after the institution of the one-child policy may have established a collective, female grammar of being.

The nature of these transformations, or the emotions associated with them, establish a framework for the female grammar of being that is shaped by their experience of being an object of their parent's care. There is consensus in scholarship that affect or emotions "are a primary idiom for defining and negotiating social relations of the self,"¹⁰² and that the early period during which socialization processes of the child occurs is a crucial time for identity formation. The psychological development of the subjectivity of Chinese women under their parents' ambivalent idiom of care was shaped by how "each person transfers elements of the parents' child care to his own handling of himself as an object."¹⁰³

This particular framework can be further elucidated through an understanding of Bollas' identification of the structure the child's grammar of being as an "unthought

¹⁰¹ For example, see Tseng, Wen-Shing, Y. H. Wu David, East-West Culture Learning Institute, and John A. Burns School of Medicine. Department of Psychiatry. *Chinese Culture and Mental Health*. Orlando: Academic Press, 1985.

¹⁰² Lutz, Catherine, and Geoffrey M. White. "The Anthropology of Emotions." *Annual Reviews* 15 (1986): 405-36.

¹⁰³ Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, 59.

known."¹⁰⁴ The unthought known of young Chinese women, derived from early transformations, was shaped by the ambivalence in the unconscious intentions of the care with regard to the value of girls as objects of parents' investment, both emotional and economic.

The unthought known, attendant but unacknowledged in Chinese females, is the foundation that informs the way a child becomes a subject. A product of being handled by parents as an object influenced by the ambivalent unthought known, the particular subjectivity of the child emerges and becomes visible in the way the child treats and interacts with others, the preferences or choices that the child makes, and the aspirations that they have. Bollas maintains that these manifestations of the subject bear significant traces of early transformational experiences.

An understanding of the subjectivity of young Chinese women influenced by an environment shaped by parents' ambivalent idiom of care regarding the worth of daughters suggests that the consumption of Korean dramas can be viewed, as Homi Bhabha articulates, as the desire to interrogate gender identity. Bollas' concept of transformational object seeking yields a view for understanding patterns of entertainment and material consumption as a form of such interrogation. For the child, the transformational object is representative of the first experience with processes of alteration of self-experience, and that memory of the first transformational object "manifests itself in the person's search for an object [...] that promises to transform the self."¹⁰⁵ Bollas defines transformational object seeking as the "memorial search in the future for something that occurred in the past."¹⁰⁶ In

¹⁰⁴ Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, 17.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

this way, material consumption patterns, such as the high levels of consumption of Korean dramas, can be recognized as the search for the transformational object. The theory of the transformational object allows us to understand young Chinese women's gendered consumption of Korean dramas as indicative not of longing or desire for the object itself but rather a certainty that the object will deliver transformation with respect to the value of females in the eyes of their parents.

Thus, the consumption of Korean television dramas can be read as indicative of a desire to search for an object that promises transformation, serving as a new paradigm for the interrogation of gender identity. The continued consumption of Korean dramas by young Chinese women is a continuous interrogation, a pattern that repeats and reflects the gendered ambiguity that surrounds identity and contributes to its formation. The childhood care of young Chinese women was shaped by feelings of ambivalence over the value of a female child that emerged from the repressive impact of the one-child policy. The collective unthought known stemming from this particular idiom of care played a crucial role in shaping the subjectivities of young Chinese women. This view permits us to reveal the Korean drama consumption patterns as an expression of the need to interrogate female gender identity through the search for the transformational object.

Methodology

Popular cultural artifacts have been increasingly recognized as rich resources for sociological analysis. More specifically, some scholars have focused on how popular media employ melodramatic tropes to encode markers of collective historical experience. As one example, scholars of Asian film and drama have argued that cultural artifacts function as vehicles for collective acts of recalling, sometimes through reenactment, painful collective experiences. This approach is relevant to the inquiry at hand because I will argue that the consumption of Korean dramas by the demographic of young Chinese women may be understood as a sociocultural phenomenon produced by a period of ambiguity with regard to traditional family dynamics that surrounded the implementation of new social and economic policies during the reform era.

Studies of consumer socialization environments are important to understand consumption choices of products of any kind, including popular cultural artifacts. These studies on consumer socialization environments, defined by Kara Chan and James U. McNeal as “the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace,”¹⁰⁷ emphasize the close affinity between material and aesthetic consumption and socializing environmental factors. In mainland China, there exists a unique collision of film and television, politics, and commerce that may be understood to influence consumer environments. Ying Zhu and Stanley Rosen posit that “changing patterns under which films are produced and

¹⁰⁷ Chan, Kara, and James U. McNeal. “Parent-child Communications about Consumption and Advertising in China.” *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 20, no. 4 (2003): 317–34.

consumed” in China reflect a distinct relationship between art and politics that is deeply imbued with a “strong historical dimension.”¹⁰⁸

In order to understand the impact that the distinct consumer socialization environment has on Korean drama viewers in China, it is useful to look at studies of television media that have yielded important insights with regard to how TV programming and commercials are both shaped by and in turn shape patterns of communication between parents and children regarding cultural values. Chan and McNeal posit that parents play a significant role in “children's consumer socialization through parent-child communication, training, and modeling.”¹⁰⁹ Premised on Richard W. Pollay's theory that “the values displayed [...] offer consumers rationales for the purchase decision,”¹¹⁰ Yan Bing Zhang and Jake Harwood claim that understanding the cultural values that inform consumption rationales are critical to understanding decisions to consume. Zhang and Harwood, who coded Chinese television commercials for value themes, concluded that there are several specific values that are “pervasive” in Chinese TV commercials, including the most frequently observed value of “family.”¹¹¹ This suggests that young Chinese women's consumption preferences may be construed as transmitted through values that were communicated through the socialization environment within which the child grew up.

I have already noted how the era into which this demographic was born and became socialized was characterized by ambivalence with regard to the question of whether or not girls are valuable as objects of investment, which stemmed from the implementation of the

¹⁰⁸ Zhu, Ying, and Stanley Rosen. *Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

¹⁰⁹ Chan and McNeal, “Parent-child Communications about Consumption and Advertising in China,” 318-319.

¹¹⁰ Zhang, Yan Bing, and Jake Harwood. “Modernization and Tradition in an Age of Globalization: Cultural Values in Chinese Television Commercials.” *Journal of Communication* 54, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 158.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 156-72.

one-child policy and other social and economic reforms. My thesis argues that the aesthetic preference for Korean dramas may be construed as reflecting on the sociohistorical conditions that lead to the aesthetic consumption of and response to Korean television dramas.

Bollas' psychoanalytical framework, which posits that a child's aesthetic preferences are shaped by parents' idiom of care, informs processes of identity formation in a similar fashion to the way sociologists have understood consumer socialization as a consequence of the communication between parents and children. As I introduced in the previous section, Bollas offers a new vantage point from which to analyze the drama: as a collective transformational object. In the search for transformational objects in adulthood, Bollas explicitly recognizes the role of the arts in stimulating the pre-verbal, unconscious memory of an aesthetic associated with the early parent-child relationship. He asserts that, in the collective search for the transformational object, "we go to the theatre...to search for aesthetic experiences."¹¹² In other words, we go to the movies, or consume television dramas, to be transformed. Bollas explains the two-way dynamic between the cultural artifact and the viewer's reception of the aesthetic moment captured in art:

Culture embodies in the arts varied symbolic equivalents to the search for the transformation. In the quest for a deep subjective experience of an object, the [cultural artifact] provides us with occasions for the experience of ego memories of transformation [...] In the arts we have a location for such occasional recollections: intense memories of the process of self-transformation.¹¹³

With this framework in mind, the drama may be understood to function as a transformational object. As a transformational object, the aesthetic embodied in the drama presents a moment that resonates with the memory of the viewers' respective relation to

¹¹² Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, 17.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

their parents, whose idiom of care lies at the source of aesthetic experience. In the context of the communication of collective values across generations, an understanding of the sociohistorical aspects of consumption is necessary for interpretation.

As discussed above, lifestyle shifts in accordance with new policies of the 1980s required Chinese families to deny their desire to maintain a status quo that valued male progeny as objects of social and capital investment. The result was an ambivalence that reflected the silencing of the traditional gender values, which aligns with observed patterns of behavior specific to children born and raised under the one-child-policy.¹¹⁴ Given the persistent role of family in TV programming and commercials in China, the idea of the family as a representation of the sociocultural environment created by the implementation of new policies will be central to my establishment of the familial connections depicted in my case study drama as key for analysis.

To explain the consumption of Korean dramas as evidence of a psychosocial legacy wrought by the junction of reforms in the 1980s, I will reveal how internal structures of coherence within *My Love from the Star*,¹¹⁵ one of the most popular Korean dramas in China, resonate with an unspoken ambivalence that concerns a female as an object of capital, social, and cultural investment. I have previously suggested that this ambivalence may be construed as the central structural framework around which identity formation processes developed in China under the one-child policy. I will use Bollas' theoretical concept of a collective grammar of being to examine aesthetic consumption as a

¹¹⁴ For example, see Fong, Vanessa L. *Only Hope*, 180.

¹¹⁵ I have chosen to use the version of title *My Love from the Star* because the majority of online video streaming and Wikipedia sites use this name. The official Korean title is (*byeoleseo on geudae*) 별에서 온 그대. The drama is also known in English as *You Came From the Star*, *My Lover From The Stars*, *You From Another Star*, and *My Love From Another Star* (http://wiki.d-addicts.com/You_Who_Came_From_the_Stars).

consequence of early childhood experiences in which females' position as an object of parental care and management was suffused with an ambivalence concerning their value. A close reading of the compositional strategy underlying the drama's cohesion offers a perspective from which to see the sociological and historical significance of this cultural artifact; this forms the basis for my analysis of the drama. On one side, internal structures of coherence call attention to the drama's inherent historical commentary; in particular, one that views a subject's behavior as traces of an earlier process of identity formation. On the other side, the resolution of an identity rent apart because of issues related to an ambivalence over the value of females in today's society located within the drama explains the intensity of the rapport between Chinese female consumers of the drama and the artifact itself.

The idea that the drama may be read as offering a metahistorical perspective is reinforced by the historical framework laid out in the drama that anchors the present-day romantic relationship between Cheon Song Yi, a successful actress, and Do Min Joon, a quiet recluse who happens to be a being from another planet who was stranded on earth for four hundred years, within the historical context of early 15th century Chosun¹¹⁶ Korea.¹¹⁷ The overarching historical continuance within the drama insists that we understand Do Min Joon's contemporary behavior framed within his relationship with Cheon Song Yi as bearing intrinsic traces of a past experience in which sociohistorical conditions shaped his identity, which becomes central to development of the plot. One might even suggest that the otherworldliness and historicity of Do Min Joon, first represented in the drama as a

¹¹⁶ Korea's Chosun era lasted from 1392 – 1897. Also commonly spelled as Choson, Chosen, or Joseon in literature.

¹¹⁷ For this thesis, I referred to the English subtitles of *My Love from the Star* found on Dramafever.com.

streak of light seen in the sky, may be seen as an analog to the idea of an unconscious “unthought known,” or a prior context whose presence is felt if not “seen.”

By rooting the story within a historical structure, the drama asks us to read deeper into how the introduction of the central relational issues attendant in *My Love from the Star* sets the stage for the rest of the drama to follow. The narrative of a young girl living during the Chosun era as she undergoes manifold acts of rejection by parental figures – first by her in-laws, then her own parents – within the historical backstory is the first instance that fashions the frame for a pattern of female identity shaped by an emotional struggle of self-handling constructed by past experiences of rejection by parents. The endemic issue over the value of a female to her parents within the drama is established early through a powerful portrayal of a young girl living during the Chosun era who must die for her value to her parents to be seen. Misrepresentation and misidentification that lead to scandal that tarnishes the reputation and consequently the value of the female protagonists are significant tools utilized in the drama to generate conflict over the value of a female.

In the historical backstory, Do Min Joon plays the crucial role of protector to a young girl who is repeatedly confronted by multiple reiterations of violent rejection by her parents attributable to her social, cultural, and economic value to the family, which sets up a key feature that characterizes Do Min Joon’s role throughout the drama. Beginning from the very core of the drama’s foundation set up by this historical frame in which Do Min Joon not only protects the young girl but also relieves her feelings of resentment allowing them to give way to a brief moment of happiness before her death, Do Min Joon’s character takes on the function of representing the promise of transcendence of negative value-laden views of female identity, which allows us to anticipate his role in Cheon Song Yi’s story as well.

The incorporation of a figure that observes other values in women proffers and facilitates a portal for a new paradigm of female identity formation helps to substantiate the view of consumption of *My Love from the Star* as the search for the transformational object. Do Min Joon's form as a magical being from another planet with magical abilities that he continually draws on to save the female protagonists may also be read to illustrate within the drama a fantasy of self-reparation from familial rejection that comes from beyond one's own contemporary setting. A close reading of the historical commentary within the drama calls attention to the important unstated conditions that show the connection between historical patterns and the theme of female value that resonates with the idiom of care under which the identities of females who consumed are shaped, and thus is the main source of appeal that may account for consumption behavior.

In addition to the historical backstory that unfolds in the first few episodes, the present-day story of Do Min Joon and Cheon Song Yi also consistently reference the historical dimension of *My Love from the Star* through various cinematic techniques, a feature that embeds the historical framework throughout the drama. After the drama transitions to the story in present day Seoul and Do Min Joon first recognizes Cheon Song Yi's resemblance to the young girl he met in the Chosun dynasty, a flashback to a moment in the Chosun era reminds viewers not to forget the relevance of the historical backstory. The strategic flashbacks that continue well into the drama present similar characterizations of Song Yi and the young girl of the past, in both physical appearance and the plot feature of being surrounded by familial issues related to their value as a daughter, which functions aesthetically to affix the drama to its historical frame.

The prominence of the historical frame within the drama draws attention to sources

of confusion and ambivalence through the linguistic vehicle of Do Min Joon's habit of using of old-fashioned Chosun phrases. Do Min Joon's speech often leaves Song Yi confused and unable to understand the meaning of his words, compelling her to ask Do Min Joon to explain what he means. In some cases, Song Yi is left wondering at the message of his words.¹¹⁸ A similar sense of confusion and ambiguity over the meaning of another's words portrayed in the drama lies within the history of subjective experience of young Chinese women as an object of their parents ambivalence over the question of being worthy of investment or not in parents' eyes. Through these small moments and pieces of dialogue, *My Love from the Star* displays a key historical dimension to the drama that acts as a compelling aesthetic feature that may explain what drives Chinese consumption.

When this historical framework is read in tandem with Cheon Song Yi's own backstory, which features familial conflict and the ultimate separation of her family as a result of parental anxiety over economic problems that are explicitly connected to her parents' evaluation of Song Yi as an object of economic value and worthy of investment, it becomes clear that the drama's portrayal of a pattern of relational conflict between the members of Song Yi's family comprises a portion of the internal structure of coherence set up by the historical framework that speaks silently of a context that lies at the core of experiential memory and identity formation for the demographic of Chinese female viewers whose consumption behavior I seek to explain.

In order to demonstrate the crucial aesthetic elements of *My Love from the Star*

¹¹⁸ For example, in an early meeting, Do Min Joon likens Song Yi to the "river banks of the year of Byungja," and after he explains to a very confused Song Yi that he was referring to her arrogance by citing the historical origin of the word, Song Yi remarks, "So you didn't just swear at me, but you swore in the ancient language...?" (Episode 2, 10:00). In another scene, Do Min Joon quotes Myung Shim Bo Gam, an old classical Korean text, which prompts Song Yi to say, "Be honest with me! Did you come from Harvard or from a folk village? Why are you so old fashioned?" (Episode 7, 19:00).

established by the historical framework of the drama that may be used to explain consumption, I will explore three tropes that recur in Cheon Song Yi's story. First, I will examine the presentation of a female identity negatively shaped by others' ambivalent perceptions of the worth of a female. Secondly, I will explore the nature of how issues over the value of daughters as worthy of parental investment manifest in the drama. Finally, I will show how the drama portrays the healing of a female identity ruptured by issues related to ambivalence over the value of daughters.

Analysis of My Love from the Star

Section 1: How does *My Love from the Star* present a female identity shaped by ambivalence in regards to the worth of a female?

The historical framework of the drama resonates with the frequent invocation of the trope of female anxiety in regards to being worthy of parental investment that reveals an identity fashioned from a similar ambivalence regarding a female's value that suffused the idiom of care that shaped Chinese daughters' subjectivities that may be used to explain the rapport of the drama's internal structures of coherence with Chinese viewers.

A salient attribute of main female protagonist Cheon Song Yi's personality is her arrogance. However, viewers quickly learn that her feisty arrogance actually comes from an insecurity that stems from being starved of affection, a lack of which she first experienced from her family. The website Dramabeans describes Cheon Song Yi's character as follows: "She's not egotistic just because egotism is funny [...] she's so starved for affection that she'd rather have hate mail than no mail, even when her hate mail rubs her heart raw and makes her cry at night."¹¹⁹ The sharp criticisms from her mother – for instance, when she tells Song Yi that she has no acting ability and only makes money from her good looks¹²⁰ – hurt Song Yi more than she's willing show to show on the outside, which she hides through exuding confidence and arrogance. The true depth of her hurt is revealed to viewers through the tearful scenes when Song Yi is alone at home.¹²¹ Song Yi portrays a female identity whose personality and identity are chiefly characterized by insecurities that are

¹¹⁹ "You From Another Star: Episode 2 » Dramabeans Korean Drama Recaps." *Dramabeans*, December 18, 2013. <http://www.dramabeans.com/2013/12/you-from-another-star-episode-2/>.

¹²⁰ Episode 1.

¹²¹ Episode 2.

heavily impacted by being an object of her parents' ambivalent care. Although the relationship between Song Yi and her parents is not close, Song Yi still harbors a desire to be loved and an anxiety over being valued by her parents.

Cheon Song Yi's insecurities about how other people regard and value her are recapitulated within the drama on multiple levels. In addition to feelings of anxiety over being valuable and worthy to her parents as described above, an internal female anxiety concerning female value is also re-presented in Song Yi's career as an actress and as a celebrity, with a constantly fluctuating relationship with her fans. Cheon Song Yi covers up her insecurities about not being liked and valued by others through acting conceited and arrogant with her parents, her friends, and her manager, but those closest to her know others' negative evaluations of her cut her to the core.¹²² When her manager suggests that Song Yi accept an offer to film a "Cheon Song Yi Special," Song Yi snorts and tells him, "I'm special to my bones. You think people wouldn't know that I'm special without such events?"¹²³ Song Yi's external arrogance juxtaposes her internal level of confidence about her career and her relationship, insecurity that arises from the conflict within her family.

The theme of mistaken identity is an organizing principle that pervades the drama and evokes feelings of confusion and ambiguity that reverberate with similar emotions that at the source are produced by an ambivalent idiom of care related to the worth of a female. From their first meeting where Song Yi mistakes Do Min Joon as a fan stalker and Do Min Joon's appraisal of Song Yi as a negligent student, to the discovery of Do Min Joon's

¹²² One character that demonstrates this well is Cheon Song Yi's manager. Although he plays a minor side role in the drama, his interactions with Song Yi are often at her most vulnerable and lonely moments in the beginning episodes of the drama, such as the plagiarism scene in Episode 2, or the epilogue in which he writes a letter to "The Next Manager" in Episode 7.

¹²³ Episode 2, 13:00.

true identity as a being from another planet and the declaration that Song Yi is not the same person as the young girl Do Min Joon knew in the Chosun era, misinterpretations of characters and identities create a powerful theme of uncertainty over whether one is valued or not, which elicits rapport with the emotions of a female identity shaped an ambivalent idiom of care.

Misrepresentation of female identity that leads to a devalued female character begins in the Chosun dynasty, where the young girl is falsely accused of a crime and bringing dishonor upon her family, and resurfaces in Cheon Song Yi's storyline in an equally disreputable and damaging manner that likewise escalates, not only threatening the female protagonist's value to her parents, but her life is put in danger as well. Cheon Song Yi's value as an actress, the feature that made her valuable to her parents, is called into question when she is falsely linked to the death of another actress and her career takes a plunge. Even the economic value of Cheon Song Yi, Korea's "national actress,"¹²⁴ is thrown into limbo, a plot device that speaks to an unthought known fashioned by the ambivalent idiom of care regarding a daughter as worthy of investment – such as economic investment in education, or social investment in encouragement to pursue career aspirations – under which Chinese viewers were raised.

A scene where Song Yi is accused of plagiarizing her school report¹²⁵ demonstrates this pattern of misrepresentation and explicitly dramatizes a moment in which the value of females as worthy of investment in educational endeavors is called into question, an issue that affects Song Yi deeply. Song Yi is labeled as "ignorant and stupid" in online comments

¹²⁴ In the first episode, Song Yi's mother brags to her friends, "Everyone knows Cheon Song Yi in Korea. Everyone has the title of national singer or national actor nowadays. But they are all exaggerations. You need to have everyone in Korea know you first."

¹²⁵ Episode 2.

after videos of the “Cheon Song Yi gets a zero!” spectacle were posted online, and Song Yi’s anxiety over the critiques and rejection that she receives from her fans culminate in an emotional break down in front of Do Min Joon.¹²⁶ As iterated above, post-reform daughters in China grew up in an environment that allowed increased parental investment in education for daughters as a direct result of the policy. However, I also demonstrated in the previous section that although the policy permitted the expansion of social aspirations of females, this environment was still a period of suppressed ambivalence regarding the worth of females in terms of investment. Thus, the scene in which a female is pictured as a fraud culpable of intellectual ignorance may echo the anxieties of female viewers who grew up in an environment characterized both by newfound educational opportunities and a powerful ambivalence over the value of a daughter as worthy of investment, frequently in terms of educational support.

The intensity of the psychological anxieties impacted by of the ambivalence that shaped female identity in regards to her worth also reveals itself in Cheon Song Yi’s behavior in her relationship with Do Min Joon. Song Yi’s fear that Do Min Joon, someone who values her, will abandon her is a prominent plot device utilized in the romantic storyline of the drama that echoes her father’s act of leaving her family when she was young. The effects of the traumatic event of her father leaving her family due to conflict brought on by issues over the worth of a daughter on Song Yi’s identity and fears manifest in scenes where she asks Do Min Joon to stay with her at the hospital, and when she tells him that her ideal preference is someone who would never leave her.

The paramount theme of brutal rejection of a female because of her value is also

¹²⁶ Episode 1.

reiterated later on in the romantic relationship. Although Do Min Joon's secret reason for breaking up with her is to protect her, he tells Song Yi that he was only interested in her because she resembled the young girl from the Chosun dynasty, but since she is "just Cheon Song Yi,"¹²⁷ she is not special or valuable to him. The drama also unobtrusively employs the setting of a museum for this breakup scene, which refers back to the implicit historical frame of the drama. Museums, or "memory institutions,"¹²⁸ allow viewers to harken back to the historical structures of coherence within the drama in which issues over the value of females play a defining role. The use of museums as the setting for several scenes in the drama mimics the staging of identity formation as a product of past experiences, further supported by scholars' understandings of museums as sites of "historical consciousness."¹²⁹

The plot mechanism in which one character breaks off a romantic relationship employing the cruel ruse of telling the other person that they are not worth anything to them is a frequently occurring pattern in Korean dramas. The secret behind these scenes is always that the character is forced to break with the person they love in order to protect them, and they utilize cruelty in saying that the other is not valuable to them in order to provide the other with a clean break. This theme in Korean dramas in which a loved one criticizes one's worth and value out of love they must hide for some reason may have rapport with viewers who wish to render comprehensible similar experiences of rejection related to their own worth.

Section 2: How do issues over the value of a daughter as worthy of parental investment

¹²⁷ Episode 17.

¹²⁸ Crane, Susan A. "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum." *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (December 1, 1997): 44–63. doi:10.1111/0018-2656.00030.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

manifest in the drama?

My Love from the Star contains an explicit pattern that establishes Cheon Song Yi as unquestionably valuable to her family in an economic sense, which speaks to the Chinese consumers' search for the object that promises transformation in regards to the value of females in the eyes of their parents. However, in spite of the theme of a valuable daughter to her parents, issues over the worth of a female still appear in the drama in junction with parental anxieties over economic issues that ultimately contribute to dramatic familial conflict that splits up a family. This element composes the structures of coherence within the drama that resonates with ambivalent conditions that shaped the identities of the demographic of viewers under consideration.

The drama features a young woman who is undeniably valuable to her family in terms of economic worth. This aspect is embedded is within the drama and explicitly illustrated through Song Yi's unemployed mother, who spends her time at spas and shopping at high-end malls, and although she is often verbally harsh towards Song Yi, she also regularly recognizes and exalts Song Yi's value,¹³⁰ a theme which may be read as resonant with the psychological desires of post-reform Chinese women to be valuable in the eyes of their parents. Young Chinese women's furious consumption of this aesthetic within the drama may be understood as the enactment of the search for the transformational object, or the promise to be transformed from a state of ambivalent worth to their parents to worthy of investment, as Cheon Song Yi is to her parents in the drama.

However, the indisputability of Cheon Song Yi's worth to her parents also emerges as a central factor in the major family conflict in the drama. The ultimate catalyst of the

¹³⁰ There are multiple scenes throughout the drama that depict Song Yi's mother regularly bragging about her daughter to other mothers.

separation of Song Yi's family is revealed to viewers through a flashback back to a scene from Song Yi's childhood, when a twelve-year old Song Yi and younger brother Yoon Jae overhear their parents' voices emerge from the cracked-open door:

Mother: You can just leave.

Father: I told you! I will raise the kids.

Mother: Then take Yoon Jae! I will take Song Yi.

Father: You want Song Yi because she makes money, and give me Yoon Jae because he's useless?

Mother: Yeah! I'm going to raise Song Yi because she's worth money. You can't help her amount to anything. I was the one who made her into an actress. I was the one who followed her to her shoots. I have to take care of her from now on. I'm going to make sure she's successful.

Father: I can do that too. I can go to her shoots like you always do. I will make her successful too. Why can't I do it when you can? Do you know how much money she makes? I can't just let you have her.¹³¹

Various aspects of this moment are crucial to the structure of coherence that permeates the drama that plays a compelling role in appealing to young Chinese women. First, the scene's portrayal of parental anxiety over economic problems is a familiar aesthetic to Chinese viewers, who were raised under an idiom of care that was shaped by an environment in which traditionally economic customs were suppressed by the one-child policy. The ambivalent sentiments that shaped the specific idiom of care used to raise Chinese girls post-1980s reforms stemmed from the repression of traditional preference for sons that came from basic economic reasons: in Chinese society, daughters traditionally left their birth house at the time of marriage, while sons stayed in the family home after marriage and carried out the responsibility to support parents as they aged, making male children more valuable to parents economically. The transmission of this idiom of care that reflected this entrenched aspect of Chinese society thus shaped the collective unthought known of young Chinese women born after the reform era, giving rise to unconscious

¹³¹ Episode 9.

psychological anxieties over their own value as worthy of economic and social investment to their parents. The plot feature of *My Love from the Star* that portrays a family with parents afflicted by economic pressures resonates with the psychological anxieties of the unthought known of young Chinese women regarding their perceived economic role and value to the family.

In addition to touching on the subject of parents' economic anxiety, this scene also contains the essential staging of issues over the worth of a daughter as a key factor that leads to familial conflict. While Song Yi's status in her parents' eyes as valuable remains ingrained, it is ultimately a condition that contributes to the conflict between her parents. Family conflict related to the value of a daughter reenacts the anxieties of the collective unthought known in young Chinese viewers. It is the nexus of these two ingredients – parental economic anxiety and issues related to the worth of a daughter – that are portrayed as the decisive components that lead to the break in Song Yi's family; these are the same ingredients that are central to the formation of the subjectivity of young Chinese women shaped by the ambivalent idiom of care. Thus, the presentation of Song Yi's family conflict is reminiscent to Chinese viewers of their own perceptions related to their own parents of being the cause of family discord due to their failure to be valuable and worthy of investment to their parents that has origins in an ambivalent unthought known. Despite Song Yi's outward accusations of her mother's greed as the cause for splitting with her father,¹³² Song Yi blames herself for her father's departure from their family and the regret for her unkind words towards him continues to haunt her and shape her thoughts, personality, and choices – her identity – for years to come.

¹³² Episode 1, 20:00.

The consequences of the rift in Song Yi's family that result from her parents' fight constitute an internal structure of coherence that also manifests in the character of Song Yi's younger brother Yoon Jae, a brooding, rebellious high school boy. The drama depicts Yoon Jae's defiant attitude and external negativity towards his family as deriving to some degree from the jarring break of their family, demonstrating another negative repercussion of the conflict engendered by issues related to the worth of a female.

To Yoon Jae, money was the cause of fracturing their family; in particular, the money Song Yi earned as child actress: "Didn't you know? I left home because I didn't want to spend your money. Because I have to spend your money at home. So stop sending money home. Your money ruined our family! Dad wouldn't have been like that if it weren't for you."¹³³ Yoon Jae exhibits his frustrations through his angry temperament and rebellious behavior towards his family. The convergence of parental anxiety over economic problems with issues related to the Song Yi's worth to her parents continue to surface through Yoon Jae's character, which torments Song Yi with feelings of insecurity and guilt that at the root trace back to the family rift.

The family conflict in *My Love from the Star* is closely linked to several aspects that resonate with the ambivalent unthought known in young Chinese women. The portrayal of how the junction of parents' anxiety over economic problems inherently linked to Song Yi's economic value to her parents as the source of family conflict and severance deeply resonates with the apprehension of young Chinese women that they themselves are not worthy or valuable in their parents' eyes. Interestingly, this critical moment in the drama is also the scene in which Cheon Song Yi meets Do Min Joon for the very first time in the

¹³³ Episode 3, 43:00.

modern day. Do Min Joon is not only present at the decisive moment in Song Yi's relationship with her parents, but he also uses his magical abilities to save young Song Yi who, blinded by tears, runs out into the street and is nearly hit by a truck. Thus, in this scene viewers witness Do Min Joon resume his role as protector, hundreds of years after he defended the young girl in the Chosun dynasty.

Section 3: How does the drama portray the healing of an identity ruptured by issues related to ambivalence over the value of females?

The presentation in *My Love from the Star* of the deeply yearned-for resolution of a female identity affected by the issues pertaining to the worth of a female is a compelling characteristic that suggests an affinity with the psychological wishes of post-reform Chinese viewers to similarly resolve psychological rifts related to their own experiential memories with their parents.

I will first explore how the inclusion of an aesthetic of female desire for reparation of a family break caused by economic conflict related to the value of daughters echoes post-reform Chinese women's own desires concerning their parents, which may thus explain the appeal of the drama to the particular demographic of Chinese viewers. Although Song Yi's relationship with her mom is tumultuous, characterized by arguing, criticizing, and yelling at each other, there still exists a desire within Song Yi to be loved by her mother that makes her continue to answer her mom's phone calls and send her money. During a fight, Song Yi's recalls when her mother told her: "You told me to never call you again. You didn't want me to be your daughter anymore." Song Yi's mother dismisses the memory, saying, "Since

when did you listen to me?” Song Yi tells her: “I always listened to you.”¹³⁴ Although Song Yi resents her mother for splitting up with her father over financial issues, she still wishes for reconciliation with her mother, father, and younger brother.

Song Yi’s yearning to reunite with her father is even more apparent and explicit in the plot structure of *My Love from the Star*. Although physically absent for most of the drama, Song Yi’s father is referenced in almost every episode, through Song Yi’s lingering look at a family picture when she opens her wallet in a taxi, her happy flashbacks to moments together with her father from when she was younger, or in a conversation with Do Min Joon. To the present day, Song Yi steadfastly continues the tradition of eating fried chicken and drinking beer on the first day of snowfall of the year, a ritual that the two once shared together. The overt pattern that both explicitly and implicitly comments on a female desire to repair familial breaks acts as a structural device that resonates with the idiom of care that shaped processes of self-fashioning for post-reform young women in China, giving rise to a psychological desire to repair rifts within the family engendered by an ambivalence regarding the value of a daughter.

My Love from the Star illustrates a process of healing in which Song Yi is able to move beyond the anger she fostered towards both of her parents over the severing of her family and leave behind the anxiety she held over being the cause of conflict within her family. Part of the reason why Song Yi is able to do this is Do Min Joon, whose character incorporates a new trope into the drama: a theme of preciousness. Do Min Joon views Song Yi as the most precious and valuable person to him, and although he denies it at first, it becomes explicitly clear that Song Yi is someone he is willing to go to any length to

¹³⁴ Episode 1, 20:00.

protect.¹³⁵ The culminating moment of the drama interestingly remarks on an important theme through the portrayal of Do Min Joon's ultimate sacrifice to save Song Yi, when he forfeits his greatest secret that he protected for hundreds of years: his identity.¹³⁶ Through Do Min Joon, the drama presents a figure that sees through negative value-laden perceptions of females to hold her in high regard, which helps Song Yi to engage in a process of healing past psychological scars.

Do Min Joon's lack of his own family and desperate wishes to stay with Cheon Song Yi and her family on earth also emphasizes a theme of the preciousness of family, especially Cheon Song Yi's family.¹³⁷ Do Min Joon acts as Cheon Song Yi's protector: saving her, doing everything she asks, listening to her, but he also saves her in a different sense through triggering the healing of her broken family that assists the resolution of Song Yi's fractured identity and family. Song Yi's life-threatening experience serves as a force that helps her to transcend her anxieties of being regarded as worthy to her parents when she decides, "I'm going to spend the rest of the time I'm given wisely."¹³⁸ This is also a powerful defining theme in Do Min Joon's storyline, when both Do Min Joon and Song Yi both decide that rather than try to be apart, they will treasure their last weeks together before Do Min Joon

¹³⁵ Episode 20, 23:00.

¹³⁶ While being questioned by detectives who are aware of Do Min Joon's secret identity as a being from another planet, one detective asks him, "What made you do it? There must have been something you wanted to protect while you lived under multiple different names. Why throw everything away in that moment? I just want to know why." After steadfastly working to keep his identity a secret for his 400 years on earth, he chose to throw it all away and expose his magical powers to the public. Do Min Joon responds, "You two have someone precious to you right? I, too, have someone precious. The thought of losing that someone made me lose my mind. [...] Looking back, everyone protected his or her precious someone by fighting, and getting hurt and losing. They all lived fiercely. I too, have someone like that." (Episode 20, 22:00).

¹³⁷ In one scene, Do Min Joon is shown in tears, saying that he wishes he could stay and be together with Cheon Song Yi and her family (Episode 20, 27:00).

¹³⁸ Episode 15, 37:00.

must leave earth and Song Yi indefinitely.¹³⁹ In the contemporary story with Cheon Song Yi, we see Do Min Joon replay the role as representative of a promise of transcendence previously presented with the backstory of the young Chosun girl, enabling Song Yi to overcome her issues related to family and assume a new paradigm of gender identity, “no longer that little girl who was crying because of her dad.”¹⁴⁰

The resolution of the breaks in Song Yi’s identity as a result of her role in the division of her family is inextricably linked to the reparation of the relational rifts in her family as well. After years of resenting her father for his choice to leave their family and stay away for twelve years, Song Yi’s mindset softens: “I guess I’ve gotten older. I can finally understand why he said those things. He didn’t mean them. I’m just angry right now... Because the time we spent together was too short. He shouldn’t have loved me so much, if he wasn’t going to stay for long.”¹⁴¹ In this conversation with Do Min Joon, Song Yi is shown to transcend her anger at her parents and thus leave behind her guilt for playing a part in the conflict between them that shaped the way she handled herself as an object. It is also interesting to read the deep impression that Do Min Joon, the symbol for the catalyst for resolution, leaves on Yoon Jae’s character, the negative manifestation of the conflict within Song Yi’s family. Yoon Jae’s admiration for Do Min Joon-*hyung*, whom he calls “older brother,”¹⁴² inspires him to study harder, act more well behaved, and be more accepting of his family, demonstrating Do Min Joon’s character’s role in repairing the manifestations of the break in Song Yi’s family and identity.

¹³⁹ Episode 18.

¹⁴⁰ Episode 12, 3:00.

¹⁴¹ Episode 9, 29:00.

¹⁴² *Hyung* is a Korean kinship term that means “older brother,” and is often used by a younger male to address an older non-relative male to demonstrate familiarity.

Song Yi's actualization of a new model for female identity is both through the transcendence of her parents' value-laden views of her as well as emotional alleviation through the repair of her family. Although Do Min Joon's character that views other values in Song Yi allows her to move past views based on the worth of a female, the new paradigm of female identity is fully instilled through the overturning of the status of separation in her family. Through the course of the drama, Song Yi makes several trips to the emergency room, and it is these life-threatening incidents that are ultimately the grounds that bring her family back together. *My Love from the Star* dramatizes the forces required for her parents to move beyond the value-laden views of Song Yi and the conflict surrounding it to finally unite, but unlike the young girl of the past who still died because of issues surrounding her worth as a female, Song Yi's survival of her accidents to wake up to the return of her father and the reunion of her family finally brings closure and a happy ending to the issues over the value of a daughter.

With Do Min Joon – the symbol of the promise of repair – present, the drama presents a scene of healing and renewal when Song Yi's family has their first family meal together in twelve years.¹⁴³ These scenes, including a tearful scene of the long awaited reconciliation between Song Yi and her father¹⁴⁴ present a moment that stages viewers' own desires to reimagine an identity shaped by ambivalence in regards to the value of females. In *My Love from the Star*, viewers witness a tale comprised of elements resonant with their own experiences that is able to achieve resolution in the end, as Song Yi describes: "It gives me a sense of relief. Like lifting a burden off a corner of my heart."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Episode 20, 25:00.

¹⁴⁴ Episode 15, 2:00.

¹⁴⁵ Episode 16, 32:00.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have sought to explain the high levels of consumption of Korean television dramas among a specific demographic of Chinese viewers. I have argued that Korean drama consumption by young Chinese women who were born after the reform era beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through the 1980s may be read to reveal a need to redress contemporary psychological issues related to gendered self-identity that can be traced back to early identity formation processes whose contours were shaped profoundly by an ambivalent idiom of care in regards to the worth of females as objects of parents' social, cultural, and economic investment that resulted from the sweeping political and social reforms of the 1980s, the one-child policy in particular. I have explored how the phenomenon of gendered consumption of Korean dramas that contain specific elements that are deeply resonant with young Chinese women may thus be read as an implicit interrogation of prevailing views of gendered identity.

I have analyzed the popular drama *My Love from the Star* for specific patterns and aesthetic elements that make up the internal structure of coherence of the drama in order to read how the consumption patterns of young Chinese females may be understood within a perspective that delves deeper beyond understanding the phenomenon as material consumption to view it as an instance of aesthetic consumption. Treatment of the Korean drama itself as an aesthetic object that reflects on historical conditions allows us to make sense of how the drama resonates with the specific demographic of viewers on a collective level. The manner in which the drama reflects on a particular nexus of psychological and

historical factors through the inclusion of specific elements elucidates consumption patterns of Korean dramas among post-reform young women in China.

I had hoped to include a component of ethnographic research in this exploration. However, during the period in which I collected data in interviews with contemporary consumers of Korean dramas in Beijing, my research concept and design were not sufficiently mature to obtain useful results. Thus, the ethnographic portion of my investigation was very limited, and not shaped by what I now conclude is an important dimension to explain the phenomenon. Had I been aware of these implications before conducting my research, I could have developed more questions related specifically to *My Love from the Star*.

Although my interview questions were shaped too broadly to be useful for this line of inquiry, the results, although extremely limited, show that oftentimes the first Korean drama interviewees ever watched was the favorite, which suggests an area to be explored in the future. A further study that includes an exploration of those dramas may reveal the extent to which my findings from my reading of *My Love from the Star* is corroborated by the presence of similar structures and aesthetic elements that resonate with an ambivalent unthought known in other Korean television dramas in that have been well-received in China.

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