



<b>Title</b>	<b>Re-Imagining a cosmopolitan 'Asian us': Korean media flows and imaginaries of Asian modern femininities</b>
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<b>Citation</b>	<b>Re-Imagining a cosmopolitan 'Asian us': Korean media flows and imaginaries of Asian modern femininities. In Huat, CB, and Iwabuchi, K (Eds.), East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave, p. 91-125. Hong Kong, China: Hong Kong University Press, 2008</b>
<b>Issued Date</b>	<b>2008</b>
<b>URL</b>	<b><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10722/146532">http://hdl.handle.net/10722/146532</a></b>
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## Re-Imagining a Cosmopolitan 'Asian Us': Korean Media Flows and Imaginaries of Asian Modern Femininities

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### 1. Introduction

The new millennium witnessed increasing transnational flows of Korean popular cultural content including TV dramas, movies and pop songs and their stars have been remarkably well received in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and other East and Southeast Asian societies. This sudden frenzy about Korean pop culture in Asia has been regionally dubbed 'the Korean Wave' ('Hallyu'). While Hallyu has aroused critical responses from both public and intellectual discourses, pointing to legitimate concerns about the potential rise of Korean cultural domination in Asia (alongside with the long-existing popular cultural influences of Japanese and Western media), Lin, Kwan and Cheung (2004) pointed out the Koreans' unique contribution to contemporary exploration of Asian modernities — exploring different ways of being modern, and being a modern woman in Asian societies, especially in the areas of familial relations, gender relations and sexuality ethics. In the first section of this chapter, we will review some of the major studies on Korean media flows, particularly the consumption of Korean TV dramas. In section 2 we shall present our audience studies of Korean drama fans in Hong Kong and Singapore. In section 3 we shall discuss imaginaries of 'Asian' modern femininities that seem to be emerging from these women's drama consumption practices. In the final section we shall discuss both potential uses and dangers of the 'Asian values' discourse when women located in different Asian societies try to imagine and negotiate their own ways of being a modern woman in Asia.

### ***1.1 The Korean Wave: Rising Transnational Popularity of Korean TV Dramas in East/Southeast Asian Societies***

In cosmopolitan cities in East/Southeast Asian societies, many people are consuming globally circulated, trendy cultural products and do not seem to care about the origins of them. This seems to be a kind of transnational cultural flow that highlights both cultural resonance and asymmetry, with Japan as the leading source of cultural media flows in East and Southeast Asia, replacing or coexisting with Western media influences, under what Iwabuchi (2004) called the decentering processes of globalization. Robertson (1995) emphasized both the global production of the local and the localization of the global: this cultural dynamic refers to the (often commercial) appropriation of local culture in transnational cultural adaptation and commodification, which results in constant interpenetration of the global and the local through cultural hybridization. The success of Japanese dramas in the 1990s in many Asian societies reveals the importance of this (cultural industrial) strategy of transnational cultural adaptation and cultural hybridization. According to Iwabuchi (2004), the most appealing elements of Japanese dramas include the subtle use of music, superior organization of plots, and sympathetic representation of urban youths' experiences. The Japanese TV dramas' depictions of stylish, cosmopolitan lifestyles readily invoke cultural resonance among audiences (particularly city-inhabiting youths) in many fast urbanizing Asian societies.

Negotiating with Japan's influence on drama production styles, Korean and Taiwan television industries have developed their own genres of youth trendy dramas. Their representation of 'here and now' in Asian urban contexts has transnational appeals in a different way from those of Japanese dramas (Iwabuchi, 2004). Korean television culture began to develop in the 1960s when a full-scale modernization project was started by the government. From the early 1970s, Korean TV dramas began to experience a boom in popularity in the domestic market. In the early 1990s, a new form of TV drama genre called 'trendy drama' emerged. It became an active agent in creating a craze for South Korean pop culture across Asia since the late 1990s (Lee, 2004). In the early 2000s, concerns about Korean dramas as cultural phenomena have arisen. 'Hallyu', or the transnational circulation and consumption of popular Korean cultural/media products (in particular, women's genres such as melodramatic soap operas), has swept across (previously) Confucianist Asia, i.e., regions and societies that share a socio-cultural history of having been under some form of influence from traditional Confucianist familial, social and cultural values (e.g., China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore).

## **1.2 *Pleasure of Drama Consumption: Audience Studies on Korean Dramas***

Among different themes of TV dramas, romance is one of the few populist issues that tugs at the hearts of the majority, and it enables the viewers to take temporary flight from the routine, ordinary life (Leung, 2004). In the case of most exported Korean dramas, the recurrent theme of romance allows viewers to give themselves up temporarily to enjoy the feelings of love without regard for consequences or practical concerns, deriving vicarious pleasures in their consumption of media. While the above theorizing about what happens when women consume Korean dramas seems persuasive and popular among both public and academic discourses, there has been little systematic research conducted on women's consumption of Korean dramas. An ethnographic study conducted by Lee and Cho (1995) found that the middle/upper-middle class female Korean drama fans in Madison, USA preferred Korean dramas to American ones for what they called the 'Confucianist' values (especially regarding sexuality ethics). Another study by Wu and Tseng (2002) found that women constitute the majority watching Korean dramas in Taiwan and most of them were aged 25 to 30, or 37 to 42. They found viewers generally expressed positive attitudes towards the modern consumerist life styles portrayed in Korean dramas.

In Hong Kong, Lin and Tong (2005a) have conducted a study on Hong Kong male viewers of Korean dramas, and most of these viewers pointed out that Korean dramas situate women at the centre of the story and tell the story from the female's perspectives, which surprisingly, is a feature they said they enjoyed. For female audiences, Lin and Kwan (2005) reported what some Korean drama fans described and saw as 'Asian subtlety' in the portrayal of romance and love relationships in the Korean dramas that they watched. Despite apparent social and cultural differences, the women interviewed in Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan (see Lin and Tong, 2005b) were all attracted to the 'fairy tale' storyline of the Korean dramas that they watched (note that this is the feature of the exported Korean dramas that they are exposed to and these dramas seem to constitute only a biased sample of all the Korean dramas produced in South Korea and thus cannot be taken as representative of all Korean dramas; Doobo Shim, personal communication, July 2005). In the fantasyland created by these Korean dramas the 'perfect prince' is ultimately there for the virtuous 'Cinderella', and the female protagonist typically can achieve both career and family success, and despite much hardship they are invariably rewarded and pampered by a perfect man's love in this drama/dream world.

### **1.3 Commonality of Cultural Experience: Imaginaries of Asian Modernities**

The TV drama is considered by some media scholars as the most powerful medium to propose a framework for representing the world as a world with meaning and order, and to redefine the context of the world (e.g., Mamoru, 2004); i.e., in projecting a social imaginary (Poovey, 2002). One of the reasons for the popularity of Korean TV dramas among women in East Asian cosmopolitan cities (e.g., Taiwan, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore) might be that Korean dramas tend to place emphasis on the dramatization of conflicts and tensions between Confucianist socio-cultural values and modern cosmopolitan living/working styles/conditions — tensions that many women in East Asian cities can readily identify with (Lin, 2002; Lin and Kwan, 2005). Besides, the local language dubbing enables the transnational viewers to treat the foreign imported drama almost as a local drama (i.e., enhancing realism) (Chua, 2004), but at the same time they can also enjoy the fantasy elements as both possible and plausible since the story happens in a different city in Asia and thus offers some room for imagination or fantasy (e.g., in Seoul).

Before the arrival of the Korean Wave, Japanese media industries had already played an important role in cultural globalization (or Asianization of Japanese culture/media), which articulates a new phase of transnational cultural flows (Aksoy and Robins, 1992). Iwabuchi (2004) suggested that the popularity of Japanese dramas in Asia is driven by the perception of ‘cultural proximity’, as Japan and other societies may share certain cultural values and Asian viewers often refer to this cultural affinity as a reason for their preference for Japanese TV dramas. This refers to the commonality of cultural experiences shared among Asian viewers, and this similarity is based upon a consciousness that we all live in the same modern temporality. Mamoru hypothesized that the ‘simultaneous progression of modernization and postmodernization boosted the commonality of the cultural experiences of each area, and pushed forward the “cohesion” of the cultural interpretative code’ (Mamoru, 2004: 40). The development of these increasingly shared ‘cultural interpretive codes’ has aroused our interest in the question of how women might consume Korean TV dramas in rapidly modernizing and globalizing East Asian cities.

## **2. The Study**

The present study aims at comparing female Korean drama fans’ drama viewing practices in Hong Kong and Singapore. Using the snowballing

method (Brown, 1994) the second author of this chapter successfully contacted and interviewed 30 Chinese females in Hong Kong and Ms. Hung Lihuan, a native Singaporean serving as a research assistant for this project, conducted similar interviews with 30 female Chinese Korean drama fans in Singapore during the year of 2005. The two authors of this chapter and Hung worked closely as a team and held Internet (Skype) meetings regularly. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 show the demographic background of the informants. Pseudo-names are used to protect the informants' privacy. The criteria used for selecting the informants as Korean drama fans is that they like very much one or more of the Korean drama series that they have watched. Each informant was invited to participate in a one-to-one, in-depth, semi-structured interview and to fill in a standardized questionnaire at the end of the interview. All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and coded for recurrent themes (using the qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA).

During the interviews, the following major areas of questions were covered directly or indirectly: their conditions and habits of Korean drama viewing, what they perceive to be the main sources of pleasure derived from their viewing, their views towards the status and situation of modern women in Hong Kong/Singapore, what they perceive to be the current challenges faced by modern Hong Kong/Singaporean women. All of the interviews in Hong Kong were conducted in Cantonese, the everyday language of the Hong Kong informants, while all of the interviews in Singapore were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the preferred language of the Singaporean informants, except for Silvia whose interview was done in English (the quotes from the informants in this chapter have been translated into English). The fact that the Korean drama fans that we came into contact with in Singapore were mostly Chinese-language oriented seems to be a correlate of (and foretells) their attachment to Chinese cultural values.

As can be seen in Tables 5.1 and 5.2 the demographic backgrounds of the informants in Hong Kong and Singapore are similar. They both cover a wide age range (from 22 to 73 in Hong Kong, and from 19 to 80 in Singapore) but the majority of the informants in both cities are in their thirties or forties. Most of the informants in both cities are white-collar workers or professionals. There is also an even distribution of marital status in both cities with approximately half of the informants in each city being married. In the next section we shall present the findings and analysis of the study.

**Table 5.1** Background Information of the Informants (Hong Kong)

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Education Level</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>
Lau	20	Accounting clerk	Secondary school	Single
Irene	22	University student	University	Single
Kat	22	University student	University	Single
Stephy	22	University student	University	Single
Pam	23	Property management trainee	University	Single
Gillian	24	Sales executive	University	Single
Kelly	25	Property management trainee	Secondary school	Married
Pauline	25	University student, teaching assistant	University (Master)	Single
Vivian	25	TV reporter	University (Master)	Single
Kin	26	Marketing executive	University (Master)	Single
Sharon	27	Social worker	University	Single
Suzanne	28	Accountant	University	Single
July	30	Social worker	University	Single
Winkie	30	ICAC investigative officer	University	Single
Angel	32	Bank manager	University	Married
Elly	39	Senior clerk at university	Secondary school	Married
Monica	40	Senior management	University	Single
Alice	40+	Senior lecturer at university	University (PhD)	Married
Emma	40+	Magazine editor	University	Married
Sally	41	Retired	Secondary school	Married
Ceci	42	Banking	University	Married
Ng	42	Housewife, part-time shopkeeper	Secondary school	Married
Fung	43	Primary school teacher	University	Single
Jenny	43	College teacher	University (PhD)	Married
Anna	49	Secondary school teacher	University (Master)	Married
Becky	50	Accountant	University (Master)	Single
Lilly	50	Retired	Secondary school	Married
Chan	65	Retired	Primary school	Married
Leung	65	Retired	Secondary school	Married
Mary	73	Retired	No formal education	Married

**Table 5.2** Background Information of the Informants (Singapore)

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Education level</i>	<i>Marital status</i>
Leslie	19	Cashier	Secondary school	Single
Niki	19	Student	Secondary school	Single
Zen	20	University student	University	Single
Sisi	22	Primary school teacher	University	Single
Tina	23	Administrative work	University	Single
Yan	24	School assistant	University	Single
Anita	26	Administrative executive	University	Single
Jessica	26	Travel agent	-	Single
Joey	28	Public relations manager	University	Single
Minnie	29	Language teacher	University	Single
Hua	30	Teacher	University	Single
Charlene	30+	Reporter	University	Married
Katherine	31	Artist	Secondary school	Single
Tani	31	Kindergarten teacher	University	Single
Neon	32	Part-time clerk	University	Married
Ling	33	Supervisor of sales department	Secondary school	Single
Silvia	33	Researcher and teacher	University (postgraduate)	Married
Polly	35	Housewife	Secondary school	Married
Bena	36	Language teacher	Secondary school	Single
Anson	39	Housewife	Secondary school	Married
Law	39	Primary school teacher	University	Married
Candy	40	Language teacher	Secondary school	Married
Jan	40	Editor	University	Married
Tammy	40+	Private tutor (postgraduate)	University	Single
Queenie	48	Editor	University (postgraduate)	Married
Yanny	48	Reporter	University	Married
Gigi	50	Housewife	Primary school	Married
Sophie	51	Dentist	University	Single
Mia	52	University hostel manager	University	Married
Monique	80	Housewife	Primary school	Married



### 3. Findings and Analysis

We shall present the findings and analysis in three main subsections. The first subsection will discuss the kinds of values the informants said they appreciate in Korean dramas. It seems that these Korean dramas appeal to them because the dramas preserve what the informants called traditional ('Asian') values while packaging them with attractive modern and trendy aesthetics. Section 3.2 describes the imaginaries of Asian modern femininities that seem to be emerging in the informants' consumption of Korean dramas, as the informants seem to identify with the female characters who possess both some of the conservative/traditional values and some of the new/modern qualities. Section 3.3 compares and contrasts the views of the informants in Hong Kong and Singapore, particularly in their stances toward tradition and modernity.

#### 3.1 *Hybridization of Traditionality and Modernity*

##### *Portrayal of Different Kinds of 'Qing', Family and Traditional Values*

Comparing TV dramas from different countries, most informants said they liked Korean dramas most, as they found them 'more subtle', and put more emphasis on 'qing' (a Chinese word referring to compassion for family members, friends, spouses, colleagues and people of different relations). Some informants pointed out that Korean dramas tend to focus on a wide range of topics including love, friendship, family relationships and moral values, issues that they said are not seriously dealt with in local productions (both Hong Kong and Singaporean ones). One of the informants in Hong Kong, Vivian (aged 25, TV reporter), said she appreciated the description of 'qing' in Korean dramas (e.g. *Dae Jang Geum*), which was not confined to heterosexual love but also extended to 'qing' of a family, 'qing' between friends, and 'qing' between teacher and student. Another informant in Singapore, Polly (aged 35, housewife) also made a similar remark. She found that Korean dramas could express 'a strong sense of human touch'. This kind of 'love', she said, is 'multi-dimensional' and can touch the very bottom of her heart.

Many of the informants said they liked the very realistic and sophisticated portrayals of what they called 'Asian' ways of expressing various kinds of relationships and emotional attachments among the characters. One of the relationships they appreciated most is the deep connection among family members, and the virtues of filial piety the characters possessed. Many of them said they were drawn by the 'family warmth', 'strong sense of family', and 'traditional family virtues' depicted in the dramas. For example, a Hong Kong

informant, July (aged 30, social worker), said that Korean culture is 'very close to Chinese culture', in terms of a sense of cultural proximity and self-perceived 'closeness' in people's qualities. Originally she was interested in Japanese culture in the mid 1990s, but later the Korean Wave drew her to Korean culture, which she described as 'very Chinese' and 'closer to Chinese values'. In her words:

I think the humanist values and the behavior [of people] in Korean dramas are somewhat like the Chinese, very straightforward, a bit coarse ... I think [they are] very straightforward, very direct, and they also value the family, and I think this is warm and sincere.

On the other hand, Tammy (aged 40, private tutor) in Singapore pointed out, 'Although the family members (in Korean dramas) sometimes have quarrels, they will be united when faced with problems; this fully shows the cohesion of a family'. Another Singaporean informant, Tani (aged 31, kindergarten teacher), found that Korean dramas often portray brotherhood and fatherly love, which led her to conclude that Korea is 'a nation with strong sentiments'. This also gave her a sense of closeness and intimacy, and invoked a sense of 'resonance' in her heart. Candy (aged 40, language teacher), also an informant in Singapore, appreciated the daily rituals like bowing to seniors, being polite and showing respect to the elderly in the dramas, and she considered all these to be examples of 'traditional values' and 'the traditional Confucianist style' which she thought people should treasure.

As mentioned above, different types of 'qing' and moral values depicted in the Korean dramas are often said to be 'Confucianist values' by our informants. These informants seem to see these values as originating from Confucianism and see them to be at the heart of what they conceive to be and affirm as the 'Asian worldview', which embraces different aspects of life: family relations, gender relations, romance and sexuality ethics. In this case, informants in both cities seem to identify with these so-called 'Confucianist cultural values', which, in fact, can also be found in some non-Confucianist, non-Asian cultures. They also revealed their deep-rooted (sociocultural) desire for 'qing' (compassion). For instance, a Singaporean informant, Silvia (aged 33, researcher and teacher), pointed out, 'The plot is, I think it's Asian, the theme is very Asian, but it's very new in the way it deals with the scripting. And I think the way it's dealing with characterization, the way they, they filmed ... and the unfolding of the themes, and all that was very new, very subtle.' A strong sense of 'Asian-ness' seems to be constructed (in contrast to what Silvia implicitly set up as 'Western cultures') and at the same time

affirmed and re-affirmed through consumption of Korean dramas. However, Silvia's appreciation of the 'new' way of scripting seems to point to another major appeal of Korean dramas — global cosmopolitan aesthetics.

*Cosmopolitan Packaging: Globalized Cityscapes and Glamorous Consumerist Lifestyles*

The informants pointed out that Korean dramas also possess 'modern qualities', side by side with the 'Asian', 'traditional' elements that they valued. There are lots of Korean dramas featuring romances of young, heterosexual individuals in contemporary urban settings. The fashion, music, beautiful sceneries, and the pleasures and plights of city life form the building blocks of the stories, and present images of a glamorous cosmopolitan city living, which stimulates global consumerist desires. These dramas combine both existing and idealized (consumerist) lifestyles into the storylines. A Hong Kong informant, Gillian (aged 24, sales executive), described Korean dramas as offering an aesthetically appealing 'package' to viewers — wonderful music, beautiful scenery and backdrops. Another Hong Kong informant, Kin (aged 26, marketing executive), liked the 'beautiful people, beautiful sceneries and beautiful clothing' that could be found in Korean dramas.

Beautiful scenery is frequently considered to be a key factor in the success of Korean dramas. Monica (aged 40, senior management), a Hong Kong informant, believed that the drama producers know that 'the plot is not important', and that the most useful tool in attracting the viewer is 'beauty'. She pointed out that many scenes have become tourist spots and it reveals the impact of shooting fancy scenes. Most of the scenes in Korean dramas, particularly outdoor scenes, are outcomes of sophisticated cinematographic design. According to the results of our end-of-interview questionnaire survey, 95% of the Hong Kong informants and 93% of the Singaporean informants reported 'the scenes are beautiful' as a reason for viewing Korean dramas. One of the Singaporean informants, Candy (aged 40, language teacher), is strongly attracted to the theme parks, snowy grounds (e.g., winter skiing resorts) and beautiful lakes. She described Korean dramas as 'using the best camera angle, shooting the best scene'. Another Singaporean informant, Polly (aged 35, housewife), said that Korean dramas stimulate viewers to do traveling and sightseeing in Korea. After watching the wonderful sceneries, she had a strong desire to join the 'special tours' (i.e. taking tourists to the filming locations of the dramas).

Korean stars have also made a big impact on consumer culture, including food, fashion, cosmetics trends and even plastic surgery (Shim, 2004). Many

of our informants appreciated the beautiful fashion of the famous stars. For instance, Anna (aged 49, secondary school teacher) from Hong Kong described the fashionable clothes of the characters in 'Winter Sonata' as 'very attractive' and 'never out-of-date'. The new generation of Koreans is believed to be more hedonistic and materialistic, and the trendy drama producers have intentionally targeted the new generation by breaking away from traditional dramatic conventions (Lee, 2004). In our study, all of the informants are attracted by the scenery, fashion, music, stars and other cultural commodities in the dramas. These Chinese female viewers seem to be very much attracted by the cosmopolitan city lifestyles and consumption patterns depicted in Korean dramas. In this way, Korean media texts embody (and perhaps 'Asianize') global consumerist cultures, and Korean dramas both project and promote a kind of mediated globalized consumer lifestyle. This matches the spread of global consumerism and expansion of the middle classes in many modern Asian cities.

Modernity promises mobility and metropolitanism, and it is said to be a cultural rupture from the experience of yesterday (Harvey, 1990: 12). The imagination of modernity usually refers to a certain image of city life (Ko, 2004). In many Korean dramas, the portrayal of modern career women and their working conditions and social mobility point to the emerging realities of modern city life for women in Asian cities. Many informants recognized the 'realism' of working scenes in Korean dramas, especially those of modern career women who are tough and capable, and bold enough to express their feelings and desires. In some stories, change in the gender hierarchy is observed, as some women can occupy relatively high positions in the workplace, or achieve personal success with their own efforts. There is a mixture of cosmopolitan pursuits of success and individuals' struggles for true love and happiness, and in many Korean drama stories, personal choices, efforts and pursuits for individual freedom are taken as keys to personal success.

The emphasis on individual choice (e.g., of one's love partner and career), social equality and personal efforts and achievement constitute important concepts in modern society. They provide a source for viewers' identification and personalization. For example, Silvia (aged 33, researcher and teacher) in Singapore identified with concepts such as 'free love' and 'social justice' which she considered 'very modern'. She appreciated the ways the characters tried to break away from traditions and strive for personal happiness, as she said:

In the dramas it seems that [they] are upholding values which upset the cultural norms. And I thought that's very brave and very modern. Through a medium of expression, their concept of free love, freedom

to love someone, and other concepts of justice ... I admire this, the modern sensibility that they have, they try to break away from certain traditions that don't make sense. (Interviewer: Right, like the parents controlling one's love and marriage.) It's the value system that I admire, the new sensibility that they are trying to craft out of agentic actions.

(Interviewer: Agency?) through this medium, they are expressing this new attitude.

In short, the representation of cosmopolitan city life, individual pursuits of free love, social justice and modern consumerist desires can go beyond national boundaries, attracting viewers in many parts of Asia and creating a shared desire among them. This helps to articulate a sense of cultural resonance as female viewers across Asian cities personalize these (modern) ideas of Korean dramas, to 'consume' both kinds of traditional (e.g., family values) and modern lifestyles (with some individualistic elements such as the pursuit of free love) through drama viewing. The inherent contradiction between respect for/obedience to parents (e.g., springing from family values, values of filial piety) and pursuit of individual freedom in the choice of love partners and careers has often been used as a plot device to create dramatic tensions in Korean dramas but very often the two are ultimately happily reconciled (e.g., the parents finally accept the young people's choices), constituting an imagined reconciliation (in the drama world) of contradictory values of new and old experienced in many rapidly globalizing societies in Asia (Lin, 2002).

*Yearning for 'Pure Love' and Family Love, and Constructing Cultural Dichotomies: Viewers Comparing Korean Dramas with Japanese/Western Dramas*

The informants often quoted Japanese dramas in comparison with Korean dramas. Some of the informants had been 'fans' of Japanese dramas before (and more accurately speaking, Japanese culture). However, almost all of them had shifted to Korean dramas in recent years. Some of them said Korean dramas 'have more depth' than Japanese dramas in portraying 'characters' and 'emotions', and the actors/actresses can express their emotions in a realistic way (e.g., constructing a sense of 'emotional realism' as suggested by Ang, 1985). One of the Hong Kong informants, Pauline (aged 25, university student/teaching assistant), criticized most Japanese dramas as 'just shooting pretty/handsome faces of popular artists' and made the charge that the story is 'superficial' sometimes. A Singaporean informant, Silvia (aged 33, researcher and teacher), also made a similar remark, when she compared the 'depth' of Korean dramas with that of Japanese dramas:

The real thing that attracted me to Korean dramas is absent in the Japanese dramas. Everything to them [Japanese dramas] is very cartoon-like, even in (the) way they present the relationship. (Interviewer: Cartoon-like?) Yes, the same character. Yes, their values are appealing, but the way they deal with it lacks the depth that the Koreans deal with human relationship ... the ways they played it out is very two-dimensional, no complexity in their characters. [Sylvia was referring to the recent Japanese drama, 'Gook Luck'.]

According to these Chinese female viewers, the root problem in Japanese dramas is what they see as their difference from 'Chinese values'. In the audience study conducted by Maclachlan and Chua (2004) in Singapore, it is found that Chinese female viewers disliked what they called 'Westernization' as reflected in Japanese dramas. Some Chinese Singaporean viewers said that the Japanese dramas lack 'traditional values and "are more open towards sex", in contrast to "our tradition from China (where) there should be no premarital sexual behavior"' (Maclachlan and Chua, 2004:164). Many informants labeled Japanese dramas as 'more liberalized' while Korean dramas are seen as much more 'traditional'. For example, Polly (aged 35, housewife) described Japanese dramas as 'too frivolous', 'lacking the correct moral values for youth' (e.g. a girl dedicating oneself to a man just to gain his love, a concept she regarded as 'absolutely wrong'). She felt that Korean dramas are more concerned with 'traditional values'; for instance, 'children should respect their parents and seniors' and 'a married woman should respect her mother-in-law, help her husband and teach her children'.

Romance depicted in Japanese dramas might be 'too explicit and too sex-oriented' for some viewers in Chinese societies. For instance, one Hong Kong informant, Emma (aged 40+, magazine editor), suggested that the relations in Korean dramas are very 'simple' and 'pure', particularly when compared to Japanese dramas. As she put it,

Those Korean dramas I watched ... [are] very different from Japanese dramas; Japanese dramas always have sexual scenes! And then you discover, there has been no such restrained love [in TV dramas] for a long time, and [you finally] find it in Korean dramas! That is, just a kind of eye contact, just a little touch, [one] still gets very excited ... [I'm] so surprised to find an ethnic group [referring to Koreans] who possesses such qualities!

Another Hong Kong informant, July (aged 30, social worker), regarded Korean dramas as 'a fresh spring' in the nowadays complicated society.

Another Hong Kong informant, Kat (aged 22, university student), described the love shown in the stories as ‘spiritual love’ rather than ‘physical love’, involving a process of ‘sublimation’, and she said she has been longing for such kind of love. Anita (aged 26, administrative executive), a Singaporean informant, appreciated the ‘pure love’ depicted in the drama. ‘[The guy] will not stay with a girl just because he wants to possess her. I like the pure feeling, purely falling in love, holding hands. Engage first, and then get married. Not sustained by physical relationship, but nurtured by time.’ Many of the informants in both cities considered ‘no sex before marriage’ a sign of respect for women.

It can be seen from the informants’ remarks above that these Korean drama fans in both cities seem to subscribe to the dualistic division of love versus sex, which insists that ‘sexual fulfillment without love is false’ (Belsey, 1994: 33). ‘Pure love’ is seen to be the necessary precedent of and condition for sex and they desired to see the portrayal of ‘pure love’ rather than ‘casual sex’. Our informants said that they are searching for ‘true love’. For these Chinese women, love is more important than, and is a precondition for, sex. Some of them compared the Korean drama shooting styles with those they found in Western television serials, saying that romance depicted in Western dramas (at least those that they are exposed to) tends to be too explicit. Here is a comment by a Hong Kong informant, Irene (aged 22, university student):

It [romance in Korean dramas] is very ideal ... When I watch [the dramas], I find Western ones start [having sexual relations] very quickly, and have some stimulating scenes [sex scenes]. I do not feel that the two characters really have deep affection for each other. But in Korean dramas, they at most give each other a hug, and will not do anything [further]. I feel it is real affection rather than [desire for] physical contact.

Apparently, the lack of ‘intimate shots’ in Korean dramas is highly appreciated by most female viewers, both in Hong Kong and Singapore. Hayashi (2005) also found that many Japanese middle-aged female viewers admired the ‘perennial theme of pure love’ in Korean dramas. They emphasized the absence of physical contact, and reserved (or restrained) expressions of sexual desire of the characters. Culture involves a set of practices which are the outworking of a worldview (or social imaginary), which develops a sense of belonging and identity. In our study, some informants described the romance in Korean dramas as a kind of ‘Confucianist culture’ and ‘Asian culture’, although as Belsey (1994) showed, this dualistic view of love and sex also has a long tradition in Western romance literature. It is interesting to note that

the cultural dichotomy of 'Asian-ness' and 'Western-ness' is artificially constructed when some of our informants believed that the Korean dramas could give them a 'heart-warming feeling' which they considered to be lacking in Western dramas (at least those that they are exposed to). As a Singaporean informant, Silvia (aged 33, researcher and teacher), said, 'It's a feeling that I get from Korean dramas, and I seldom get this feeling when watching Western dramas like "Desperate Housewives".'

To conclude, Korean dramas are preferred to Japanese/Western dramas for their cultural proximity (i.e., Confucianist familial, social and sexual values). A recent study by Lee (2004) contrasted the production values and styles of Japanese and Korean TV dramas. She found that while Korean TV drama producers have drawn on the modern production values of Japanese TV dramas, and both kinds of dramas portray cosmopolitan globalized consumerist life styles, Korean TV dramas are different from Japanese TV dramas in its greater emphasis on the portrayal of familial relationships, family values and sexual morality. In our study, Korean dramas seem to provide an important space for fulfilling and reconciling the conflicting desires of the informants as they explore the contested issues of modernization and Westernization by dramatizing the tension between the pursuit of personal freedom/happiness (e.g., in the choice of spouse and career) and the traditional Confucianist sociocultural value of stressing one's responsibility to the family, to fulfill traditional gender roles and to follow different types of moral values regarding sex and romance. Interestingly the sexually repressed or 'restrained' (in the words of our informants) feature of Korean dramas (c.f., the more 'liberalized' feature of Japanese/Western dramas) seems to be precisely what is appreciated by these Korean drama viewers and this feature seems to be readily drawn upon by viewers to construct cultural dichotomies and 'Asian' cultural identities (e.g., an 'Asian us' vs. a 'Western/Westernized they').

### ***3.2 Imaginaries of Asian Femininities: Modern Asian Women with both Old and New Qualities***

#### *Reproducing and Reaffirming Traditional Qualities of Ideal Women*

One of the important interpretive practices of drama audiences is personalization; that is putting oneself in the drama scenario and identifying with the situation and characters (Baym, 2000). This process of identification, or personalization implies a sense of fantasy. This fantasy expresses the desire for fullness, which bridges the gap between reality and wish (Hinderman, 1992). Dyer (1986) proposed that the media stars represent how our



experience is or more often how we would love it to be. The characters in Korean dramas seem to embody some idealistic femininities desired by the fans, even though they also explicitly acknowledged that these qualities are difficult to find in the 'modern' world. In our study, it is discovered that despite their 'unrealistic' nature of the 'nearly perfect', the female characters still constitute a kind of identifiable female image that many viewers long for.

The gendered nature of modernity in the European Enlightenment tradition has naturalized and institutionalized an essentialist, binary system of masculinity and femininity (Marshall, 1994, 2000; Felski, 1995). A similarly hierarchicalized, binary system of gender role relationships also seems to underlie the Confucianist social order in East Asian cultural traditions (Lin and Tong, 2005a). Deeply inscribed in our culture and language are the Confucianist sayings regarding women's subordinate position to men. Confucianism defines women's social positions according to the submissive relationship with their male family members, the principle of 'Thrice Following' — a woman should follow her father when young, her husband when married, and her son when old (Ko, 1994). In order to perform their caretaker roles, they should be soft, tender, persevering, hardworking and obedient.

However, there has been an increasing number of women receiving higher education and participating in the labor markets in many Asian cities, even taking up high-status professional and managerial work (just like many of our informants in Hong Kong and Singapore). They have increased socioeconomic mobility and financial independence, and some of them are no longer satisfied with the traditional division of labor. Many modern-day Asian women are seen by some of our informants to be losing some of the 'traditional virtues' (e.g. too strong, too independent). It seems that the binary of women's traits/roles as domestic subordinates and men's traits/roles as leaders promoted by Confucianist ideals/ideologies has been somewhat destabilized in the modern workplace, especially in fast cosmopolitanizing Asian cities such as Hong Kong and Singapore. The identities of modern women are not just dependent on or derivative from men's identities and they have developed many new qualities beyond the 'traditional Confucianist framework' (this will be further discussed in the latter part of this chapter).

At the same time, our informants seem to be able to recover the lost traditional feminine virtues in the female protagonists in Korean dramas. In terms of personal qualities, most of our informants pointed out that the female characters in Korean dramas have an 'attractive appearance', and that they are 'soft', 'tender', 'humble', 'considerate', 'delicate and touching'. Tammy

(aged 40+, tutor) in Singapore could easily identify with the tender image of the female protagonist, and she felt that 'it will be great if I can be her'. In terms of working attitudes, the heroines tend to be depicted as less aggressive and more submissive in Korean dramas. A Hong Kong informant, Anna (aged 49, secondary school teacher), found them very obedient and polite in the workplace; for instance, she noted that women frequently nod their heads in the dramas, like those female news anchors in *All about Eve*.

In terms of love relations, many informants described the female protagonists as 'single-minded', 'faithful to love' and 'willing to sacrifice' for their partners. They always put their lovers as their first priority and orient themselves around their male partners. A Singaporean informant, Sisi (aged 22, primary school teacher), said that many female characters have their own careers, but 'love seems to be more important to them', and 'they can give up their careers for love.' The above qualities — tender, soft, obedient, indulged in faithful love — are considered to be 'traditional' (and some informants labeled them as 'Asian' as well). One of the Hong Kong informants, Becky (aged 50, accountant), described most female protagonists as having a 'traditional mind'. In contrast, women in modern-day society, especially Hong Kong women, may not possess these qualities. For example, a Hong Kong informant, Leung (aged 65, retired), described most Hong Kong women as too 'ferocious' and 'blatant', and preferred women to have a good temper and to be more obedient to their partners, like those characters in Korean dramas.

It should also be noted that traditional femininities are affirmed and rewarded by the qualities of the non-traditional (but desirable) qualities of the male characters in Korean dramas. They seem to fulfill the criteria of 'good men' in TV dramas. 'Good men' in TV dramas are 'caring', 'nurturing' and 'verbal', who are rather feminized and seldom express their masculinity in direct action (Fiske, 1989). Our informants showed their appreciation of these male qualities using adjectives like 'gentle', 'handsome', 'faithful', 'kind-hearted', 'caring', 'good and able', 'perfect in every way' to describe those men in the dramas. One of the Hong Kong informants, Kin (aged 26, marketing executive), pointed out women's desire to be treasured by men. She believed that portrayal of the considerate male character was an essential factor for the success of Korean dramas.

Because it [Korean dramas] always portray the male characters as very understanding. Japanese [dramas] will not do that to such an extent. Frankly, girls want to be treasured, to be loved, just because they want men to understand them, to take care of them, and to protect them! I

think Korean dramas are very successful; they successfully portray such kind of male characters!

One of the very important functions of Korean dramas is in their provision of a fantasy world. They offer channels where women can express their desires — desires for a pure society, for pure romance, for being pampered and loved by men — this can also be seen as an escape from everyday stress (e.g., full of struggles at work with men). Many informants agreed that Korean dramas projected ‘a fantasyland which does not exist in reality’. In this dream world, the heroines and heroes are idealized females and males. Our informants were deeply impressed by the beautiful sceneries and perfect characters of the series, even though they realized that these were unrealistic and cannot be found in real life easily. For instance, a Hong Kong informant, Kat (aged 22, university student), described the leading actress in Korean dramas as ‘Snow White’, i.e. an ideal woman. Another Hong Kong informant Kin (aged 26, marketing executive) held a similar view, ‘Watching Korean dramas really makes you feel that you are a princess, and then think that this world is very beautiful ... even if it is a tragic story ... sickness and some things like that, you still feel very sweet after viewing [the drama].’

#### *New Qualities of Modern Asian Women*

Though the female protagonists are described as ‘beautiful’, ‘tender’ and ‘humble’, they are not ‘conservative’ in the eyes of our informants. Despite the traditional (‘Asian’) qualities they possessed, they are also ‘strong’ and ‘open-minded’ in certain aspects. Many informants found the female characters quite ‘tough’ in general, as they ‘have their own ideas’, and they will take the initiative to strive for happiness (especially in love affairs). For example, one of the Singaporean informants, Niki (aged 19, student), recalled the story of *Beautiful Days*, which features a poor orphan (the female protagonist) who is very hardworking and tough, and who never gives up but strives to achieve her goals. She appreciated this character very much. Emma (aged 40+, magazine editor) in Hong Kong found women in Korean dramas ‘very traditional’ but ‘not stupid’. They need to work for their own living, and to face problems by themselves, which she believed, can ‘reflect the modern situation’.

We can see that these female images possess some new/modern women qualities: tough, with working abilities and independence. On the other hand, they are willing to express their wishes and desires, particularly in love relations. Most female protagonists in Korean dramas insist on finding ‘true

love'. They are eager to take the initiative in a relationship and even fight for their love. For instance, a Hong Kong informant, Sally (aged 40, retired), appreciated the toughness of the female character in face of love troubles in the drama *Autumn Tale*. She described the female leading actress, Eun Suh (Song Hae Gyo), as a 'strong' girl who can 'put forth new life by her own efforts' (e.g. Eun Suh in *Autumn Tale* always tells the male protagonist Joon Suh how important he is to her, while Joon Suh seldom does the same thing). Combining the traditional virtues and new women qualities, our informants seem to identify with a 'hybridized modern woman's image'. A Hong Kong informant Becky (aged 50, accountant) said that her favorite love storyline is about a 'talented' and 'career' lady meeting a man who is willing to protect her (e.g. *All about Eve*). She believed that a 'happy modern woman' should be career-minded while dedicated to a man/a relationship at the same time.

Similar to the substantive transformations brought by socioeconomic developments and feminist movements in Western societies (Bourdieu, 2001), the conditions of women in many developed Asian societies, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, have changed in many different social and economic arenas; for instance, increasing access to higher education and waged work, increasing participation in the public sphere. The level of education attained by Hong Kong women has improved continuously over the past decade. In 1991, the proportion of women with tertiary education (9.4%) was much lower than that of men (13%) but by 2001, the proportion increased to 15.1%, which was closer to the 17.8% of men.<sup>1</sup> The situation is similar in Singapore, as the proportion of women graduating from institutions of higher learning increased dramatically from 37 (per 10,000 female population) in 1986 to 68.5 (per 10,000 female population) in 1996.<sup>2</sup>

Another dramatic social change in the twentieth century has been the entry of women into the workplace. Better education, more favorable attitudes and ample job opportunities have resulted in a substantial rise in **participation rate** of women. During the past two decades, the female labor force increased while that for men decreased in both cities. The female labor force participation rate in Hong Kong increased from 49.5% in 1981 to 51.6% in 2001.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the male labor force participation rate in Hong Kong substantially decreased from 82.5% in 1981 to 71.9% in 2001. In Singapore, the female labor force participation rate increased from 24.5% in 1957 to 52.2 % in 2000, while that of males dropped from 85.7 % to 70.6% in the same period.<sup>4</sup> Many women in Hong Kong and Singapore have become outstanding performers in the labor market. Some of them have entered the professional/associate professional ranks and have taken up important positions that were previously reserved for males (See Tables 5.3 and 5.4).



**Table 5.3** Proportion of Working Population by Occupation in Hong Kong (%)

	1991		1996		2001	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Managers and administrators	11.8	4.9	15.4	7.1	14.1	6.5
Professionals	4.1	3.0	5.5	4.3	6.3	v4.6
Associate professionals	9.7	11.3	11.0	13.9	14.6	16.2
Clerks	8.0	28.8	8.5	29.5	8.2	26.6
Service workers and shop sales workers	13.7	12.5	14.0	13.5	14.5	15.7
Craft and related workers	20.9	4.4	17.9	3.7	16.2	1.9
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	13.9	12.7	11.6	4.0	11.4	2.2
Elementary occupations	16.6	21.7	15.3	23.5	14.3	26.2
Others	1.2	0.7	0.9	0.5	0.4	0.1

Source: Hong Kong Statistics Department

**Table 5.4** Proportion of Working Population (below 40) by Occupation in Singapore

	1987		1997		1997	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Administrative and managerial	7.4	13.1	13.1	6	44.9	41.5
Professional and technical	16.6	33.4	33.4	29.2		
Clerical	6.2	6.0	6.0	32.8	17.6	40.5
Services and sales	13.8	10.9	10.9	10.4		
Production and related workers	43.8	27	27	21.4	31.1	17.6
Others	12.2	9.7	9.7	0.2	5.8	0.4

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore

With their increasing educational attainment, economic independence and financial contribution to the family, traditional gender role boundaries between men and women have become increasingly destabilized, both at the workplace and in the family. Korean dramas seem to act as sites of hegemonic discursive practices, through their projection of imaginaries of ‘Asian modern femininities’ — a combination of both traditional virtues and modern sensibilities. This kind of ‘ideal perfect modern Asian woman’ seems to embody the deepest desire of many Asian women — to have the best of both worlds (i.e., career and love/family). This matches the ‘role-play’ tactics mentioned by a Hong Kong informant, Lau (aged 20, accounting clerk), who emphasized that women need to take up different roles depending on the

context. She said, 'I think she needs to get a balance in the middle! Under certain situations, [women should be] as tender as a little bird [in a romantic relationship], but sometimes [they] need to be brave and fight for their own rights [in a job situation]! Yes, that's it! Be strong when you need to be strong, and be weak when you need to be weak!' These discourses of the strong-and-weak, tough-and-gentle ideal woman have many inherent contradictions. We shall turn to a discussion of these contradictions in the next section.

### *Conflicting Discourses of Femininities*

As mentioned in the previous section, more highly educated career women have been entering the labor market in Hong Kong and Singapore. Some of them occupy professional positions and have proved themselves to have the same ability as their male counterparts, if not higher. Most Hong Kong informants agreed that women should try to show great ability in the workplace and to achieve financial independence. For instance, Jenny (aged 43, college teacher) found most Hong Kong women to be very 'independent' and 'tough'. She described them in this way, 'thinking independently, earning [money] independently, [doing] everything independently'. Some Singaporean informants also supported this viewpoint, like Tina (aged 23, administrative work), who believed that modern women should be independent and be able to maintain their own living, 'No matter man or woman, only if he/she has a pair of hands to work, how come he/she needs to lean on others?'

Some of our informants are examples of such kind of 'strong and capable' modern working women (as accountant, manager, professor, teacher, editor, etc.), who are important breadwinners of the family. These modern Chinese women are no longer confined to the domestic sphere, and they have established their own financial independence. Some of these so-called 'superwomen' work harder than men, gaining higher social prestige as well as making more money than their partners. However, the emergence of capable, independent career women also results in dilemmas and conflicts in everyday life. One of the serious problems faced by modern Asian women is that many of them suffer from double heavy burdens, as they need to take up multiple roles, both within and outside the family. All of our married informants found themselves in a dilemma of double burdens, and they admitted that taking up two jobs (taking care of family and having a paid job) made them lose most of their personal time and space. Below are some tensions expressed by some informants:

- I think if you are a career-minded woman, then how can she strike a balance between her family and her work? That is I think you go out to work nowadays, it's impossible to come back early, [get] off duty at five o'clock, and have to cook when you get back to home! You get back to home at eight or nine o'clock, then I think it will certainly affect your family life. The time you spend with your husband, children, family will be less, and there will be communication problems! (Becky, aged 50, accountant, Hong Kong)
- If we want a career, if we want [a] family, and all that, then it's up to you to balance it all out ... For me, it's like ... only when he [her husband] is extremely tired, when he, when both of us are extremely tired, then he will say let's not do anything. But the thing is I feel compelled [compelled to do them] ... that's [it's] women [who] do all these [household chores]. Because if not, how [can] all these things [be] left undone? I'll have to do it. He can still, when both are extremely stressed, he can take the position that, the more comfortable position ...' (Silvia, aged 33, researcher and teacher, Singapore, interviewed in English)

Faced with all the dilemmas encountered in the real world, our female informants seem to gain some pleasure in consuming Korean dramas. Within the realm of everyday life, they need to work very hard in their job on the one hand, and to fulfill the perceived social expectations of women as primary care-takers in the family on the other. However, the fantasyland of Korean dramas is completely different. As mentioned by many informants, most of the male characters are 'born to be rich', and they do not need to worry about money. This allows them to take care of the females and provide them with a comfortable life. Besides, the perfect (both tough-and-weak) female figure offers an important source of identification, which allows the viewers to take a break from the tough and harsh everyday world by going into the dream world created in Korean dramas.

Despite the phenomenon of more women entering the labor force and taking up important roles in both Hong Kong and Singapore, many informants (especially those in Singapore, and this point will be explored in the next section) believed that establishing a happy family is their 'ultimate goal' in life and only this will bring them 'ultimate happiness'. Lee (2004) found that many Korean dramas finally jump back to traditional gender relations, and these happy endings conform to the traditional ideology of marriage which sustains the traditional values underlying the relationship between men and women. In our study, the Chinese female viewers in both

cities dreamed of such 'happy endings' in their real life. They identified with the social realism of women portrayed in the dramas, who appear to be strong and career-minded on the surface, but in fact they cherish the wish of being a happy housewife, and to have a husband to lean on.

One Singaporean informant, Minnie (aged 29, language teacher), defined a woman's happy life as one with a 'complete family', and she said, 'A family should have a father and a mother, then it is completed and happy ... and also a son and a daughter; that will be good.' A Hong Kong informant, Kin (aged 26, marketing executive), admitted that she wanted to be 'the woman behind a successful man'. One of the reasons that she worked very hard is to be 'smart and beautiful', so that she could find a good husband. 'I think that working makes me beautiful, and working makes me smart. Getting more beautiful and smart, then my husband will love me more.' A married Hong Kong informant, Emma (aged 40+, magazine editor), suggested that many Hong Kong women are still bound by the 'traditional framework'. She quoted herself as an example, as she believed that 'family is much more important than career', and her most important goal in life is to 'maintain a healthy and harmonious family.' Though she is also a career woman, she secretly wished for an ideal life like this — 'having a man to take care of you financially, then no need to work, you can sleep till very late and wake up whenever you like!'

Most of our informants admitted that family/love is an essential part of their lives. The romance depicted in Korean dramas are particularly attractive to female viewers and thus constitutes an important source for identification. For example, a Singaporean informant, Anita (aged 26, administrative work), enjoyed the ever-lasting love in the stories, and she pointed out that 'a lover' is more important than 'a career' in a woman's life. However, in the harsh reality, many women (and particularly the career women, like some of our informants) fail to find such love and so viewing Korean dramas becomes a form of vicarious pleasure for them. The comment of a Hong Kong informant, Winkei (aged 30, ICAC investigative officer), is illustrative:

This kind of life and death love story will never happen to me ... in Hong Kong, especially our job, really makes people exhausted. Therefore, those things that are too tiring to me, I may not do that! Especially this kind of life and death [love relationships], wastes me too much time, I will not do that definitely ... all are things that will never happen to me, and I feel that they have happened [to me] through viewing the drama world.

Ang (1985) pointed out that there is no punishment for whatever identity one takes up in the fictional world, and it offers a safe space of excess in the otherwise ordered and restrained social life. In this case, Korean dramas seem



to offer an idealized buffer space to reconcile the conflicting discourses (and desires) of femininities in reality — traditional women who are soft and family-oriented, completely dependent on men at one extreme; and superwomen being tough and career-minded, completely independent at another extreme. The ‘almost perfect’ female characters and ‘romantic love mixed with social realism’ help these Chinese female viewers to construct an imaginary of Asian modern femininities, which seem to form a main source of pleasure in Korean drama viewing. Consumption of Korean dramas seem to provide temporary relief from the un-reconcilable tensions created by both kinds of femininities (traditional and modern) which seem to constitute their contradictory subjectivities. These Chinese women seem to be located at the crossroads of tradition and modernity and experiencing intense tensions between contradictory values regarding what counts in being a good woman and a good life for a woman amid the many contradictory demands of modern societies.



### 3.3 Differences between Hong Kong and Singaporean Viewers: The ‘Asian Values Discourse’ and Patriarchal Ideals of Femininities in Singapore

#### *Singaporean Viewers’ Identification with the ‘Asian Values Discourse’*

As mentioned above, both groups of audiences recognized and appreciated the happy hybridization of traditional values and modern images in Korean dramas. On top of this common cultural appreciation and personal identification, the female viewers in Singapore seemed to be more inclined towards traditional values and Confucianist ideals, such as traditional virtues related to family relationships. According to the survey results (see Table 5.5), 28.5% of our Hong Kong informants (19% agreed and 9.5% strongly agreed) adored Korean dramas because ‘they can reveal the importance of family’. For the Singaporean informants, 46.7% of them (36.7% agreed and 10% strongly agreed) adored Korean dramas for the same reason.

**Table 5.5** Reason for Viewing Korean Dramas: ‘They Can Reveal the Importance of Family’

	<i>Hong Kong informants (%)</i>	<i>Singaporean informants (%)</i>
Strongly disagree	4.7	6.7
Disagree	23.8	23.3
Neutral	42.9	23.3
Agree	19.0	36.7
Strongly agree	9.5	10.0
Total	100	100

First of all, our informants in Singapore seemed to pay more attention to moral values in the family (e.g. filial piety) in Korean dramas, and they could easily identify with the storylines and characters. One of the favorite Korean dramas of Ling (aged 33, supervisor of sales department) is *The Gift*, which features children's love for their parents in a subtle way. She enjoyed the love provided by parents of the female protagonist, as she recalled this scene — the father cooks for her after work, and her mother takes care of her when she is sick — she believed that all these were instances of 'love in daily life'. Another Singaporean informant, Charlene (aged 30+, reporter), was deeply impressed by the family warmth in the dramas, and she pointed out that family is 'the most important thing' in one's life. She said, 'In case of emergency or (in a) risky situation, family is the best support. No matter how successful you are, family is still the most important thing.'

The ethical principle of filial piety in Confucianism emphasizes kinship networks as the focus of Chinese culture. The Singaporean government has promoted a certain version of Confucianism as an ideology for political and social control, emphasizing that individual views must be subordinated to the common good (Wilen and Wilen, 1997). Its notion of 'Westernization' / Western choices refers to 'wrong' or 'bad' choices, including values, attitudes and ideas that pit the individual and his/her concerns over and above societal concerns (PuruShotam, 1998). One of the common good that Singaporeans are concerned with is the family good — harmony among family members. For instance, one of the Singaporean informants, Silvia (aged 33, researcher and teacher), placed great importance on family values and she considered this an indicator of 'Asian-ness'. She pointed out her personal feelings on 'traditions' and 'family values' in this way:

The tensions between, the traditions, the family values, the Asian-ness, okay? I do not know, I think that is very relative. I related to it. I am very Chinese, I am very family-oriented, kind of person, the more I grow up, the more I realize. I watch myself, and I realize that I am, I am very attached to the family ... I probably admire [the] Asian, or the Chinese that I think I was. When I watched these [Korean dramas], I found myself relating very deeply to that family values, very, very deep. (original in English)

Her claim of 'Asian-ness' reveals that family values are seen to be at the heart of the 'Asian worldview' that she seems to be constructing for herself as she watches Korean dramas. In addition to family values, some informants claimed that their conservative attitudes toward love/sex are also characteristics of Asian people. The Singaporean informants seem to be more inclined towards

traditional values in love affairs and sexual relationships. As indicated in Table 5.6, about half of the Hong Kong informants agreed/strongly agreed to the statement ‘I will be faithful to my partner unto death’, while over 70% of the Singaporean informants reported with the same answer. Women in both cities, particularly those in Singapore, seem to affirm faithfulness and loyalty to love. Similar to the practice of ‘learning family values from Korean dramas’, some Singaporean informants considered Korean dramas ‘educative materials’ for youth in terms of love/sex relations today.

**Table 5.6** Response to the Statement ‘I Will Be Faithful to My Partner unto Death’

	<i>Hong Kong informants (%)</i>	<i>Singaporean informants (%)</i>
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	4.4	3.4
Neutral	43.5	23.3
Agree	39.1	50.0
Strongly agree	13.0	23.3
Total	100	100

Singaporeans are in a very controlled environment and most people are still very conservative towards sex (Maclachlan and Chua, 2004). In our study, many Singaporean female viewers emphasized that they cannot accept premarital sex, and they preferred more ‘restrained’ and ‘pure’ expressions of love. For instance, Minnie (aged 29, language teacher) has been in love with her present boyfriend for ten years, and both of them cannot accept premarital sex. Another informant, Jessica (aged 26, travel agent), suggested that ‘the good thing is worth waiting for; waiting till marriage will be more valuable’. When talking about ‘one-night stands’, most informants showed a strong opposition; for instance, a Singaporean informant Bena (aged 36, language teacher) said, ‘(I) can accept it mentally, but cannot accept it physically’. Polly (aged 35, housewife) believed that Korean dramas could deliver a positive message to youth in modern Singapore (in contrast to Japanese dramas), which she said fits the traditional mind of East Asian people. As she puts it,

I prefer encouraging those (youths) to watch Korean dramas. The love attitudes depicted in Japanese dramas are not good, and the trend is not good, either. For example, the female protagonist (in a Japanese drama) is willing to dedicate her body to a man, just to gain his love; the feeling is so frivolous. It’s less conservative than our thinking, (different from) the traditional mind of East Asian women.

It seems that Korean TV dramas have offered these Chinese women a helpful alternative to some sexualized Western productions (e.g., *Sex and the City*), as they seem to use Korean dramas to negotiate alternative forms of Asian modernities and femininities. As illustrated above, our Singaporean informants appeared to be more attached to the 'traditional' notion of family and conservative ethics of love/sex, with some claiming that these attitudes belong to 'Asian values', which the Singaporean government constructed as the basis of an Asian modernity (Wee, 2002). Langlois (2001) believes that Asian values are used as political tools by the state to carry out the so-called authentic Confucian governance. Our Singaporean informants seem to have internalized this government-promoted 'Asian values discourse' and Korean dramas are appealing as the dramas appear to re-affirm their values as 'Asian' rather than just Singaporean.

#### *Modification vs. Preservation of Patriarchal Ideals of Femininities*

Though women in both cities are confronted by similar family-job dilemmas their attitudes in dealing with role conflicts seem to be a bit different. It seems that female viewers in Hong Kong preferred a more liberalized/Westernized notion of femininities, while those in Singapore held a rather conservative/conventional definition of femininities. Leon and Ho (1994) argue that under the influence of Westernization and modernization, the patriarchal traditions of Chinese culture have gradually been modified in Hong Kong to adapt to urban city lifestyles. Many Hong Kong informants believed that Hong Kong women were quite different from those in Korean dramas, as they now occupied much higher social status than before and tended to be more career-minded. One of the indicators is the relatively high proportion of female government officials in Hong Kong as compared to other Western and Asian societies.

In many Western societies there seems to be a general movement of the two genders toward each other, a movement towards common occupations, common interests and common ideals in modern societies (Felski, 2000). Many Hong Kong women seem to accept and welcome this trend, and they embrace a more liberalized discourse on femininities, which grants women more freedom and allows them more room for self-development. Some informants found that Hong Kong women could be very independent and aggressive (e.g., in their careers), and that they always made decisions on their own without negotiating with their partners. In contemporary Hong Kong, it is generally accepted that women's social status is very close to, or even the same as, the social status of men. Many of them have become dissatisfied

with gender stereotypes and rigid role boundaries, and they cannot accept males' superiority over females. Most of our Hong Kong informants disliked the kind of 'male dominance' depicted in Korean dramas, both in the workplace and in love relations.

According to the results of our end-of-interview questionnaire survey (see Table 5.7), 20% Hong Kong informants believed that there was no discrimination against women in Hong Kong, while only 6.7% Singaporean informants held the same belief. On the other hand, nearly half of the Singaporean informants reported that 'there is some discrimination', but only 29.6% of the Hong Kong informants reported the same view (also see Table 5.7).

**Table 5.7** Self-perceived Discrimination against Women in One's Country

	<i>Hong Kong informants (%)</i>	<i>Singaporean informants (%)</i>
There is no discrimination at all	22.2	6.7
There is little discrimination	44.4	36.7
There is some discrimination	29.6	46.7
Not sure	3.7	10.0
Total	100	100

The Singaporean government has particularly strong feelings about a woman's social role as a mother, and Singaporean men still prefer wives who are controllable (Wilén and Wilén, 1997). In our study, though many of the Singaporean informants are independent career women, most of them still adhered to the ideological discourse that stipulates that women have to put family matters before her career, that the identity of 'mother' is more important than that of 'worker'. According to our survey, the 'maternal love' expressed by the female characters constitutes a major element of appeal to the Singaporean female viewers. A larger proportion of Singaporean informants than Hong Kong informants agreed to the statement that they watch Korean dramas because they can reflect the maternal love possessed by traditional women (see Table 5.8), and also a larger proportion of them agreed that 'I have to be married to be happy' (see Table 5.8). This seems to point to their strong identification with the social role of mother/care-taker.

According to many Singaporean women, families and mothers are their main sources of values and identities (Wee, 2002). Although the median age of first marriage has kept increasing from 23.3 in 1970 to 26 in 1997 for Singaporean women,<sup>5</sup> the tendency towards getting married remains relatively strong for Singaporean women (Saw, 1999). The general marriage rate only



**Table 5.8** Response to the Statement: 'I Have to Be Married to Be Happy'

	<i>Hong Kong informants (%)</i>	<i>Singaporean informants (%)</i>
Strongly disagree	4.3	6.7
Disagree	39.1	10.0
Neutral	26.1	46.7
Agree	30.4	26.7
Strongly agree	0	10.0
Total	100	100

**Table 5.9** Response to the Statement: 'It Is Natural to Have Children when Married'

	<i>Hong Kong informants (%)</i>	<i>Singaporean informants (%)</i>
Strongly disagree	11.1	10
Disagree	48.1	16.7
Neutral	18.5	33.3
Agree	14.8	26.7
Strongly agree	7.4	13.3
Total	100	100

decreased slightly from 11.5 (per 1000 population) in 1970 to 10.7 (per 1000 population) in 1997.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the divorce rate for Singaporean Chinese indicates a recent deterioration in marital harmony. From 1980 to 1997, Singaporean Chinese divorce rate increased steadily from 55.3 (per 1000 marriages) to 159.8 (per 1000 marriages).<sup>7</sup> As a result, the Singaporean government has promoted the 'happy marriage discourse' with greater effort. Despite the steadily increasing divorce rate, Saw (1999) believes that most Singaporean women are inclined to see 'marriage' and 'motherhood' as two of the crucial goals in their lives, which shows that they seem to have retained Confucianist notions of femininities in their modern lives.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this concluding section, the implications of Korean drama watching cultures among Chinese female viewers in Hong Kong and Singapore will be explored, with a critical discussion of the pleasures and imaginaries offered by Korean dramas. We shall start with a critical discussion of the construction of conservative ideals of femininities by the Singaporean government, followed by the largely government-led projection of Asian cultural identities as packaged in the 'Asian values discourse'. Then we shall end on a discussion

of imaginaries of Asian modern femininities that seem to be emerging in the Korean drama consumption practices of these Chinese female viewers.

#### **4.1 *'Masculine' Singapore: Construction of the Happy Family Discourse and Conservative Ideals of Femininities***

Most of our Singaporean informants are more attached to the traditional discourses of femininities than the Hong Kong informants. They affirm many of the so-called 'Asian'/'Confucianist' virtues of women — conservative, restrained, obedient, family-centered. The 'traditional virtues' possessed by those female protagonists in Korean dramas seem to provide them with resources to re-affirm what they construct as their 'Chinese and Asian cultural identities'. With increasing education and job opportunities, many Asian women have begun to realize their possibilities and have started to make independent judgments. For example, women in Hong Kong and Singapore seek more education and treat careers seriously, sometimes refusing marriage and children. There are public discourses lamenting that working mothers do not spend enough time with their children, causing family breakups. As the former Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew said, this might have posed 'real dangers to the transmission of our traditional values, our cultures' (Lee, 1984).

As compared to the Hong Kong government, it seems that the Singaporean government has been more active in promoting the 'happy family discourse' to stabilize the gender role boundaries between men and women. Today the Singaporean government's official discourses still promote marriage and childbirth, and the 'happy family discourse' divides women by conferring status to those who have conformed to the state-set ideals — married mothers, while those who have not (i.e. single females) are identified as potentially problematic (Maclachlan and Chua, 2004). The promotion of traditional and pro-family values (e.g. filial piety, sexual restraint and marital fidelity) aims at restoring families and mothers as the sources of values and identities (Wee, 2002). This helps preserve the patriarchal culture and paternalistic governance in Singaporean society. Singaporean women thus have to strive to organize their lives amid the conflicting demands of (1) the traditional caretaker role of women, (2) the exigencies of an industrial economy that encourages and rewards female labor force participation, and (3) the modern values of gender equality.<sup>8</sup>

Even with a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to Confucianism, there is no denying that some Confucianist sayings regarding women's subordinate position to men have been deeply inscribed in our culture and

language, and our lived experience as Asian women. This Confucianist/traditional version of femininities constructs women as caring, submissive and obedient, attending to 'qing' (compassion, attachment), and dependent on men for protection. Their ultimate goal/happiness is to get married to men, which turns out to be the recurrent kind of happy endings offered in Korean dramas (Lin and Kwan, 2005). In our study, many Chinese female viewers, especially those in Singapore, seem to readily endorse the Confucianist/traditional version of femininities. This may provide the most comfortable subject positions for them, which consist of modes of femininities that are most culturally acceptable/legitimate in many Asian societies (in this case, particularly the Singaporean society).

Although we have reservations in labeling these traditional version of femininities 'Confucianist values', they seem to be part of the lived cultures that many Asian women (e.g. our informants) have experienced. Our informants seem to be finding value and re-assurance in re-affirming their traditional cultural roots and cultural identities through re-affirming their traditional/Confucianist cultural ways of caring and expressing love as depicted in Korean dramas. Unwittingly, this also reproduces the Singaporean government's 'happy family discourse' and the relatively conservative ideologies of femininities. It should be noted that the Singaporean informants might be re-voicing the discourses of the government (i.e., drawing on the state discourses to narrate their own stories). However, their stories might also reveal their lived experience and perceived status of women in Singapore, which deserve closer attention and deeper analysis.

#### ***4.2 'Neo-Traditional Modernity': Constructing an Asian Cosmopolitan Imaginary with the 'Asian Values Discourse'***

As described earlier, Korean dramas are attractive in their ways of packaging traditional values with modern aesthetics. Korean dramas affirm the commitment to certain traditional values in a globalizing and Westernizing modern Asian society. It is interesting to note that these Chinese female viewers identify these 'traditional elements' (e.g. conservative attitudes towards love and sex, female chastity as a natural quality of women, family-orientedness, respect for seniors and the elderly) as being 'Asian'. They try to construct their own 'Asian' cultural identities (in contrast to Western cultural identities) through the personalization of the subtle ways of expressing love, romance, care and respect as depicted in Korean dramas. It seems that this is a very important part of the pleasure that these female Chinese viewers seem to be deriving from their consumption of Korean dramas.



At the same time, the representation of cosmopolitan city life, love affairs and global consumerist lifestyles in Korean dramas is appealing. One of the Hong Kong informants, Irene, found that the Korean cityscape in the dramas remains in a developing stage, which she said is 'more developed than China, but less developed than Hong Kong'. She liked this stage very much as it represents a mixture of tradition and modernity. This leads to a hybridization of two seemingly conflicting discourses — traditionality and modernity — which together constitute a kind of 'neo-traditional modernity'. The term 'neo-traditional modernity' includes a simultaneous homogenization and differentiation, which originally refers to harmony among different ethnic groups (Wee, 2002). However, its meaning can be extended to embrace both traditional and modern values/virtues, and can be constructed to represent some form of cultural coherence/solidarity in a trans-border Asian cosmopolitan imaginary.

The term 'modernization' has often been used as a code word for 'Westernization' although recently 'globalization' has replaced the term, 'modernization'. However, Asian societies have their own economical, social and cultural contexts, and we cannot copy the practices of Western societies without considering our own needs. Ang points out the uniqueness of Asian modernity in this way, 'Modernization may unavoidably involve a fundamental element of Westernization, especially in a structural sense, but Asian modernity — as a way of life — is by no means a simple replication of Western modernity.' (2004: 306). She believes that Asian idealized cultural modernity is associated with material affluence, consumerism, female emancipation and individualism. Our study shows that the kind of 'Asian modernity' desired by Chinese women seems to be based on a hybridization of both modern (e.g., pursuit of choice in love and careers) and traditional values (conservative family and sexuality values). It represents a dream of alternative modernities that can embrace both modern and traditional values, and the term 'modern' becomes more fluid and also ambiguous.

However, one of the dangers of the Asian values discourse is the government's use of it in imposing conservative ideologies for political and social control, including the control of women's bodies and aspirations. Wee (2003, 2004) suggested that the Singapore state's Asianization attempt is now in abeyance, given the criticism of 'Asian values' to be nothing more than bad values like collusion, corruption and nepotism after the 1997 Asian economic crisis. It is possible that this 'Asian values discourse' can be manipulated by the government to continue its authoritarian and paternalistic rule, and to reject liberalized ideas from the West. In fact, 'Asian values' are extraordinarily diverse, ranging across the political spectrum and drawing on

religion, tradition, politics and culture (Mamoru, 2004). Owing to the diversification, it should be noted that there is no such thing as a monolithic Asian modernity (Ang, 2004). The term 'Asian values' should be considered a representation of a set of cultural and moral norms, which are not exclusively good or bad, and diverse within itself. Future studies may analyze the changing 'Asian values discourse' in correspondence to the economic, social and cultural development of different societies in Asia.

### ***4.3 Escape or Agency? Transnational Korean Drama Flows and Imaginaries of Asian Modern Femininities***

Despite the fact that informants in both cities seem to identify with these so-called 'Confucianist cultural values', some of them (mostly Hong Kong female viewers) actually practice 'selective' identification with the traditional femininities depicted in Korean dramas (as well as in everyday discourses). This ensures that a more fluid subject position can be adopted by modern Asian women, which preserves the 'good qualities' of what they labeled as an 'Asian' tradition while keeping up with demands of the rapidly changing society. The modern/Western feminist discourses construct women as becoming more assertive, rational, independent of men and equally capable of handling their tough everyday management work just as men do. Some of our informants, especially the career women in Hong Kong, recognized and appreciated the 'realism' of workplace scenarios in Korean dramas (e.g. modern career women who are tough and capable, willing to express their wishes and desires). They rejected a complete and blind acceptance of all traditional gender values that are considered to be 'Confucianist virtues'.

While a non-critical acceptance of the 'Asian values discourse' (including traditional gender ideologies) seems to be rather regressive, it should be noted that some of the traditional values are not necessarily 'bad things'. Some of these 'traditional ideals', such as the emphasis on 'qing' and commitment to a love/sex relationship, constitute a social imaginary with compassion and love, which is very important to women suffering from the alienation and rationalist discourses in modern society. Many modern working women need to fit into the tough masculine workplace culture on the one hand, but would also like to retreat to a safe fantasy space where they no longer need to put up with the struggle and return to a more traditional/Confucianist femininity on the other (Lin and Kwan, 2005). As illustrated by our informants, we can see that many working women are yearning for 'qing', for pure and absolute love in a society that privileges rationalist efficiency discourses and non-compassionate approaches to work. A Hong Kong informant, Irene, said that

she loved the warm feeling offered by the dramas. She believed that Korean dramas were a response to rapidly changing Asian society:

In reality, the relationship[s] between people are getting more and more distanced, [Korean drama] wants to give people a space for reflection, something like that, to represent the kind of warm love, warm feeling, such kinds of things.

In the identification process, the Chinese women may feel that they are bonded with other Asian women who also cherish lost traditional values/virtues. This shows the social imaginary constructed and consumed by the Chinese women through viewing Korean dramas. Poovey points out that 'social imaginary is not simply a social theory developed by specialists but 'is at least partly generated by ordinary people for use in life, and it reveals itself in stories, myths, and commonplaces as well as theoretical narratives' (2002: 131). What we will like to propose in this chapter is that Korean dramas seem to constitute an important imaginary space which portray a social universe with compassion, as embodied in the Chinese saying 'you-qing tian-di', which can be translated as: 'a sky and earth with compassion', and this is alternative to the Western modern imaginary of objectification and abstraction (see Poovey, 2002). Nevertheless, it is by nature an imaginary re-creation of the social world, and there is always a tension between the realism and idealism offered by a drama.

To conclude, this study reveals the complexities and contradictions inherent in the modern living conditions and subjectivities of women in the rapidly modernizing, Westernizing and globalizing societies of Hong Kong and Singapore. Korean dramas seem to re-affirm the traditional discourse of femininities on the one hand, and provide a potential imaginary space for alternative (hybridized) modernities and femininities on the other. Modern Asian women need to recognize that the 'Asian values discourse' (including the 'patriarchal ideals of femininities', 'happy family discourse' described in this chapter) is a modern-day construct that different parties (e.g., the government, the media, politicians, and also ourselves) have participated in creating and maintaining. What counts as a good life for an Asian modern woman and what counts as ideal femininities in modern Asian societies? As Asian women continue to experience conflicting demands exerted on them by various modern society structures and discourses, Korean dramas would seem to continue to have a role to play in these women's simultaneous consumption, construction and exploration of different Asian modern femininities.

Whether this role is largely progressive or regressive (or mixed) would seem to turn on how women use the dramas rather than the narratives of the dramas per se. We believe that agency is one's socioculturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001). The agency of the women consumers can be enhanced if their consumption practices are taken seriously to generate critical discussion of the different kinds of social imaginaries emerging from women's reading (interpretive) practices when they consume different media texts such as Korean dramas. And perhaps in the process both the consumers and the analyst shall also be acquiring critical media literacy (a kind of sociocultural and interpretive resource) that enables us to use Korean dramas (and other media texts) in ways that are more an expression of our agency than escape.

### **Acknowledgements**

This chapter is based on a research project funded by a Strategic Research Grant (2004–5) awarded to Angel Lin by the City University of Hong Kong. The authors are also indebted to Professor Chua Beng-huat for his many useful critical comments on an earlier version of this chapter.