

The Female Gaze and the Middle-Aged Filipino Women's Reception of Empowered/Disempowered Women in Korean Television Series

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, 'Hallyu' or the 'Korean wave' has become one of the biggest cultural phenomena across Asia, resulting in a surge in foreign demand for all things Korean. Hallyu first spread to China and Japan, later to Southeast Asia, including the Philippines. The present study delves into 'Hallyu,' more specifically, the K-dramas. This study is a feminist reading of the female reception on how women are portrayed in K-dramas, specifically the empowered female characters, in terms of the Western values and ideologies. This study employs mixed method approach using online survey (N=34) and in-depth interviews for data collection. Textual analysis of the data is anchored in Hall's encoding-decoding theory, dual-systems theory and the concept of the female gaze. The results reveal that the middle-aged Filipino women perceive the interaction of power and oppression brought about by the influence of Western values and ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism as depicted in the male villains' aggressive and violent behavior, the male dominance over women, and the perennial characterization of heroes as heirs to the family-owned companies. Using the female gaze, the middle-aged Filipino women's dominant readings of the characterization of empowered/disempowered women in the K-dramas uncover values of self-confidence, independence, competence, hard work, leadership, perseverance and determination.

Keywords: Female Gaze, Empowered Women, Capitalism, Patriarchy, Hallyu

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Introduction

Hallyu or “*hanliu*” in Chinese, a term which was coined by Chinese journalists in the late 1990s, translates as “Korean wave” (Kim, 2015). It refers to the global popularity of South Korea’s cultural economy exporting popular culture, resulting in a surge in foreign demand for all things Korean, i.e., fashion, cosmetics, food, music, electronics, movies, and television shows (Kim, 2015).

The Origins of the Korean Wave (Hallyu)

Hong (2014) describes South Korean dramas before the 1990s as ‘provincial and tedious’ underscoring the improbability of such old-fashioned local productions to become popular in other countries. Since the end of the twentieth century, popular culture products have increasingly become important in South Korean economy. In the face of the financial crisis of 1997-98, then President Kim Dae-Jung gave priority to the cultural industries in the government budget.

Hallyu began with the successful showing of Korean television dramas in China. The first craze of Hallyu began in 1997 “when the Korean TV drama *What Is Love All About* was broadcast on state-run Chinese television CCTV, following an MBC-TV drama *Jealous* which was imported as the first popular cultural product from South Korea in 1993” (Kim, 2007, p.15). The drama *Sparks*, which was aired in 2000 on GTV, sparked the Korean Wave in Taiwan for the first time (Ju, 2014). While the demand for Korean television dramas increased, they were still regarded as cheap alternatives to expensive US and Japanese counterparts during the initial phase of the Korean wave (Ju, 2014). However, an unexpected success of *Winter Sonata* in Japan on April 3, 2003 (Yang, 2012) changed this perception, and moved the Korean television industry to a new phase during which it has extended its reach to an increased number of Asian markets (Yang, 2012).

Due to globalization and postcolonial relationship between Asia and the West, the issue of “glocalization” of culture, as well as cultural adoption and adaption, race/gender issues, cultural consumption and capitalism, is all addressed by the success of the Korean wave (Kuwahara, 2014). Glocalization entails the adaptation of foreign (global) content (e.g., Western or American) by a local medium by combining it with “indigenous and exogenous cultural components,” and makes it easy for local audiences to receive foreign content “that suit their lifestyles, sensibilities and dispositions better” (Ju, 2014, p. 34).

The success of the Korean wave in Asia is closely associated with regional cultural affinities because South Korean culture has the ability to translate Western or American culture to fit Asian taste. “Western popular cultural artifacts will not likely succeed because of a certain non-negotiable cultural heterogeneity” (Ryoo, 2007, p. 45) whereas South Korean popular culture is much more readily relatable and acceptable to Asian audiences. Korean dramas portray themes that “typically deal with family issues, love and filial piety in an age of changing technology, and often reinforces traditional values of Confucianism” (Ryoo, 2007, p. 140). Moreover, the global success of the Korean Wave is regarded as an indication of a contra-cultural flow (Thussu, 2006) or “a counter-case to media imperialism: a fissure in West-centered globalization” (Kim, 2009, pp. 732-37) because the Korean cultural products are welcomed around the world - from East to West, and from developing to developed countries (Jin & Yoon, 2017).

Hallyu in the Philippines

According to the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism, K-dramas debuted in GMA-7 with *The Successful Story of a Bright Girl* to compete against ABS-CBN's phenomenal airing of the Taiwanese (Chi-novela) drama *Meteor Garden* in 2003 (Igno & Cenidoza, 2016). The next K-drama *Endless Love 1: Autumn in My Heart* also aired in 2003 captured the hearts of the Filipino audience and paved the way for the rest of the successful K-dramas in the Philippines. The high viewership of *Autumn in My Heart* was attributed to the charisma of the good-looking actors and actresses, and its offbeat storyline. In 2004, the second installment of *Endless Love: Winter Sonata* was aired by GMA-7 followed by *Stairway to Heaven* (Igno & Cenidoza, 2016). ABS-CBN began airing their first K-drama *The Truth* followed by *Lovers in Paris*. *Full House*, a romantic-comedy was aired by GMA-7 in 2005 followed by *Jewel in the Palace*, a historical drama, aired in 2006 (Igno & Cenidoza, 2016).

The Status of Women in South Korea

Although South Korea has experienced rapid industrial growth and economic modernization brought about by globalization since the end of the Korean War, gender inequality has remained justified by their traditional gender role relationships rooted in and rationalized by Confucian values and teachings (Palley, 1990). To say the least, in traditional Korean society, "women have long been in a disadvantaged position," (Korean Women's Development Institute, 1985; cited in Palley, 1990).

Nowadays, South Korean women are largely well-educated and more empowered although the country still ranks among the lowest in the gender gap rankings (Lee, 2022). With the globalization of South Korea's economy and incessant cultural influence from the United States and other Western countries, the employment of women has increased continuously which contributed significantly to promoting gender equality in society; thus, changing the social perception on the role of women in it. This reality is now reflected in many Korean television series. Today, K-dramas feature more stories with female characters showcasing their strengths, achievements, and success.

The present study delves into the Korean wave phenomenon, more specifically, the K-dramas. This study is a feminist reading of the female reception on how women are portrayed in K-dramas, specifically the empowered female characters, in terms of the Western values and ideologies. In this regard, this study aims to answer the following research problems: How are Western values and ideologies reflected in the middle-aged Filipino women's reception of the portrayal of empowered/ disempowered women in selected Korean television series? How do middle-aged Filipino women gaze at the characterization of empowered/disempowered women in selected Korean television series in relation to their own lives?

Significance of the Study

In 2020, Nielsen Media Research published daytime ratings report showing that women aged 50 and above comprise the bulk of daytime viewers of television soap operas (Lewis, 2020). Moreover, a survey conducted in South Korea in December 2023 revealed that dramas and films had the highest viewership rating among women aged sixty years and older (2.3%). K-drama genre was generally more popular among older age groups (Statista, 2024). In the

Philippines, a survey conducted in 2020 revealed that television shows were more popular with older viewers aged between 45 and 64 years (Balita, 2022).

In view of the Nielsen ratings report and other survey results, this researcher decided to employ middle-aged women (40-60 years old) for this study. This researcher believes that middle-aged women can provide thicker or richer descriptions because of their extensive experience and breadth of knowledge or wisdom. To date, there are limited studies about the reception of K-dramas with middle-aged women as participants, so this is the research gap that this study aims to fill.

Framework of the Study

This study uses the concept of female gaze, Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory, and dual systems theory which combines Marxist feminism and radical feminism.

Encoding-Decoding Theory/Reception Theory

For a television show to be successful and meaningful communication to take place, Stuart Hall (1973) argues that the producers of the media text and the audience need to have a shared understanding of the signs and symbols used in the creation of the program's content, so the producer (encoder) has to consider how the audience (decoder) will perceive the media text.

There are three major decoding positions proposed by Hall, namely preferred (also called dominant), negotiated, and oppositional (1980, pp. 136-138). The preferred position, or dominant reading, is when the decoder (audience) takes the connoted meaning as it has been encoded, and fully accepts and reproduces the code to the encoder (Benshoff, 2015, p.16).

The negotiated position is when decoding by the audience entails both acceptance and opposition to some elements of the text. The audience believes the code and broadly accepts the message, but sometimes resists or modifies the message that best reflects one's own experiences, interests, and positions.

In the oppositional position, the audience perfectly understands the text, but completely disagrees with the message, and decodes it in a way that is totally contrary to the dominant ideology (Hall, 1993, pp. 515-516).

Dual-Systems Theory

Dissatisfaction with both traditional Marxism and radical feminism motivated Heidi Hartmann to develop the Dual Systems Theory (Young, 1997). The Dual-Systems Theory is a synthesis or a "marriage" of Marxist and Radical feminist theory, therefore neither Capitalism (Marxism) nor Patriarchy (Radical Feminism) takes a position of importance because in a capitalist-patriarchal society, both systems work together. Patriarchy provides a system of control and law and order, while capitalism provides a system of economy in the pursuit of profit (Walby, 1990, p.5). According to Hartmann, class domination and relations of production and distribution on the one hand, and women's oppression, on the other, are aspects of the same socio-economic system. Therefore, patriarchal relations are internally related to production relations as a whole (Young, 1997, pp. 49 and 56).

The Female Gaze

In the Male Gaze Theory, Laura Mulvey explains that “the eroticization of women on the screen comes about through the way the cinema is structured around three explicitly male looks or gazes (Dirse, 2013):” 1) the gaze of the male spectator or viewer; 2) the gaze of the male character within the narrative; and 3) the gaze of the male director or the camera which is inherently voyeuristic (Riebe, 2020).

Although the existence of the male gaze implies the presence of a female gaze, it cannot be presumed that the female gaze should also appeal to female desire and sexuality. The female gaze is developed when a film uplifts women’s desire and sexuality to the forefront of the plot (Coles, 2023) and puts the onus of the perspective in the female character, maker, and audience (Ganguly, 2022). Therefore, the female character is viewed as an active participant instead of a passive subject that is deliberately viewed for the male audience’s gratification.

Conceptual Framework

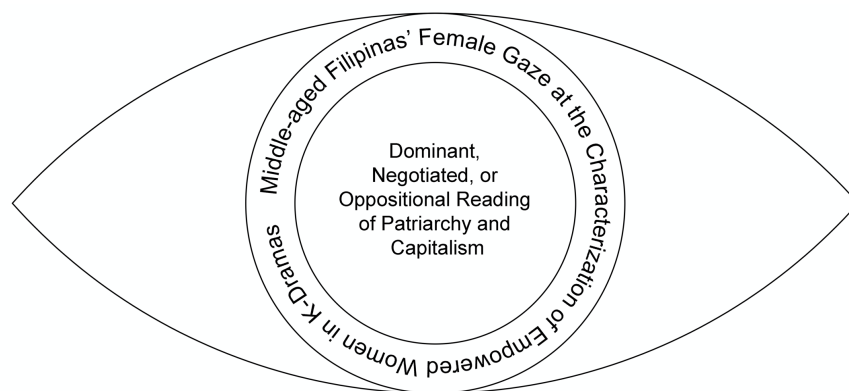


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Integrated Stuart Hall’s Reception Theory, Dual-Systems Theory, and the Concept of the Female Gaze

Figure 1 above shows the centrality of the middle-aged Filipinas’ female gaze at the characterization of empowered women in K-dramas which results in the dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading of the capitalist (Marxism)-patriarchal (radical feminism) values and ideologies embedded in the K-dramas.

Methodology

This study employed mixed method approach using online survey and in-depth interviews for data collection. The online survey using google form garnered 34 responses coming from the researcher’s circle of friends, sister, and acquaintances (i.e., sister’s schoolmates) whose ages range from 45 to 70. Three middle-aged Filipino women who were also online survey respondents were invited to be interviewed for the study. Textual analysis was used for data analysis.

Results and Discussion

Profile of the Respondents

Of the 34 female respondents, more than half (55.9%) were married; 26.5% were single; and 8.8% were widows. The age of the respondents ranged from 45 to 70, but a majority (85.3%) of the respondents were 60-69. A majority (67.7%) of the respondents were college graduates while 23.5% had master's degree which indicated that most of the respondents were highly educated. More than half (56.3%) had monthly family income of above Php100,001 while 29.1% had monthly family income between Php25,001 and Php100,000 which suggested that almost all of the respondents belonged to upper middle class to high-income class.

Top 5 K-dramas

The second part of the online survey contained a list of 50 K-dramas with empowered female characters. The respondents were asked to check the K-dramas that the respondents have watched on television or by any other means. Of the 50 K-dramas, the top five K-dramas were *Crash Landing on You* (91.2%) written by Park Ji-Eun, *Extraordinary Atty. Woo* (91.2%) written by Moon Ji-Won, *What's Wrong with Secretary Kim?* (85.3%) written by Jung Kyung-Yoon, *Start-Up* (82.4%) written by Park Hye-Ryun, and *Goblin* (79.4%) written by Kim Eun-Sook. The top five K-dramas were all romantic-comedies written by female scriptwriters. When asked which was their favorite K-drama, the respondents answered different K-dramas, but the reasons were basically the same, i.e., interesting and unpredictable plot, entertaining and unique storyline, handsome actors, superb acting, very good script, funny at the same time heartbreaking, wholesome family drama with comedy, wonderful mix of comedy and fantasy, the determination to attain goals, the struggle to succeed and be the best that you can be, "kilig" (thrilling) factor, has family values, and nice ending.

Reasons for Watching K-dramas

In the third part of the survey, the respondents were asked to rate 20 statements using the following scale: SA for strongly agree; A for agree; N for neither agree nor disagree; D for disagree; and SD for strongly disagree.

It is interesting to note that middle-aged Filipinas first watched K-dramas because they read good reviews about them (41%), not because of the influence of their family members nor their friends. The dominant readings of the respondents are evident in their reasons for liking K-dramas. The respondents expressed their predilection toward the K-dramas' unusual storyline (56%) with unpredictable endings (35%), true-to-life plots (41%) and beautiful values and messages (59%). They enjoy watching good-looking actors and actresses (65%) who portray their roles well (71%), and K-dramas with "kilig" (thrilling) factor (50%) which explains their fondness for romantic-comedies. They prefer wholesome (56%), funny (62%), family-oriented stories (53%) with kissing scenes that are not too vulgar (62%) unlike Western television shows that present torrid kissing scenes. They also enjoy action scenes that are exciting and credible (53%), and appreciate authentic costumes, props, and sets (59%). However, the respondents expressed their negotiated position in the statement that "K-dramas are all the same" (50%). Moreover, 50% of the respondents believe the number of episodes of K-dramas is fewer compared to local television series, and sad to say, the dominant reading of the respondents is that K-dramas are better than local television series

(47%). Finally, the dominant position of the respondents is that the overall quality of K-dramas is good (74%).

Male and Female Characterizations in K-dramas

In the fourth part of the survey about the male and female characterizations in K-dramas, the respondents were asked to rate the statements using the same scale as in the third part. Some of the respondents perceive the male villains to be aggressive and violent (47%) reflecting the influence of oppressive Western capitalist patriarchal society. The dominant reading of the respondents is that the male heroes are respectful to elders (44%) which is an expression of the respondents' cultural affinity with the Korean culture which is similar to the Filipino culture in this regard.

One vital information that the respondents do not know is that the scriptwriters of the top five romantic-comedies are all women which suggests that the storylines and scripts they like are actually written from the point of view of women and underscores the female gaze. However, the online survey reveals a negotiated position (56%), probably due to the 50 K-dramas they have to consider in their responses.

As stated in the framework section, the female gaze puts the responsibility of the perspective in the female character, maker, and audience. Nowadays, more female Korean television directors, producers, and scriptwriters (i.e., female maker) are being hired, so more empowered women are being characterized in K-dramas and because of this, more accurate nuances of women's lives are represented which makes it easier for the female audience to relate the female character's experiences to their own lives.

The task of theorizing how the spectatorial (audience) patterns of pleasure and identification are produced in K-dramas is made apparent by the fact that the female scriptwriters themselves know the nature and struggles of being a woman as well as the female desire of breaking away from the normative gendered roles and stereotypes which are culturally produced. By portraying empowered women in their scripts, the female writers through their vision (female gaze) in the television series have succeeded somehow in transcending traditional historical disadvantages of women who were once relegated to passive objectification and marginality created by men in our patriarchal society.

Based on the online survey, the dominant reading of the respondents is that the heroes in K-dramas show respect to women (79%). This is because the female scriptwriters (female maker) know that the innermost desire of every woman is to be respected and loved. The myth or conventional image in television series is that the hero is strong and able to save the damsel in distress (i.e., typical characteristics of manhood) while the heroine is feminine, weak, and needs to rely on her man (i.e., typical characteristics of womanhood). The influence of media is probably one important reason why men and women experience the social world differently. The gender roles (i.e., women stay at home to take care of the children) and stereotypes (i.e., fathers are the breadwinners) in mass media reflect how women in general, not just Korean women in the K-dramas, have been culturally and historically marginalized in patriarchal societies. However, the modern K-dramas written by female writers who are certainly influenced by Hollywood's portrayal of liberated women now feature an alternative femininity that exudes strength of character, self-confidence, independence, competence, and intelligence that female spectators can identify with and

emulate. This female gaze of the maker (scriptwriter) frees women from traditional feminine identities and enables the modern women to invent new roles and dismiss the old.

Because the scripts are written by women, the male characters in K-dramas are depicted to be expressive of their feelings (79%), perhaps more expressive than in real life, while the female characters are portrayed to be quite emotional (47%). Moreover, the dominant reading of the respondents is that the K-dramas portray heroines as very determined to reach their goals (82%) which reflects the Western concept of empowered women while 47% of the respondents think that female characters are not dependent on their men which likewise reflect characteristics of empowered women. On the other hand, a majority of the respondents (59%) perceive that the lead male characters in K-dramas are always heirs to family-owned companies which reflect the Western values and ideology of capitalist patriarchy, and mirror the reality in South Korean corporate world.

A majority of the respondents (71%) empathize with the heroine in the K-drama and almost all of the respondents (94%) feel happy when the heroine becomes successful and attains her goals which indicate that the respondents can relate the heroine's struggles to their own lives--a manifestation of their gaze at the female characters. Almost half of the respondents (44%) think that women in K-dramas are more empowered than Filipino women in local television series because most of the local television series usually portray the lives of oppressed women in our patriarchal society.

The last item in the survey asks if the respondent wants to become a Korean while and after watching the K-drama, and the respondents articulated their oppositional position (74%) which shows that they are unwavering of their Filipino identity.

In the interview, when the three interviewees were asked which K-drama showcases empowered women, the first respondent said "Queen Maker" and "Extraordinary Atty. Woo" while the second respondent said "Jewel in the Palace," and the third respondent said "The Glory" and "Agency." To explain how the K-dramas portray empowered women, the first respondent said that in the "Queen Maker," the female election campaign manager transformed the female human rights lawyer into someone who could be a leader (i.e., mayor). In "Extraordinary Atty. Woo," despite her condition (respondent does not want to use the word "disability"), she was able to build confidence, develop strength of character, and become an extraordinary and successful lawyer in the firm. The second respondent said that the female lead character in "Jewel in the Palace" accomplished what she set out to do in a non-combative manner. The third respondent said that in "The Glory," despite being poor and being bullied by her classmates in high school, she did not lose hope nor commit suicide. Instead, she channeled all her time and energy into becoming a teacher and saving enough money for her revenge against those people who bullied her in the past. In the "Agency," despite being poor and a graduate from a community college, the female lead character became the CEO of a conglomerate through hard work and her intelligence, overcoming all the challenges in a cut-throat advertising industry.

When asked about their opinion on what makes a strong woman, the first respondent said that the love and support of her family gave her strength especially during the most difficult times in her life. The second respondent said that a strong woman is somebody who is comfortable in her own skin, who knows her worth, and accomplishes what she sets out to do without resorting to aggressive means. The third respondent said that a strong woman turns

something negative or a bad event in her life into a challenge and motivation to succeed in life.

When asked if they see themselves in the female characters, the first respondent said “yeah” because when she faces challenges, the love and support of her family gives her strength to overcome these challenges just like the female characters in the K-dramas. The second respondent said that she sees herself in the female character in “Jewel in the Palace” because she accomplishes things even without recognition. The third respondent said that at the time she is watching the K-dramas, she puts herself in the situation of the lead characters.

Finally, when asked if they see themselves as an empowered woman just like the female characters in the K-dramas, the first respondent said “Oo naman” (yes, of course) because she sees herself as successful. She said that as a single mother, she perceives herself as an empowered woman because she was able to raise her three children by herself, and with her faith in God as well as the support of her family, she was able to overcome all the challenges in her life. The second respondent said “yes, definitely” but did not elaborate. The third respondent said “yes, in my own small way” because she was able to raise her four children--two have already graduated from college, and the other two are on scholarship. She also said that she doesn’t allow herself to be oppressed by anyone because she is not a pushover or a weakling.

The reflexive meaning that the respondents articulated is produced in their narratives as they determine the commonality between the fictionalized lives of the empowered women in the K-dramas and their own experiences which inevitably shapes their aesthetic perception in their gaze as spectator. On the one hand, the respondents’ dominant position regarding the heroine overcoming all the challenges in life is a reading in favor of the Western ideology of women empowerment reinforced and embedded in K-dramas. On the other hand, the respondents’ oppositional position regarding aggressive and violent behavior of male characters, as well as the perpetual portrayal of male scions is a reading against the grain of Western ideology of capitalist patriarchy also reinforced and embedded in K-dramas.

Conclusion

The survey results show that middle-aged Filipino women prefer the romantic-comedy genre for K-dramas. The top five favorites are “Crash Landing on You,” “Extraordinary Atty. Woo,” “What’s Wrong with Secretary Kim,” “Start Up,” and “Goblin,” all written by female scriptwriters, which suggests that these best-loved K-dramas were written from the point of view of women. The respondents like to watch K-dramas because of the good-looking actors and actresses who portray their roles well, the “kilig” (thrilling) factor, the plots that are true to life, the unusual and interesting storylines, the unpredictable endings, the wholesome, funny, family-oriented stories with kissing scenes that are not too vulgar unlike Western television shows, affirming Ryoo’s claim that “Western popular cultural artifacts will not likely succeed because of a certain non-negotiable cultural heterogeneity” (2007, p. 45). The respondents also enjoy K-dramas with lots of values and good messages, and action scenes that are exciting and credible. Thus, they believe the overall quality of K-dramas is good.

The results of the online survey and interviews reveal that the middle-aged Filipino women perceive the interaction of power and oppression reinforced by Western values and ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism as depicted in the male villains’ aggressive and violent behavior, the male dominance over women, and the perennial characterization of heroes as heirs to the

family-owned companies which also mirror the reality in South Korean male-dominated corporate world. In order to survive, the heroines have to struggle and overcome the traditional discriminative capitalist patriarchy in the workplace and in society.

Moreover, the results of the online survey and interviews reveal the dominant readings of the respondents that the K-dramas portray heroines as being very determined to reach their goals, working hard to overcome life's challenges, being confident, and being a leader which reflect the Western concepts of empowered women. Using the female gaze, the middle-aged Filipino women's dominant readings of the characterization of empowered/disempowered women in the K-dramas uncover values of self-confidence, independence, competence, hard work, leadership, perseverance and determination.

The female gaze is also reflected in the reflexive meanings articulated by the respondents as they are able to relate to the struggles and challenges that the empowered heroines experience in the K-dramas. They empathize with the heroines and feel happy when the heroines achieve their goals. They gaze at the lives of the heroines and see the reflection of their own lives as they temporarily escape from the drudgery of their own domestic life, and get immersed in the fictional world that the K-dramas have created. They become one with the heroines even for a fleeting 60 minutes of vicarious bliss, and perceive the heroines' triumphs as their own.

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