

**SOCIAL CHANGE AND FEMALE DESIRABILITY IN
CONTEMPORARY SOUTH KOREA: THE CASE OF
HALLYU DRAMA**

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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Etelä-Korea kävi läpi nopean talouskasvun 1900-luvun toisella puoliskolla. Maa kehittyi sodan runteleman valtiosta rikkaaksi demokratiaksi vain muutamassa vuosikymmenessä, ja 1990-luvulta alkaen korealainen populaarikulttuuri, kuten televisiodraamat, musiikki ja muoti, ovat levinneet maailmanlaajuisesti ilmiöksi, joka tunnetaan nimellä Hallyu. Maan ekonomisen ja teknologisen kehittyminen ja avautuminen ulkomaailmalle on johtanut perinteisten arvojen taantumiseen talouden uusien vaatimusten tieltä, mutta korealaisen kulttuurin kehittyessä taloutta hitaammin, ovat erityisesti naiset jääneet hankalaan tilanteeseen, erilaisten odotusten konfliktiin.</p> <p>Tutkin korealaista naiskuvaa Hallyu-mediassa, lähteinäni kolme Hallyun eri aikoina tehtyä draamaa: <i>Winter Sonata</i> (2002), <i>Boys Over Flowers</i> (2009) ja <i>Fight For My Way</i> (2017). K-Draamassa naiset esitetään erityisesti 2000-luvun alussa hyvin konfutselaiseen ihanteeseen sopivina: viattomina, nöyrinä ja itseuhrautuvaisina. K-Draaman maailma, joka on ennen kaikkea idealistinen ja kauniiksi kuvattu, säilyttää raaminsa 2020-luvulle saakka. Hahmojen, etenkin naisten kokemat ongelmat käsittelevät 2000-luvun alussa ennen kaikkea ihmissuhteita ja rakkautta, ja yleisön ollessa pääasiassa itäaasialaisia naisia, olivat draamat myös suunnattu ja kehitetty tähän demografiaan sopiviksi. 2010-luvun lopulla tätä konfliktia perinteiden ja modernien odotusten ja unelmien välillä, erityisesti sitä miten naisten odotettiin olevan sekä uhrautuvia kotiäitejä että ahkeria uranaisia, alettiin käsitellä yhä enemmän, ja työstä tuli K-Draamassa tärkeämpi teema kuin koskaan aikaisemmin. Yleisön ollessa maailmanlaajuinen ja monipuolisempi, myös Hallyu-tuotteet kuten K-Draama vastasivat tähän muutokseen, ja ne ovatkin pysyneet nuorisokulttuurin muutosten aallonharjalla miltei koko olemassaolonsa ajan.</p> <p>Myös suoria eroavaisuuksia todellisuuden ja draaman väliltä löytyy – plastiikkakirurgian suuren suosion myötä aihetta käsitellään draamoja myöden, mutta fyysisen kauneuden korostaminen ja kehon muokkaaminen nähdään yhä negatiivisena asiana, jota haluttavat, esimerkilliset päähenkilöt eivät milloinkaan tee. Korealaiset viihdyttäjät, idolit, ovat ankaran kritiikin kohteena maan sisällä, kun ulkomaille he edustavat korealaisia ihanteita. Hallyu on taipunut kansainvälisen yleisön tarpeisiin ja mukailee kansainvälisiä kulttuurin trendejä enemmän kuin korealaisen yhteiskunnan omia muutoksia – K-Draaman naisprotagonistit ovat pohjimmiltaan feministisempiä, voimaantuneempia ja kansainvälisesti tietoisempia kuin mitä tavallisilta korealaisilta naisilta odotetaan.</p>	
Asiasanat Korea, draamasarjat, lähiluku, diskurssianalyysi, naiskuva, konfutselaisuus	
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1 INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I will be examining how the portrayal of women and what is seen as ideal for women has changed following societal changes in South Korea in recent decades. The timeline chosen for this thesis is approximately thirty years, from the early 1990s to the late 2010s, because this was the time when Korean popular culture became phenomenally popular around the world. I will analyze the changes in society and the expectations on women, before examining how these changes have influenced and been portrayed in one of the most popular Korean¹ *Hallyu* (Korean wave of popular culture) products, *K-Drama*.

1.1 South Korea at the start of Hallyu

After the Korean War in the 1950s, the Korean peninsula was in a state of devastation. The artificial split into two countries and the aftermath of the war were a difficult basis to start with, for both countries². North Korea developed quicker at first, but it entered an era of stagnant development and transformed into the most closed-up society ever seen in modern times, while South Korea built a nation that grew into a wealthy, developed society at an exceptional speed³. South Korea went through rapid industrialization and urbanization and its economy grew quickly⁴. This rise from a poor, rural country to a modern technology giant is what sets South Korea apart on the global stage today⁵.

¹ In this paper, Korea refers to South Korea only.

² Seth. 2011, 373

³ Seth. 2011, 437, Peterson & Margulies 2009, xvi

⁴ Seth. 2011, 492 - 494. Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001, 86

⁵ Kim-Yoon & Williams. 2015, 5

After 1987, democracy became the system of the South Korean government after years of instability and authoritarian military rule, and the socio-cultural landscape of the country continued changing at an even quicker pace⁶. As technological developments made the world easier to access and the Western influence especially spread over all continents, South Korea developed its own assets for the global market⁷. This time period marked the beginning of a certain cultural phenomenon that would shape both South Korea and its neighboring countries, and its effects on culture would reach a global scale over the next thirty years. That phenomenon is now known as Hallyu.

The term *Hallyu* (한류) is of Chinese origin. It is derived from the word *han liu* (寒流) which literally means *cold wave*⁸. Hallyu as a word was first used as a pun in Chinese mass media in the late 1990s, to mean Korean popular culture spreading outside of the country's own borders⁹. Nowadays Hallyu is widely used, in both Korea and worldwide, to describe the phenomenon of Korean popular culture products - TV Dramas, music, and fashion to name a few things - spreading across the globe¹⁰. Depending on the source, the Hallyu phenomenon can be seen as having started sometime from the late 1980s to the early 1990s; some sources even suggest that the first waves of the Hallyu only hit the outside world in the early 2000s¹¹. By the early 2020s, Hallyu is still an ongoing phenomenon and though it first gained ground in South Korea's neighboring countries¹² and South East Asia, it has spread all around the world¹³.

Hallyu can be separated into different waves depending on what cultural product was the driving force behind it, and which areas it reached, its effects mimicking those of actual waves. The first wave is sometimes called the "K-Drama wave", as that was when Korean dramas became popular outside of Korea in the mid-1990s. However, it only reached countries that were nearby both geometrically and culturally, such as countries that shared the same values as Korea, China and Japan. The second wave started after the K-Drama wave had nearly died down in the mid-2000s and Hallyu was expected to reach its end. With the added popularity of K-Pop, Hallyu started to become global during the second wave, and the wave is sometimes referred to as the

⁶ Seth. 2011, 417 - 435. For more on Korean history see e.g., Seth, 2011, *A History of Korea - From Antiquity to the Present*, Peterson & Margulies. 2009, *A Brief History of Korea*.

⁷ Boman. 2022. Han & Lee. 2008. Kim. 2015.

⁸ Yook, et al. 2014, 6. Han & Lee. 2008, 115

⁹ Kim & Nam. 2016, 525. Han & Lee. 2008, 115

¹⁰ Ju, et al. 2020, 16. Lee. 2020, pp 67

¹¹ Lee. 2012, 448. Lee. 2020, 67

¹² Excluding North Korea

¹³ This model of different waves is common among researchers, and this particular cut to four is the latest. Boman. 2022, 421 - 423

“K-Pop wave” or “Hallyu 2.0”. The third wave included K-Beauty, Seoul became the worldwide “plastic surgery capital” and Korean beauty products and fashion became popular around the world in the early 2010s. The fourth wave is the most recent one and started around the year 2016. This was the time when Hallyu reached all continents and this wave is often known as the “K-Lifestyle wave”, when along with K-Drama, K-Pop, and K-Beauty, Korean food became a worldwide phenomenon.¹⁴

What characterizes Hallyu media especially is the way that everything has been polished to perfection. From looks to milieus and perfectly orchestrated, innocent love stories, these soap operas and melodramas that air on Korean TV daily are much more than just light-hearted entertainment for teenagers and stay-at-home mothers. After the Korean war in the early 1950s, the world knew South Korea as a poor and war-torn place, but the Hallyu phenomenon has had a lot of power in changing the image of the country¹⁵. Even before K-Beauty became a worldwide phenomenon, Korean idols - singers, actors, and models - were used effectively to sell the idea of a beautiful Korea with beautiful people in it to the outside world. Hallyu celebrities in Korea go through rigorous, highly competitive training programs in the entertainment companies that produce everything that is considered Hallyu, both for domestic and international markets¹⁶.

What makes Hallyu unique is its intense growth in popularity, as well as its calculativeness, after initially starting by chance¹⁷. From the 2000s onwards, popular culture became one of South Korea’s leading exports¹⁸, and it is widely recognized in Korea that Hallyu’s success can be attributed to the South Korean government's efforts to promote tourism by tying it in with the popular culture industries such as fashion, music, movies, and TV dramas¹⁹. It has, however, also been argued that the government’s role in boosting Hallyu has been exaggerated, as the driving forces behind Hallyu have been individual companies and conglomerates, and the government subsidies for film and music production have had little to do with developing the products, as they have usually been directed towards smaller companies that have had a lesser impact on the development of Hallyu. That said, the relationship between the South Korean government and Korean popular culture industries is unique and publicly recognized around the world.²⁰

¹⁴ Boman. 2022, 421. Lee. 2012, 448. Kim, Bok Rae. 2015, 157 - 159

¹⁵ Korea University’s professor Gil Sung Park’s interview to *The Korea Herald*, February 12th, 2013.

¹⁶ Ju. 2019, 26

¹⁷ Lee. 2012, 448, 465

¹⁸ Choi & Maliangkay. 2015, 3

¹⁹ Han & Lee. 2008, 118. Lee. 2012, 448

²⁰ Parc. 2021, 30-33. Oh & Lee. 2014, 83

The single product that started the whole Hallyu phenomenon is K-Drama. One of the reasons why K-Drama was the specific product that became so popular outside of Korea is its high quality due to the strong competitiveness between the programs in Korea. In the late 2000s, TV drama was the second most preferred type of TV entertainment in Korea after daily news, and the three major Korean broadcasting stations, KBS, MBC, and SBS, aired a total of 30 different dramas per week and were constantly gathering viewer feedback to make sure that they stayed up to date on what people wanted to see. Many other Hallyu products, such as K-Pop and the idols themselves, can be seen as just an extension of this huge drama industry.²¹

1.2 Women and a changing society

The basis of South Korean social order lies in Confucianism, which is a philosophy and a belief system deeply rooted in Korean culture²². Although South Korea is not the only nation that has a long history with Confucianism, it is the one that has historically followed the Confucian tradition in the strictest manner²³. During the 20th century, as Globalization became prominent and South Korea also opened its borders for both cultural and economic exchange, many foreign ideas started influencing the culture and society at an accelerating pace. Among them were ideas including but not limited to atheism, Christianity, and nationalism.²⁴

Confucianism is a complex philosophy that consists of a plethora of social, philosophical, and religious ideas, values, and practices²⁵. The main aspect and point of contemporary Korean Confucianism is its focus on the hierarchical structure of the world, and the importance of one “knowing their place” in relation to everything around them²⁶. Other important aspects of Confucianism are filial piety, chastity as the greatest womanly virtue, humility, hard work, and a moderate lifestyle²⁷.

In this Confucian worldview, women are placed under men. Although there is no contemporary state law that enables women to be put under men, the old Confucian belief that women should serve men in all stages of their lives is still strong in people’s

²¹ Han & Lee. 2008, 116–117

²² Shim. 2001, 134

²³ Kim, Sung Moon. 2015, 2. Mitu. 2015, 31–32

²⁴ Boman. 2022, 420–422

²⁵ Mitu. 2015, 34

²⁶ Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001, 85

²⁷ Kim. 2006, 28

minds: A woman should first serve her father, then her husband in marriage and later, in widowhood, her son²⁸. While quick industrialization made it possible for women (and indeed forced them) to enter the workforce along with men, they are still widely expected to fulfill the same traditional roles as mothers and caregivers at home on top²⁹. In marriage, a woman becomes a part of her husband's extended family and is fully responsible for them³⁰. This traditional view mixed with what is being demanded of women in a modern work life causes a lot of strain especially in mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships, due to different generations having very different upbringings in a very different, quickly-changing nation³¹.

As women joined the workforce and gained more economic independence, they started to question the old Confucian worldview, and this has led to tension in the discourse between men and women who view equality issues very differently³². The rise of feminism has generated anger in the male population that has also become more vocal on what they deem is radical hatred towards men³³. Some of the most difficult issues on women's side are the prevalence of sexual harassment that women face in workplaces, the gender pay gap, societal expectations towards women in marriage, and issues with tightening beauty standards that South Korea is also particularly known for³⁴. There is a great difference between rapid economic transformation and slower cultural change in Korea, which is an especially difficult place for women, as the traditional values of Confucianism and the needs of the modern economy are in constant conflict³⁵. Some of the biggest social changes that have accelerated in the early 21st century have to do with people starting families later if at all, which is a huge change from Confucian tradition where family is the most important part of life³⁶.

The majority of Korean people are seen as being a part of either middle-class or working-class that have a major gap between them in terms of wealth and resources, connections and opportunities. Sometimes, especially in the eyes of younger generations, middle-class people are referred to as having been "born with golden spoons" while the working-class people were left with "dirt spoons". This highlights the fact that the

²⁸ Shim. 2001, 135

²⁹ Park & Liao. 2000, 571 - 572, An, et al. 2022, 1-3

³⁰ Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001, 85-88

³¹ Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001, 85-88

³² Jung. 2013

³³ Jung. 2013, Kim. 2020, 465

³⁴ Jung. 2013

³⁵ Chun, et al. 2006, 588

³⁶ Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001, 85-86. Chun, et al. 2006, 587

people from these two classes have vastly different basis for life, and it is immensely difficult to climb up from a working-class background.³⁷

Though K-Drama tends to dodge sensitive subjects, it has still received quite a lot of backlash for several reasons. Especially in China, where Hallyu has been prominent for decades, fan cultures and “feminine masculinity” typical for Hallyu stars have received negative responses among the leading elites and regular citizens alike³⁸. However, if the image of men is being criticized so heavily, what is the portrayal of women that rarely seems to get criticized, even though it exists within the same unrealistic framework?

1.3 Research questions and sources

Therefore, the questions that I am answering in this thesis are:

1. How has South Korean society changed, particularly regarding the lives of women, from the early 1990s to the late 2010s?
2. How can this change be seen in popular K-Drama portrayals of women?
3. What other factors have affected this portrayal and its change over time?

To answer them, I have chosen three dramas for closer inspection. What unifies the dramas is their popularity, as well as similarities in their themes and milieus. All three dramas contain at least a section of the main characters’ high school lives, which is a popular K-Drama setting, and they all focus on the real-world issues that regular Koreans face today, such as family dynamics, work-related issues, and love and dating.

The oldest of these dramas is *Winter Sonata*, which aired in South Korea in 2002 and has been widely regarded as one of the prime forces kickstarting the Hallyu phenomenon into action in East Asia³⁹. *Winter Sonata*, a classic K-Drama of a love story that survives the tests of time and disapproving family members, gained huge popularity in Japan and led to a rise in drama-induced tourism and even a craze over the lead

³⁷ Kang. 2017, 139 - 140

³⁸ For more on Anti-Hallyu perspectives and movement in China, see e.g. Chen. 2016. *The emergence of the anti-Hallyu movement in China*. Louie. 2012, *Popular Culture and Masculinity Ideals in East Asia, with Special Reference to China*.

³⁹ Lee. 2012, 451. Hanaki, et al. 2007, 282. Han & Lee. 2008, 115

actor, Bae Yong Joon⁴⁰ (Yonsama in Japan, *Yonsama-craze*)⁴¹. This emphasis on actors and idols themselves, and a focus on their image outside of their work, is yet another specialty of K-Drama where the actors are regarded as a significant part of the idealized Hallyu world and expected to uphold a flawless image⁴². In *Winter Sonata*, the female characters mostly struggle with interpersonal relationships, the main focus remaining on the romantic love between the two main characters.

The second drama chosen for closer inspection is *Boys Over Flowers*, which first aired in 2009. Its roots are not in Korea originally as it is based on a Japanese manga and TV drama of the same name⁴³. *Boys Over Flowers* was made during the time when Hallyu 2.0, where Korean pop music, K-Pop, topped the popularity of dramas and gained even more popularity overseas. *Boys Over Flowers* is a love story of class differences in a high school setting. What comes in the way of love for the two main characters is family, differences in wealth and status, and bullies at school. As the only source K-Drama entirely set in high school, *Boys Over Flowers* offers insights into portrayals of young people still dependent on their parents.

The third drama is *Fight For My Way*, which aired in 2017. When nearing the end of my research period, the late 2010s, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate different “waves” from one another. Some researchers claim that in 2016, the fourth wave of Hallyu was set into motion⁴⁴, and *Fight For My Way* is a part of that. What separated the times of *Boys Over Flowers* and *Fight For My Way* from one another was a huge growth of social media, with Korean artist PSY becoming a worldwide phenomenon with his hit song *Gangnam Style* and bringing attention to K-Pop globally⁴⁵, and the growth of streaming services. During the airing of *Fight For My Way*, many K-Dramas were becoming popular overseas at the same time, this time not through cable TV but the internet instead, which increased its spread over the continents⁴⁶. *Fight For My Way* has not been considered as significant as the other two dramas, but it was popular in Korea during its airing and is thematically close to the earlier two, as it is a story of

⁴⁰ Korean names typically have three syllables: first, a one-syllable family name (Kim, Park) and a one or two syllable given name (Hyun ah, Min Ho, San). These names are romanized in different ways according to the source and the style used. As Korean names are written all together without a space in Korean (김현아, 최민호) people have chosen different ways to write them with Latin script - either all together without a space (Hyunah), with a space (Hyun Ah) or with a hyphen (Hyun-Ah). For the sake of cohesion, I have decided to always write the names with a space, regardless of the original choice of style.

⁴¹ Kim. 2007, 50. Hanaki, et al. 2007, 281-282. Han & Lee. 2008, 116-120

⁴² Han & Lee. 2008, 116

⁴³ Miyose & Engstrom. 2015, 2

⁴⁴ Boman. 2022, 420

⁴⁵ Jung & Li. 2014. Kim, et al. 2017, 2

⁴⁶ Lee. 2018, 335-336

young adults deemed underdogs due to their backgrounds, trying to make their dreams come true, and the blossoming love between them. In *Fight For My Way*, the female characters have conflicts within their careers, and although love and traditional family relationship trouble are still important parts of the story, they are much less in the limelight compared to the earlier two.

These three K-Dramas will be researched in three different categories. First, I am looking into women's roles in life and how they are expected to fulfill them in the workplace and at home, as well as in interpersonal relationships. Then, the main focus moves to physical traits and behavior, and the third theme researched here is romantic relationships, and how the portrayals of men and women differ. I will look into the three dramas listed and strengthen my own analysis by making reference to examples from other K-Dramas, as presented in the existing academic research on the topic. In this research, I will be focusing mainly on young, middle to lower-class women, as these are the social classes mainly represented in the dramas under scrutiny.

Drama	Winter Sonata	Boys Over Flowers	Fight For My Way
Original name	겨울연가 Gyeouryeon-ga	꽃보다 남자 Kkotboda Namja	쌈 마이웨이 Ssam Maiwei
Year	2002	2009	2017
Director	Seok Ho Yoon	Ki Sang Jeon	Na Jeong Lee
Writers	Eun Hee Kim, Eun Kyung Joon Soo Yeon Oh	Ji Ryun Yoon	Sang Choon Im
Original network	KBS2	KBS2	KBS2

1.4 Methodology and conceptual framework

What can an idealized world tell us about reality? Although fiction can never be a perfect depiction of our everyday lives and is rarely trying to present itself as such, it is widely noted that K-Drama, and Hallyu media as a whole, is an idealized portrayal of a world that is a rather agreeable place at its core, with love as its most cherished

value which conquers all⁴⁷. K-Drama can be regarded as “comfort entertainment” for adults because it contains the same troubles that they face in their everyday lives - family, career, and relationship issues - with the distinction that everything is perfectly resolved in the end. K-Drama is a world of ideal love with ideal characters, easily distinguishable good and bad with no ambiguous endings.⁴⁸

When analyzing the dramas, I will be using close reading and discourse analysis methods. Using the method of close reading⁴⁹, I will research the dramas as Hallyu texts and focus on the original Korean as well as English translations. Discourse analysis can be defined in multiple different ways but at its core, it is a method that focuses on what lies beyond the simple lines of dialogue - language is in no way a neutral form of communication and should not be seen as such⁵⁰. The language of drama, which is fictional and fantastical, has to be studied with a clear look into its subtext: what is it trying to accomplish and why? Along with overt meanings, what is the message - in this case, the desired outcome of female characters and what an ideal woman ought to look and act like - that lies underneath it? Along with these two methods, I will further contextualize and deepen my findings by providing historical background and context, analyzing the K-Dramas within the sociopolitical time in which they were made.

A direct comparison of reality and drama will not suffice in itself. Not all cultural products produced in Korea are considered Hallyu, and not all Koreans enjoy it or find that it represents the country. Hallyu products have also reflected international cultural changes rather than just (or if at all) Korean culture, and in some views, it reflects less so what is happening in Korea and more so what the global youth culture deems important or popular⁵¹. It is, however, still very likely that societal changes in South Korea itself have affected the development of dramas and this change is what I am going to research. I am not expecting to find big changes as the phenomenon is still quite new and my time period is limited, but it is safe to assume that some significant changes have taken place as the period chosen for this thesis has been a time of rapid technological change and growing international exchange thanks to such developments and Globalism. The term Globalism describes a theory, a method of doing anything, mostly economic or political in nature, based on a global, rather than a local scale and recognizing that the operator in question is working or has the potential to

⁴⁷ Lee. 2012, 454-455

⁴⁸ Lee. 2012, 454-459

⁴⁹ More on close reading, see e.g., Schur, 1998, *An Introduction to Close Reading*. Dubois, 2013, *Close Reading: An Introduction*

⁵⁰ Gill. 2009, 172-174

⁵¹ Lee. 2012. 454 - 459

work on a worldwide scale⁵². Hallyu is a phenomenon that would not have existed without the effects of Globalism reaching Korea, as well as all of the countries that it has reached and become popular.

When researching the fictional portrayal/image of women, focusing on what is portrayed as ideal and desirable, it is important to define the meaning of the word in this context. There are different forms of desirability, or definitions of desirability, shown in the dramas - the characters themselves often have an opinion, and the male and female characters (young and old, high school students and mothers-in-law) have their own, and the possible audience that can be and is increasingly transnational and multicultural also have their own⁵³. I am looking into what is seen as ideal in the context of Korean society during the research period, the Confucian views mirrored with the postmodern, post-capitalist Korean society of the late 20th and early 21st century.

Multiple pieces of research have been written on the appeal of, as well as the consumer behavior around, Hallyu media and K-Drama. As Hallyu is a global phenomenon, many of these studies have focused on the effect that these dramas have had on the people outside of South Korea and the far-reaching positive effects that Hallyu has had on the culture and economy of the country, particularly in forms of tourism and image building.⁵⁴ Hallyu and K-Drama have also been studied in the context of *soft power*; the concept of soft power was first introduced in the late 1980s by Joseph Nye, though in practice soft power has existed for a long time before⁵⁵. In comparison to hard power which bases its effects on coercion and payment, soft power puts emphasis on attraction and persuasion instead⁵⁶. Soft power became especially visible on a global scale during the Cold War when the Soviet Union and the United States not only took part in military conflicts but also competed in terms of popular culture and sports more directly⁵⁷. Since the 1990s South Korean soft power has had an effect on the cultures of East and South East Asian countries especially, so much so that certain countries have even started to work against it - a good example being China, which has recently banned some Korean culture products from being widely distributed, to

⁵² Walker. 2012, 183

⁵³ For more on transnational audiences of Hallyu, see Kim. 2019 'Do they really do that in Korea?': multi-cultural learning through Hallyu media. Ju. 2020, *Korean TV drama viewership on Netflix: Transcultural affection, romance, and identities*

⁵⁴ For more on Hallyu tourism, see Kim & Nam. 2016. *Hallyu Revisited: Challenges and Opportunities for the South Korean Tourism*. Han & Lee. 2008. *A Study on the KBS TV Drama Winter Sonata and its Impact on Korea's Hallyu Tourism Development*

⁵⁵ More on Soft Power, see Nye, 1990, *Soft Power*.

⁵⁶ Watson. 2012, 304

⁵⁷ More on Soft Power, see Nye, 1990, *Soft Power*.

protect the country's own culture industries⁵⁸. The dramas have had an impact, whether intended or not.

⁵⁸ Jun. 2017, 163. For more on Hallyu's Soft Power impact, see Kim et al. 2016. *Catching up to Hallyu? The Japanese and Chinese Response to South Korean Soft Power*.

2 DILIGENT WORKER, YET A DEVOTED MOTHER – WOMEN’S ROLE IN LIFE

2.1 In-law relationships and female self-sacrifice

Drama makes me think about lots of things. While watching the drama I thought, “Too smart a daughter-in-law is adenifite NO!” A too smart woman tends to be rude. I tell my son, “You should not bring that kind of wife, I would not approve of that type.”⁵⁹

- Quoted in Women, Television and Everyday Life in Korea: Journeys of Hope. Kim, 2006, page 62.

The societal landscape of South Korea in the early 2000s can be described as being in a state of “identity crisis”⁶⁰. This crisis related to the rising rates of divorce, and traditional family values losing their meaning – in other words, huge changes in the family⁶¹. These changes can be seen as a consequence of the changing role and status of women following the modernization of society⁶². Though the 2000s was the decade where this “crisis” could be seen the clearest, these changes can be seen as having begun decades earlier⁶³.

⁵⁹ The person quoted is a 52-year-old working-class woman. You Na Kim, Lecturer in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science, interviewed several women of different ages about their lives and identities, as well as the role of television in South Korea for her book that was published in 2006.

⁶⁰ Kim. 2006, 3

⁶¹ Kim. 2006, 3

⁶² An, et al. 2022, 1-3. Park & Liao. 2000, 571. Kim. 2006, 26-27

⁶³ Kim. 2006, 26-27

In Confucian tradition, where the family is the basic unit of society, a woman takes care of the inner circle of life: home and childcare⁶⁴. Men, in turn, take care of matters outside of the home⁶⁵. During the fast modernization process that South Korea went through in the latter half of the 20th century, women joined the workforce outside of the home - yet they are still expected to take care of the home as they used to⁶⁶. In the twenty-first century, Korean women are expected to excel at their studies and work full-time, while still caring for their husband's extended family as they uphold the pure, gentle, and self-sacrificing image of a Confucian housewife⁶⁷. This pressure comes primarily from the expectations of earlier generations, the Confucian tradition upheld in society, mixed with the modern needs of the economy⁶⁸. The kind of woman who is desirable in the workforce is not the kind of woman who is wanted as a daughter-in-law.

The strain between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is considered and represented as a big one within Korean society, and being a daughter-in-law is commonly regarded as the hardest period of a Korean woman's life⁶⁹. The strain between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is often portrayed as very difficult and a recurring theme in K-Dramas of the late 1990s and early 2000s⁷⁰. This dynamic is present in all of the dramas chosen for this thesis, not as the central focus but still as very important for the character growth of the main leads.

In *Winter Sonata*, the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin⁷¹ gets engaged to her childhood best friend Kim Sang Hyuk in early adulthood. Earlier in the story, during their high school years, she had fallen in love with Kang Joon Sang, the male lead of *Winter Sonata* who, however, to her and everyone else's knowledge dies in a car accident. This is later revealed to not be the case as he only suffers amnesia due to the accident and moves to the U.S.A with his mother who creates a whole new name and identity for him. Yoo Jin and Sang Hyuk's relationship is portrayed as mostly one-sided, as Sang Hyuk keeps confessing his love to Yoo Jin and proposes to her, while she still secretly longs for Joon Sang, but she accepts the engagement and tries to fulfill her duty to Sang Hyuk's family as his fiancée. She is, however, constantly treated coldly by Sang Hyuk's mother who does not like her because of her poor family background and

⁶⁴ Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001, 85-86. Chun, et al. 2006, 587

⁶⁵ Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001, 85-86

⁶⁶ Kim. 2006, 31

⁶⁷ Kim. 2006, 31. Park & Liao. 2000, 571

⁶⁸ Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001, 88. Kim. 2006, 31. Park & Liao. 2000, 571

⁶⁹ Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001, 88

⁷⁰ Kang & Kim. 2012, 131, 136

⁷¹ In this thesis, the names of K-Drama characters will be written family name first, because that is the way in which they are written and referred to in Korean.

careless personality which she had as a teenager, and although it has entirely vanished as an adult, Sang Hyuk's mother refuses to accept her. "Do not get me wrong. I don't want you into my kitchen before you're married"⁷², she snaps at Yoo Jin as she tries to help her with dinner preparations⁷³ - the implication is that she does not want her there at all. Sang Hyuk ends up kneeling before his own mother to beg for permission to marry Yoo Jin, but is denied⁷⁴.

In 21st-century Korea, the elder generations of women look down on the younger generations for abandoning the old customs and thus becoming more self-centered in their desires of achieving a career instead of becoming devoted wives and mothers⁷⁵. At the same time, mothers-in-law are aware of the growing power of the daughters-in-law when the cohabitation of husband's parents and young married couples becomes less usual and women gain more independence, thus limiting the power over them⁷⁶. A smart daughter-in-law can be a threat in this sense if she puts her career over her family, which includes her in-laws who will be dependent on their children as they grow old⁷⁷.

While the younger generations have started questioning the old hierarchical structures, the scrutiny still prevails⁷⁸. In Confucian tradition a woman is subordinate to a man in nearly every aspect of life, however, at home, after getting married and having children of her own, she is the head of the "inner circle", and thus, has this power to hold over everyone⁷⁹. In practice this does not always happen, for example, in interviews made in 2006 by You Na Kim, many working-class women admitted to being at their husbands' mercy both outside and inside the home. The working-class women do not have power over their husbands anywhere. For middle-class women, this is less of a case, and they have more power inside of the home.⁸⁰ In *Winter Sonata*, the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin's fiancée Kim Sang Hyuk comes from a middle-class family. His mother's refusal to let him marry a woman she disapproves of is a great power she holds in the family and no one can overturn that, not even Sang Hyuk's father or

⁷² All translations are taken from the translations offered on VIKI streaming service website unless otherwise stated.

⁷³ *Winter Sonata*, episode 13

⁷⁴ *Winter Sonata*, episode 14

⁷⁵ Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001

⁷⁶ Kim. 1996, 181, 188

⁷⁷ Kim. 1996, 181

⁷⁸ Kim-Yoon & Williams. 2015, 5

⁷⁹ Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001, 85. Shim. 2001, 135

⁸⁰ Kim. 2006, 57-62, 127-130

Sang Hyuk himself even though he is an adult man at this point (approximately in his late 20s to early 30s although the story does not state this directly).

In *Boys Over Flowers*, the male lead Gu Jun Pyo's mother also dislikes his choice of a girlfriend, the female lead Geum Jan Di. She expects her to have low morality because of her poor family background and is certain that she is the pursuer of the relationship, even though this is not the case.⁸¹ It has to be noted, though, that she insists that as the future heir of the family conglomerate, her son Gu Jun Pyo, should not have friends at all, least of all love interests. Jun Pyo's mother is a powerful woman due to the huge amount of money, and high position that she possesses, thanks to the success of the conglomerate. Still, though, she is unable to control her stubborn son. That is why she turns first to bridging Jan Di's family, and then to blackmailing them, to break the young couple. She openly humiliates Jan Di at her son's birthday party⁸², tries to offer her family some money and luxuries⁸³, and then causes them trouble in their community, which leads Jan Di's parents to lose their income and having to move far away to a fishing village in order to save money, while Jan Di is left to look after her younger brother in the city⁸⁴. In the end, Jan Di is able to change the heart of Jun Pyo's mother by talking to her about the meaning of family, and although she is never shown to accept her directly, in the last two episodes she is shown being emotional for the first time, shedding tears and taking care of her ill husband by herself instead of making the maids do it, as she used to before⁸⁵. Jan Di's kindness moves her, and she changes into a caring wife and mother; which are, at least in the Confucian worldview, the best that a woman can be⁸⁶.

Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships are also portrayed in *Fight For My Way*. It is no longer in focus as much as in the earlier dramas, and no full episodes are used to explore this theme, but several supporting characters are tormented by their difficult mother-in-law relationships. In the very first episode, the main female lead Choi Ae Ra's friend gets married to an old and wealthy plastic surgeon, and her mother-in-law is shown snapping at her during the wedding and generally being aggressive towards her⁸⁷ - albeit Ae Ra's friend is portrayed as an obvious gold digger, and this behavior could be justified. A disapproving mother-in-law is a common archetype in K-Drama. The class element is clearly present there since it is often the case

⁸¹ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 16

⁸² *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 15

⁸³ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 10

⁸⁴ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 18

⁸⁵ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 25

⁸⁶ Kim & Hoppe-Graff. 2001

⁸⁷ *Fight For My Way*, episode 2

that the male character is wealthy and more powerful, and the female character comes from a poor background⁸⁸, and this is something that the mother-in-law especially dislikes.

Later, Ae Ra's best friend and the second female lead of the series, Baek Seol Hee is shown to be disliked by her mother-in-law and other female members of her boyfriend's family. They openly trash talk about her family background at a party where she ends up cleaning and working while everyone else is busy drinking tea and gossiping. Her boyfriend's sister makes fun of her, saying "We call Seol Hee 'seol seol hee' [wordplay of her name and the word for cringe] because she is not as good as my brother. So, she is always 'cringing' [seol seol gi da]"⁸⁹. Seol Hee's own mother accidentally overhears this and is shown to be in tears due to their words. Later, Seol Hee's mother is shown being concerned for her daughter's reputation and future as a daughter-in-law because she is "the daughter of a pig-feet [cheap Korean food] food-stall family" and asks her husband if they could set up a more expensive restaurant, to make her life easier.⁹⁰ In *Winter Sonata*, Yoo Jin's mother is also concerned about how her daughter would be treated as a daughter-in-law later in the series when she has broken up with Sang Hyuk, and the male lead of the drama Kang Joon Sang asks for permission to marry her instead. Yoo Jin's mother tells her about the problematic history that she and Joon Sang's mother share and expects her to "torment" Yoo Jin as a daughter-in-law - she expects this to be so bad that she is ready to prevent Yoo Jin from marrying altogether.⁹¹ In K-Drama, the power of the mother-in-law is recognized, shown, and feared.

Mothers-in-law have less power in later productions - while in *Winter Sonata*, the leads are heavily affected by the denial of their mothers and it becomes a central conflict of the drama, in *Fight For My Way*, it is no longer a relevant fear. In modern South Korea, even if moving in with the husband's family after marrying has become increasingly unusual, marriage remains a union of two families rather than only two people⁹². In *Fight For My Way*, however, the approval of parents is no longer discussed much even when the main pair starts to plan a wedding, and what is at the center of the story is only the shared love of the main characters themselves. Love is still a central theme in K-Drama, but the force against it that the main characters have to overcome has shifted from family issues to societal issues instead. Following this change, the theme of family trouble between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is also less popular and less

⁸⁸ Ju, 2019, 34. Lee. 2012, 456-457

⁸⁹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 6

⁹⁰ *Fight For My Way*, episode 6

⁹¹ *Winter Sonata*, episode 17

⁹² Kang & Kim. 2012, 136-137. Kim. 1996, 181, 188

of a focus in the dramas of the 2010s. The female lead of *Fight For My Way*, Choi Ae Ra, does not meet her future mother-in-law a single time.

The initial popularity of this theme was because most of the consumers of these K-Dramas were, and still are, women⁹³. At the start of the first wave of Hallyu, the dramas were predominantly consumed by middle-aged, Korean, and Japanese, female viewers, who were struggling with the pressure of getting stuck in-between modernity and traditional views of what it meant to be a woman⁹⁴. The average age of K-Drama fans has decreased as the dramas have moved from cable TV to internet platforms and streaming services from the early 2010s onwards⁹⁵. The nationalities of K-Drama audiences have also become more varied, now consisting predominantly of ethnically non-Korean viewers such as white, Latina, and East and South East Asians⁹⁶. It has been researched that the majority of the K-Drama audience who end up traveling to Korea, are women⁹⁷.

Modern, international teenagers are less likely to feel a connection to such traditional relationships, so they no longer need fantasy to soothe their feelings regarding it. It could also mean that the daughters-in-law who suffered in the early 2000s now possess a different worldview. The Korea in which they grew up was a very different nation from that in which their parents or grandparents grew up, so the expectations differ because of this. In *Fight For My Way*, the second male lead Kim Joo Man directly yells back at his family for disrespecting his girlfriend⁹⁸, which is not something that he should do according to the Confucian tradition that highlights respecting elders and filial piety.⁹⁹

It is typical for Korean families to prefer sons at their daughter's expense, and self-sacrifice in favor of one's sons and brothers is still expected of women¹⁰⁰. Giving up other things in favor of one's family is also expected of women more so than of men, and these include but are not limited to career and education¹⁰¹. Over the course of Hallyu, Korean culture has turned more individualistic, and fewer women are willing to adopt this self-sacrificing role. In the extremely competitive environment of Korean work life, staying behind is simply not an option for an individual who wants to

⁹³ Lee. 2012, 448–449

⁹⁴ Kim. 2006, 30. Lee. 2020, 68

⁹⁵ Lee. 2018, 365–367.

⁹⁶ Lee. 2020, 68

⁹⁷ Kim, et al. 2019, 237

⁹⁸ *Fight For My Way*, episode 6

⁹⁹ Kim. 2006, 28

¹⁰⁰ Kang & Kim. 2012, 142

¹⁰¹ Kim. 2006, 27

succeed on their career path - having a family puts women at a great disadvantage, as the pressure on women to become caretakers for their husband's family has not evaporated, even though their lives are more varied now.

2.2 Humble servants

This humble, self-sacrificing attitude that is expected of women at home can be seen as reaching out into the workplace as well. In *Winter Sonata*, the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin has a small business of her own, which has employed several other female workers, and so does her friend Oh Chae Rin. However, women are not usually shown very high up in the world of work - all bigger business deals are made by men in power, and the skills and authority of young female workers such as Yoo Jin are often questioned by men¹⁰². Women are, however, also shown to always prove these expectations wrong - both by doing their work well, but also by standing up against these doubting people. An example being a construction worker who, after hearing that he has to work with Yoo Jin and her staff, storms in and yells "I have to work with those young things? What, am I supposed to play house with them? I refuse!" Yoo Jin, who is shown being very reserved and quiet in her adulthood immediately stands up and loudly debates the old man, calling out his misogyny in front of everyone, thus making the man quiet down and earning her applause from her coworkers, men and women alike.¹⁰³

In *Boys Over Flowers*, no woman other than the male lead Gu Jun Pyo's mother - who also gained her status through marriage - is seen very high up in a commanding, leading position of a big company. Women are portrayed as waitresses and maids, in positions usually regarded as typically feminine - as in, work resembling housework such as housekeeping and nurture, and sometimes as leaders of other women, e.g. in charge of groups of cleaners and maids - but no more than that.¹⁰⁴ The female lead Geum Jan Di's parents own a dry-cleaning business together¹⁰⁵, but it is somewhat typical in Korean society for working-class women to work alongside men in lower-earning fields than it is for middle-class women to work alongside men¹⁰⁶. In *Winter Sonata*, most young women are shown working hard, even though they receive many comments questioning their expertise. In *Fight For My Way*, a drama made 15 years

¹⁰² *Winter Sonata*, episode 6

¹⁰³ *Winter Sonata*, episode 6

¹⁰⁴ *Boys Over Flowers*, episodes 3, 11, 15

¹⁰⁵ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 1

¹⁰⁶ Kim. 2006, 57-59

after *Winter Sonata*, the comments prevail but hold less importance, and women are shown to be accepted at the offices alongside men. In *Fight For My Way*, many women are also seen holding high-up positions, as supervisors and managers¹⁰⁷. However, those women who have ended up in high-up positions are often portrayed as rude, cold, and self-centered. This does change to an extent during the run of the series and even those women who treated the main characters with little empathy earlier in the series soften up as the main characters change them. In the very first episode, when the second female lead Baek Seol Hee makes mistakes at work, her (female) supervisor reprimands her harshly, but later, as Seol Hee resigns to start a business of her own, the supervisor is shown happy for her and encourages her with kind words, saying that she had believed in her all along.¹⁰⁸ While it is highly desirable for women to be hard-working and dedicated, in K-Drama they become undesirable when they hold high-rank positions and have a lot of power over others.

Throughout Hallyu in K-Dramas, whenever it comes to work life, a similar opinion prevails: women are often told to get married soon so that they can quit their jobs, by both same-aged friends and colleagues, as well as older people, their parents and seniors at work. This can be seen happening repeatedly in *Winter Sonata*, and the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin is shown planning on leaving her job as she gets engaged. In *Boys Over Flowers*, the female lead Jan Di is constantly told to behave appropriately by her parents so that she can get married to a rich husband and by doing so, bring wealth to her whole family. The implication that marrying rich is all that she is expected to do, rather than gaining wealth independently, is clearly there. In *Fight For My Way*, the lead female characters as well as some supporting female characters are also told to get married soon so that they can quit their jobs - especially the elder generations of women seem to minimize the value of their careers and usher them to become housewives¹⁰⁹. What is different in *Fight For My Way*, however, is that women's value as possible breadwinners is also recognized: in an office scene with the second male lead Kim Joo Man and his male colleague, where they are talking about a new female intern who has clearly expressed an interest in him, the colleague says "If you got together with her, you could stop working the very next day. Her family owns a restaurant!"¹¹⁰ Although the tone of *Fight For My Way* is humorous, this is not presented as a comedic comment, rather just a possible scenario and something that Joo Man ought to consider, according to his colleague - even though in this case as well, the female intern's wealth is dependent on her family and connections¹¹¹. The setting, where a woman

¹⁰⁷ *Fight For My Way*, episodes 1, 8, 13

¹⁰⁸ *Fight For My Way*, episodes 1, 16

¹⁰⁹ *Fight for my way*, episode 6

¹¹⁰ *Fight For My Way*, episode 4

¹¹¹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 4

comes from less wealth and the man is the stronger party, is a common K-Drama trope¹¹², and even on a smaller scale, the opposite in terms of gender roles is not seen often. However, as the number of K-Dramas produced has increased, it has become increasingly popular to venture further away from these classic storylines and societal gender roles.

Boys Over Flowers is based on a Japanese manga that was first published as early as 1992, and in many aspects, it has been deliberately Koreanized and made to fit the cultural climate and moment in time in which it was produced¹¹³. In the original, Japanese version of *Boys Over Flowers*, *Hana Yori Dango*, the main female character, gets put into a wealthy school because she applies there herself, but in the Korean adaptation, the female character Geum Jan Di gets to go to the wealthy high school as a reward, because she saves a student from killing himself¹¹⁴. She does not want to go, and gets bullied very badly by the rich and entitled kids for being poor, but she decides to continue going because this means so much to her parents as they are extremely proud of her. This was an intentional change from the Japanese original, because such devotion is very wanted from K-Drama characters and Korean women in general¹¹⁵.

Korea's long history as a colony left a deep impact on the culture and turned it into one that highlights hard work and sacrifice as a great virtue¹¹⁶. Unselfishness, dedication, and loyalty are seen as such good traits that the main female characters are often seen possessing them, to the point of them having their own lives compromised because of their dedication. In all three dramas analyzed, women are shown helping those in need even at their own expense. In *Winter Sonata*, the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin is often shown helping people on the street and taking on huge job deals on her own¹¹⁷. In *Boys Over Flowers*, this is taken to the extreme, as the female lead Geum Jan Di works day and night in different part-time jobs due to her family having a hard time financially, and she is shown accidentally falling asleep in inappropriate places and getting a nosebleed, highlighting how worn out she is¹¹⁸. Despite all this, she still finds the time to volunteer at a small hospital daily¹¹⁹. This is a huge responsibility and shows dedication to the community, and her actions not only influence the male

¹¹² Ju, 2019, 34. Lee. 2012, 456-457

¹¹³ Chan. 2014, 67

¹¹⁴ Chan. 2014, 67, *Boys Over Flowers*, episodes 1, 2 and 3

¹¹⁵ Chan. 2014, 67

¹¹⁶ Yang. 2004.

¹¹⁷ *Winter Sonata*, episodes 7, 22

¹¹⁸ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 10

¹¹⁹ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 10, 16, 18

lead Gu Jun Pyo but also the second male lead, Yoon Ji Hoo, who she is briefly romantically involved with¹²⁰. Jan Di never complains or asks for help either.

In *Fight For My Way* as well, this portrayal holds: at the start of the series, the female lead Choi Ae Ra finds out that her boyfriend has been cheating on her, and her best friend (and love interest later on in the story), Ko Dong Man, questions their relationship, even condemning how she had spent years working multiple jobs to support her boyfriend's dreams of getting into university to study medicine¹²¹. She also works hard to support Dong Man, even though she does not like his choice of career as he is a professional martial artist and gets repeatedly hurt which Ae Ra finds difficult to accept¹²². The second female lead of *Fight For My Way*, Baek Seol Hee, is also shown diligently working and supporting her boyfriend, the second male lead Kim Joo Man. The two of them break up towards the end of the series, however, she is still presented as being happy, starting and maintaining a small business of her own, and the unsatisfying situation regarding her love life is not able to destroy her happiness¹²³. Also, while in *Boys Over Flowers*, people are inspired and awed by Jan Di's hard work, in *Fight For My Way*, people are shown rolling their eyes and shaking their heads at the over-the-top dedication of the female characters¹²⁴, particularly when it leads to the female characters themselves either suffering or not getting anything back from it. This comparison reveals that self-sacrifice in itself is no longer viewed as a positive thing by the younger generations in the late 2010s, even though the expectation that women do so prevails in older generations. It is clear that this traditional female self-sacrifice sets the female characters at a disadvantage and their male peers do not necessarily want that for them. In *Fight For My Way*, the second male lead Kim Joo Man expresses his distaste towards his girlfriend's self-sacrificing attitude in their relationship as follows: "What I'm tired of is... that when I'm with you, I become the bad guy. You don't get tired, you're kind and you're endlessly giving and full of love, so I always seem like the bad guy!"¹²⁵

After 2011, the term "*samposedae*" (giving up on three-generation) became commonly used when talking about the then-current generation of young adults who were, because of the problematic state of the economy, postponing doing three things regarded normal in life: courtship, marriage, and childbirth¹²⁶. In the late 2010s and early 2020s,

¹²⁰ *Boys Over Flowers*, episodes 10, 16, 18

¹²¹ *Fight For My Way*, episodes 1, 2

¹²² *Fight For My Way*, episodes 4, 5

¹²³ *Fight For My Way*, episode 16

¹²⁴ *Fight For My Way*, episodes 1, 2, 14

¹²⁵ *Fight For My Way*, episode 11

¹²⁶ Lim. 2021, 5

the discourse had already moved on to “*oposedae*” (giving up on five-generation) with employment and home ownership added to the list of things that regular Koreans were starting to give up because of the lack of resources to do so¹²⁷. This can be seen as being reflected in K-Drama, as in *Fight For My Way*, the characters are shown struggling with all five of these things. The two main characters are unemployed and the second female character Baek Seol Hee says sadly that her biggest dream is to get married and to become a mother which, because of her and her boyfriend’s unsteady jobs, she has not been able to do yet.

It is an interesting contradiction, how on one hand women are expected to excel in their studies alongside men and give their full devotion to their work in order to earn enough to even fund their everyday lives, but on the other hand they are encouraged to leave their jobs to start their own families. In Confucian tradition, a woman can only be fulfilled by having a family (most of all, having a son)¹²⁸ but in contemporary South Korea, through the course of Hallyu and increasingly so, a woman’s worth comes from her education and how good of a job she has. In K-Dramas, even the most work-oriented characters end up falling in love and getting married, but in reality, this is an increasingly less likely outcome.

Thus far, Hallyu has reflected society more than it has shaped it, but the portrayal of Korean society in K-Drama can be very far from the truth. Studying Hallyu from the context of it being advertisement for the country, it is understandable why the dramas do not reflect the most difficult realities of work and family lives in Korea. As comfort entertainment for women lost in conflict of tradition and modernity, the world of K-Drama being fantastical in terms of the most difficult subjects is understandable. The female protagonists are powerful and independent in K-Drama, as the drama industry increasingly follows westernized modernity rather than Confucian tradition¹²⁹.

2.3 The nation’s girlfriends - idol image

What characterizes the Korean culture industry and makes it somewhat unique on a global stage, is the way in which companies within the entertainment industry train people to become *idols* - singers, actors, dancers, and hosts¹³⁰. The first Hallyu entertainment company (SM Entertainment) was founded by Lee Soo Man in the 1990s,

¹²⁷ Lim. 2021, 5

¹²⁸ Kim. 1996, 187

¹²⁹ Boman, 2022.

¹³⁰ Ju. 2020, 26

and it introduced an idol training program that soon became popular. More companies have followed suit, creating a whole industry which “manufactures” Hallyu idols¹³¹. The training process usually includes auditioning and classes in various fields of entertainment, such as dancing, singing, and acting as well as foreign languages¹³², and it can last for several years¹³³. The “trainee period” of Korean idols has internationally been noted to be vigorous, having become increasingly so, as the Hallyu phenomenon has developed onwards, and the competition between companies, as well as individual trainees, has increased¹³⁴. These idols, who often start their careers as members of K-Pop groups and venture to other fields of entertainment later on, are often disliked by the public and press alike. All idols but especially the actors produced by this machine, *idol actors*, are met with prejudice within the acting scene, often being regarded as incompetent by default, mass-produced, and lacking authenticity because of their background.¹³⁵

On the other hand, these idols are viewed as the epitome of Korean beauty and moral standards, and they are praised for uplifting Korea’s image outside of the country, at the upfront of the Korean wave¹³⁶. Female idols are expected to be girlish and sweet with fair skin and delicate, skinny and well-shaped bodies, and they are incarnations of ideal - both Korean as well as global - beauty and physical expertise¹³⁷. Because of these expectations, their behavior is closely monitored and criticized, and their personal affairs are put under scrutiny, both by the companies they work for, as well as by the public eye¹³⁸. The idols - as well as actors who are not classified as idols - are often expected to uphold the same standards as the ideal characters they play in dramas, and when their lives differ from this, they are at risk of losing their reputations which is essential for getting work in the industry¹³⁹. As idols of the nation, they are expected to be an example around the clock. From the Soft Power perspective, the influence of idols is essential and deliberate considering their education on foreign languages and behavior training, and the dislike of the public in Korea has had little effect on the idol industry over the years. It is very likely that Hallyu and K-Dramas have had an influence on domestic audience in terms of making them more aware of international trends and thus opening their perspective.

¹³¹ Kang. 2017, 137

¹³² Kang. 2017, 137

¹³³ Padget. 2017, 4

¹³⁴ Padget. 2017, 3 - 6

¹³⁵ Kang. 2017, 136

¹³⁶ Kang. 2017, 136

¹³⁷ Lee. 2012, 462-463

¹³⁸ Venters & Rothenberg. 2022

¹³⁹ Venters & Rothenberg. 2022

The effect of this celebrity media is huge. In *Winter Sonata* (2002), celebrities are not talked about or mentioned, but already in *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), celebrities are sometimes mentioned, and they are especially talked about when appearance is mentioned. In a scene where the male lead Gu Jun Pyo describes his friend's ideal type, he says "Yi Jung never dates anyone unless their body is better than Lee Hyori [actress] and their face is better than Kim Tae Hee [actress]"¹⁴⁰. In *Fight For My Way*, the language itself that the characters use has changed from the two previous dramas - English loan words (such as love, *lo-beu* in a Korean accent) are used much more often. The characters mimic the actions of celebrities and mention them in nearly every episode. "Ae Ra, you look nice in a ponytail. Like a Twice [Popular K-Pop girl group] member!" the second female lead Baek Seol Hee tells the female lead Choi Ae Ra¹⁴¹. The female characters do *aegyo*, which is a type of acting cute that is popular among Korean idols¹⁴², and *Winter Sonata* was not intentionally made for the global K-Drama market so in that way¹⁴³, it could be called the most authentic out of the three dramas picked. During the making of *Fight For My Way* celebrity culture was at an all-time high and these young adult characters, who grew up during the growth of Hallyu, would obviously be especially familiar with it. In general, amongst younger people, looking and behaving like an idol is viewed as very desirable. "She is amazing. She has an entertainment company, right?" is what a male colleague says about Seol Hee after she behaves well on set at work¹⁴⁴, and this is a great compliment.

While Korean TV is quick to censor raunchy performances done by both genders, it has been noted by both Korean and international audiences that female performances are put under special scrutiny. This could be because one of the cornerstones of post-modern Korean Confucianism is a "chaste woman" (the other two being the filial son and loyal husband)¹⁴⁵ and as Soo Yeon Lee states, desirable Korean women are never sexy in K-Dramas - they are lovely and irresistible in their goodness, never in their sex appeal¹⁴⁶. In *Winter Sonata*, *Boys Over Flowers* and *Fight For My Way*, the women are all very chaste. In *Fight For My Way* the female characters are much more forward in their romantic relationships than before, although they are still portrayed as youthfully clueless, easily embarrassed and innocent rather than sexy and empowered.

¹⁴⁰ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 16

¹⁴¹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 7

¹⁴² Puzar & Hong. 2018, 333-334. More on this in chapter 3.3

¹⁴³ Han & Lee. 2008, 116

¹⁴⁴ *Fight For My Way*, episode 9

¹⁴⁵ Shim. 2001, 135

¹⁴⁶ Lee. 2012, 456-457

IU (Lee Ji Eun) is a great example of an idol star who mastered several fields of entertainment. She debuted as a solo singer at the age of fifteen in 2008 and later ventured into film and TV, becoming a very popular actor. IU received the nicknames “the nation’s little sister” and “the nation’s sweetheart” in the industry and is a prime example of an idol with a stainless image. Internationally known for her strict IU diet and youthful image, IU is the epitome of what an ideal Korean woman is expected to be like. Other female idols have also received similar nicknames as IU: Bae Suzy, from the popular girl group *Miss A* (debuted in 2010) was nicknamed “the nation’s first love” and Yoona, from an internationally popular K-Pop girl group *Girls’ Generation* that debuted in 2007 has been named “the nation’s ideal type” and is, along with Bae Suzy, one of the most popular comparisons that Korean women use when going to get plastic surgery¹⁴⁷ - although it is impossible to say whether they have themselves had any work done, as idols in general do not talk about their procedures or opinions on important matters publicly. Female idols especially are widely seen in Korea as lacking autonomy and as mere “products of the patriarchal K-Pop machine”.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Chung, 2021, *Style*

¹⁴⁸ Venters & Rothenberg, 2022.

3 BEAUTY, YOUTH, INNOCENCE - A WOMAN'S BEST (AND ONLY?) ASSETS

3.1 Beauty and cosmetic surgery

Your eyes. Your nose. Your watch. I bet you paid for them. You can buy whatever you want with money, so why not one's face? All of you have had plastic surgery, so why are you making fun of Min Ji? So it's okay for pretty girls to have plastic surgery, but not for ugly people to do so?

Geum Jan Di to her classmates, Boys Over Flowers, episode 5

In 21st century South Korea, strong emphasis is placed on appearance, in both men and women¹⁴⁹. Beauty and attractiveness have become increasingly important in the highly competitive job market, where employees value looks alongside a sufficient skillset, so the pressure to look good is higher than ever¹⁵⁰. The Korean beauty standard is known for being extremely strict. To fit into this standard, one has to have what is called a "small face", as in a slim face, a V-shaped jaw, big eyes with double eyelids, a slim nose, and plump lips¹⁵¹. It is also extremely important to have very light, smooth skin and a slim figure¹⁵².

¹⁴⁹ Holliday & Elfving-Hwang. 2012, 58

¹⁵⁰ Holliday & Elfving-Hwang. 2012, 73

¹⁵¹ Jin & Whittall. 2022.

¹⁵² Lin & Raval. 2020, 98

South Korea is internationally known for being “obsessed” with plastic surgery because of the high rates of its citizens who undergo aesthetic surgeries¹⁵³. In 2008, it was estimated that at least one-fifth of the population had undergone a cosmetic procedure. Out of women ages 20 to 50, the number was estimated to be closer to 30 percent¹⁵⁴. It has to be noted though that the number is likely to be much bigger since many of the operations go unreported as they are done on private clinics and cosmetic procedures are poorly regulated¹⁵⁵. The most popular beauty operations (also known as the K-Pop combo, as it is very popular among K-Pop idols) are eyelid surgeries, nose jobs, and jaw reshaping¹⁵⁶. Plastic surgery has become more accepted: in 1997, 30 percent of Koreans responded that they view it in a positive way, while in 2015 the number was 66 percent¹⁵⁷. It is even a popular graduation gift received from parents¹⁵⁸.

The subject of plastic surgery comes up more and more frequently in K-Drama as time goes by. In *Winter Sonata* it is never even mentioned, but in *Boys Over Flowers* it is brought up a few times, and several of the female lead Geum Jan Di’s rich classmates are hinted at having had some work done: all of Jan Di’s biggest bullies who are shown to be extremely vain and mean, but also a girl who Jan Di befriends at her new school, Oh Min Ji, are portrayed as having undergone plastic surgery procedures¹⁵⁹. The bullies are ashamed and do not admit to having gone through any procedures even when directly confronted but Min Ji is portrayed as a sad character who admits to having undergone several surgeries only to appeal to the boy she loved but who turned her down because she was ugly as a child¹⁶⁰. Despite all her sacrifices and changes, she is still rejected, and it is being shown as a valuable lesson that plastic surgery - and appearance altogether - is not important when it comes to true love.

In Confucian philosophy, the human body is considered sacred, a gift from one’s parents which should not be altered in any way. If viewed this way, all alterations are seen as direct counterattack against one of the most important Confucian virtues, filial piety. On the other hand, in contemporary Korean society, beauty is seen as a tool to enter a good marriage or a good job, so in this sense, physical alterations such as cosmetic procedures could be seen as a sacrifice to get ahead in life and provide for one’s family, so it can be seen as an understandable (if not even honorable) option¹⁶¹.

¹⁵³ Holliday & Elfving-Hwang. 2012, 58

¹⁵⁴ Holliday & Elfving-Hwang. 2012, 59

¹⁵⁵ Holliday & Elfving-Hwang. 2012, 59

¹⁵⁶ Holliday & Elfving-Hwang. 2012, 60

¹⁵⁷ Jin & Whittall. 2022.

¹⁵⁸ Jin & Whittall. 2022

¹⁵⁹ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 5

¹⁶⁰ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 5

¹⁶¹ Lin & Raval. 2020, 99

Although Koreans have become more accepting of plastic surgery, it has become common to separate “natural” beauty from “surgical” beauty, and natural beauty is still deemed superior and more desirable¹⁶².

In *Winter Sonata* (2002), the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin is constantly called a beauty by her colleagues and family friends. She is, however, never shown putting on makeup or getting ready, nor is she shown in a more relaxed light at home, doing leisure activities. Her appearance is not important for her as a person - or not important enough to show to the audience. The only one visibly putting effort into her looks is Oh Chae Rin, a villainous character who briefly dates the main male lead Kang Joon Sang after his memory loss. “Do you like it?” she asks Joon Sang after dressing into one of the designer dresses in the store that she runs, and Joon Sang just comments nonchalantly: “Isn’t it too revealing? You know when women look most gorgeous? When they don’t realize how pretty they are. But you are flaunting your beauty”¹⁶³.

In *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), the male lead Gu Jun Pyo, who comes from a rich family, repeatedly calls the low-class female lead Geum Jan Di ugly. “That girl isn’t pretty. She is short and she doesn’t have any bosoms and she eats too much!” is what a side character, a friend of a friend, says after spending a single afternoon with her¹⁶⁴, highlighting that this is not just Jun Pyo’s personal opinion. Jan Di is shown not caring about such comments, and she dresses very simply in her everyday life, in hoodies and jogging pants. She is also often shown with her hair messy and eating huge mouthfuls, being tired and wearing comfortable clothes, and otherwise in a more relaxed environment. This is a much more realistic portrayal than in *Winter Sonata* where the characters are never shown getting ready or relaxing at home, however, it must be noted that the atmosphere of *Boys Over Flowers* is more humorous to begin with. Relaxed home environments and everyday life are not a part of *Winter Sonata*’s story. Beauty seems to be a given in *Winter Sonata*, but in *Boys Over Flowers*, beauty is more of a thing that is achieved through money and wealth, and for Jan Di, as a daughter of a low-class family, beauty is a luxury that she simply cannot afford so she has grown to not care about such a thing. Jan Di does receive several makeovers by rich characters such as the male lead Gu Jun Pyo as well as his sister and female family friends, to make her more desirable for Jun Pyo and to fit into his world of luxury as she visits parties and events. She usually does not appreciate having these forced makeovers done and they do not leave a lasting impression on her. Jan Di’s best friend Chu Ga Eul also goes through a makeover initiated by Jun Pyo’s friend, So Yi Jung so that she

¹⁶² Holliday & Elfving-Hwang. 2012, 62

¹⁶³ *Winter Sonata*, episode 5

¹⁶⁴ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 14

would fit into acting as his fake girlfriend for a night¹⁶⁵. Both Jun Pyo and Yi Jung change into less superficial characters by the end of the series, inspired by Jan Di and Ga Eul respectively - this does not affect their perfectly put-together looks, but they end up dating these girls who they would have never been attracted to, had they remained vain.

In *Fight For My Way* (2017), the subject of plastic surgery is portrayed in a much more light-hearted manner. Although it is still a symbol of vanity, villainous characters are the only ones who have actually undergone beauty operations - such as the ex-girlfriend of the male lead Ko Dong Man who constantly torments the female lead Choi Ae Ra¹⁶⁶ - it is much more common for everyone to look after their appearances. Things such as skin care routines and hair care are shown more regularly, and paying attention to one's appearance to look good is not shown to be inherently vain anymore - just a part of the routine and, because of the growth of K-Beauty and K-Lifestyle markets, worthy of showing in K-Drama as well.

In *Fight For My Way*, taking care of one's beauty is no longer seen as vain, but rather, a chore and a necessity for everyone. The second female lead Baek Seol Hee is shown doing her skincare and makeup by the mirror in several scenes, and the characters openly admit the role that physical appearance plays in their lives. The female lead Choi Ae Ra tells the male lead Ko Dong Man that she cannot drink soju (alcohol) with him because her face will be puffy the next day if she does¹⁶⁷. While in *Fight For My Way*, the female lead Choi Ae Ra is shown considering beauty operations light-heartedly, to increase her chances in the work market, her friends immediately turn her down¹⁶⁸. In K-Drama, the kind and desirable main characters do not go through such procedures.

Is the fantasy decreasing by showing the characters doing more human-like things, or is it just settling into a different mold? Although many characters of *Fight For My Way* are shown behaving unattractively, such as when the female lead Choi Ae Ra scratches her armpits and eats with her mouth open one morning so that even the male lead Ko Dong Man questions her behavior for being "not womanly"¹⁶⁹, there are certain things that are never shown in K-Drama even if they are common among "normal" Koreans. Things such as skin problems and acne, variety in body types such as darker skin or

¹⁶⁵ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 9

¹⁶⁶ *Fight For My Way*, episode 7

¹⁶⁷ *Fight For My Way*, episode 5

¹⁶⁸ *Fight For My Way*, episode 8

¹⁶⁹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 3

overweight characters, or muscular women and underweight men are never shown as being the main leads - even as side characters, they are rarely seen, and if so, they are usually the comedic relief characters or villains. Even if the main characters do undesirable things, they are still portrayed as inherently lovable and beautiful.

What makes the Korean plastic surgery scene different is its relatable gender neutrality¹⁷⁰. The most popular beauty surgeries - eye, nose, and jaw procedures - are similar for both men and women¹⁷¹. Some of the most desirable traits in Korean beauty standards, such as light and smooth skin and a youthful image, are attainable for both genders in similar ways¹⁷². In *Boys Over Flowers*, Jan Di's older male colleague sighs and tells her that he should start doing some skincare too, to make sure that he stays pretty, which Jan Di and her friend Chu Ga Eul find ridiculous¹⁷³. This simple scene reflects its time well, as during the airing of *Boys Over Flowers* and partly because of its popularity and influence as well, "Korean soft masculinity" (sometimes described as a metrosexual style) became popular in South Korea and the influence spread across Eastern Asia¹⁷⁴. The soft appearance of the main male characters of *Boys Over Flowers* had an effect¹⁷⁵. In the late 2000s, Korean men started to pay more attention to skincare and hair care, and Korea became known for having high numbers of men using makeup, as well as a high number of men undergoing beauty operations¹⁷⁶. This flower boy image, ("*kkonminan*" in Korean) has been in high demand for the past twenty years¹⁷⁷.

The most significant reason for this was that from the late 1990s onwards, middle-class women became a significant consumer market in Korea as well as in other South Eastern Asian countries such as China, and this change moved onto Southern Asia in the upcoming decades¹⁷⁸. This was thanks to the growth of the middle class, and the growing freedom of women to make consumer decisions by themselves - and more wealth to do so¹⁷⁹. Women are often regarded as the main consumers of soap operas and boy bands that K-Drama and K-Pop represent¹⁸⁰. While the male characters - and Korean men in real life as well - started to prefer softer qualities, female characters

¹⁷⁰ Holliday & Elfving-Hwang. 2012, 60 - 62

¹⁷¹ Holliday & Elfving-Hwang. 2012, 60 - 62

¹⁷² Holliday & Elfving-Hwang. 2012, 60 - 62

¹⁷³ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 7

¹⁷⁴ Chan. 2014, 68. Miyose & Engstrom. 2015, 2, 4, 7

¹⁷⁵ Chan. 2014, 68

¹⁷⁶ Chan. 2014, 68

¹⁷⁷ Holliday & Elfving-Hwang. 2012, 60, 73

¹⁷⁸ Lin & Kwan. 2005, 1-3

¹⁷⁹ Lin & Kwan. 2005, 1-3

¹⁸⁰ Lin & Kwan. 2005, 1-3

stayed fairly similar for a long time. In *Fight For My Way*, a male Taekwondo fighter is shown getting his hair dyed white in a salon, and he also uses a lot of makeup and worries about his looks, despite his profession¹⁸¹, but no woman in the series is portrayed to care as much about their appearance as him.

No matter the gender, it is extremely important to look attractive, but caring about such a thing is undesirable and in this sense, beauty can be seen as being a matter of luck or earned by being a good person on the inside, as without an exception the desirable main characters possess all these good qualities naturally. Still, pressure around beauty and attractiveness remains higher in women, and on a worldwide scale, South Korea scores high on body image issues among women and girls¹⁸². Female idols and other public figures are criticised for their appearance constantly, and things such as not using a bra in social media pictures¹⁸³ and having short hair¹⁸⁴ have generated anti-feminist hate online in the age of social media, from mid-2010s onwards.

3.2 Vanity and money

In *Boys Over Flowers*, class differences are a consistent theme across the run of the series. The female lead Geum Jan Di comes from a poor, low-class family while the male lead Gu Jun Pyo is a wealthy heir of a huge family conglomerate. As Jan Di starts dating Jun Pyo and her family finds out, it becomes increasingly important for Jan Di's parents to make sure that she looks good, as Jan Di's possible engagement with Jun Pyo would lift her entire family from poverty, they deem it as her "most important goal"¹⁸⁵. Jun Pyo is extremely superficial because of his upbringing – his family is portrayed as very rich, having maids and a huge mansion with luxuries they do not even care about, as they are so used to it. Jan Di's family focuses on superficial things because their future livelihood may depend on the attractiveness of their daughter. Jan Di is shown sighing and being frustrated at this, but she dutifully follows the orders of her parents. In one scene Jan Di's mother holds a dress in front of her daughter's

¹⁸¹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 5

¹⁸² Jung & Hwang. 2016, 3

¹⁸³ Female celebrities have received a lot of backlash on social media for appearing without wearing a bra, and "going braless" has also become a way for Korean feminists to push for equality. For more on these themes, see news outlets such as Reuters: Lih Yi. 2020. *South Korea's Feminists Fight To Go Braless In Push For Equality*.

¹⁸⁴ Korean female archer An San received plenty of attention in Korea due to her appearance in Tokyo Olympics in 2021, with men calling her ugly due to her short hair. This generated an internet phenomenon where Korean women came to her defence and started posting pictures of themselves with short hair. More on this in news outlets such as Vietnam Times: Cho. 2021, *South Korean Archer's Short Hair Draws Anti-Feminist Sentiments, Women Showing Support*.

¹⁸⁵ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 10

face and yells at her “You have to look sexy, sexy, sexy!”¹⁸⁶. As Jun Pyo is a young heir of a rich, multinational corporation, growing up in a time when these foreign influences were spreading fast, it is smart for Jan Di’s mother to expect him to prefer his partners to be sexy.

In *Fight For My Way*, the characters are also somewhat of a lower class. The second leading couple, Kim Joon Man and Baek Seol Hee, work in the same company, however, Joon Man holds a higher position as Seol Hee has worked to support his career path, neglecting her own. They hide their relationship as they have not been able to get married yet, and Joon Man is constantly bombarded with questions about his relationship status¹⁸⁷. Joon Man is aggravated at this and although he is not in a position to support her financially, he does buy her an expensive dress to wear, to make her appear richer than she is at work¹⁸⁸. When Seol Hee refuses the gift, saying that it is not her style and is too expensive, Joon Man is shown being aggravated as he screams at her: “What is your style then? Cheap cheap cheap!” and he keeps saying how sorry he is, for making her turn into a stingy person¹⁸⁹. Even if they are lower class and cannot afford to care about their looks, Joo Man believes that they should not portray that. He is from a middle-class background, so, his views are very different from the other characters.

The superficiality of villainous characters in terms of what they value, who they look up to, and who they find attractive is an apparent trait that stays similar throughout the different Hallyu waves. In the very first episode of *Winter Sonata*, the male lead Kang Joon Sang, starts in a new school. He is called “mysterious” and “handsome” among the female students, and he is immediately approached by several female classmates, among them Oh Chae Rin, who is portrayed as a beautiful girl and is later shown to bully the female lead, Jeong Yoo Jin. Joon Sang, however, turns her down immediately¹⁹⁰, and he only gets interested in Yoo Jin because she helps him with adjusting to the school. Later in life when the two reunite after Joon Sang’s memory loss, he wonders out loud to Yoo Jin: “You confuse me. You are the only woman who is not falling at my feet.”¹⁹¹ When he gets romantically interested in Yoo Jin, he dumps his then-girlfriend Chae Rin and treats her very coldly¹⁹². Chae Rin is, however,

¹⁸⁶ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 8

¹⁸⁷ *Fight For My Way*, episode 4

¹⁸⁸ *Fight For My Way*, episode 4

¹⁸⁹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 4

¹⁹⁰ *Winter Sonata*, episode 1

¹⁹¹ *Winter Sonata*, episode 9

¹⁹² *Winter Sonata*, episode 16

portrayed as having been with Joon Sang for superficial reasons, and thus Joon Sang's extremely rude behavior towards her is portrayed as justifiable.

In *Boys Over Flowers* rich and entitled female classmates find the male lead Gu Jun Pyo very attractive and discredit the rude and entitled behavior that he manifests constantly, sometimes abusing and humiliating those he views as below himself¹⁹³. As Jun Pyo's older sister, who had previously married rich, comes for a visit to the school, the pretty but villainous girls sigh in unison saying things like "She is the legendary charisma queen!" and "She is married to the richest hotel owner of the world - she is my idol!"¹⁹⁴ The use of the word idol does not appear in *Winter Sonata*, however, it does in *Boys Over Flowers*. The female characters of *Boys Over Flowers* are also often portrayed as acting like fan girls, surrounding boys that they find attractive - such as Jun Pyo and his friends, and singers and models - in large groups and yelling and crying to get their attention¹⁹⁵. At the start of *Fight For My Way*, again, when the main characters are in high school, the male lead Ko Dong Man is a local taekwondo star. A rude and entitled female classmate of his visits his matches and says "Dong Man is mine. I only date the best!", and she is shown throwing her hair from side to side in an exaggerated fashion. The female lead Choi Ae Ra rolls her eyes at this¹⁹⁶. The audience is, thus, given a clear indication that superficial feelings of desire are ought to be seen as undesirable.

3.3 Bright, cute and submissive

"Why haven't you been talking like before? Are you acting like a real woman or what?"

"A real woman?"

"You, who aren't sexy or innocent - of course, on the cuteness side, you are above average!"

Ko Dong Man and Choi Ae Ra, *Fight For My Way*, episode 11

K-Drama is a genre where emotions are big and expressed as such. Huge romantic gestures, loud crying, and screaming are often seen, and characters of all ages go through these powerful emotional moments. Behavioral patterns of desirable and undesirable characters are, however, easy to separate from one another. K-Drama has the tendency to portray only superficial archetypes of the obvious villains, and this

¹⁹³ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 1, 2, 4

¹⁹⁴ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 7

¹⁹⁵ *Boys Over Flowers*, episodes 1, 2, 11, 13

¹⁹⁶ *Fight For My Way*, episode 1

can also be seen as part of K-Drama being an ideal representation of a world where good and evil are easily distinguished, black and white.

Cheerfulness is an especially desirable trait for women in Korea¹⁹⁷. As K-Dramas portray characters who manifest idealized masculinity and femininity, the main female characters are usually cheerful in nature, as well as good, faithful, kind, and patient¹⁹⁸. In *Winter Sonata*, the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin is complimented for being bright. In *Boys Over Flowers*, the main female lead Geum Jan Di is very aggressive at first but over the course of the series, she turns into a kind and cheerful woman and is also complimented for those personality traits. In *Fight For My Way*, when a new intern starts working in the company where the second leading couple work, everyone keeps saying that she is so “bright and bubbly” and the co-workers keep fawning over how attractive she is because of that¹⁹⁹. The female lead Choi Ae Ra is also complimented for being “cheerful”²⁰⁰. Similar words are used in all three dramas.

Cuteness becomes a more prevalent and desirable trait in female characters of K-Drama as time goes by. As Korean society prefers youthfulness in looks, having a childlike face with features such as big eyes and smooth skin above all else, cute behavior patterns are also desirable. What has become increasingly popular in pop culture is *aegyo* (애교), which is derived from the words *ae* meaning love, and *gyo* meaning ‘charming’ or ‘bewitching’.²⁰¹ “Aegi” in Korean also means baby), a type of acting in a baby-like manner such as using baby talk with a high-pitched voice, singing children’s songs to appear cute and making infantilized word choices, and acting deliberately clumsy, clapping, stomping feet and pouting²⁰².

Aegyo is not even mentioned in *Winter Sonata*, and the characters do not act in this manner, ever. In *Boys Over Flowers*, the male lead Gu Jun Pyo punishes the female lead Geum Jan Di by asking her to apologize in aegyo to him, which she finds humiliating²⁰³. In *Fight For My Way*, the female lead Choi Ae Ra repeatedly does aegyo to the male lead Ju Dong Man, to annoy him because he cannot stand it²⁰⁴. Direct, intentional aegyo is disliked by all main characters, but unintentional cuteness is found endearing – not all cuteness is aegyo, but the words are sometimes used interchangeably. The

¹⁹⁷ Lee. 2012, 456 - 457

¹⁹⁸ Lee. 2012, 456-457

¹⁹⁹ *Fight For My Way*, episodes 3, 4

²⁰⁰ *Fight For My Way*, episode 5

²⁰¹ Puzar & Hong. 2018, 333-334

²⁰² Puzar & Hong. 2018, 333

²⁰³ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 9

²⁰⁴ *Fight For My Way*, episodes 2, 9, 13

main female characters of all three K-Dramas are often cute by accident, which makes them more desirable - although villainous characters may be beautiful, they are never cute, and that is a drastic difference.

A part of idealized femininity is also a passive and self-denying behavior when it comes to love²⁰⁵. Sexual purity of women is an essential part of the Confucian ideal, and acting submissive in romantic affairs reflects that²⁰⁶. Aegyo has partially been a counterpower to passive, submissive femininity²⁰⁷, which is still a common female trait in K-Drama. It is quite typical for the male love interests in K-Drama to physically manhandle the women, such as by grabbing their wrists and hugging them against their will, but also making decisions for them, even the kind that the female leads clearly do not agree with. In *Winter Sonata*, the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin is ready to marry a man she does not love and later, when she gets together with the man she loves, she rarely voices her own opinions and goes by his every whim. In *Boys Over Flowers* the male lead Gu Jun Pyo first torments the female lead Geum Jan Di, and then announces that they are in a relationship because he wants to try it out of curiosity, and Jan Di does not object²⁰⁸. In *Fight For My Way*, although the female characters in general speak up more, they are often manhandled by their male counterparts²⁰⁹. Misbehaving and loud female characters calm down over the course of the series, and in all three K-Dramas used here, the female characters are more in control of their emotions at the end than they were in the beginning.

Getting into unfavorable situations and just pushing through, biting their tongue and not saying anything, is something that all female K-Drama leads face here. Although in *Winter Sonata*, the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin is a wild and loud girl who breaks rules sometimes as a teenager, as a young adult she is usually extremely reserved and is even willing to go through an engagement and marriage that she does not really want, as it is convenient for both her and her fiancé's families²¹⁰. In *Fight For My Way*, the female leads are also very submissive, not saying what they think in conflicts and just staying quiet - this is even highlighted in scenes where the second female lead Baek Seol Hee imagines herself shouting and expressing her emotions loudly, but always lacks the courage to say anything at all in the end²¹¹.

²⁰⁵ Lee. 2012, 456-457

²⁰⁶ Shim. 2001, 134-135

²⁰⁷ Puzar & Hong. 2018, 333 - 334

²⁰⁸ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 3

²⁰⁹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 13

²¹⁰ *Winter Sonata*, episode 6

²¹¹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 9

Expressing negative feelings such as anger and jealousy is something that desirable characters do not do - it is something that supporting characters and villains often do, but also something the main characters might at the start, before their growth. Confucian philosophy highlights social harmony, where individuals should have respectful and nonconfrontational interpersonal relationship²¹². In *Winter Sonata*, when everyone thinks that the male lead Kang Joon Sang is dead, only the villainous character, Oh Chae Rin, cries and screams loudly, and later in their adulthood when she dates Joon Sang and they break up, she keeps crying after him and demanding him to return, putting her own feelings above Joon Sang's happiness. The main female character Jeong Yoo Jin never does such a thing, and even when she does feel agony over her lost love, she does not show it to anyone. In *Boys Over Flowers*, the female lead Jan Di is aggressive and screams a lot at the start, but she becomes much more reserved while her bullies remain loud and aggressive. In *Fight For My Way*, the main leads cry and fight a lot at the very start as well, but they learn to manage conflicting emotions without great outbursts by the end of the series.

A slight difference in these dramas is that in *Winter Sonata*, every character is very reserved compared to the later productions. In this drama, conflicts are usually resolved over a cup of tea. In Yoo Jin and Chae Rin's case, where Chae Rin is very angry at Yoo Jin for stealing Joon Sang from her, and she tries her best to sabotage their relationship, whenever they meet face to face she always serves her tea and does not let her feelings show. After the brief high school period where they do fight face to face, they never show aggression towards each other, Yoo Jin most likely because she does not feel such an emotion and Chae Rin because she is good at hiding it. This is not the case in *Fight For My Way* where the characters confront each other directly all the time. The only character who does not do so is the second female lead, Baek Seol Hee. She is often portrayed as screaming and saying what she wants, truly expressing her feelings, but only in her head and not in real life. At the very end of the series, she throws a glass of water at the face of a female intern who knowingly sabotaged her relationship and curses at her - but she does all this in a very calm demeanor and tells her "I can do this, right? I couldn't help it when you didn't know, but if you did it [sabotage] willingly, then you're really a bad woman"²¹³. A similar thing happens in *Boys Over Flowers*, where the female lead Geum Jan Di's best friend Chu Ga Eul throws a glass full of water at the face of her love interest, So Yi Jung, after he has treated her badly²¹⁴. Men, especially undesirable men but oftentimes also the main characters, resort to violence easily in these dramas, but female characters never go further than this.

²¹² Lin & Raval. 2020, 99

²¹³ *Fight For My Way*, episode 12

²¹⁴ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 19

In *Fight For My Way*, the nasty thoughts of characters are shown to the audience in the form of inner monologues, even if they never act on them or say them out loud. In *Winter Sonata*, this is never the case, and especially the main, desirable characters are never shown considering doing harm to anyone, not even to those characters who would deserve it. *Boys Over Flowers* falls in the middle where the inner dialogue of the female lead Jan Di fades away across the run of the show, and her negative thoughts or patterns mostly disappear. In *Fight For My Way*, some characters also curse a lot, especially the female lead Choi Ae Ra. In *Boys Over Flowers* it is rare but happens, while in *Winter Sonata* no one, other than the old men, uses derogatory terms.

4 ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

4.1 Marriage, dating and intimacy

In Korean culture, marriage is much more than just an official relationship between two people in love - it is a union of two families. Even though arranged marriages are rare in contemporary Korea, it is essential to get the blessings of both families in order for the marriage to happen. Weddings are a huge spectacle to which hundreds of people are invited, from close family to work acquaintances of the parents of the groom and bride. Attitudes towards marriage have shifted a lot during the late 20th and early 21st centuries.²¹⁵

Arranged marriages sometimes stand in the way of love in K-Drama²¹⁶. Arranged marriage does not necessarily mean forced in modern Korean society²¹⁷, however, in the case of K-Drama where Confucian ideals are often highlighted, the main female characters take filial piety very seriously and are willing to do what is best for their family, even if it comes in the way of their personal interest. In *Winter Sonata*, the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin is, at first, ready to marry a man who she does not love, because it is a wise decision for her family. In *Boys Over Flowers*, the male lead Gu Jun Pyo's sister hears that their mother has arranged a marriage for him, with a girl who she does not love, and says to her angrily: "When you need a hotel you sell your daughter, when you need an investment, you're selling your son"²¹⁸. In this case, Jun

²¹⁵ Seth. 2011. Kim. 2006, 3. For more on marriage in South Korea, see e.g. Yoo. 2016, *Postponement and Recuperation in Cohort Marriage: The Experience of South Korea*.

²¹⁶ Lee. 2012, 455

²¹⁷ Yoo. 2016.

²¹⁸ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 17

Pyo is being forced into marriage, but he is an exception from the general rule as in the story he is the son of one of the most powerful families in Korea, and his mother is trying to both make him forget about the poor girl he is currently seeing, but also, to merge two powerful companies through marriage. Jun Pyo's sister was previously married to an heir of a hotel conglomerate, to merge companies as well, and she wants to save Jun Pyo from this fate. She married unwillingly, out of duty²¹⁹. She is portrayed as a desirable character for being protective of her brother and standing up against their controlling mother, and her sacrifice of love over duty makes her all the more desirable. The stereotypically ideal woman in K-Drama is loyal to the family and willing to sacrifice herself if need be.

In *Fight For My Way*, no arranged marriages are seen, but marriage is still very much a family business. The male lead Ko Dong Man snaps at his parents for asking when he is planning on finding a wife, saying "What kind of a family would give their daughter to me?!" when at the time, Dong Man is unemployed and poor²²⁰. The second leading couple, Baek Seol Hee and Kim Joo Man's mothers discuss arranging a family meeting to start planning the wedding of the two. "There's no rush", Seol Hee's mother says at first. "But Seol Hee is already at a certain age-", Joo Man's mother starts to argue, but Seol Hee's mother quickly snaps back with "It's not only Seol Hee that is aging. Both of them are the same age".²²¹ It has already been established that Joo Man's family dislikes Seol Hee as a bride candidate for Joo Man because of her poor background so bringing up age as a negative might be a mere excuse. Joo Man is ready to go against his family's wishes, and so are the male characters of *Winter Sonata* and *Boys Over Flowers*, but women are more hesitant to do such a thing.

In the K-Drama world, love is pure and innocent in nature and the single most cherished value²²². Love is always represented as romantic rather than sensual²²³, and the characters are very innocent in nature, steering away from physical intimacy. In *Winter Sonata*, no kind of nudity is shown, and the characters never do anything more than hold hands or kiss, which is portrayed as dramatic and very significant to the plot when it does happen. No sensual content is shown, not to the characters nor to the viewer. In *Boys Over Flowers*, the way in which closeness and intimacy are shown is very similar. When the characters go to a beach and the male lead Gu Jun Pyo removes

²¹⁹ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 20

²²⁰ *Fight For My Way*, episode 12

²²¹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 13

²²² Lee. 2012, 454

²²³ Kim. 2007, 49. Ju. 2019, 30

his shirt in front of the female lead Geum Jan Di, she is noticeably uneasy with it and voices her discomfort when she thinks that he is going to undress even more²²⁴ - even though they are alone in private and already dating at this point. Later, Jun Pyo is shown to cover himself in embarrassment when Jan Di accidentally sees him after showering, as he is wearing only a towel around his hips²²⁵.

In *Fight For My Way*, the leads Choi Ae Ra and Ko Dong Man are shown to be very comfortable around each other as they have known each other ever since childhood, but when Ae Ra sees Dong Man without a shirt on after showering - a scene that is very similar to the one in *Boys Over Flowers*, intended to be comical - he also covers his chest and yells at her in anger and embarrassment²²⁶. He soon relaxes, however, and no longer feels embarrassed after the initial surprise. In another scene, when the two characters hug, Dong Man shyly reprimands Ae Ra for “not wearing anything underneath”, hinting at the fact that she is wearing a hoodie but no bra under it. Dong Man is so shy that he is not able to say the needed words out loud, which results in a short moment of confusion for Ae Ra. Dong Man loans his jacket to her and they both feel embarrassed about the situation²²⁷, and act very innocent and childish, even though they are young adults nearing their 30s.

In *Winter Sonata*, when Sang Hyuk, the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin’s fiancée, suggests that they spend a night together, she is immediately against it. When Sang Hyuk tries to touch her, she is distraught and fights back, repeating “this is wrong, this is wrong” before fleeing the scene.²²⁸ Intimacy is strictly saved for marriage in *Winter Sonata*, and in *Boys Over Flowers*, sex is talked about, but never explicitly. Instead, it is usually hinted at in various ways, but the characters never engage in such behavior - the only exception to this is the male lead Jun Pyo’s friend So Yi Jung, who is known as a *casa-nova* by his friend group and people around him, but even he does not do more than link arms with girls he deems “pretty enough”. This side of him, though, is portrayed as being the result of a turbulent relationship with his parents, and it vanishes as he enters a meaningful relationship and grows as a character.

In *Fight For My Way*, an established relationship alone is enough for physical intimacy to be acceptable - although, the characters still shy away from it and never use the correct terms when discussing it. When the second leading couple Kim Joo Man and Baek Seol Hee are talking about the current state of their relationship, Seol Hee notes

²²⁴ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 5

²²⁵ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 16

²²⁶ *Fight For My Way*, episode 3

²²⁷ *Fight For My Way*, episode 6

²²⁸ *Winter Sonata*, episode 8

quietly that “We are not even doing *it* anymore”, to which Joo Man reacts with embarrassment²²⁹. The couple is shown sleeping next to one another in the drama²³⁰, which would not have been appropriate in the early 2000s dramas. “Why can’t we tell everyone that I am basically your mistress?” Seol Hee also asks him in a separate scene, which Joo Man finds embarrassing as well and refuses to publicize their relationship in that way²³¹. Shame is still connected to intimate relationships before marriage in K-Drama, but in Korean society and especially among younger generations, it has grown much more accepted. K-Drama is still widely enjoyed for its pure portrayals and lack of sexual content²³², so despite the changes that Korean society is going through, it is unlikely that this pure world of K-Drama would change anytime soon.

When *Fight For My Way*’s leading couple, Choi Ae Ra and Ko Dong Man, sleep together in the same bed in a hotel room - which they themselves find inappropriate as well as they are not dating yet, but the situation does not leave them a choice - and Ae Ra’s father finds them there in the morning, he immediately blames Dong Man for the situation²³³. In his eyes, this behavior is highly inappropriate, and he wants to protect his daughter from losing her reputation. Confucian tradition and Korean society have a double standard regarding sexual promiscuity, where women’s purity is valued highly and thus, a bigger tragedy if it is lost²³⁴. In *Fight For My Way*, Ae Ra’s mother had to leave her family and disappear when Ae Ra was very little, because her desperate attempts to make money had led to her working as a nude actress and she did not want her daughter to live in shame²³⁵.

In the case of *Fight For My Way*, which aired in 2017, the female characters are more assertive and grow into more independent characters as the story progresses, and they are also shown being more in control of their relationships, going as far as being the instigators for bringing physical closeness into the picture. After driving around one night with a man that she had been seeing for a while, Ae Ra asks her date half-jokingly if he wants to “eat ramyeon²³⁶” with her, which has become a request to spend an intimate night together²³⁷. This phrase, often compared to the American “Netflix and chill”, has been credited to have been born from the film *One Fine Spring Day* that

²²⁹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 11

²³⁰ *Fight For My Way*, episode 9

²³¹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 8

²³² Ju. 2020, 30

²³³ *Fight For My Way*, episode 10

²³⁴ Shim. 2001, 133

²³⁵ *Fight For My Way*, episode 15

²³⁶ Instant noodles, a very common food in Korea.

²³⁷ *Fight For My Way*, episode 4

aired in 2001²³⁸. Ae Ra's date is baffled at this suggestion, and nothing ends up happening between them²³⁹. Later, when Ae Ra and Dong Man have been in a relationship for a while already and act shy around each other, Ae Ra climbs to Dong Man's bed and says "We've known each other for 20 years, why do we have to take this so slow now?". "Why are you so progressive?!", Dong Man answers her, baffled as well, and they both end up getting embarrassed²⁴⁰. It also becomes a running joke in the show that whenever someone asks the couple if they have done it - usually pointing at something other than intimacy - the couple repeatedly misunderstands the question and quickly says no, embarrassed. They are never shown or hinted at having done anything intimate before they get married. In this sense, this "progressive" side of Ae Ra could be seen as an undesirable trait which only highlights Dong Man's ability to restrain himself - Ae Ra stops being suggestive towards the run of the series and the couple agrees to get married, reaching a traditionally ideal outcome.

From the late 2000s onwards, partly due to outside influence and the lessening influence of Confucian tradition among younger generations, premarital sex has become more socially acceptable even though the couple is expected to get married if a child is conceived²⁴¹. Sex is, thus, a problematic thing for women who bear the consequences such as loss of reputation and economic difficulties in case of pregnancy, when in the 21st century South Korean society even a planned marriage and pregnancy is deemed out of reach for an increasing amount of people. Due to the increased individualism that has indeed reached Korea because of outside influence, a dutiful marriage can be something that people no longer fantasize about, as it still brings women a lot of traditional responsibilities - not to mention, a demanding mother-in-law. Also, performing suggestive scenes on dramas could ruin the very carefully built, fresh and innocent image of the female celebrities playing those roles. There are multiple reasons why K-Drama deviates from reality in this regard.

²³⁸ Noble. 2020 *Cosmopolitan*. In *One Fine Spring Day*, the main characters both eat ramyeon and get intimate with one another, but using the phrase as a pick-up line only came after and is often used as a joke rather than a serious suggestion.

²³⁹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 4

²⁴⁰ *Fight For My Way*, episode 11

²⁴¹ Sussman. 2023, *The Atlantic*

4.2 The Lack - women as fixers and healers

Senior Researcher Soo Yeon Lee²⁴² describes the appeal of Korean Wave texts - in this case, K-Drama series - as culminating into two things: fantasy and lack. This fantasy is the idealized world in terms of love, human relationships, and masculinity and femininity, and the lack is something that the male lead struggles with, and which ends up getting fixed by the pure love that he forms with the female lead. This lack is usually a lack of a father or at least the lack of a close paternal bond.²⁴³

Lee uses *Winter Sonata* (2002) as an example. The male lead, Kang Joon Sang, does not know his father, and his mother has a strong hold on him, limiting his relationships and making radical decisions to separate him from the friends that she deems “unworthy” of his time. He lacks a father figure in his life and is tormented by the uncertainty regarding his identity because of it²⁴⁴. By the end of the series, Joon Sang’s father’s identity is revealed to him but by then, it is no longer quite as important to him, and he finally comes to terms with this lack when he falls in love with the female lead Jeong Yoo Jin.

In *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), something similar can be seen. The male lead, Gu Jun Pyo, is very cold, cruel, and unempathetic, and treats the people around him with the utmost disgust at worst, and indifference at best. In episode two, when a junior classmate presents him with a cake, he smears the cake on her face in front of a crowd of students, thus humiliating her publicly, and wipes his hands on a handkerchief of another female classmate before giving it back to her nonchalantly²⁴⁵. Jun Pyo’s life is also lacking the presence of a father while his mother is a stronger character, a very unempathetic one at that, and who Jun Pyo clearly takes after in terms of personality. Jun Pyo also lacks romantic experience and skills despite him constantly having a crowd of girls swooning over him²⁴⁶. This lack ends up getting fixed and soothed by his relationship with the female lead Geum Jan Di - he learns what a familial bond can be like after meeting Jan Di’s family, which he notes to be very important himself, but he also learns to care about people other than just himself, by following Jan Di’s example.

²⁴² Lee is Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Equality Policy Center at Korean Women’s Development Institute in Seoul, Korea

²⁴³ Lee. 2012, 453-459

²⁴⁴ Lee. 2012, 453-459. *Winter Sonata*, episodes 1-4, 17-20

²⁴⁵ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 2

²⁴⁶ *Boys over Flowers*, episodes 2, 5, 6, 17

The same trait can also be seen in the second leading couple of *Boys Over Flowers* as well: Jun Pyo's friend So Yi Jung suffers from a turbulent relationship with his father, as he constantly witnesses him cheating on his mother with various women²⁴⁷. Yi Jung adopts a similar lifestyle, treating women as throwaways, being very cold and distant towards them. He ends up changing his behavior and taking responsibility for his actions after getting to know Jan Di's best friend, Chu Ga Eul, and getting into a meaningful relationship with her²⁴⁸. This notion of pure love being able to fix anything is a popular K-Drama fantasy that has not changed over the years of Hallyu.

Although there are common themes and storylines used in Hallyu dramas, nearing the end of the 2010s, the number of dramas increased, and the storylines became more versatile²⁴⁹. Lee's article was written in 2012 and although it does match the earlier Hallyu dramas, in *Fight For My Way* this theory of lack is not valid as the male lead Ko Dong Man does not possess any of the traits listed, nor does he have personality faults that end up getting fixed by his love for the female lead Choi Ae Ra. According to some research, feminist themes have only become more prominent in Hallyu during its fourth wave, which started in 2016²⁵⁰, and this could be seen clearly in *Fight For My Way* where the women are not only much more active, also powerful, forward-thinking and independent.

It has to be noted, though, that the audience does not expect nor desire a big change in male K-Drama characters²⁵¹. Physically, the female characters usually become more attractive, and their make-up and styling of hair change, but the male characters maintain their already attractive attributes, even if their personalities become less vain and superficial and more agreeable and loving, which is exactly the case in *Boys Over Flowers*. "Why did you choose me? Me, I'm not pretty, I don't have money or anything", Jan Di asks Jun Pyo, who answers "Because I have everything -- Because I have money, status and looks. I have all that. I don't need anything. All you need to be is Geum Jan Di."²⁵² The female leads of both series are seen with their hair long and curled and dressing in more appealing clothing by the end of the series. In *Fight For My Way*, the physical changes are not as apparent, but the main characters were never superficial to begin with.

²⁴⁷ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 9

²⁴⁸ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 25

²⁴⁹ Boman. 2022, 420–422

²⁵⁰ Boman. 2022, 421.

²⁵¹ Ju. 2020, 34

²⁵² *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 22

In the very last episode of *Boys Over Flowers*, Jun Pyo asks Jan Di to marry him, and to move out of the country with him as he has unfinished business with his family conglomerate that he has to take care of, which will take him a few years to settle. Jan Di refuses, pointing at the fact that she has everything that she wants right here - however, she tells him that "If you come back as a good man, I promise to think again".²⁵³ Four years later Jun Pyo returns as a changed man, to find Jan Di as a medical student and he proposes again, to which she says yes²⁵⁴. Thus the series is a clear story of a male character achieving a change because of the female lead, or rather, the couple becomes closer and more able to compromise. It could also be argued that Jan Di achieves personal growth as well, by regaining some independence, since at the very end of the series she, for the first time, tells Jun Pyo no, and Jun Pyo respects her decision. Before that, along the run of the whole series, Jun Pyo had made all decisions in their interpersonal relationship, disregarding Jan Di's resistance - if she even tried to say no at all. She reaches a position of power and the gap between the two gets smaller, and they make decisions on a more equal ground from then on.

In *Fight For My Way*, all four lead characters end up changing during the series, however, it is not obvious that this is because of their love lives, or that they change each other - rather, they are portrayed as growing into more independent actors, helping each other change but their happiness does not only come from family and love as in previous Hallyu dramas, but work instead. The second leading couple, Baek Seol Hee and Kim Joo Man do not return together after breaking up (initiated by Seol Hee) however, they are not portrayed as devastated about it. Even though in previous episodes, Seol Hee mentioned that her biggest dream is to become a mother, in the final episode she is shown being very happy about her new plum extract business, and the female lead Choi Ae Ra narrates the scene saying "Seol Hee, without a prince or a makeover, stood tall on her own"²⁵⁵. This can be interpreted as a jab at obvious K-Drama tropes, highlighting the fact that *Fight For My Way* is conscious about its genre and is thus trying to be something different. This self-awareness of K-Drama has become more prominent in the later years of Hallyu, possibly due to the criticism that it has received from the outside world, but it is in no way common yet to recognise the overall fantastical and fictitious world-building within Hallyu itself. The self-criticism only limits to obvious tropes that have been at the centre of criticism for a long time before Hallyu started, such as Cinderella complexes and other traditional fairy tale tropes,

²⁵³ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 25

²⁵⁴ *Boys Over Flowers*, episode 25

²⁵⁵ *Fight For My Way*, episode 16

The main leads Choi Ae Ra and Ko Dong Man do end up marrying each other, but this is not the climax or ending of the story, rather it is only an afterthought, mentioned a few times as the drama ends with the main four hanging out together the night before the wedding²⁵⁶. The biggest climax of the plot was Dong Man's Taekwondo match victory, which had little to do with his romantic relationship with Ae Ra - only, Ae Ra had begged Dong Man to stop competing, because she did not want him to get hurt and went as far as telling him that she would break up with him if he ever chose to compete again²⁵⁷. With Dong Man winning his biggest match and proving his skills in the sport, this pressure eased in their relationship. Ae Ra's request could be viewed as unfair because of how important Taekwondo is to Dong Man, and her letting go of this rather harsh and non-negotiable view of his passions is portrayed as a great development for her character, similar to that of Jan Di's in *Boys Over Flowers* where Jun Pyo was able to win her over in the end. The second leading male character in *Fight For My Way*, Kim Joo Man, also persistently tries to win her ex-girlfriend Baek Seol Hee back by gifting her food and soft toys, but when she does not warm up to this behavior, he does not get angry anymore and just accepts that he has to be consistent if he wants to be forgiven - this is not an uncalled for assumption, as Seol Hee gives her signs of slight approval from time to time²⁵⁸. The male characters who lacked patience, and are sometimes aggressive or even violent at the start of the series become very understandable and devoted to their spouses by the end of the series, which is a great thing, and something that the desirable female characters usually possess already, and also desire from their partners.

The world of K-Drama is filled with portrayals of idealized masculinity and femininity, where the main characters are the incarnations of these ideals²⁵⁹. In the case of male leads, their power, and charisma are some of their strongest attributes. In all three dramas, there comes a scene where a male character ends up saving a female character from a street harasser. The setting is very similar in all three cases - a female character ends up in a darkened alleyway where a strange man, usually older and usually very drunk, tries to get their attention and then violently force the girls into something that they do not want. In all three dramas, this happens at a beginning of the relationship between the two main characters, and it serves the function of establishing the relationship between the two, strengthening it as the female character notices how manly the male character is, and how much they care, for them to step up in-between a violent man and them. In *Winter Sonata* and *Boys Over Flowers*, the main

²⁵⁶ *Fight For My Way*, episode 16

²⁵⁷ *Fight For My Way*, episode 15

²⁵⁸ *Fight For My Way*, episodes 15, 16

²⁵⁹ Lee. 2012, 455-456

male characters beat up the harasser and chase him away, but in *Fight For My Way* the scene is not as glorious. This happens to the second leading couple, Kim Joo Man and Baek Seol Hee, and while Joo Man does chase the harasser away, he also gets punched and injured in the confrontation, which leads to Seol Hee having to repair his injuries and reprimanding him softly²⁶⁰. This type of a scene, where the main male character is being reckless and the female character has to patch him up, can be seen in other dramas too. In fact, it is a very common way of establishing the relationship between the two lovers - while the men might be stronger, the women end up taking care of them in their own, soft way.

The male characters are often aggressive and violent at the start, and being with the female lead over the course of the series, that trait is being toned down. The female characters in this sense heal them from their hot-headed tendencies as the male characters learn to resolve conflicts by talking instead of sheer force alone. As the female characters tend to be more mature from the get-go (even if the setting often is that the male protagonists are older and wealthier) they help the male characters grow and calm down.

The main female lead of *Fight For My Way*, Choi Ae Ra notes after returning from a date: "For me, when a prince is giving [me] a ride home with his white horse, I... really dislike that"²⁶¹. Her love interest Ko Dong Man does, however, save her from many situations such as at work when she is being yelled at, and he shields her from other people's eyes when she cries at a public place²⁶². The male characters often act heroically - they carry the female leads away from dangerous situations, clean their wounds, and lend them their clothes, and the female leads also tend to fall asleep against their shoulders in all three K-Dramas. The female characters often become dependent when they are around the male leads, but when alone, they are able to protect their loved ones and act bravely, which is a desirable female trait²⁶³. Even though *Fight For My Way* criticizes these obvious K-Drama cliches in dialogue, it does fall for similar tropes which are immensely popular.

²⁶⁰ *Fight For My Way*, episode 10

²⁶¹ *Fight For My Way*, episode 4

²⁶² *Fight For My Way*, episode 5

²⁶³ Lee. 2012, 456-457

5 CONCLUSION

The rapid growth of the internet has accelerated the spread of the Hallyu phenomenon as well as introducing outside influence to the country, but it will take more time for these influences to take hold and shape society, if they ever will. South Korean society has adapted to global phenomena with a great lag in the past, but the power of technology and the great attention that the country is getting thanks to Hallyu could change that.

The changes taken place in the portrayals of desirable women in K-Drama have not been tremendous over the years of Hallyu, but they have diversified. With the ever-growing demand for diverse stories worldwide, K-Drama has been great at adapting to what is trendy and profitable, and Hallyu has been at the forefront of developing what popular culture can do. Even if at the end of the story the female characters still reach an ideal place both traditionally as well as in terms of modern standards, where exactly they end up in is changing. Love stays in the center of the story, but that is no longer the only source of contentment, or the main goal for the female protagonists – career and personal goals have started stealing the limelight and the previously passive female love interests are becoming more empowered, whereas their male counterparts have more growing to do. The male-female relationships and family structures are more complex, and the struggles that the characters face are bigger on a societal level rather than staying on the level of interpersonal relationships.

What is the upcoming path of development for Hallyu? As it has reached all continents and the latest wave has been dubbed the wave of “K-Lifestyle”, it is hard to see it spreading much further. Like with any other fad, if it does not transform, it is bound to dry out when new ideas and trends take its place – although, in the case of Hallyu, its ability to transform and be reborn has been what has made it so effective in the first place. Hallyu has been declared dead before, such as in the late 2000s when K-Dramas

started to lose their popularity, but another wave came, stronger than the previous one, and the same has continued. In a time of great leaps in technological developments and the world getting ever smaller and easier to access, rapid changes are to be expected and Hallyu must keep following them.

Confucian traditions will continue to lose their meaning in South Korean society. The ever-dropping birth rate and the great changes in what life looks like for younger generations will have a great impact on the culture, and by extension, the products created in said culture. The future of women in South Korea is filled with uncertainty but change is inevitable, and Hallyu will most likely reflect it. It also looks like Hallyu products such as K-Dramas are becoming more reflective on the societal issues, as previously completely a-political dramas have started to comment on society a bit more, but it is not clear yet, if this will be a permanent change or just a momentary shift.

The female characters of the K-Drama world will most likely remain beautiful and flawless, but it is justified to expect some social commentary – even subtle and deliberately ambiguous – to start taking place. Difficult and condemned subjects in Korean culture, such as feminism, mental health issues and LGBT+ issues have slowly made their way to K-Pop in the late 2010s and they might start becoming more apparent in K-Drama as the international audience keeps calling the industry out for non-inclusivity, and Korean culture slowly keeps becoming more open for such ideas. K-Drama is not necessarily a reflection of what is happening but rather, what society would like to happen – once society adapts to different, new ideas and finds them good and desirable, the K-Drama fantasy will most likely do the same.

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