The Dilemmas of Modern Working Women in Hong Kong:
Women's Use of Korean TV Dramas

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Abstract

In this paper we describe our audience study of some career women's viewing practices of Korean TV dramas in Hong Kong.   Using the snowballing method (Brown, 1994) we have conducted individual, in-depth interviews with fifteen Korean TV drama fans in Hong Kong.   In our data analysis, we attempt to understand women's viewing pleasure and the ways in which Korean TV dramas might provide modern working women in Hong Kong with resources to negotiate real life tensions between some deep-rooted, Confucianist sociocultural values and new, modern working conditions in a rapidly westernizing and globalizing Hong Kong society.   Implications for women's TV drama viewing practices and the (re)production and negotiation of women's femininities in rapidly modernizing, westernizing and globalizing Asian societies are discussed.

1. Research on Women's TV Dramas: Tension between Women's Pleasure and Feminist Desire

The melodramatic serial, or the soap opera, has long been considered almost exclusively a women's genre although many men and boys actually watch this form as well (Brown, 1990).   Soaps-watching is usually denigrated in both general public discourses and academic discourses.   Key debates in the feminist media research literature revolve around the negative social functions or impact of soap operas.   Many feminist researchers held the view that TV soap operas have a largely negative impact, i.e., reinforcing and naturalizing traditional gender roles and values (e.g., the notion that women's greatest happiness lies in marriage or women's place is in the home).   Also, if the soaps function mainly to create a fantasyland for women viewers to live out vicariously dreams that they cannot fulfill in their real life, or to release their emotions

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due to the frustrations of everyday life, then the relation is hegemonic.   As Singaporean cultural theorist, Wan-Ling Wee, puts it, "What happens after they watch all the K-dramas [Korean dramas]?   Does it change the way they behave – or is it mainly cathartic?   If so, then it maintains the status quo; no, and it still doesn't exceed Adorno's critique of the culture industry – that it retards individual autonomy and doesn't make for change…." (personal communication, 31 October 2003)

However, there remains the disturbing question of women's pleasure, i.e., the soaps do seem to provide pleasure for women viewers who are critically aware of how alienating they are (Mattelart, 1986).   Andrea Press's study (1990) found that women from different social class backgrounds responded differently to the US soap, *Dynasty*. Working class women seemed to derive pleasure from vicariously living the wealthy life styles depicted in the soap and were less critical of the characters, their personalities and their situations than middle class viewers, who on the other hand seemed to derive pleasure from feeling superior to the characters, or seemed to use the dilemmas depicted as a "mental worksheet" to sort out their own similar problems in real life.   Press's findings seem to suggest that there *can* be positive or negative consequences, depending on how viewers *use* the soap, and their orientations towards soaps might be class-based and might correlate with different social class capital/resources.   This seems to us to have implications for *critical media literacy education* (Semali, 2000; Alvermann, Moon & Hagood, 1999), which could help even out/redistribute the resources required to use soaps in beneficial ways.

Studies by Ien Ang (1985, 1996) on the other hand have sought to address the tension between female pleasure and feminist desire by understanding what she calls the "melodramatic imagination".   Ang argues that feelings of unsolvable dilemmas in modern living are common among modern women (e.g., how to combine work and love, how to compete with guys at work, how to deal with growing older), and there is already much hard work for the modern woman who has to constantly put up a struggle in real life.   The recurrent plots about conflicts and struggles in these soaps function as metaphors for life's torments (e.g., conflict between going one's own way in search of personal happiness, or to submit to the social fetters of the family structure).   Identifying with the melodramatic heroine and her sense of resignation to powerlessness thus provides a safe fantasy space for the modern woman to take a break from real life (e.g., feminist) struggles, which explains why pleasure can be derived from viewing soaps even among the politically aware (Ang, 1985, 1996).   Ang's studies document "how women

can use television rather than how they *should*" (Brown, .1990, p. 210).   Brown (ibid) sees such studies as having a positive political value as they validate women's choice of pleasure: "women take pleasure into their own hands.   They nominate, value, and regulate their own pleasure.   I am suggesting that consumers can use the products of a consumer society…in order to constitute acts of resistance while still remaining within the dominant economic order".   Besides, Brown's (1994) ethnographic study of women's conversational networks which surround soap-opera viewing draws on the insights of de Certeau and Fiske into meaning production in everyday life.   Brown takes the view that 'the sense-making that people engage in when they talk about television may be as important as their actual viewing of the television program.' (Brown, 1994, p. 2).

While the above studies have helped us to understand the background of feminist debates on women's television viewing in the west, little research has been done on women's television viewing practices in East Asia.   In the next section we shall review some of the recent studies on Korean TV dramas.   In the third section we shall discuss the research methodology of this study.   In the fourth section we shall present our findings. In the last section, we shall discuss implications of this study.

2. Research on Korean TV Dramas

"*Han liu*" (the Chinese term for 'Korean Wave' /'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 sociocultural history of having been under some form of influence from traditional Confucianist familial, social and cultural values (e.g., China, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore).   This transnational media/cultural wave has taken place with the rapid emergence of women as a rising labor force as well as a principal sector of (cultural/media) consumers in Asian Cosmopolitan cities, especially in the rapidly industrializing and modernizing cities in China and South Korea in the 1990s (Shim, 2003).

Little research has been conducted on women's television genres in East Asia, and even less on Korean TV dramas despite its rapidly rising popularity across East Asian societies since the late 1990s as a distinctive women's genre in contrast to Japanese TV idol dramas, which have more youngster (both male and female) fans (Shim, 2003).   We

have found only four recent studies which touch on this topic.   The first study by Minu Lee and Chong-Heup Cho (1995) is an ethnographic study of female Korean soap opera fans in Madison, Wisconsin, USA.   They found that these middle/upper-middle class Korean housewives preferred Korean soap operas to American ones and they engaged in local strategic acts of resistance to their husbands' denigration of their soaps viewing. Lee & Cho write that the Confucian code of behaviour seemed to prescribe what constitutes appropriate female behaviour in these families but these women were not passive and they used their skills to challenge traditional patriarchy; e.g., by using her husband's favorite dish as a weapon against him; forming a Korean soaps video club which operated as a forum to get together to share not only their soaps viewing pleasure but also criticisms of their husbands' behaviour.   This confirms what Brown (1990, 1994) says about the active use of soaps and the empowerment value of the conversation networks built around soaps watching by women even within the limits of existing social and economic orders.

Another recent study by Wu and Tseng (2002) used questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews to study Korean soaps viewing habits and cultural identification patterns of viewers in Taiwan.   They found that women constitute the majority watching Korean dramas and are mostly aged 25-30 and next 37-42.   The viewers in their study generally expressed positive attitudes towards the modern consumerist life styles portrayed in Korean dramas but they did not express wishes to become Korean, learn about Korean culture, to live in Korea or to marry Koreans.   This indicated that what seem appealing to the Taiwanese female viewers are mainly the cosmopolitan modern city life styles and consumption patterns depicted in Korean dramas, which seem to have a pan-Asian appeal that is not associated with Korean culture per se but rather with a pan-Asian cosmopolitan modern city life style.

A third recent study by Lin (2002) is a textual analysis of two recent Korean TV dramas: (1) Autumn in My Heart (or Autumn Tale, produced by KBS in South Korea) and (2) Friends (jointly produced by TBS in Japan and MBC in South Korea).   Lin argues that *Autumn Tale* and *Friends* seem to represent two different possible stances towards the traditional order at this historical conjuncture when South Korea is experiencing enormous economic success and going through modernization and a certain degree of westernization that come with its participation in the global economic order. Sociocultural tensions, conflicts and resolutions are simulated and explored in the relatively safe, imaginary space of popular TV dramas, which play an important role in

engaging the transnational public (e.g., audiences in East Asian societies which share a Confucianist tradition) with controversial sociocultural issues.   She argues that these Korean TV dramas seem to provide an important public space for the debates and exploration of a society's cultural ethos and the contested issues of modernization and westernization, by dramatizing the tension between the pursuit of personal freedom (e.g., in the choice of spouse, choice of career) and the traditional Confucianist sociocultural value of stressing one's responsibility to the family and to fulfill parents' expectations.

A fourth recent study by Dong-Hoo Lee (2004) contrasts the production values and styles of Japanese and Korean TV dramas.   While Korean TV drama producers have drawn on the modern production values and technical, audio-visual, aesthetic styles 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, i.e., Confucianist familial, social and sexual values.

The recent rising popularity in (South) East Asian cosmopolitan cities (e.g., Taiwan, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore) of Korean TV dramas (e.g., circulated in the form of VCDs and DVDs) which tend to place emphasis on the dramatization of the conflicts and tensions between Confucianist sociocultural values and modern cosmopolitan living/working styles/conditions has aroused our interest in the question of how modern working Asian women might consume, use, or appropriate Korean TV dramas in relation to their own real life conflicts and struggles in rapidly modernizing and globalizing East Asian societies (e.g., Hong Kong).   In the next section we shall describe the methodology of our audience study.

3. Reducing the Power Differential between the Researcher and the Researched: Researchers as Members of Communities of Korean TV Drama Fans

Feminist research is seen as the systematic process used to change and correct the invisibility and the distortion of women's experience in public as well as academic disciplinary discourses (Lather, 1991).   In this respect phenomenology, symbolic interaction, cultural anthropological and ethnographic approaches (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) are useful as they put emphasis on uncovering the *emic* (i.e., insider's, cultural member's) perspectives, values, meanings, implicit norms and ways of seeing and doing things first and foremost.   In addition to (or because of) this *emic* emphasis, feminist

research methodology demands researchers to be critically aware of their own sociopolitical locations (and power differentials) in relation to the informants in the research and the possible shaping/constitutive influence of this (potentially problematic) researcher-researched relationship on the data and the knowledge collected/constructed (Stanley & Wise, 1990).

To do feminist research then requires a heightened awareness on the part of researchers about *the politics of representation*, not only as a research topic in the investigation of media texts (e.g., analyzing how women are represented in media texts) but also as a critical reflexive engagement with the question of how women are represented in the knowledge, theories and narratives produced and validated by the researcher in the research process.   This concerns an upfront recognition of the politics and ethics of research itself and the inter-relationship of power, discourse and knowledge.   This heightened awareness, however, should not paralyze us but should instead be a constant reminder of the need to build into our research design opportunities for *dialogic, interactive, collaborative theory and knowledge building* between the researched and the researcher, or even destabilizing the boundaries (Lather, 1991).   While recognizing that feminist research criteria go beyond what is generally required in the average qualitative audience research study, we take them as a goal to strive towards, without claiming that we have already achieved a research design that has fully satisfied the criteria.   One of the goals of our study is to learn and document in the research process how we ran into some of the practical difficulties and constraints (and how we tried to tackle them) when we strived to meet the above criteria.

Born and raised in pre-1997 British colonial Hong Kong, educated in western countries (Canada) for their undergraduate/postgraduate studies, the authors of this paper have experienced three successive transitions in their sociocultural worlds—from British colonial, rational/pragmatic English-based education to overseas western post-structuralist scholarship to research and teaching in postcolonial Hong Kong when Hong Kong has become part of motherland China.   They have witnessed in themselves multiple (sometimes conflicting) cultural identifications at the multiple conjunctures of Confucianist cultural roots and western globalized outlooks.   "Unwittingly" they have also all been drawn to Korean TV dramas and become "secret" Korean TV drama fans in recent years ("secret" for being afraid of being laughed at by colleagues, bosses and relatives).   Their explorations about their own cultural identities and (traditional and modern) gender roles in rapidly modernizing and capitalizing Asia have motivated their

research on the rapidly changing sociocultural values among modern Asian women and the possible role played by TV media consumption in the processes of social and cultural change (and/or reproduction).

In attempting to reduce the power differential between the researched and the researcher, we have adopted a participant-researcher approach.   As both authors have many friends who are Korean drama fans, we interviewed our friends (and friends of friends using the snowballing method) who are regularly watch Korean TV dramas.   In our individual in-depth interviews, which on average lasted from one to two hours, our interview conversations were informal and casual and the researchers strived to establish a non-threatening, light-hearted, sharing atmosphere throughout the interview.   The interview conversations resemble those between fellow Korean drama fans although the researchers followed a semi-structured interview schedule covering key areas of the research questions (e.g., viewing habits, sources of viewing pleasures, attitudes towards different images of masculinity and femininity and gender relations, views on the conditions of modern working women in Hong Kong).

Using this approach we have successfully interviewed 15 working women in Hong Kong who are also regular Korean TV drama watchers. All of them are well-educated, occupying relatively high positions/professional status. Table 1 below shows the demographic background of the informants in this study:

Table 1: Background information of the Informants

Informant	Age	Occupation	Education level
Eva	38	Insurance underwriter	University
Jane	24	Research assistant	University
Miranda	43	Secondary school teacher	University
Mary	45	Primary school teacher	University
Grace	39	Private banking officer	University
Patricia	49	HRO and administrative officer	University
Nelly	48	Accountant	University
Alice	46	Securities broker	University
Jessica	48	Teacher	University
Amy	32	Bank manager	University

Annie	49	Secondary school teacher	University (Master's)
Betty	50	Accountant	University
Monita	40	Administrative officer	University
Winnie	30	Investigative officer	University
Venus	25	Television reporter	University (Master's)

4. Major Findings

Four inter-related themes seem to have emerged from our data analysis. They are outlined below (the quotes are English translations of the original Cantonese utterances of the participants).

(a) Psychological realism and "Asian" subtlety

All the participants said they liked the very realistic and sophisticated portrayals of "Asian" ways of expressing various types of relationships and emotional attachments among the characters of the serials they had watched. Viewers fall for the dramas because of their realism, something which they can see in the real world, something which they can identify with not from personal experience but perhaps from secondary experience.

> 'I think the most gratifying part is that they put all these real scenarios before you to make you feel so identified with them. To the other extreme, they put something before you which is so elusive, things which you might not see in this world, which makes you equally gratified.'   (Grace)

One of the recurring comments is about the ways romance is depicted in these Korean dramas.   For instance, one of the participants said, 'They [the portrayals of subtle feelings] are so real.   Men's hiding of their emotions and their love for women expressed in such subtle ways of touching hands and stealing glances of the loved ones is depicted so real.'

> 'For Beautiful Days, I like it because Min Chul's characterization is very 'man', like he's a real man. Ah, I should put it this way, like it says, like before Min Chul really expresses his love explicitly for Yeon Soo, the subtlety of expressing love is very … pleasurable. [*Could it be that because it is different from the very explicit and sexually oriented kind of love?*] Yes, you can say that. It's much better than the man comes and kisses you crazily. [*Do you think this is an Oriental way of expressing love?*] mmm… yes. ' (Alice)

Other informants compared the Korean drama shooting styles with those they found in western TV serials, saying that romance depicted in western TV dramas tends to be 'too explicit and too sex-oriented'. It seems that the Korean TV dramas are preferred to western TV dramas for their cultural proximity (Iwabuchi, 2002), but this time, it is not Japanese culture but Korean Confucianist culture regarding love and sex which seems to approximate these Chinese female viewers' sensibilities. It is also interesting to note that they identify these subtle ways (and certain culturally specific orientations towards love and sex) as being "Asian", when it seems more true to say these are Confucianist cultural values (for there exist non-Confucianist Asian cultures too). It is worth noting how "Asian" cultural identities (in contrast to western cultural identities which they seem to distance themselves from) are being constructed, demarcated, and re-affirmed through the viewers' identifying with the subtle ways of expressing love, romance and feelings depicted in Korean TV dramas. It seems that part of the pleasure that these female Chinese viewers derive from the consumption of Korean TV dramas is through a re-affirmation/construction of their cultural ("Asian") identities in re-affirming subtle ways of expressing love and romance as their own "Asian" ways in contrast to what they see/construct as "western" ways.

Many informants also reported crying while watching and it's the crying which really attracts them to watch Korean dramas. As they are all professional women holding positions, crying and showing the weak and emotional side which might not be allowed in their working environment. It can be argued that Korean dramas afford them the channel to live that side of the self in the private haven of their homes.

(b) Modern workplace rationality vs. Chinese 'qing' (compassion)
Pure love, absolute love, commitment and in general, 'qing' are also some major elements of KD which have attracted them. They found different types of relations on top of romance love in Korean dramas: sisterly relation, friendship, parent-sons. One of the reasons for watching Korean dramas is their description of 'qing' [relations]. The ways in which the characters act evoke the long suppressed 'qing' (a Chinese word referring to compassion for family members, friends, spouses, colleagues and people of different relations).

> 'I really appreciate their depiction of respect for parents, and also qing between siblings, which you cannot see in locally produced movies [including series]. They can really sacrifice for their siblings, for their parents. You may say that these are blind sacrifices. But, how should I put it, like do you really need to do

that much for your family? The world is very liberal now. But, I find them quite acceptable in Korean dramas. ' (Patricia)

An informant reported that during and after viewing various drama serials she started to search for her own cultural identity as being a Chinese and, on a more general level, being an Asian woman.   The ways in which the characters act evoke the long suppressed 'qing' (a Chinese word referring to compassion for family members, friends, spouses, colleagues and people of different relations) which she feels she has laid aside for a long time ever since she started working in a predominantly male and white working environment, which stresses the rationalist efficiency discourse and privileges non-compassionate approaches to work (e.g., non-personal, business tone/style/attitudes).

(c) Conflicting discourses of femininities in Hong Kong
One interesting theme which recurred in the remarks made by the viewers is the seeming co-presence of both traditional/Confucianist and modern/feminist discourses of femininities among them, suggesting that some female viewers seem to be caught in the contestation of the two different discourses.   Many informants pointed out differences between the portrayed statuses of Korean women in Korean dramas and HK women. They found that they were more submissive and play secondary roles at work.   However, women   (in reality) in Hong Kong are slightly different. They occupy rather key positions at work such as managers

> 'The situation of women in Korean dramas is very much like ours in the 70s in Hong Kong.   In Hong Kong now, we are a lot ahead of them. The world has changed. Women occupy quite high positions. So the situation of women in Korean dramas actually helps me see the traditional situation but not the situation now.' (Miranda)

> 'I think that Hong Kong women absolutely have their own characters. Why do I say so? I find in other countries, say like in Japan, women after 30s have no position…(there are) almost no opportunities for them to develop (themselves)…Hong Kong women are independent and have their own abilities, and are also given lots of opportunities. This place (Hong Kong) provides women a room for development!' (Amy)

In line with our informant, Amy's, observation above, Tables 2 and 3 below show the

increasing women's participation in Hong Kong's labor market.

Table 2: Labor Force Participation in Hong Kong: 1981-2001

	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001
Male	82.5%	80.9%	78.7%	76.6%	71.9%
Female	49.5%	51.2%	49.5%	49.2%	51.6%
Total	66.8%	66.4%	64.3%	62.8%	61.4%

Table 3: Proportion of Working Population by Occupation in Hong Kong: 1991-2001

	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%	4.6%
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%	20.0%

Source of information: Hong Kong Statistics Department

We can see that while the percentage of women is still much behind that of men in high managerial and professional positions, the associate professional positions are increasingly occupied by women in recent years. The larger socioeconomic change has made many Hong Kong women more assertive of their working capacity and their agency in finding themselves a career outside of romance and family.   That might explain why they like the scene when the female characters fight back and advance themselves in career, like the scene an informant quoted in 'Winter Sonata':

'Why can't women fight back? … That's why I like in Winter Sonata, the female character for some reasons begins to get seriously involved in her career again and become quite independent. And I think, yes, that's it. Like it does not mean that we cannot be without him [the male character or a man].'(Miranda)

Paradoxically, however, they were also attracted to scenes where the female character encountered difficulties at work and the male character would appear without fail to come to her rescue. About such scenes this viewer remarked:

'It's very heart-warming to see these happen…to have a man always ready to comfort you when you're in crisis… to have a man who knows when you will cry and where you're hiding when you're crying.' (Annie)

Though the informants endorse equality between women and men, some of them admit that it's quite 'hang fook' [fortunate and happy] to be submissive to a man and to be taken care of by him. For instance, one of them admits that the ultimate happiness in her life is to find 'a man who loves me very much until the moment of death' (Venus). This suggests a slight conflicting view they hold towards the status of women in the modern society.

Our informants thus seem to have identifications with two very different characters in the drama: one very strong masculine character (identifying with the rational, authoritative, independent, strong male protagonist), another very weak female character, who is always waiting for a strong man to come to her rescue (identifying with the weak, emotional, dependent female protagonist). This suggests that this career woman viewer, like many other career women in Hong Kong, perhaps, seems to embody both the modern/feminist version and the Confucianist/traditional version of femininities. The Confucianist/traditional version constructs women as emotional, vulnerable, attending to 'qing' (compassion, attachment), and dependent on men for protection. Their ultimate goal is to marry men, which is the most-sought after form of happiness (which turns out to be the kind of happy ending offered in the drama).

The modern/feminist version constructs women as becoming more assertive, rational, independent of men and equally capable of handling their tough everyday management work just as men do. These two conflicting visions of femininities seem to co-inhabit the same woman viewer and it seems that the two are likely to create internal psychological tensions. As one viewer reported, she struggled to leave at home the

Korean drama-evoked traditional femininity when she left her apartment for work every day.   She reported the fear of losing her rational, efficiency discourse at work because of her viewing of Korean dramas.   She dreaded that people at work and at church would find out that she was a big fan of Korean dramas.   Other female viewers shared similar experiences of compartmentalizing the two conflicting kinds of discourses for fear that people would see them as weak at work.   One viewer found herself staying alert and cautioning herself to resist such a vision of woman after she had finished viewing a serial, which upheld marriage as the ultimate happiness a woman should seek in life.   The human resources manager in the transnational American company teased herself as being crazy and felt extremely embarrassed when others learnt that she was keeping pictures of different episodes of the drama serials.   She is acutely aware of her perceived need to have two compartmentalized images of herself, one at work, and one at home and to close friends.   She said in one telephone conversation to one of the authors:

> I won't tell my colleagues about my passion for K-dramas.   Yes, among girlfriends like you and Mary, I could act crazy.   I don't want colleagues to know my inner world, and in this company in particular.   People in this company, how to put it, perhaps my position is… I'm molded to distinguish myself from them.   I can't mix with them and people from other departments neither.   I can't mix with them.   I can't show my personal side.   I will only barely talk about that [I watch K-dramas]. But I wouldn't talk to them like to you and to Mary.   This is to keep my image [in my company].

It seems that she perceives that to do her management job well in the modern workplace (working in a large multinational American company in Hong Kong) she is required to keep her personal, compassionate (the Chinese "qing") side well-hidden, but she does seem to have that side in her too, and this side she can only show to her close friends outside of the rational, impersonal workplace.   By compartmentalizing her different images (and identities), she manages to live and work successfully as a modern Asian woman who somehow needs to navigate her course between different ways of being a woman (different femininities): being a woman at work is different from being a woman outside of work.   This, however, should not be seen as a schizophrenic symptom but rather, as part of a modern Asian woman's resources to handle the contradiction of the rationalizing, impersonal demands of modern managerial work and their deep-rooted (sociocultural) desire for "qing" (compassion) and for traditional/Confucianist feminine ways of connecting with others, which however will lead to failure in a modern

workplace.   The K-dramas and the talk about them with close girlfriends seem to have created to her a safe space to share these tensions with trusted friends and to provide some psychological balance for her outside of work.   Interestingly they also seem to be acutely aware of the society's negative discourses on soap watching and some of them seem also to readily engage in self-mockery and call themselves 'silly':

> 'Like accidentally I found out that there're many colleagues who also watch Korean dramas.   I remember one time I talk to Eva (another informant) and found that we both love watching Korean dramas and we both laughed. Coz, like I'm very surprised. 'Oh, you too love Korean dramas.' Like there's another person who is as 'silly' as I am.'

> 'Yes, I would fear being mocked by others for chasing these kind of trashy stuff only housewives would chase. Like women like us working in professions wouldn't let others know that we watch all these weepies. '
> (All from Grace)

> 'Like I cannot imagine. Sometimes, I may surf websites and cannot stop. Like I thought I would just log on to check email, and then ah, I would sit there for two hours visiting the KD pages. Ah, I feel very guilty. …Ah, I wouldn't let my two girls (both in their early 20s) know about this. I dare not tell them this. They would mock me.' (Nelly)

It seems that these women navigate delicate lines between what they see as acceptable to the society and what they themselves would like to do in private and while they are conscious of the society's negative evaluation of their own viewing practices they nonetheless want to keep their viewing practices and find rapport and support from finding like-minded people in their circles.

(d) Pleasure from vicarious experience of romance and the appeal of images of weak, crying men
Our informants readily admitted their pleasure in seeing the romantic scenes in the Korean dramas.   For instance below is a comment made by a fan of 'Winter Sonata':

> 'Like because of this young girl's fantasy, like I really like the scene where the two (Joon Sang and Yu Jin) first went out on a date. Yes, yes, like it's very romantic, like making the snowman, riding a bike together, … and Bae Young Jun is pretty handsome.' (Jane)

Another informant appreciates the romance in 'Beautiful Days':

> 'Like the scene where Yeonsoo and Minchul talk outside the elevator. Like Yeonsoo enters the elevator and the door closes. She cries inside the elevator. And then suddenly the door opens. It's like a nice surprise to see Minchul out there. Things like this won't happen in real life. But, it gives you this fantasy. I don't know how to say it. I quite appreciate this kind of surprise.' (Miranda)

Some of the viewers also reported that they were struck by scenes of crying men. These men-crying scenes touched a tender spot in them. They came to think more about men and women, both their differences and their shared characteristics in handling crises in life. This builds up a new image of man:

✧ Men can be emotional and can break down

✧ Men can also yearn for their lovers/mothers in time of crisis

✧ Men can overcome by extreme fear and helplessness

For example, some said that the creation of Minchul's hidden weak character (in 'Beautiful Days') represents females' fantasy about men's emotional side, which is usually hidden, and they found these images in the Korean dramas especially appealing to them.

5. Implications

As this paper reports work in progress, our data collection and analysis have not been completed yet. Interviews with the scriptwriters of Korean TV dramas have just been conducted and analysis has just started. Textual analysis of the recent popular dramas and their internet fan groups' activities is also being conducted. However, the findings from our audience interview data have some tentative implications for our understanding of women's identities, their pleasure, and their ways of using Korean TV dramas:

First, the practices of viewing and talking about Korean TV dramas seem to have heightened these viewers' own self-awareness: e.g., awareness of their attractions to sometimes conflicting visions of what a woman can be and want to be given various societal (and modern work) constraints. These conflicts reflect existing social dilemmas for modern working career women who on the one hand have to fit into the tough masculine workplace culture and on the other hand sometimes would like to retreat to a safe fantasy space where they no longer need to put up with the struggle and can revert to a more traditional/Confucianist feminine identity and be protected by a strong loving man. This is somewhat similar to Ien Ang's (1985, 1996) observations about the melodramatic

imagination.   This, however, does not mean that they will necessarily be corrupted by this fantasy and lose their ability to manage their everyday work (although it means some extra psychological work in compartmentalizing the two kinds of feminine identities, one to the workplace and one to the private space of enjoying Korean dramas with friends).

Second, it seems that in their consumption of the Korean dramas, they are not only taking a break from the tough, rational, strong woman workplace identity, they are also finding resources to re-affirm their Chinese and Asian cultural identities.   It is interesting or ironic to note that while postcolonial theorists have problematized the nineteenth century imperialistic metaphor of likening Eastern cultures with women's cultures, these twenty-first century Chinese Hong Kong career women 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 expressing love and emotions as depicted in Korean dramas.   More (research and analytic) work is needed before we can gain more understanding into the consequences/inadequacies of dichotomizing Eastern/Asian and western cultures, and masculine and feminine cultures.   It seems that social and cultural change can be effected if we (e.g., women simultaneously as researchers, informants, fans, audiences and critics of K-dramas) can have more self-reflexive understanding of our own ways of handling the demands of modern living and careers and what role our consumption and talking about K-dramas can play in our negotiation of different, at times conflicting, identities.

Third, the images of weak, crying men in the fantasyland created by Korean dramas seem to have a strong appeal to the female viewers.   It seems to reflect a deep-rooted desire of them to break down the traditional dichotomies between the strong, authoritative male figure and the weak female figure.   At least in this fantasyland they can see themselves sympathizing with the weak male, deriving pleasure from equating themselves to the same level playing ground with the male, and in a way, seeing both males and females as equally human, equally weak, and who are equally in need of human understanding and compassion.   This kind of feeling seems to give the female viewer a satisfying sense of relief and tranquility, or gentle understanding of the suffering and pain in this world of both males and females.   However, it does also have the potential hegemonic effect of effacing/masking the subordination of women in the patriarchal system by emphasizing the suffering of both males and females due to life's mishaps (i.e., by chance and not by patriarchal design).   However, we still see a positive value in women's conversations about Korean TV dramas.   As Mary Ellen Brown puts it:

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Through these conversations, we can see the beginning of the emergence of a theory of sociocultural empowerment in the field of hegemony centering on the political economy of the patriarchal family.   Soap operas are not the cause of this process of change or of empowerment as such. Rather, myriad structural changes are introducing structural strains in the traditional family roles and women are renegotiating at the level of family structure the relationships of power and the institutional definition of their roles.   The tension that such struggles generate can be dealt with within the boundaries of soap opera networks.   (Brown, 1994, p. 92)

It is therefore not soap operas per se which we think can generate the helpful space but how and what women do with them and talk about them that constitutes the most interesting phenomena for our study and for our (feminist) hope/desire in creating a discursive space for women's negotiation of their identities and achieving of self-awareness of their current dilemmas and positioning in the society.

The above observations will need to be (dis)confirmed by further research work that can include a larger data sample.   However, the present study does point to the dilemmas of some modern working women in Hong Kong.   Through understanding how they consume and use Korean TV dramas we might have achieved a small window on understanding the complexities and contradictions inherent in the modern living conditions and subjectivities of women, especially in rapidly modernizing, westernizing and globalizing Asian societies such as Hong Kong.

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