

Hallyu: Through the Looking Glass

KATHLEEN MAE N. PRADO

*4 BS Chemistry
Ateneo de Manila University*

Abstract

At the turn of the 21st century, the world witnessed a global phenomenon involving the rise of interest in Korean pop culture. This spread of popularity is termed *Hallyu*, transliterated as “flow of Korea,” by academic scholars. Kpop music and Korean dramas have been captivating a lot of people, especially teenagers and young adults, not only in Asia but also in the West. The Korean entertainment industry emerged as a major player in the export of popular culture, competing with the Western countries like the US and UK. Capitalizing on this, the Korean government used *Hallyu* to increase its soft power and supported the export of everything Korean: from food, taekwondo, traditional culture and history, to cosmetics, and tourism, even allotting some of its national budget for the said purpose.

As *Hallyu* successfully and continuously conquers the world’s entertainment industry, we, as its target audience, must not consume blindly but instead, we should be critical of the kind of media we immerse ourselves in because it greatly affects our idea and perception of everyday reality according to Cultivation Theory.

This paper aims to examine portrayals of women in *Hallyu* by identifying the tropes and common qualities of female leads in internationally-recognized Korean dramas. The effects of these constructed female images on Korean society will then be examined. Also, female gender roles present in Korean society and their roots in history will be identified. Lastly, the interaction of the media portrayal of women and their societal role will be analyzed using the Cultivation Theory.

At the turn of the 21st century, the world witnessed a global phenomenon involving the rise of interest in Korean pop culture. This spread of popularity is termed *Hallyu*, transliterated as “flow of Korea,” by academic scholars. Kpop music and Korean dramas have been captivating a lot of people, especially teenagers and young adults, not only in Asia but also in the West. The Korean entertainment industry emerged as a major player in the export of popular culture, competing with the Western countries like the US and UK. Capitalizing on this, the Korean government used *Hallyu* to increase its soft power and supported the export of everything Korean: from food, taekwondo, traditional culture and history, to cosmetics, and tourism, even allotting some of its national budget for the said purpose.

As *Hallyu* successfully and continuously conquers the world’s entertainment industry, we, as its target audience, must not consume blindly but instead, we should be critical of the kind of media we immerse ourselves in because it greatly affects our idea and perception of everyday reality according to Cultivation Theory.

This paper aims to examine portrayals of women in *Hallyu* by identifying the tropes and common qualities of female leads in internationally-recognized Korean dramas. The effects of these constructed female images on Korean society will then be examined. Also, female gender roles present in Korean society and their roots in history will be identified. Lastly, the interaction of the media portrayal of women and their societal role will be analyzed using the Cultivation Theory.

Portrayals of Women in Korean Dramas

This analysis will be limited to mini-series, Korean dramas with only 16 to 20 episodes, usually aired twice in a week. These dramas are usually in the romantic comedy genre with a mix of melodrama and bits of fantasy. Korean dramas set in both traditional or historical and modern-day times will be examined. In addition, dramas mentioned in this paper are at least in the yearly top 10 ranking of Contents Power Index (CPI). Conducted by CJ E&M and Nielsen, CPI is based on the number of searches on online search engines, news subscription rankings, and mentions in social networking sites. Although it only measures the overall interest in a drama and not the user ratings, the author deemed CPI objective enough to be a main reference. There is no standardized measurement of Korean ratings available at the moment. Popular fan drama websites that rate and recap Korean dramas like *couchkimchi*, *dramabeans*, and *asianwiki*, were judged as too subjective because they are based on the authors' tastes. Because of this, the kinds of dramas evaluated and analyzed here is another limitation. In addition, the ratings mentioned here are based

on average audience share conducted by TNMS and AGB Nielsen both in Seoul and nationwide.

As a long time Korean drama fan who has watched at least 100 dramas, one cannot avoid observing clichés that could be tiresome and too predictable but otherwise, still serve as a good plot device to hook and bait new fans. Some of the common and popular tropes and set-ups between the lead characters are the following: love at first sight, childhood first loves, hate-turned-love relationship, cohabitation (or being neighbors) due to extraordinary circumstances although the leads are not yet in a relationship, and the-poor-girl-and-rich-*chaebol* (business tycoon heir) or Cinderella trope. Furthermore, common romantic scenes include back hugs, accidental and static kisses, wrist grabbing, accidentally sleeping on the guy's shoulder, piggyback rides, couple items (like shirt, phone charm, necklace), airport scenes, and (at least) a family member disapproving the lead couple's relationship.

Among the scenes mentioned above, things relevant to this paper are the portrayal of female leads as damsels-in-distress and the poor girl-rich guy (Cinderella story) trope. What's problematic about these two is the perpetuation of an image of a weak woman that needs to be saved literally and metaphorically by a strong man. In dramas like *Boys Over Flowers* (with an average rating of at least 25% based on AGB daily ratings), and *Secret Garden* (with an average rating of at least 24% based on TNMS daily ratings), the female leads started strong, bubbly, and fierce. In the former, Geum Jan Di is the family's breadwinner who stood up and went against the male lead, a famous and rich school bully, while in the latter

Gil Ra Im works as a stunt woman. These kinds of personalities are refreshing and appealing to the hot-headed and spoiled male leads. The attraction between contrasting characters builds an interesting dynamics to propel the love story. However, after meeting and falling in love with the male leads, the feisty and independent female leads succumb into being docile, passive, and submissive (“Exploring Gender Roles,” 2014).

Another stark example is Moon Chae Won’s character in *The Innocent Man*. She is a brilliant businesswoman who always saves her father’s company through her quick decisions. However, there is this looming fear that all her effort goes to waste because it will be his brother that will take over the company as soon as he’s old enough. Her father doesn’t acknowledge her either. She is rebellious and prickly to the point of being repulsive but these qualities are needed for her to survive the male-dominated company and household (“Smiling Girlfriends,” 2013). In spite of these laudable qualities, midway through the series, however, she becomes incredibly helpless and miserable because of brain damage which she sustained through an accident in the name of her boyfriend.

The damsel-in-distress trope is depicted in *Oh My Venus*, a 16-episode drama that tells of a love story between a 33-year-old overweight lawyer and a *chaebol* who’s also a Hollywood personal trainer. Here, Shin Min Ah (female lead) uttering “please save me” is a recurring scene. She cried this when she was confronted by a stalker, had leg cramps, slipped on a pavement, and hit her head on the glass door. Magically, So Ji Sub, the male lead, kept appearing whenever she called out. It

shows the female lead's utter helplessness and dependence on someone to save her, reinforcing the prince-charming-saving-the-damsel-in-distress trope.

Besides not caring about material goods and their physical appearance, female lead characters, who are mostly depicted as average-looking, are portrayed as pure and virginal. This is the reason why most Korean dramas are about childhood first loves reuniting as adults. If not, then the female lead would be someone who has never been kissed, in love, or in a relationship. On the other hand, the male characters are exceptionally rich (*chaebol*) and/or famous (idols, actors) so they are highly desirable to other women, depicting the existing double standard.

Because of this obsession with virginity, female lead characters are stripped of their sexuality and desexualized. Its conservatism, e.g., lack of torrid kissing scenes and sexual intercourse is what separates Korean dramas from Western dramas and what draws some fans to patronize *Hallyu*. This desexualization perpetuates the image of a pure-hearted girl who will sacrifice anything for love and always put her male partner as first priority over her career. Besides appealing to young women, this virginal purity attracts male audiences in Korea and may function to serve males' fantasies as "innocence, inexperience, and immaturity" fulfil them. Women are also viewed as bodies rather than subjects. Hence, only few dramas depict women enjoying kisses or even, sexual intercourse like *Coffee Prince*, *Que Sera Sera*, and *Iris* ("Female Sexuality," 2014). On the other hand, sexually-active women or women having sexual desires are portrayed as

negative and having no happy endings as depicted in *Que Sera Sera* and *My Princess* (“Female Sexuality,” 2014).

Another disturbing thing to note is the over-used and anticipated wrist-grab scenes that have become a trademark of Korean drama romantic comedies. This is featured in popular dramas like *You’re Beautiful*, *The Heirs*, *Boys Over Flowers*, *Playful Kiss*, and *Secret Garden*. Typically, wrist grabbing is used by male characters to 1) stop a woman from leaving, 2) drag her away, or 3) fight for a woman in a tug-of-war between two men (“Opinion: Why I Hate,” 2015). In some of these scenes, the woman protests and struggles, asking him to let go but he doesn’t listen and continues to drag her. She could neither fend him off because he is stronger. What’s worse is that sometimes the female character is not offended at this kind of rude treatment at all and just meekly submits and lets him have his way.

In contrast to holding hands which requires consent from both parties, wrist grabbing is very one-sided and less intimate. It is an assertion of power and physically difficult to reject. Aside from being arrogant, aggressive, violent, and disrespectful, wrist grabbing portrays a weak woman who can’t fight against a dominating man. This perpetuates the stereotype that by subduing women, men assert their masculinity. Furthermore, it conveys that women are treated as possessions, like a ragdoll.

It is indeed very depressing that most fans find these scenes very romantic and acceptable. For them, wrist grabbing sweeps the lead off her feet. They don’t view it as something violent and offensive because this is how their beloved and flawless

male lead behaves. It is possible then that in real life, they will find this behavior acceptable when confronted by their lover.

There's also a repeating story arc of a fascinated male lead actively pursuing the disinterested female lead. In *Secret Garden*, the male lead took domineering to another level by committing stalking, harassment, physical confinement, and assault against the female lead. Despite her showing no interest in him, he was so determined to win her over, that he never listened to her protests. He insulted her often about being poor and incessantly called her ugly. In *A Gentleman's Dignity*, a 20-episode show about four male *ahjussis* and dubbed as Korea's Sex and the City, the mentioned stalking and harassment also occur as the male lead "wooded" another disinterested female. Interestingly, these two dramas have the same writer, Kim Eun Sook.

In addition, in most Korean dramas, there is a lot of forced kisses. While the female lead struggles and resists, showing signs of distress and shock, the male lead persists to kiss her, holding her down firmly. Because of the difference in physical strength, she soon relents and just stands there, letting him kiss her with her eyes closed or startled. These forced kisses can be seen in *Secret Garden*, *The Heirs*, and *You're Beautiful*. Besides ignoring the lack of consent, the female is also stripped off her sexuality, as mentioned earlier.

A notable example of sexual violence occurred in *Queen of Reversals* Episode 20 ("Hands Off," 2013). As the female lead was leaving the scene, the male lead grabbed her wrist, placed his mouth on hers, and firmly held her face while she struggled to free herself. When she managed to shove him away and

attempted to slap him, he intercepted her arm, grasped the back of her neck, and forcibly kissed her again. To “soften” the violence and package the scene as romantic, sweet music played in the background and the romantic setting, with bright Christmas decorations and snow falling, helped set the romantic mood.

However, there are notable dramas, usually in the historical and traditional genre, that portray strong women. *Dae Jang Geum*, a 60-episode drama aired in 87 countries, narrates the adventures of a palace maid to become the first female royal physician in the Joseon Dynasty. It depicts the victory of a woman in a male-dominated Neo-Confucian social hierarchy without losing her identity (“Top K-Dramas,” 2011). Another drama is *Queen Seondeok* which is about the obstacles and tribunals of a Silla princess as she fights her way to become the first female ruler of the Silla kingdom. Due to its incredibly high viewership ratings, which reached a peak 44.7% (Kim, L., 2009), it has been extended from 50 to 62 episodes. Lastly, *Empress Ki* is another drama about the rise of a Goryeo native to an empress of the Yuan Dynasty.

In the romantic comedy genre, *King 2 Hearts* depicts a strong and empowered female protagonist. Played by Ha Ji Won, Kim Hang Ah was a North Korean Special Forces officer who married the Crown Prince of South Korea (“But of course,” 2014). She was a brave fighter and a respectable queen who transformed Lee Seung Gi, the male lead, from a happy-go-lucky playboy to a responsible king. There was no hint of damsel-in-distress in Ha Ji Won’s character. In fact, she was portrayed as bad-ass with strong leadership and fighting skills. There was one scene wherein she appeared to be

stronger than the king because she rescued him when he had been kidnapped (“But of course,” 2014). Their relationship was also very well-balanced as they depended on each other to unite the two Koreas and fight off the antagonist. The drama shows the king relying on the queen for strength, motivation, and support.

Neo-Confucianism in Korean Society

Why these dynamics exist can be traced back to Korea’s Neo-Confucianism belief system. Neo-Confucianism was “established as a state ideology and code of conduct for men and women” (Park, 2008) during the Joseon Dynasty. Koreans believe that women are inferior in status to men. To understand this, the concept of *ki* is vital. Could also be thought of as air, spirit, and energy, *ki* is a material force flowing through all things that connects the mind and the body, giving them form and vitality. This concept was derived from the idea that there is no distinction between the self and the universe. “The many are ultimately One.” For men, letting go of the ego and becoming selfless is the focus of the *ki*, that is, to have no consciousness of an individual and separate self apart from others. For the family, the *ki* is composed of a unified body, and the identity of the self and family was continuous and undifferentiated (Turnbull, 2008). Because of this, there is a sense of non-individuated and fluid self. However, this concept of *ki* only applies to men and it is believed that women do not carry it.

Furthermore, Neo-Confucianism adopted the *yin-yang* concepts of Taoism. *Yin*, associated with femininity, passive, negative, and weak, while *yang*, associated with masculinity,

active, positive, strong (opposite qualities and forces), are paired complementary opposites whose interactions kept the world in balance (Park, 2008).

Thus, Neo-Confucian techniques of self-cultivation of the mind (through the study of classics) and body (through ancestor worship) do not apply to women because they are an inferior gender. Women do not have the need or ability to strive for this spiritual transcendence of the self and body because they were viewed as “passive receptacles of the life which men implanted in them; they played no active part in creating life” (Turnbull, 2008). The best women could aim for in life then, is to continue her husband’s *ki*, through the production of children and management of household. Hence, they were regarded as “subjectless bodies” and were valued mostly for their bodies and its reproductive labor; beauty and wealth were only secondary to the physical attributes required for reproduction.

As a result, this ideology reinforced the concept of women as primarily physical bodies. Mixing this image with capitalist patriarchy, the current social order in Korea illustrates a female subordinated under a male’s control and becoming his personal property. It is expected that women be obedient and submissive to their husbands.

Korean dramas’ lack of sexual scenes and conservatism can be attributed to the Neo-Confucian idea of marital sex as private. The pre- or extra-marital affairs of women are viewed as threats to the patriarchal system so female sexuality becomes problematic and chastity and obedience are highly valued.

Analysis Using Cultivation Theory

According to Cultivation Theory proposed by Gerbner and Gross (1976), heavy viewership of TV affects our idea and perception of everyday life, making us more susceptible to accept media messages as real and valid. It suggests that prolonged exposure to television cultivates attitudes that believe that the world created by TV is an accurate depiction of the real world. “The theory suggests that this cultivation of attitudes is based on attitudes already present in our society and that the media take those attitudes which are already present and re-present them bundled in a different packaging to their audiences” (Davie, 2011). Thus, it is very critical that we are mindful of the kind of media we consume.

Given the disturbing and abusive Korean drama tropes i.e., forced kisses and wrist grabbing, described above, most fans, however, find them really romantic. They don’t notice at all how the lack of consent from the female character is alarming. In fact, fans even blog and categorize the common wrist grabs and kisses seen in Korean dramas (“The 11 most dramatic Wrist Grabs,” 2015). They find them fascinating and dramatic, not considering the fact that these moves are very aggressive and borderline rape because of neglect in the female lead’s consent.

In *Secret Garden*’s Episode 13, there was a scene bordering on rape (Kim, 2010). The male lead successfully attempted to sleep on the same bed as the female lead, by forcefully pinning her down with his legs and hugging her tight. Although it showed how many times she struggled and resisted him, even saying that she’d file a case against him, her efforts were futile

as he continuously ignored her pleas. It should be noted that the scene after the struggle was played out well by playing a romantic song and zooming in on the male lead's handsome face, giving the audience the perspective of the female lead. The male lead did not face any consequences for his forceful actions because the female lead did not call him out against crossing her physical boundary the next day. Hence, the male lead's creepiness and violence are disguised into being romantic and funny. It is worrisome that this scene cut has more than 4,700 likes and only 245 down votes on youtube. Most of the comments are about how romantic the scene was, how swoony and sexy the male lead is, and how *Secret Garden* is the best drama for them.

One reason Korean drama fans behave and react like this is they have already been desensitized by this kind of rude behavior. Following the Cultivation Theory, by constant exposure to Korean drama, they are conditioned to believe that wrist-grabbing and forced kisses are normal actions. Dangers of this include being unable to recognize sexual assault when it happens to them, giving excuses for their partner's horrible behavior, and believing he can change.

Another thing to note is that 83% of Korean drama screenwriters are female (34 out of 41) ("The behind the scenes," 2013). Although women make up a considerable majority of the romantic comedy and melodrama writers, Korean dramas still contain an abundance of anti-feminist stories and weak characterization of the female leads (in contrast to male leads complete character arc e.g., Ji Eun Tak and Kim Shin in *Goblin*). It can be said that it is the women themselves that perpetuate and support the abuse of their own

sex, although these contents may abound because of what the audience likes, thus leading to higher ratings.

The female lead stereotype as bubbly, pure, and virginal gives rise to an unrealistic idealism among male audience, which is not a faithful depiction of the Korean society (“Confucianism and the female roles,” 2012). Most Koreans engage in pre-marital sex. Korea also has one of the largest prostitution industries in the world and its age of consent is 13. Because of the virginal expectation on women, sexually-active women have to pretend to be inexperienced so as to appear virgin and pure (Turnbull, 2009). By shaving their pubic hair, Korean women are perceived as sluts, just because they are assumed to be sexually-active. This should never be the case because it is her body and only she owns it. Thus, she should be free to whatever choice she wants without societal prejudices. As a repercussion of this, Korean women regard contraception as entirely a man’s responsibility, by not insisting to wear condoms or feigning ignorance of all contraceptive methods.

There is promise for the future, however. Recently, there has been emergence of cable TV channels like OCN and tVn. Because they have more freedom in broadcasting, their content is more varied and there is a wider range of stories narrated. In addition, it is observed that more sexualized and strong women are portrayed in dramas like *Secret Love Affair*, *I Need Romance*, and *Reply 1997*.

In summary, portrayals of women in Korean drama i.e., damsels-in-distress and Cinderella trope, is a reflection of Korea’s existing social order, based on Neo-Confucianism

ideologies that took root during the Joseon era. Although it is fictional, the images and messages they contain reinforce existing harmful stereotypes and desensitize people.

References

- But of course, there are exceptions. (2014, April 8). *Feminism and male chauvinism in Korean dramas*. Retrieved from <http://lifeisnotakdrama.tumblr.com/post/82110734395/but-of-course-there-are-exceptions>
- Confucianism and the female roles in K-Drama. (2012, June 26). *Seoulbeats* Retrieved from <http://seoulbeats.com/2012/06/confucianism-and-the-female-roles-in-k-dramas/>
- Davie, G. (2011, May 2). Cultivation theory. *Mass communication theory*. Retrieved from <http://masscommtheory.com/theory-overviews/cultivation-theory/>
- de Bary, W. T., & Bloom, I. (1960). *Sources of Chinese tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Exploring gender roles in K-Dramas. (2014, April 8). *Feminism & male chauvinism in Korean dramas*. [Tumblr post]. Retrieved from <http://lifeisnotakdrama.tumblr.com/post/82111008148/exploring-gender-roles-in-k-dramas>
- Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication* 26(2), 172-199.
- Female sexuality in K-Drama: Where is it? (2014, August 17). *Kdramareport*. Retrieved from <https://glitterkid.wordpress.com/2014/08/17/female-sexuality-in-k-drama-where-is-it/>
- Hands off: Consent and the Asian drama male. (2013, August 13). *Outside Seoul*. [Blog post] Retrieved from <http://outsideseoul.blogspot.ca/2013/08/hands-off-consent-and-asian-drama-male.html>

- Jinkerson, L. (2015, January 11). The 11 most dramatic wrist grabs in a K-drama. *DramaFever*. Retrieved from <http://www.dramafever.com/news/the-11-most-dramatic-wrist-grabs-in-a-k-drama/>
- Kim, E-S. (Writer), Shin, W-C., & Kwon, H-C. (Directors). (2010). Episode 13 [Television series episode]. In A. Hunt (Producer), *Secret Garden*. Seoul, South Korea: Seoul Broadcasting System.
- Kim, T. (2003). Neo-Confucian body techniques: Women's bodies in Korea's consumer society. *Body & Society* 9(2), 97-113.
- Korean dramas, domineering men, and the worries of a chick-flick-loving feminist. (2012, February 07). Not another wave: The feminist conversation for everyone. [Blog post]. Retrieved from Opinion: Why I hate the K-drama wrist grab. (2015, July 03). *Soompi*. Retrieved from <http://www.soompi.com/2015/07/03/why-i-hate-the-k-drama-wrist-grab/>
- Opinion: Why I hate the K-Drama wrist grab. *Soompi*. Retrieved from <http://www.soompi.com/2015/07/03/why-i-hate-the-k-drama-wrist-grab/>.
- Park, J-y. (2008). Seeing stars: Female film stars and female audiences in post-colonial Korea. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.897.6923&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Smiling girlfriends and personality draining in K-drama leading ladies. (2013, August 19). *Beyond Hallyu*. Retrieved from <http://beyondhallyu.com/film-tv/smiling-girlfriends-and-personality-draining-in-dramas-leading-ladies/>
- The behind the scenes gender divide in K-Dramas (2013, September 28). *Beyond Hallyu*. Retrieved from <http://beyondhallyu.com/film-tv/tv/drama/behind-scenes-gender-divide-k-dramas/>
- Top K-dramas and Stars. (2011). In *K-drama: A new TV genre with a global appeal*, (pp. 75-109). Korea:Korean Culture and Information Service.

Turnbull, J. (2008, March 18). Women's bodies in Korea's consumer society, Part 1: Their neo-Confucian heritage. *The Grand Narrative*. Retrieved from <http://thegrandnarrative.com/2008/03/19/womens-bodies-in-koreas-consumer-society-part-1-their-neo-confucian-heritage/>

Turnbull, J. (2009, October 9). Korean women are sexually conservative. *The Grand Narrative*. Retrieved from <http://thegrandnarrative.com/2009/10/09/koreans-sexually-conservative>

* * *

Kathleen Mae Prado is currently attending Ateneo de Manila University. She is studying Chemistry and minoring in Korean Studies. She aspires to work in the field of forensic chemistry. You can find her cooped up in her room while binging on Korean dramas and psychological thriller books.