

To Cite: Lin, A. M. Y., & Tong, A. (2007). Crossing boundaries: Male consumption of Korean TV dramas and negotiation of gender relations in modern day Hong Kong. Journal of Gender Studies, 16 (3), 217-232

CROSSING BOUNDARIES:

Male consumption of Korean TV dramas and negotiation of gender relations in modern day Hong Kong

Angel Lin & Avin Tong

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Abstract

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 underlies the Confucianist social order in East Asian cultural traditions. Our recent study of some educated, Chinese, heterosexual men's consumption of Korean TV dramas in the late/post-industrial (but not post-capitalist) society of Hong Kong, however, shows that while the binary gender boundaries are increasingly being destabilized and crossed over in their everyday lived experiences, these boundaries are also simultaneously being nostalgically hanged onto by some of the men in their pleasurable consumption of Korean dramas. The implications of their consumption practices are discussed in terms of the dilemmas faced by some Hong Kong men when they are confronted with the increasing destabilization of the gender role boundaries and how they use Korean dramas to negotiate new gender relations in modern day Hong Kong society.

Keywords

Destabilization of gender roles boundaries, Images of femininity and masculinity, Male consumption of TV dramas, Masculine notion of romance, Modern gender dilemmas, Negotiation of gender relations

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Women, men and the ‘modern’: Construction of gender polarity in enlightenment modernity and modern sociological theory

Women occupied a contradictory and ambivalent position in relation to the ‘modern’ as it has been sociologically interpreted, particularly in the sense of modernity as representing a gradual liberation of the individual from the bonds of tradition. Women were cast as unable to fully transcend these bonds, and thus figured most frequently as a ‘strategic absence’ in classical sociology.

(Marshall, 2000, pp. 17-18)

Western feminist sociologists have argued that the project of modernity in the Anglo-European tradition has been gendered and masculine, valorizing the ideals of rationality, competitive individualism, order and progress as ‘masculine’ and ‘modern’, and relegating the ideals of affection, social bonds and continuity as ‘feminine’ and ‘traditional’ (Marshall, 1994, 2000; Felski, 1995). Enlightenment modernity has thus constructed two distinct types of personalities, labeled them as masculine and feminine respectively, and used this binary gender system to map out the gendered division of labor. The so-constructed masculine/feminine dualism thus also becomes expressed as the gendered dualisms of public/private, economic/familial, rational/emotional, instrumental/expressive, culture/nature.

These binary divisions are not merely differences but are also hierarchicalized differences, i.e., differences that are linked to unequal power relations and inequalities between men and women.

This binary gender system is also essentialized by 'role theory' in modern sociology theory (Marshall, 2000, p. 34). While modern sociology theory has recognized social constructionism by construing gender division not as primarily rooted in biological difference but more in social and cultural experiences, gender role theory is as static and essentialized as its preceding sex role theory. As Marshall puts it:

In general, the substitution of 'gender' for 'sex' in role theory (i.e., from 'sex role' to 'gender role') does little to address its fundamental weaknesses: its underlying functionalism, its inability to grasp the *dynamics* of change, its underemphasis on power, its tendency to reify 'roles', and its focus on individual behaviors rather than social institutions. (Marshall, 2000, pp. 34-35; italics original)

Thus both modern sociology textbooks and popular cross-gender communication self-help books are saturated with static, binary, reified images and notions of masculine vs. feminine traits, from personality traits to communication and language styles and categorically different ways of expressing love and romance, and so on. However, this kind of gender polarity is not unique to Western cultures as we shall

see in the next section.

Norms governing gender role relationships in the Confucianist social order

In East Asian societies where the Confucianist social order has been a deep-rooted social and cultural force, discussions of modernity and modernization have often revolved around the tension between the spread of Western individualism and liberalism that come with modernization, globalization and contact with the West on the one hand and the preservation of traditional sociocultural values and familial and social structures that stress mutual obligations, social harmony and a certain form of “benign” paternalism on the other. Gender role norms, however, seem to constitute an area where Western modernity and East Asian Confucianist traditions seem to coincide: both seem to construct and sustain a static, reified, binary system of gender roles and gender relations that maps onto a gendered division of labor, and all the other dualisms such as public/private, leader/follower, breadwinner/familial care-taker, rational/emotional.

We must, however, be aware that the term ‘Confucianism’ should be handled carefully. Jensen (1998) argues that Confucianism was manufactured by the Jesuits in the seventeenth century, and reinvented by the Chinese in the twentieth century. He uses the term ‘manufacturing Confucianism’ to imply the ‘manyhandedness’ in the creation and recreation of our notion of Confucianism and there is ‘a cumulative

tradition of local knowledge of rite, text, and the strategies for using them that we associate with Confucianism' (Jensen, 1998:22). Some critics also point out that the notion of Confucianism has been applied in diverse ways; for instance, Dirlik (1995: 235) believes that Confucianism is the 'object of reinterpretation and reinvention'. He argues that Confucianism has been reduced to a few general traits, deprived of its history and complexity that can accommodate diversity.

In a recent study on gender role stereotypes in Hong Kong, Fung and Ma (2000) found that many Hong Kong people still tend to perceive that men are more 'independent', 'aggressive' and 'willing to improvise'; while women are seen as 'gentle', 'shy', 'compassionate', 'affectionate', 'sympathetic' and 'understanding'. In particular, women are believed to be 'child-loving' and 'sensitive to the needs of others'. Fung and Ma (2000) argue that most males and females in Hong Kong still cling to traditional Chinese ideological notions, and one of the possible explanations is that many Hong Kong Chinese might have been socialized in their family habitus to value some traditional Chinese cultural thoughts. While we hesitate to label these 'Chinese thoughts' as 'Confucianist values', they seem to be the effects of the lived cultural milieu that many Hong Kong people (e.g., our informants) have experienced. While being fully aware of the need for a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to Confucianism, we believe that some traditional Chinese sayings (with a

Confucianist origin) regarding women's subordinate position to men have been deeply inscribed in our culture and ordinary language, and this is testified to in our own lived experience as Chinese women in Hong Kong.

Many traditional Confucianist sayings commonly found in our everyday language imply a definition of women's social positions according to the women's submissive relationship with their male family members; e.g., the saying of 'Thrice Following' -- a woman should obey her father when she is young, her husband when she is married, and her son when she is old (Ko, 1994). Traditional Confucianism also emphasizes men's traits vs. women's traits and the set of rights/obligations governing the relations of husband and wife. For instance, some popular Confucianist and traditional Chinese sayings such as 'a woman without talents is her virtue', and women were expected to be confined to the inner domestic realm (Ko, 1994; Mann and Cheng, 2001).

In this paper, however, we shall discuss how these traditionally reified gender role boundaries seem to be increasingly crossed over and destabilized in the lived experiences of many middle-class, educated heterosexual men in modern day Hong Kong. The findings reveal the dilemmas faced by them, and how they use Korean TV dramas to negotiate new gender relations in modern day Hong Kong society.

In the following sections we shall first describe the rising popularity of Korean TV

dramas in East Asian societies as riding on the wings of global consumerist capitalism. Then we shall present the study and discuss the findings and their implications.

The Korean Wave: Rising transnational popularity of Korean TV dramas and images of glamorous capitalist city lifestyles

In the early 2000s, concerns about South Korean dramas as a cultural phenomenon have arisen. 'Han liu' (the Chinese term for 'Korean Wave'; 'Hallyu' in Korean), or the transnational circulation and consumption of popular South Korean cultural/media products (in particular, women's genres such as melodramatic soap operas), has swept across rapidly modernizing and capitalizing East Asian societies (e.g., Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mainland China). A study by Wu and Tseng (2002) found that women constitute the majority watching Korean dramas in Taiwan and most of them generally expressed positive attitudes towards the modern consumerist life styles portrayed in Korean dramas.

Soap operas and melodramas are closely linked with the capitalist/consumerist society. For instance, Feuer's (1995) discussion of the drama 'Thirtysomething' points out the yuppie culture and yuppie consumerism created by the drama while another well-know drama 'Dynasty' is analysed as a consumer spectacle (Feuer

1995; Press 1991). It is found that there was increased commodification of television dramas starting from the 1980s (Feuer, 1995). Reis (1998) discovers that some young girls in Brazilian Amazon love buying nice clothes and costume jewelry after watching television dramas, and it marks a new wave of consumerism. Television also acts as an 'interpreter of urban dress codes' and 'urban consumer behavior' in developing countries like India (McMillin, 2003: 502). In particular, such kinds of fashion and lifestyle are seen as areas in which capitalism works through feminization of mass culture, and linked through the figure of the female stars/characters, who act as an idealized mirror or shop window for the viewers (Thornham, 2000).

Likewise, the fashion, music, beautiful sceneries, and the pleasures and plights of city life all form the building blocks of Korean dramas. These dramas present images of a glamorous cosmopolitan city living style infused with consumerist desires. Most of the Korean dramas, especially those produced in recent years, enjoy a high reputation for their modern aesthetic styles. These dramas combine both existing and idealized (consumerist) city lifestyles into the storylines. Recent South Korean media texts thus embody (and perhaps 'Asianize') global consumerist cultures, and both project and promote a kind of mediated globalized consumerist lifestyle. This matches the spread of global consumerism and expansion of the

middle classes in many fast capitalizing Asian cities such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Even in some developing Asian countries like Vietnam, many young people are interested in learning about and practicing Korean lifestyles, fashions, and make-up (Young, 2005). Yang (2005) points out that the discourse of femininity in Korean dramas can also be interpreted as promoting consumption and entertainment that are seen as essential to a consumer society in which women are constructed as consumers.

The study: Consumption of Korean dramas by some middle class heterosexual men in Hong Kong

The data collection methods consisted of individual in-depth interviews and end-of-interview questionnaires. The interviews were conducted between Jan 2005 and May 2005 by the second author. Using the snowballing method (Brown, 1994), 15 male fans of Korean TV dramas have been interviewed in the study. All informants are regular viewers of Korean TV dramas, and they like very much at least one of the series that they have watched. The background information of the informants is summarized in Table 1 (pseudo-names are used to protect the privacy of the informants).

Table 1: Background Information of 15 Male Informants

Name	Age	Occupation	Education level	Marital status	Self-perceived social status
Dickson	17	Secondary school student	Secondary school	Single	Lower-middle class
Tommy	23	University student	Bachelor	Single	Middle-upper class
Charles	23	Insurance consultant	Bachelor	Single	Lower-middle class
Steven	23	Research assistant	Bachelor	Single	Lower-upper class
Siu Ming	25	Advertising officer	Bachelor	Single	Upper-middle class
Sean	25	Property management	Bachelor	Single	Upper-middle class
Jacky	27	Television reporter	Master	Single	Middle class
Leo	28	Research assistant	Master	Single	Middle-class
Vincent	31	Doctoral student	Doctor	Single	--
Harry	32	Medical doctor	Master	Married	Upper-middle class
Neon	40	Engineer	Master	Married	Middle-class
Albert	40	Medical doctor	Doctor	Married	Middle-class
Eric	41	Teacher	Bachelor	Married	Middle-class
Perry	47	Senior officer	Bachelor	Married	Upper-middle class
Simon	49	Supervisor	Bachelor	Married	Middle-class

Destabilizing essentialist gender role binarisms: Crossing over

In this section, four aspects of gender role ‘cross-over’ will be described and discussed. Except for the quotes of Vincent, all other quotes are English translations of the original Cantonese utterances of the informants.

(1) Korean TV dramas: Women’s genre only?

In many Asian societies including Korea and Hong Kong, the phrase ‘TV drama’ is used by people instead of ‘soap opera’, referring to the wide spectrum of fictional dramatic programs including both what Americans would call soap operas and other prime time mini-series’ (Shim, 2004). In this paper, the Korean TV dramas discussed possess many important features of the soaps, such as their focus on romance, women’s matters and emotional realism. We can see that both soap operas and Korean TV dramas possess ‘feminine’ characteristics, so they are considered to be ‘women’s genres’.

Morley (1986) suggests a clear difference in their genre preference between women and men in choosing television programs: women like fictional programs with ‘emotional realism’ such as soaps whereas men claim that they prefer programs that can increase their knowledge; for example, national news, sports programs and documentaries. Those Korean TV dramas which enjoy widespread popularity in East

Asia (e.g., *Winter Sonata*, *Stairway to Heaven*) thus seem to largely fall outside of the male genres.

Interestingly all the male informants in this study have been attracted to Korean TV dramas. They admit that these dramas belong to ‘women’s genres’ which focus on love and romance. For instance, one of the popular Korean TV dramas, ‘*Winter Sonata*’, is a touching love story that emphasizes ever-lasting love. In the story, the male protagonist and female protagonist face lots of obstacles—opposition from parents and friends, triangular relationship, amnesia, etc. In the face of difficulties, they persist to remain loyal to each other. Finally they overcome all the obstacles and have a happy ending. This is one of the favorite dramas mentioned by our informants.

Many of the TV dramas focus on ‘women’s matters’ (Brown, 1990; Fiske, 1989), and in viewing these dramas female audience can identify with and take up different subject positions. Some male informants say that most Korean TV dramas situate women protagonists at the centre of the stories; Whereas male characters are cast in ‘supporting roles’, whose functions are to ‘accompany’ the female protagonists. Sean, a 25-year-old property management trainee, thinks that there is actually ‘no male leading character’ in Korean dramas. Another informant, Neon, a 40-year-old engineer, describes males in the dramas as ‘green leaves’ (i.e., to support the

flowers—female protagonists). Nevertheless, these male informants are still attracted to Korean TV dramas.

Another typical feature that has been described in the research literature about the soaps genre is the representation of emotions/feelings, which provides a sense of emotional realism for audiences (Hobson, 2003). Many informants appreciate the touching storylines of the Korean dramas, and even express their emotions in the form of tears. Leo, a 28-year-old research assistant, recalls his own crying experience when he watched ‘Winter Sonata’: ‘I watched it together with my mother. (We) started crying from episode eight...Every scene, every episode, (you) needed to cry!’

The male informants seem to find an unconstrained imaginary space for identification and emotional release. A 31-year-old doctoral student Vincent said, ‘That is the style or type we humans want to have anyway. So you can just take it as imaginary or just a fantasy, for you to... to cherish. You can’t have (it) in the real world, but anyhow you can just cherish it in your mind.’ A 32-year-old medical doctor, Harry, mentioned the resonance aroused by the dramas. ‘You must have had some painful experiences in your life...just like suffering a lot (in love relations)...when you watch those related scenes, you will have sympathetic understanding.’ Harry’s experience is similar to the ‘tragic structure of feeling’

suggested by Ang (1985), which can provide audiences with the pleasure of imaginary identification and emotional release.

In addition to the above 'feminine' qualities of Korean dramas, another important feature of 'women's genre' is deemed to be women's talk related to soap operas and TV dramas. 'Gossip' appears to have specific functions in women's culture, which helps to validate women's socially recognized area of expertise (Brown, 1994). In this study, we find that nearly all male informants have the experiences of talking about the dramas with others, too. Many of them are interested in this kind of 'drama talk' that resembles what is described in the research literature as 'women's talk' about the dramas. Leo even used the word 'desire' to describe his enthusiasm to share comments on the characters and storylines with friends and family members.

Although their sharing circles consist mainly of female friends and family members, their participation in the talk as men themselves clearly extends the boundary of the traditional 'women's talk' to become 'men and women's talk' about dramas.

The informants' viewing experiences challenge the binary, polarized definition of men's genre and women's genre in the media research literature. However, this act of 'crossing boundary' is by no means smooth and easy. Many male informants are cautious of the gendered hierarchies of cultural tastes and social pressures and norms governing these. Some of them try to restore the boundary by showing the

‘masculine aspects’ of the dramas by also saying that they are informative and educative, rather than purely emotional and entertaining.

One of the examples is by making reference to the genre features of the recently hugely popular Korean drama, ‘Jewel in the Palace’, which seems to be a ‘cross-over’ of historical, informative and romance genres (Lin & Kim, 2005). Some middle-aged informants point out that the ‘historical background’ and ‘educational messages’ in ‘Jewel in the Palace’ are very different from ‘other dramas’. Simon, a 49-year-old supervisor, says he uses this drama as ‘teaching material’ for his children and even arranges a ‘family viewing time’ during the weekend.

Although some informants are engaged in ‘men’s talk’ of TV dramas, some other informants resist joining the discussion. As a medical doctor, Harry seems to be acutely aware of the stigma of fans, which he regards as ‘contradictory’ to his social identity. Therefore, he just keeps his viewing habit to himself, in order to preserve his professional image. He is afraid that if he talks about Korean dramas with others in his workplace (e.g his clients and colleagues), he would be ‘looked down upon’ by them. Apart from crossing boundaries in their consumption of what used to be viewed as “women’s genres”, these men also seem to be crossing some traditional boundaries in their appreciation of images of masculinity and femininity. We shall discuss this in the next section.

(2) *Images of femininity and masculinity in Korean dramas: Perfect women and crying men*

The binary gender system assigns certain qualities to women and men, and in this system, the former is always seen as inferior to (or weaker than) the latter. In many East Asian societies, traditional Confucianist cultural ideas promote a clear division of women's traits/roles and men's traits/roles. Women are expected to shoulder the responsibility of taking care of the family and handle every tiny chore in the domestic sphere. However, in modern China today there are new challenges which are altering the range of gender-subject positions, and they contribute to the destabilization of traditional, essentialist approaches to gender (Evans, 2002)

The image of Asian women has also been changing fast in the past few decades. For instance, in Hong Kong there has been an increasing number of women receiving higher education and participating in the labor market. In 1991 in Hong Kong, the proportion of women with tertiary education (9.4%) was much lower than that of men (13%). By 2001, the proportion increased to 15.1%, which was much closer to the 17.8% of men. During the past two decades, the female labor force participation rate increased from 49.5% in 1981 to 51.6% in 2001 (All figures from Hong Kong Statistics Department). Some of these women even take up high-status professional and managerial work. They have attained more socioeconomic mobility and

financial independence and some of them are no longer satisfied with the traditional division of labor.

Many of our male informants agree that modern women are now becoming stronger, more independent and active. Taking the six married male informants as examples, all of their wives are career women occupying high/professional status. Two of them are bank managers, two are administrative executives, one is an auditor and another is a secondary school teacher.

Although the emergence of 'new modern women' were described as 'normal' and 'reasonable' by the informants, many men seem to be becoming increasingly dissatisfied with these so-called 'strong women' in modern day Hong Kong. For instance, a 41-year-old secondary teacher, Eric, describes his wife (who is also a teacher) as a 'modern' woman who is independent and smart, but then he continued to say, 'nowadays all of them are ambitious, desire to advance, and are self-reliant, becoming much stronger than before...I wonder if they have lost other feminine virtues like tenderness, obedience and submissiveness.' Another informant, Ng, seems to dislike those women who 'try to be men'. He said, 'some women are relatively rebellious...put on men's outlook, or behave in a tough manner...but her real character is not like that! You just pretend to be tough, and you have to pay for it.'

Leo and Jacky, who are both single at the moment, criticize that many Hong Kong women treat their male partners badly. Leo used the word 'painful' to describe the situation of Hong Kong men. He finds many women 'difficult to serve', as they have very high and sometimes contradictory expectations of men: 'They want you to be masculine, but yet you should be soft and tender'. Jacky, a 27-year-old television reporter has also made a similar remark. He finds Hong Kong women very 'dominating', and says that those women in Korean TV dramas are 'much better' than women around him in reality.

Modern day Hong Kong women are seen to be losing some of the traditional virtues, as suggested by our male informants, who then seem to be able to recover the lost traditional feminine virtues in the female protagonists in Korean dramas. In most Korean TV dramas, the female characters have attractive appearance, and they are modest, considerate and willing to sacrifice for their partners. Charles, a 23-year-old insurance advisor, describes the female characters as 'tolerant' and 'perseverant'; 'much better than Hong Kong women'. Another informant, Eric, said, 'The girls are very pure, very faithful to love, and willing to sacrifice... (I) have been waiting for this kind of girl, and now such a pure girl really appears!'. Vincent believes that they are the 'ideal women' in all men's eyes:

'They tend to be tender and of the traditional type. That is what,

maybe what we men, or we guys appreciate... I think even the modern type (of guys) they will still want to have such a, maybe, female partner anyway... And another thing is, well, you can find most of the housework done by... by women anyhow.'

An interesting finding is that in addition to these traditional qualities, the male informants wish that their partners could be 'strong in certain aspects'. Charles considers 'Jang-geum' in 'Jewel in the Palace' as a role model, who is 'strong' but yet different from many so-called 'strong women' in Hong Kong. He said, 'Jang-geum is very tough, but she is not the type that gives you the sense of a threatening force. She works hard silently.' This image is similar to the image of the 'two-sided perfect women' who show the possibility of embracing both masculine and feminine traits: 'rationality, decisiveness and strength' on the one hand, and 'caring, tenderness, considerateness' on the other, as discussed in a study by Lee (2004). Lee discovers that Hong Kong female politicians are described (or constructed) in the Hong Kong media discourses as 'perfect women', with both 'passion and rationality', both at work and in the family. Our male informants enjoy watching the dramas as they can fantasize about their ideal, perfect women in Korean dramas, which they cannot find in Hong Kong, or perhaps anywhere in the world.

Evans (2002) points out that an ideal wife in modern Chinese society is expected to strike a balance between sacrificing to support her husband and acquiring 'masculine' skills associated with the world of public affairs. While some of our informants are especially drawn to this image of the two-sided (i.e., both career-minded and family-minded) perfect woman, Eric, on the other hand points to the 'persevering quality' of women in their loyalty to love:

'Actually the strength of a woman should not be expressed by being career-minded, telling people that "I am a strong woman". It is a kind of innate character, a kind of dignity, which is revealed in her loyalty to love. This is already an expression of strength, which deserves appreciation.'

Eric's remark seems to confirm our observation that male viewers appreciate the particular kind of image of 'strong women' in Korean dramas, in which women's strength is portrayed as in the service of love, and not to pose a kind of threat or competition to men. Besides, Leo points out that all female characters in Korean dramas are 'soft outside, tough inside', expressing their strength in a gentle way. This is why they can admire the 'strong women' in Korean dramas but not the 'strong women' whom they find in the real world in Hong Kong.

On the other hand, the male characters in Korean dramas seem to fulfill the criteria

of 'good men' in TV dramas. 'Good men' in TV dramas are 'caring' and 'nurturing', who are rather feminized and seldom express their masculinity in direct action (Fiske, 1989). Some informants seem to appreciate the gentle and caring qualities of the male characters. Albert, a 40-year-old medical doctor, always identifies with the male protagonists, and he admires their 'sincerity' and 'faithfulness' in particular. He recalls the scene in 'Jewel in the Palace': Jang-geum was trapped in the quarantine; everybody tried to run away, but Jung-ho went back to save her. Albert is moved by the 'authentic action' of Jung-ho: '(he is) such a faithful guy! I can really identify with him!' he says.

Another convincing piece of evidence of boundary shift seems to be that all of the informants feel comfortable with the 'crying men' portrayed in Korean dramas. They believe that men 'should be able to cry', and 'we should not force them to swallow their tears'. Our end-of-interview questionnaire results show that 11 out of 15 male informants disagree with the statement that 'a man crying in front of his partner is a sign of weakness'. In fact, many of them are moved by the 'crying scenes'. Siu Ming, a 25-year-old advertising and promotion officer, said, 'They are crying for love, that's really great! How many men will cry for love?'

At the same time, these crying male characters remind the male audiences of the social pressure leading to repression of men's emotions. In order to preserve their

masculinity, they cannot easily burst into tears in public in their everyday life. Jacky used the term 'discourse' to describe the phenomenon, 'actually starting from childhood, all boys are like that (being expected to be strong and tough). This is a kind of "discourse"!'. Another informant, Tommy, a 23-year-old university student, changed his attitudes after viewing Korean dramas. He said, 'Traditionally people may find crying men too weak...why does a "manly man" cry? But now I have changed my mind. I think that if you want to cry, then you'd better cry. You are just expressing your emotions.'

We can see that these male informants readily recognize the traditional masculine norm against men crying. This norm imposes on every man the duty to perform/preserve his manliness in all circumstances (Bourdieu, 2001). All informants explicitly assert that men should be able to cry and should have a chance to express their emotions, and Korean TV dramas thus seem to offer them an outlet for emotional release. Perhaps Hong Kong men's shifting idea about this particular masculine norm has been both reflected in and shaped by Hong Kong pop singer and movie star Andy Lau's popular Cantonese song titled 'Cry, men, it's not a sin'. Apart from shifting some of the gender qualities (e.g., men can cry and it is not a sign of weakness) while still holding onto some (women should be gentle and tough

only in love), these men also seem to be showing a shift in their notion of romance.

We shall turn to a discussion of this in the next section.

(3) Fantasy of pure love relations: A new definition of the masculine notion of romance

Traditionally people associate love with emotional expression and talking about feelings, and these are considered to be aspects of love that women prefer (Canician, 2004). The expression of tender feelings and being gentle are considered to be ideal qualities for women and not for men. The ‘sentimental’, ‘melodramatic’, and excessive coverage of romance is often devalued as ‘feminized popular culture’ (Felski, 2000). Therefore, women are believed to be more attached to the idealized notion of love as portrayed in popular texts, such as soap operas.

One interesting finding is that the majority of male informants actually seem to aspire to the so-called ‘feminized expression of love’. The male protagonists’ loyalty to and faith in love are highly appreciated. Their caring and considerate personality also seems to provide the audiences with a cultural imaginary of new gender images/relations. For instance, Leo is strongly attached to the portrayal of ‘ideal love’ in Korean dramas:

‘This is a very ideal situation, loving each other, and passing through so many obstacles. There are always some people who don’t want you two to be together, and some bad things often happen, such as illness, history of the older generation, or (distanced and distinct) social statuses...but they still hold the same belief, that is whatever the situation is, they will have each other in her/his heart.’

Apart from the faithfulness and loyalty to love, the portrayal of ‘pure’ love relations also reflects the desire in these men’s hearts. Albert appreciates this kind of ‘high level’ portrayal, as he quoted the love scene in ‘Jewel in the Palace’ as an example. He recalled, ‘They ran on the snowy ground, and played at the seashore, chasing each other in a romantic way...In my view, this is even more “passionate” than showing me a naked couple!’ Another married informant, Eric, is also deeply impressed by the conservative ways of expressing love in the dramas, as he said:

‘They never go beyond the boundary (moral standard) ...(the man) won’t try to possess the woman, take advantage of her, or extend the relationship further...there is no casual sex, what they want is pure love, and to respect the woman...It’s (spiritual) love that comes first, not physical happiness.’

It can be seen from Eric's remarks above that he seems 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 he desires to see the portrayal of 'pure love' rather than 'casual sex'. In fact, all informants claim that they are searching for 'true love', and this suggests the notion of bringing physical sensation into harmony with rational and moral commitment.

Their attitudes toward love are also reflected in the responses to the end-of-interview questionnaires. When they are asked about the ideal type of love, seven of them choose the answer 'like a small river, not great, but stable and everlasting', and none of them chooses 'temporary relationship, e.g. one-night stand'. 11 of the informants agree with the statement 'I will be faithful to my partner unto death'. This longing for pure, stable, and everlasting relationship as expressed by our male informants stands in sharp contrast with the increasing divorce rate witnessed in the past few decades in Hong Kong. All informants agree that the general public holds a completely different attitude towards love. They criticize most Hong Kong people as 'materialistic', 'not serious towards love'. Tommy, for instance, points out that many youngsters rely on 'feeling' in starting a relationship, and 'once the feeling is gone,

they just say goodbye to each other'. Another informant Perry uses the word 'fashion' to describe modern day love relations, which he finds unacceptable:

'They treat (love) as a fashion ...just like one-night stands...Maybe I am a bit old-fashioned, I find it (the love relation) more acceptable in (Korean) dramas...nowadays many people just want to be excused, so that they don't need to take responsibilities.'

Some married informants bring out another important point -- the changing pattern of love/romance after marriage. Both of our informants, Eric and Perry, who have been married over ten years, believe that no more passionate love could exist after marriage. Perry's remark below is very illustrating:

'When you are not yet married...you will show the best side to each other... sometimes you just tolerate (each other) patiently...however, after you are married, two of you have to live together. Everyone has many bad habits, and you may dislike some of these habits of your partner. Then how can you forgive each other? How to make a compromise? This is a very big problem.'

In face of the imperfect love relations encountered in reality after marriage, the ideal love depicted in Korean dramas seems to serve an important function – substitute for the missing elements in their marriage. It tends to depict a world that is shown to be

benign, promise readers satisfaction, pleasure and fulfillment (Belsey, 1994). Our male informants explicitly express their desire for romantic love, and Korean dramas seem to function as a source of confirmation, compensation and encouragement in times of disappointment.

Although many scholars and public discourses label the desire for romance/love as one of the 'feminine qualities' (Cancian, 2004), these male viewers seem to defy this tradition by yearning for romantic love. Some males, like some women, also desire romantic love, and if they cannot find it in their everyday lives (e.g., after marriage), they want to find it in the TV dramas they watch and enjoy. Much to the dismay of these men, the changing gender roles in the modern day society in Hong Kong has also increased the unlikelihood for these men to experience the kind of romance they desire as we shall see in the next section.

(4) Dilemmas of modern day career men and women: More flexible gender roles?

As discussed in the early part of the paper, an increasing number of highly educated career women has been entering the labor market in Hong Kong. Many of them occupy professional status/high positions and have proved themselves to have the same ability as their male counterparts, if not higher. For instance, all of our married informants say they have 'strong and capable' wives, who are important

breadwinners of the family. Some of these so-called 'superwomen' even work harder than men, gaining higher social prestige as well as making more money than men.

Apparently these male informants welcome women into the traditionally male's world. However, some of them express their worries and anxiety about this situation.

Leo and Sean both find their female counterparts outstanding and at the same time 'threatening'. Leo describes modern women as 'terrible creatures':

'Many jobs in Hong Kong are suitable for both sexes...and women have one important strength--they are more meticulous, and they can handle different tasks at the same time. I believe that once women are educated, and become financially independent, they can be "very terrible creatures". I think that's why men tried to suppress women in the past.'

Abelmann (2003) in her study of changing gender roles in modern South Korean society points out that in the rapid processes of modernization, the traditional status hierarchies in Korea are being shaken or re-organized, resulting in dislocation and status anxiety of people, especially among men. Most of our male informants, however, seem to still subscribe to the traditional ideology of separate gendered spheres in their mind--a breadwinner husband and a homemaker wife. Ten of the informants agree with the statement 'even though a woman has a job, the main

responsibility of supporting the family should go to the man.’ One of the explanations is the social expectations governing gender roles, which imposes great pressure on men as the main financial supporter of the family. Perry mentions the relatively high expectation for males, ‘If a woman doesn’t have a job, the society won’t consider it a problem. But if a man doesn’t have a job, how would the society think about this man? This is very great pressure, isn’t it?’ Vincent considers it a kind of ‘Chinese tradition’ and says that Chinese males have to ‘preserve their face’. In addition, the social norms leading to the repression of emotions also made many men feel tired and exhausted. As discussed in the previous section, men are expected to be ‘tough’ and ‘strong’, which are considered to be ‘masculine qualities’. Eight of the informants agree that ‘men should be tough all the time’. One of our informants Neon said, ‘It’s undeniable that it’s easier for women to cry, most of the time they cry first. And for men, so sorry, you can just cry for a while! You can’t cry (too much), otherwise who can settle the problem? I think the expectation is different.’ As a married man, Eric discovers ‘double standards’ governing the emotional expressions of a wife and a husband’:

‘I think modern Hong Kong men, those married men, are under great pressure. First of all, many of their wives are employed and have their own careers, so you (men) cannot lose the job...I believe that the

psychological pressure for men is greater than that of women...
whatever terrible conditions they face outside (the family), they cannot
speak it out at home, but the wives can do so. If you always mention
(the difficulties), it shows that you are weak, and your wife will
become impatient with you, as men should not behave like that! (Men)
should be stronger, willing to bear pressure. '

Within the realm of everyday life, men need to work very hard to make money, and to fulfill the perceived social expectations by performing the identity of a rational, tough and independent supporter/protector. However, in the fantasyland of Korean dramas it is a completely different world. As mentioned by many informants, most of the male characters are 'born to be rich'—Joon-sang in 'Winter Sonata' comes from a rich family and becomes a famous architect; Song-ju in 'Stairway to Heaven' even becomes the chief executive of the family business. Many male audiences find these 'unrealistic' characters very appealing, as they do not need to deal with one major hardship in real life—fighting for money and social status.

On the other hand, the increasing number of double-earner families results in another important boundary-shift. In the old days, the everyday tasks of mothering and parenting, like the routine care of home and children, are taken to be the natural expressions of femininity (Coltrane, 2004). Nevertheless, men's household labor

appears to have increased in recent years (Gerson & Pesis 2004, Popenone 2004).

Thirteen of our fifteen informants agree that 'a husband should help his wife in doing housework'. Most of our informants claim that they have made contributions like cooking the meals occasionally, taking care of children in their spare time. One of the married informants, Neon, has a 'career-minded' wife who is a supervisor in a company's human resources department. He admits that he has to 'exchange roles' with his wife:

'It seems that I have taken up her role; and she has taken up the role of a husband. My wife is very busy with her work, and my job is relatively stable (an engineer)...I don't mind doing (the housework), say like cooking meals, going to markets ...even washing clothes, ironing clothes, drying clothes...'

However, this shift in responsibility for household labor cannot completely solve the fundamental conflicts between work and family in modern day society. Even though some men are willing to take up domestic responsibilities, their contributions are limited and occasional. Besides, not all men can accept 'exchanging roles' as suggested by Neon. Many of them still expect women to be the 'primary care-takers' at home and refuse to go through 'role transformation', as they find it difficult to break the 'traditions'. The personal experience of Perry is very illustrating, which

reflects the tradeoff of establishing a dual-earner family:

‘My wife is an auditor, and she always needs to meet deadlines...sometimes, like the Chinese New Year Eve, the whole family had been waiting for her (to have the New Year Eve dinner). I was on time, but she was so busy with her work, and all my family members needed to wait for her...is it so difficult to squeeze a little time?’

He admits that if economic conditions permits, he prefers returning to the traditional idealized model of family—a breadwinner father and a housewife mother. This viewpoint is shared among many informants, who believe that a full-time housewife plays a pivotal role in maintaining a healthy family. For instance, in modern day China, despite the apparent ‘genderless’ images of an ideal couple, women are still represented as having the major responsibility in doing domestic tasks, regardless of other responsibilities and needs they may have (Evans, 2002). This shows that even though women’s roles are perceived as less rigid than before, they are still closely linked to domestic roles. The social expectation exerted on women causes dilemmas in modern day society and might result in ‘never-solved conflicts’ in family life.

Coda: Challenges ahead

In doing this research we have learnt a lot about the dilemmas and pressures faced by men in modern day Hong Kong society, and sometimes they need to escape into the romantic fantasy created by TV dramas to take a break from their harsh working life and tension-filled gender relations, just like many modern women do. Many of the melodramatic series are believed to focus on 'women's matters' (Brown 1990, Fiske 1989), and most existing research tends to describe how female audiences are addicted to television dramas and romance fiction as an emotional escape (Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985). In this study, however, it is shown that men also readily identify with and take up different subject positions in television dramas. Our informants enjoy the emotional realism and appreciate the touching storylines of Korean dramas. It breaks the stereotypical discourse of considering television dramas as 'just appealing to women'. It seems that modern men (and in our case, mostly highly educated and middle-class working men) also yearn for a fantasyland to fulfill their deepest desires (e.g. for romance and ideal women).

It seems that the intensification of professional work in the modern capitalist workplace has made it difficult for both men and women to be both employed in full-time work and to co-build and co-care for a family if there are not other social support systems, networks or structures to help ease the double burden of full-time

work and children rearing and parenting in modern society. However, does the solution lie in asking women to go back to their traditional home-caretaker role? It seems that even men themselves do not want to see such a reversal as many of our informants admit that they need their partners to work full-time to secure more income to cover family expenses, especially educational expenses of their children. It seems that releasing women from their traditional roles have created both advantages and disadvantages for men, and men are still struggling with this new kind of dilemmas they find themselves in.

When the solutions are still not there, these men seem to find it emotionally pleasurable to go into the fantasyland created in Korean dramas. Korean dramas thus serve as a safely valve in enabling these men to take a break from the tough and harsh everyday lives, from the tensions and dilemmas created in the new types of gender relations and work relations which they find themselves in. It seems that in enjoying seeing the perfect women and faithful men in the dramas, they can for a short while at least get reassured emotionally that gentle love, pleasant relations with gentle women are still possible in the modern world.

In doing this analysis, we are also doing a symptomatic reading of the Korean drama consumption practices of some well-educated heterosexual men in Hong Kong. They enjoy the images of the ideal woman, fantasy of love, as well as beautiful

cosmopolitan city life (e.g., the globalized Asian cityscapes and glamorous consumerist lifestyles) as depicted in the dramas. This offers them a fantasyland embracing both traditional gender values and modern desires with a cosmopolitan aesthetic. We see them as using Korean dramas to negotiate the tensions and pressures in their lives under an increasingly competitive, highly rationalized and impersonal workplace culture heightened by the penetration of global capital and global management discourses and practices. Life in many fast globalizing Asian cities is becoming increasingly dry and full of pressure, and leisure time is increasingly reduced for the middle class white-collar / professional adults, both male and female. While Korean dramas can provide a temporary emotional release and pleasurable break for men (and women), some longer-term solutions need to be sought in exploring viable ways of helping men and women build new kinds of gender relations, new and flexible ways of seeing and performing gender roles, under the new economic and material conditions created in late/post-industrial, fast globalizing capitalist societies.

We propose that understanding the tensions and dilemmas as experienced by both men and women and encouraging understanding of these tensions and dilemmas on the parts of both men and women will perhaps represent a first step towards building a dialogue between men and women under the tough new modern work and family

conditions. It is in this sense that both men's studies and women's studies (or gender studies) will be important in this project. And understanding both men and women's media consumption practices under the penetration of relentless global capitalist modernity and consumerism will provide us with useful windows on the tensions and dilemmas in modern day gender relations in rapidly modernizing and cosmopolitanizing Asian cities such as Hong Kong.

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