

Real Women in Korean Film and TV

Progressive Portrayals of Unmarried, Elderly, and Lesbian Women

By Alicia Kang

Advisor: Prof. Christina Klein

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Introduction

The Search for a Realistic Female Character on the Korean Screen

Before the twenty-first century, young adults in the U.S. knew little to nothing about South Korea. What was a tiny nation in Asia has blossomed into the world's next big thing with a hand in every sector of entertainment. Korean stars who have gained international fanbases range from different ages and career experiences. Veteran actor Song Kang-ho, for instance, boasts a 25-year career encompassing countless well-known Korean movies like *The Host* and *A Taxi Driver*; he garnered global attention within the past couple of years through the Academy Award-winning film *Parasite* ("Kang-Ho Song"). SAG award-winning actress Jung Ho-yeon, who plays a protagonist in the Netflix hit show *Squid Game*, soared to similar world stardom in 2021 (Wynne). However, she worked for most of her career as a successful model, and she only recently made her acting debut (Yeo). And BTS, a K-pop group of seven male members in their 20s, exhibits a slightly longer but perhaps equally explosive rise to fame. After debuting in 2013 with a humble domestic fanbase, the group went on to win several American music awards and now boasts a 40-million member fanbase ("Profile: BTS: Bighit Music"; Moon). These few examples show a glimpse of the extent to which Korean stars have permeated international media. The flourishing of Korean mass media in global spaces in the twenty-first century, specifically through film, TV, and pop music, is called "Hallyu," or the Korean Wave. Through Hallyu, international audiences have been able to learn about Korean culture.

With this newfound access to Korean media has come the possibility for global viewers to perceive Korean women and their place within the nation's society. This paper aims to examine how women have been represented in Hallyu films in order to analyze how progressive portrayals can be created in Korea and what their effects may be on international audiences. These portrayals, when exported to the global market, often become international viewers' only

reference points for understanding Korean women. This tokenizing effect is particularly dangerous when it comes to American audiences, who simultaneously hold diverse racial identities while often judging their racial minorities based on a few media representations. Thus, in analyzing key feminist characters and their stories through Hallyu dramas and movies, this paper examines how Korean women in real life are perceived within and outside of Korea.

The Intentionality of Hallyu

Before analyzing the gender dynamics in Korean media, I aim to contextualize my focus on this nation within the broader trend of Korean entertainment's popularity today. While Korea's rise to fame might surprise anyone not paying specific attention to Korean history from the 1950s onward, Hallyu is actually the result of the South Korean government's concerted efforts to export their culture, their products, and their overall brand as a nation to the world. Hallyu is "a deliberately fostered manifestation of economic development that has resulted from a distinctive form of industry policy" that focuses on global consumers (Walsh 2). The government supports media and entertainment endeavors in order to boost the nation's image and space in the international market. Hallyu is actually a continuation of Korea's export-led economic strategy, which began in the 1960s under President Park Chung-hee, who believed that the future of the nation's development lay in exporting heavy industrial goods to other countries with more market power—specifically the U.S.—and building solid international economic relationships with such global powerhouses. In comparison to Korea's naturally small domestic market, international consumers were always an attractive target, and modernization has only further facilitated this export strategy. Hallyu is simply a "content- rather than technology- led enterprise" that continues Korea's outward-facing focus ("What is the K" 359).

This shift to exporting culture over industrial products occurred on the cusp of the twenty-first century, during which time Korea experienced many economic and political shifts that pushed the nation to build soft power. Soft power is the “intangible power a country wields through its image rather than through force” (Hong 4).¹ President Kim Dae-jung, elected in 1998, was perhaps the first Korean president to truly recognize the importance of soft power. Kim “sought to become a ‘culture president’ and promised to devote one percent of government expenditure on cultural content” (“What is the K” 359). Kim also launched a “Cyber Korea 21 program,” after which “South Korea had become the country with the world’s most extensive broadband penetration” (“Seoul Calling” 129). This internal decision enabled Koreans to simultaneously explore international channels of communication like social media while spreading national culture through modern forms of technology such as the internet and television.² Even after Kim, the Korean government continued to support the media and entertainment industry, viewing these businesses as an important factor to achieving soft power.³

Beyond a change in leadership, Korea’s turn to soft power was brought forward by both a microeconomic stagnation in the music industry as well as a macroeconomic financial crisis. After climbing out of wartime poverty and enjoying the fruits of industrialization, “South Korea’s economic boom hit a wall in 1997 in the form of the Asian financial crisis,” otherwise known in Korea as the IMF crisis (Hong 90).⁴ The domestic music industry in particular suffered

¹ According to Euny Hong in her book, *The Birth of Korean Cool*, “Hard power is military might or economic coercion. Soft power, on the other hand, is how the United States got the world to buy its Marlboro Reds and Levi’s jeans: by peddling a desirable image. By peddling cool” (4).

² The government knew that technology would be vital to enhancing Hallyu’s reach, so it “subsidized Internet access for the poor, the elderly, and the disabled. Currently, the government is wiring every single household with a 1 gigabit-per-second connection—which would make it two hundred times faster than the average Internet connection in the United States” (Hong 5).

³ This focus on soft power continued across party lines, as “even the conservative Lee Myung-bak, elected in 2007, has sought to promote Brand Korea” (“What is the K” 359).

⁴ A more comprehensive resource on the IMF crisis can be found in Ha-joon Chang’s article, “Korea: The Misunderstood Crisis.” Chang elaborates on why “ill-managed

a “massive downturn in South Korean consumption, which was grossly exacerbated by the introduction of digitized music and largely unprotected internet downloads” (“What is the K” 352). Following its export-led economic strategy from the 1960s, the Korean government decided once again that the best course of action for boosting the music industry and the economy overall was to captivate global consumers. It began funding the K-pop industry and focusing specifically on “the lucrative Japanese market,” evident in the direction of marketing for early K-pop stars or groups like BoA and Dong Bang Shin Ki towards Japan (“What is the K” 354). Then, throughout the 2000s and into the 2010s, Korean music spread through East Asia and eventually made its way into the U.S. largely by utilizing new social media channels.⁵ After planting the seeds for an initial foothold in global media through music, the Korean government expanded its support to the entertainment industry overall, leading to the flourishing of Korean dramas and films in international markets.

In order to ensure global success, the actual content of exported Korean media avoided controversy by abstaining from any radical messages or portrayals. The music and movies the nation exported were “largely apolitical and uncontroversial, centering [...] upon narratives of romance, family and/or work with little commentary offered on Korea itself” (Glynn and Kim 333-334). The first breakthrough piece of Hallyu media, for instance, was the KBS drama *Winter Sonata*, which became an “overnight sensation in Japan” in 2002 (“What is the K” 351). *Winter Sonata* focuses exclusively on a tumultuous love story between childhood friends. The drama is a classic example of Korea’s decision to shy away from the “contentious aspects of Korean ideology or burning social issues” and to focus on harmless romantic subject matter instead (Glynn and Kim 334). Through self-censorship, Korea constructed an international image of

financial liberalization, abandonment of investment coordination, and poor exchange rate management were the underlying causes of the crisis” (Chang 1555).

⁵ This social media-focused wave is often called Hallyu 2.0 (“A Decade” 4).

itself “as an unthreatening, trendsetting modern country with decent, conservative standards and traditions in little need of change” (Glynn and Kim 333-334). The nation’s media was so marketable because it refused to make any radical social commentary.

Korean Gender Roles in Hallyu Media

In terms of gendered representations, Korea’s strategy in remaining uncontentious meant the nation had to keep itself aligned with Confucian gender roles. As with many East Asian countries, much of Korea’s societal values originate from Confucian philosophy, which dictates that the “law of nature [...] accorded woman an inferior position. She had to obey her superiors: when unmarried, she had to follow her father's orders; when married, those of her husband; when widowed, those of her son” (Deuchler 231). This ideology was based on the belief that, in order to achieve societal balance, people had to maintain “a sharp distinction between the woman’s ‘inner’ or domestic sphere and the man’s ‘outer’ or public sphere” (Deuchler 231). Though Korea has modernized drastically in just the past few decades, Confucianism’s legacy of patriarchal thinking still remains strong, and such thinking largely hinders the possibility of breaking gender roles. Therefore, when women exhibit behaviors beyond these restrictive norms, they are seen as dangers to societal order rather than beacons of progressive thought. And because Hallyu first found success within Japan and China, both of which still adhere to largely conservative gender expectations, Korea was encouraged to continue creating female protagonists and idols who generally accorded with Confucian values.⁶

Women in Hallyu media primarily fit the mold of Confucian womanhood even while operating in modern settings, causing these female portrayals to perpetuate traditional gender

⁶ It is important to acknowledge that, when it comes to developing soft power, international efforts cannot find traction without domestic support. In other words, Korean media’s conservative values are not born entirely of international influences. They are bolstered by the patriarchal values already within Korean society through its legacy of Confucian thinking.

roles without addressing current struggles for gender equality. The typical Korean female protagonist exhibits “‘appropriate’ femininity—submissive, fragile, excessively slim femininity,” which “has been constructed in South Korea to remasculinize Korean men” (Oh 59). In her analysis of the dancing body, Chuyun Oh points out a musical example of this in the K-pop group Girls’ Generation, one of the first major Korean girl groups to successfully establish an international fan base. Girls’ Generation exemplified how Korean women could be desirable to mass audiences: by sporting short skirts, showing off impossibly slender figures, and acting “in hypergirlish-feminine ways” (Oh 64). At the same time, however, their song lyrics “tend to reinforce the patriarchal ideology that says a woman should be a good wife and a wise mother, who serves and boosts the energy of men, while staying in a domestic sphere” (Oh 59). This dichotomy between sex appeal and domesticity works to captivate male audiences by presenting the female idols as attractive, feminine bodies who obey conservative gender norms. The success of Girls’ Generation—as well as the countless girl groups formed afterwards that copied this formula of cheerful, child-like femininity—through the Hallyu wave reveals that Korea’s attempts to appeal to global audiences have enabled it to maintain a conservative ideology. The inability of these representations to challenge this traditional thinking is perhaps what makes them so internationally marketable.

This adherence to Confucian gender roles originates from and finds support in Korea’s internal patriarchal structure, which has been further enforced through the recent rise in anti-feminism. Though Korea has always been rooted in patriarchal values, in the wake of the country’s #MeToo movement, feminism has actually become a polarizing issue often equated with misandry (Kim and Lee). The nation’s military service mandate, which only applies to men, has heightened gender tensions as young men struggling to find employment argue that this law unfairly favors women who do not have to take two years off from work in order to serve. Open

expressions of misogyny have also become increasingly common after the first female president Park Geun-hye's impeachment (Kim and Lee; "South Korea Exempts Women").⁷ Anti-feminism has found support in Korea within both men and women as many claim the country has gone too far in attempting to provide women with more equitable opportunities.

How Film and Netflix Enable Korean Media to Avoid Censorship

More recent films and TV shows have found success in breaking Hallyu's mold of sanitization in order to criticize the corruption within Korean society. In terms of Korean cinema, for example, the country's entry into the global market first began with commercial auteur directors like Park Chan-wook, Bong Joon-ho, and Lee Chang-dong. Though these filmmakers garnered success within the smaller Korean movie industry, they also turned their attention to international film festivals to garner loyal international audiences (Raymond). Perhaps because these directors entered the U.S. through the art film scene, they were able to avoid some of the informal censorship restrictions Korea placed upon the music and TV content it actively exported. As films like *The Host* and *Oldboy* broke into the American movie market, American film buffs began to laud the provocative nature of Korean films and their criticisms of Korean society (Raymond). This slow build towards recognizing Korean cinematic talent finally exploded onto the public scene with director Bong Joon-ho's 2019 film *Parasite*, which enjoyed unprecedented global and American recognition as a Korean movie. Its criticisms of capitalism held true for audiences outside of Korea, and the movie's success quickly put Korea on the radar of most Americans.

⁷ After becoming president in 2013, Park was impeached in 2017 on the basis of "bribery, abusing state power and leaking state secrets" ("South Korea's"). As the first female president of Korea, the shameful end to her administration confirmed patriarchal biases against women in positions of power.

Recognizing the appeal of Korean content to international audiences, Netflix began pushing Hallyu stories for its own interests, and its success reveals that viewers, both global and domestic, want to see Korean content with social commentary. *Squid Game*, for example, garnered “a staggering 1.65 billion hours of viewing in 28 days following its Sept. 17 premiere, according to Netflix” (Spangler). As of now, it ranks as the “most popular original series ever” streamed on Netflix, “not just topping every other series on Netflix’s charts, but doing so in *dominating* fashion” (Tassi). *Squid Game* fits the American standard of a hit show far better than Korean norms: it is much more graphic, fast-paced, and dystopian than typical Korean dramas. The show also employs a nine-episode format, veering from the usual drama criterion of 16 episodes. Other Korean dramas have excelled on Netflix while clearly adhering to international expectations rather than domestic ones. *All of Us Are Dead*, for example, is a 12-episode, dystopian zombie series that quickly became Korea’s second number one show on Netflix (Brathwaite). These examples reveal that Hallyu is far from falling off the curve, as “from January 2019 to March 2020, global demand for Korean programming climbed by 80%” (Parrot Analytics). This is due at least in part to Netflix’s ability to distribute much more graphic content than that of mainstream, domestic Korean TV. Breakthrough stories like *Squid Game* and *Parasite* signal to Korean creators that uncensored content with social commentary can lead to booming global success, even if this requires a break from Hallyu’s sanitized image of Korea.

What Hallyu Means for Korean Feminists

Despite this progress beyond Hallyu’s initial censorship, the patriarchal norms embedded in Korean society continue to disproportionately represent women in Korean media as unrealistically submissive people almost exclusively concerned with attaining a husband and children. Across genres and styles of Korean dramas and popular films, viewers can see female

characters being pigeonholed into cookie-cutter roles that do not allow for the exploration of a broad spectrum of womanhood. Unmarried young women are usually depicted through the lens of what men find desirable so that male audiences can become engrossed in Korean dramas and romanticize the female leads. And once women lose their desirability to men—specifically by growing old—they are sidelined to trivial familial roles like the nagging mother or the doting grandma. Lesbian women, who do not view men in romantic contexts, are written off as aberrations who pose threats to societal order because they do not fit Confucian expectations of sexuality. The majority of female characters in Korean film and TV find their stories dominated by the goals of heterosexual marriage and family.

In this paper, I highlight and analyze female characters who expand rather than break gender conventions. I choose to focus on progressive portrayals of unmarried women, elderly women, and lesbian women in Korean dramas, television, and film. Elderly and lesbian women are some of the most marginalized female identities in Korean entertainment. Unmarried women, on the other hand, are the most common Korean drama protagonists; however, they are often written according to Confucian expectations, and truly feminist depictions of women living for themselves and not for the sake of men are difficult to find. While there are many singular stories of audacious women conquering male-dominated landscapes, these plots often further perpetuate the idea that strong, independent women are rare to find in real life. I choose to focus on women who have more realistic occupations or familial roles in modern Korea in order to show how they exhibit progressive thinking in their everyday lives. In doing so, I hope to identify general decisions feminist writers can make in terms of their protagonists' characteristics, socioeconomic circumstances, and overall storylines to give their female characters agency and to represent real Korean women. Every progressive protagonist I study takes a self-motivated approach to shaping her own life, and her story helps to normalize all women who bend Confucian gender

conventions. These normalizing portrayals explore how Korean women can claim more power and space in both media and real life. By simply expanding the range of “normal” lifestyles for women, Korean media can enact lasting changes to the way all audiences expect women to exist in society. For both domestic and international viewers, and in both critical and popular entertainment, Korean stories have the power to widen the scope of how Korean women are perceived and accepted.

Chapter One

Feminist Versions of the Unmarried Female Protagonist

South Korean society often aims to keep women in marginalized, domestic roles either to follow tradition or to avoid accusations of misandry. In adherence with Confucian ideology, Korean patriarchal ideals “presume the dichotomy between good/traditional/‘natural’ women and bad/educated/false women” by arguing that the latter betray nature while the former assume their proper roles in society as mothers, leaving employment struggles to the men (Park 214). You-me Park analyzes this dichotomy using Hyōn Kiyong’s 1989 novel, *Island in the Wind*, in which educated, new women are said to “abandon tradition and thus nation” (208). These new women have “*false bodies*” (209) and “are perpetrators of coquetry and falsehood” (208) while their natural, uneducated counterparts are happy to remain in the domestic sphere while depending on men for their income. Currently, in Korea’s extremely limited job market, men see educated women who can enter the professional job industry as threats to their own careers, so they continue to assert that women’s proper role is “genuine femininity/motherhood” (209). Women who step out of the domestic sphere are therefore unnatural and bizarre—the only possible explanation for why they could excel beyond men in places of work.

Those who support women in their struggles for equal employment are labeled as man-haters who want to deny men job opportunities or suppress men in favor of women. Because the default in Korean society has, for so many decades, been to sequester women into submissive, dependent roles, Koreans are quick to misjudge any amount of feminist advocacy as misandry. So while in recent years, more women have been gaining higher education than men, women continue to receive disproportionately lower wages and find it difficult to fight for equal pay because of anti-feminists who claim that women have already taken up more than their equal share in the job market (“Gender Equality”). Women in Korea also continue to face constant

threats of sexual blackmail and harassment, with multiple scandals coming out in just the past few years over illegal, nonconsensual recordings of women in public restrooms and motels (Reuters; Seo). And yet, the majority of Korean citizens continue to believe in patriarchal notions that uplift men over women, as is evidenced by the recent election of Yoon Suk-yeol, a conservative party candidate who champions anti-feminism, for president. Yoon's victory over the more liberal Lee Jae-myung, who believes in addressing structural gender inequality, signifies Korea's belief that preventing misandry and maintaining traditional gender roles matter more than trying to achieve a more inclusive nation.

When translated to the world of media, this marginalization of women can be seen in mainstream Korean dramas in which female protagonists almost solely take the roles of dependent, unmarried damsels in distress looking for love. In a standard drama, the typical Korean female protagonist is most recognizable not by her personality but by her appearance: she is pale, young, thin, and beautiful. In some dramas she is gentle, caring, and self-effacing, while in others she is spunky and outspoken—but only for comedic effect. She is either poor or simply in a lower socioeconomic class than her male love interest, and she is almost never in a position of power. Rather than her own career aspirations or passions, her story is dominated by her desire to find a husband so that she can get married and achieve what society deems to be success for someone of her gender. Common drama tropes include women who meet men with otherworldly powers (*You Who Came From the Stars*, *Goblin*), poor women who fall in love with men from rich families (*Heirs*, *Boys Over Flowers*), and weak princesses in historical dramas who cannot possibly gain power in society without men (*The Moon that Embraces the Sun*, *Scarlet Hearts Ryeo*). In every case, these mainstream dramas center on a female protagonist whose life is infinitely improved by her male love interest. Even in cases where these female protagonists themselves are otherworldly—such as in *Goblin* and *Oh My Ghost*, where the main

characters see spirits, or in *Arang and the Magistrate*, in which the protagonist is a ghost herself—the women are still in need of saving by men.

Strong women, on the other hand, are often villainized or used as humorous side characters for viewers to laugh at. The most common powerful female character types are the vain mother-in-law who only cares about protecting the wealth she married into or the duplicitous third point in a love triangle, a natural enemy for the weak and lovely protagonist. Viewers are trained to hate these women. Such characters use their strength only against other women, and their methods are usually underhanded. Outspoken women who fight for what they believe in are another iteration of female strength in dramas; however, these women are often depicted as bizarre or aromantic because they do not fit society's expectations of feminine docility. Some examples of this character type include the protagonist's headstrong tomboy friend (*Weightlifting Fairy Kim Bok-joo*) and the straightforward aunt who no longer cares about social cues (*When the Camellia Blooms*). These women rarely drive their own narratives, primarily serving as quick laughs. Even in the case of seemingly independent female protagonists with their own career goals and passions, such women often end up falling in line with social norms once they have found their true loves (*Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha*). Though their stories start out filled with hobbies and responsibilities, their screen time is increasingly dedicated to love and romance, and their previously busy personal lives dissolve into romantic happily-ever-afters. Such character tropes reassure viewers that strong women are just anomalies that occur when women do not properly respect social order or cannot find relationships.

Some more recent dramas have focused on building up singular, strong, female characters by emphasizing their offbeat journeys while excelling in a man's world. In such dramas, women often work in male-dominated positions and fight for morality, revenge, or money (*Hyena, My Name, Strong Woman Do Bong Soon*). While these dramas do break the mold by highlighting

their female protagonists, they do not actually challenge the idea that women who are as capable as men are irregular or unexpected. Rather, such dramas reinforce how strange a strong female protagonist is in the first place by focusing on only one powerful woman and emphasizing how much she stands out from the crowd. In other words, dramas with a single, stand-alone, strong female protagonist sometimes take one step forward and two steps back because of the focus put on the peculiarity or even the hilarity of a situation in which a woman is stronger than men.

When dramas do feature female protagonists who exhibit their strength outside of purely male-dominated workplaces, they often portray such women as bizarre or weird. Such women can be labeled “*yŏpki*,” a term describing those whose behavior is absurd, funny, or simply not aligned with social norms. This term was recently popularized through “South Korean netizens’ embrace and pursuit of non-traditional and non-heteronormative events,” and it can be used to empower people who reject conformity (Choo 343). However, when applied to women, *yŏpki* behavior is often considered a negative trait, as it can manifest in anything from aggressive behavior that rejects social expectations of docility to a prioritization of work over domestic life. Female *yŏpki* behavior also draws more attention to women in general because of its sheer absurdity. This claiming of the spotlight is an act of feminism in itself in a country where “the very existence of women in a public space historically coded ‘male’ defies traditional gender norms and ideologies” (Kim and Kim 7).⁸ In the social sphere, this means encouraging women to choose their own paths in life so that women who wish to enter male-dominated spaces can do so with increasing ease. Even though Koreans might initially label such behavior as *yŏpki*, as more women claim spaces in the public eye, what was previously labeled *yŏpki*—in both its positive and negative connotations—will become increasingly normal.

⁸ In the political sphere, feminist advocacy through presence means increasing the percentage of women in government positions. For reference, the highest percentage of Korean women in parliament occurred just two years ago in 2020, hitting 19% (“Analysis”).

In mainstream dramas and movies, *yŏpki* behavior in women is quelled and social order is restored by the end of the story. Kukhee Choo analyzes perhaps the most famous example of *yŏpki* culture on the Korean screen in her essay “*My Sassy Girl* (2001): The Taming of the *Yŏpki*.” *My Sassy Girl* is a wildly popular movie from 2001 in which the female protagonist, aptly named “Girl,” (Jun Ji-hyun) acts aggressively, loudly, and confidently, shaking up the male main character Kyun-woo’s (Chae Tae-hyun) world. The film easily resolves itself once Girl and the audience learn that her bizarre actions have all been a coping mechanism for the heartbreak she recently experienced. After overcoming this realization, Girl becomes much more docile and composed. Her *yŏpki*-ness is and always was an aberration rather than her true personality.

This chapter focuses on progressive dramas that do not conclude with a suppression of *yŏpki* but rather start and end with *yŏpki* protagonists who become so normalized for the audience that viewers question their perceptions of *yŏpki* in the first place and eventually redefine their ideas of real, “normal” women. Female characters who are presented in feminist ways can still provide comedic relief by bending social norms, but their personal motivations must be explained and understood to the point where viewers laugh with these women rather than at them. In this chapter, I explore one web series and one film that subvert negative perceptions of *yŏpki* behavior in order to argue for more realistic expectations of Korean women and the way they live today. In these examples, I highlight the well-written, complex personalities that enable these female protagonists to drive their own narratives by living for their own goals rather than an external need to fulfill social expectations.

Yŏpki as Empowering Entertainment in Work Later, Drink Now

The 2021 web series *Work Later, Drink Now* is one such example of a progressive show that challenges negative connotations of *yŏpki* behavior. This series centers on three women from

college who keep their friendship strong through their love of drinking. Ahn So-hee (Lee Sun-bin) works as a writer on an entertainment show and deals with her incompetent male boss Kang Book-gu (Choi Si-won). Kang Ji-goo (Jung Eun-ji) quit her job as a high school history teacher and now lives a reclusive life filming origami tutorials on YouTube. In contrast, Han Ji-yeon (Han Sunhwa) has her hands full going on dates, working as a yoga instructor, and making her friends laugh with her ridiculous yet somehow rational logic. The three women are all individual and complex, so while the show's plotlines are frivolous at times, the series is anchored by their dynamic personalities.

The show's first episode introduces the protagonists from a man's perspective through his blind dates with each woman; on these dates, all three women exhibit their own forms of *yŏpki* behavior, and in doing so, they actually marginalize their male counterpart, Hak-soo (Kim Ji-seok). On Hak-soo's date with Ji-goo, for example, she embodies an online feminist troll technique called "mirroring," which first began on a feminist chatting website named Megalia (Jeong and Lee 706). According to Jungmin Seo and Seoyoung Choi, through this technique,

Female users switched the subject of existing misogynic phrases from male to female and devised new words that twisted and countered the misogynic vocabulary used on male-dominant websites to create a new context (Yoo 2016, p. 64). For instance, "Women should stay home and be docile" was mirrored as "Men should stay home and be docile," "Women should be beaten up every three days" as "Men should be beaten up every three days," and "Women should be ditched once screwed" as "Men should be ditched once screwed." (381)

Many self-proclaimed Korean feminists reject Megalian trolling because of the harsher mirrored messages, but mirroring relies on and uses hate speech that has already been written by men towards women online. Thus, its harshness reveals the misogyny women are already enduring.

Ji-goo's *yŏpki* behavior is an example of offline, mild mirroring as her actions break down stereotypes of women being weak or unintelligent by displacing these ideas on to Hak-soo. Throughout their date, Ji-goo speaks without honorifics as she instructs Hak-soo on when to drink, how to drink, and even when to eat. At one point, she tosses a piece of food into his bowl in a derogatory manner. Ji-goo's demeanor emulates that of a self-assured, perhaps even ignorant man, and, intimidated by Ji-goo, Hak-soo becomes meek and respectful. He speaks in honorifics and pours drinks for her with both hands, a courtesy typically used for elders. He often apologizes or thanks Ji-goo for small matters, acting more in line with the submissiveness expected from well-behaved women. Using mannerisms society has coded as male, Ji-goo mirrors the marginalization women experience onto Hak-soo.

Hak-soo's date with Ji-yeon explores a different way in which women can challenge gender norms: through casual attitudes towards sex, relationships, and beauty. Out of the three women, Ji-yeon is arguably the closest to an embodiment of the misogynistic label, *kimchinyeo* or "kimchi girl" in English, which "allow[s] young Korean men to tag, label, and stereotype the Korean women of their generation as a selfish, self-obsessed, and vain group" (Jeong and Lee 710). *Kimchinyeos* are seen as promiscuous and fake, often associated with plastic surgery. Though Ji-yeon values her appearance above all else and flirts with men constantly, she also does not care if others see her as a *kimchinyeo*. She openly tells her yoga students that she lost weight through medicine, not exercise, and she speaks freely about her eyelid surgery. She even calls her own beauty fake, asking Ji-goo loudly in a crowded fish market if she knew Ji-yeon "wasn't a natural beauty when [she] first saw [her]" ("Episode 5" 00:31). Ji-yeon is honest about how much she values beauty and what she is willing to do to attain it.

Ji-yeon also refuses to be ashamed of her own sex drive: though she dates primarily to get married, she directly asks her dates if they want to sleep together, opening up a less restrictive

and more realistic conversation about sex in women's lives. Conservatives may still expect modern women to abstain from sex until marriage, and historically, for Korean women, sex has been associated with the dangers of prostitution or sex trafficking (Kim and Kim 48). Though it is important not to erase the history of sexual slavery in Korea, modern conversations around women's sex and sex work often strip women of their autonomy by automatically presuming a victim narrative (Kim and Kim 58). This ultimately hurts women because it perpetuates the falsehood that women do not have sex drives. Ji-yeon breaks this mold by speaking comfortably about her desire for sex. During Ji-yeon's blind date with Hak-soo, for instance, she suggests that they go to a motel together. After Hak-soo happily agrees, she calls him "Jae-hee's dad" and explains that Jae-hee is the name of her future baby ("Episode 1" 13:30). She says she is "always ready to get married," (13:41) and that Jae-hee is "probably in the sperm of some man right now" (13:50) before pointing to Hak-soo's lap and bursting out laughing. Though more conservative viewers might scorn Ji-yeon's casual attitude toward sex or simply dislike her *yŏpki*-ness, they should actually appreciate the level of responsibility she brings to the subject of sex. She is equally ready to talk about marriage and children, a refreshing contrast to the men who want to sleep with Ji-yeon without intending to marry her. The way Ji-yeon treats sex and her disregard for how Hak-soo perceives her shows that she is strong enough to speak on what she wants out of life without bending to others' expectations.

So-hee, Hak-soo's last blind date, similarly acts in accordance with her own values, and her *yŏpki*-ness emerges through her prioritization of her job over romance. When Hak-soo enters the bar, So-hee is seated in front of her laptop, working. After politely asking Hak-soo if she can answer a call from her colleague, she picks up the phone and casually curses out her coworker. As the date continues, So-hee continues to drive the conversation toward her work, asking Hak-soo if she can test out a few questions on him for her quiz game show. She apologizes time

after time for making Hak-soo feel uncomfortable, and yet she continues to use him as a guinea pig for her work, ultimately putting him through various penalties like tasting disgusting drinks or blowing out a candle with her stocking on his head. The scene uses So-hee's obsession with work and her disregard for Hak-soo's reactions for comedic purposes, but it also does not attempt to scold So-hee's out-of-line, *yŏpki* behavior. Rather, something as mundane as a woman's dedication to her work becomes a source of entertainment for audiences, and this enjoyment of *yŏpki* behavior continues as viewers begin to identify with the protagonists throughout the show.

As viewers begin to laugh with the main characters rather than at them, the show gradually displaces the hilarity of *yŏpki* culture onto its ridiculous male side characters, further normalizing the women. One such example is Mr. Park, a businessman trying to enter politics whom So-hee interviews during her first job at a publishing company. At the start of their meeting, he jumps into an absurd story about the day he was born, telling her his birth was like that of a god's or like "the Virgin Mary giving birth to Jesus" ("Episode 6" 22:16). He claims that within five months of his birth, he "realized all the ways of life" (22:34). A whimsical soundtrack plays to heighten his bizarre story, but it pauses when the camera shows So-hee asking a question and making an incredulous expression. This break in the music implies that the absurdity of Mr. Park's story is not working on either So-hee or the audience. Mr. Park's male assistant takes diligent notes and occasionally chimes in to support his boss's claims, acting almost like a prop. When Mr. Park asks So-hee if she needs to take notes, she looks at her laptop, and the camera shows a straight-on shot of her Word document with one line reading, "God..." (23:13). This shot solidifies the audience's identification with So-hee by using her point of view and showing viewers what only she can see. Through this perspective, the use of music, and Mr. Park's male expression of *yŏpki*, viewers are made to identify with So-hee—a minority, female voice in the room—rather than the inexplicably pompous businessman.

The protagonists' specific brand of *yŏpki*-ness thus becomes a refreshing counter to the incompetence of the men around them, causing viewers to further identify with the female protagonists. During a second meeting with Mr. Park, for example, Mr. Park offers So-hee alcohol and once again chatters on about his own excellence. Fed up and drunk, So-hee thoroughly chews him out for his ridiculous bravado through a tirade of rapid-fire insults. Her aggression and confidence are enough to beat down Mr. Park's *yŏpki*-ness with her own while simultaneously enabling viewers who have ever felt frustrated at self-important men to live vicariously through her brash honesty. Though such rash behavior from a woman would not be applauded in real life, So-hee enables audiences to imagine a more righteous world in which people do not have to meekly bow their heads to the men in power.

During her years as a schoolteacher, Ji-goo similarly dealt with her school's principal whose incompetence bordered on *yŏpki*-ness. In a meeting concerning a lesbian student Park Se-jin (Han Ji-hyo), the principal defines Sejin's sexuality as "her lesbian sickness" (1:11). Ji-goo asks him if he does not think such a description is ignorant, and he defends himself by saying he graduated from Seoul National University. His random declaration seems out-of-place and ironically uneducated. Through his incompetence, the show enables viewers to instead identify with Ji-goo's sympathy toward Se-jin. When Se-jin is outed to the entire school, she goes to the school's roof to attempt suicide. Ji-goo hurriedly tells the principal to call 911 while she goes to the roof, and the principal, in shock, stops her to say he does not know the number to 911. Ji-goo angrily replies, "Press 911 on your phone. You don't even know that when you graduated from Seoul National University?" (22:47) His stupidity makes Ji-goo's blatant lack of respect for her boss in the moment not only acceptable but also enjoyable to viewers. The show therefore enables viewers to identify with and applaud the three women not in spite of their *yŏpki* behavior but because of it.

It thus matters that *Work Later, Drink Now* does not end on a quiet note like *My Sassy Girl* does. So-hee, Ji-goo, and Ji-yeon stir up trouble until the very last scene, when four men anxiously wait for them at separate tables in the women's favorite bar on Christmas Day. In the show's very last shot, the camera looks into the bar from outside. Then, the door opens and the camera moves forward, emulating the perspective of one of the protagonists stepping inside. Mr. Hwang (Kim Jung-min), the bar's owner and a close friend of the women, comes forward and casually greets whomever has just arrived. All four of the men and Mr. Hwang look directly at the camera, reinforcing the viewers' identification with the protagonist as her perspective dominates. The show does not end with the main characters falling in love. Instead, the ending blatantly sets up for further *yŏpki*-ness, pairing four men with three women in order to suggest that their love stories will be anything but a calm end to the protagonists' antics.

Work Later, Drink Now achieved overwhelming success among Korean viewers, particularly given its short-form style and *yŏpki* storylines. Halfway through the show's season, its streaming platform, TVING, saw that its "number of paid subscribers increased by 178 percent" ("Work Later, Drink Now"). Snippets from the show, subtitled in English, have amassed 60 million views on YouTube, suggesting that its popularity in Korea enabled it to reach global audiences. Within the nation, the three actresses rose to fame and gained recognition from viewers of all different ages. Lee Sun-bin, for instance, guest-starred on Korea's hottest reality TV show, *My Little Old Boy*, which regularly rakes in the attention of over 10% of all Korean households during its airtime ("Top 20"). The titular "little old boys" are middle-aged male celebrities who have either gotten divorced or failed to marry. Their daily lives are recorded for their mothers—who are in their 60s and 70s—to watch and react to, often with great frustration and anger. Though the show can be quite backwards in its conceptions of marriage and social norms, the mothers were surprisingly fond of *Work Later, Drink Now*. When Lee appeared on the

show, the mothers greeted her happily and even recalled some scenes from the show, indicating that *Work Later, Drink Now* has reached older audiences despite its *yŏpki* protagonists. *Work Later, Drink Now*'s success suggests that not only young viewers but also those of all age groups in Korea are becoming increasingly receptive to progressive representations of independent women.

Representing Realistic Socioeconomic Struggles for Women

Not all feminist media demands hilarious *yŏpki* behavior in order to break from social norms; some movies may focus on the harsh realities working women face in order to fight the idea that women exist only to get married, have children, and live off of their spouses' wealth. Korean misogynists claim that women who are successful in work only get ahead by "stealing the bread from poor men who had to complete their military service," ignoring the massive setbacks working women endure when they take maternity leave (Seo and Choi 378). Misogynists also describe women as "selfish predators who steal men's property" on the basis of the 2005 abolition of *hojuje*, the traditional family head structure in Korea under which property rights and inheritances depended on male lineages (379). Such thinking assumes women are sure to succeed in life because they can rely on others for financial support, either through social welfare or marriage. Anti-feminists believe women are protected from Korean poverty, but according to Lee Hyekyung, "the poverty rate for women is higher than that for men" in Korea and in the world because "it has always been more difficult for women to gain access to resources or opportunities," (102) which is the very reason why "the majority of public assistance recipients are women" (132) in the first place. In reality, Korean women have always faced worse socioeconomic disadvantages than men do.

Director Jeon Go-woon's 2017 film *Microhabitat* delves into the issue of women's economic struggles through a *yŏpki* protagonist whose peculiar life is not criticized but rather opened up for discussion through the movie's noncommittal tone. Mi-so (Esom) is a young woman living in poverty in Seoul. Whatever money she makes as a housekeeper goes directly to her rent, medicine to prevent her hair from prematurely graying, cigarettes, and whiskey. When her rent increases beyond what she can pay, Mi-so decides to become homeless in order to continue affording cigarettes and alcohol. Though she does not suffer from substance abuse, Mi-so refuses to give up her vice of casually enjoying a smoke or a drink. The film follows her subsequent visits to each of her college friends for temporary housing while she saves up to find a new place to rent. Though her lifestyle is unconventional, because the camera follows solely Mi-so's journey, the film enables viewers who might otherwise judge her strange budgeting choices to identify with her. In the film's very first scene, for instance, the camera focuses on Mi-so as she cleans her friend's house. At a relaxed pace, with a light melody playing in the background, the camera shows Mi-so washing the dishes, wiping the stairs, and cleaning the bathroom, calmly lingering on her completing these mundane activities. The owner of the house ignores Mi-so, reclining in the living room with headphones on, and the camera in turn ignores the homeowner, whose brief presence in the film is only used to introduce Mi-so's occupation. After Mi-so finishes cleaning, the camera follows her on her walk home, and the homeowner never reenters the film. This first scene sets up an ensuing pattern of side characters briefly entering and exiting the overall narrative of Mi-so's life, which remains driven by her decisions and desires.

It is important to note that the film does not garner empathy for Mi-so solely by suggesting she could be a perfect wife or mother. Though she excels at housework, Mi-so does not see her job as preparation for marriage, and she does not actually care about perfecting her

own home—evident in how easily she decided to become homeless. When Mi-so goes home from cleaning her friend's house, her meager dinner is shown from a top-down shot that emphasizes the emptiness of her metal plate, containing three small vegetables. Her landlord comes by to inform her that he is raising her rent, and the camera frames Mi-so in a straight-on, medium-long shot, seated on the floor in front of an orange suitcase that doubles as her table. She gets up to greet her landlord, and, rather than following her, the camera remains trained on the space she has left, showing her blankets on the floor—which serve as her bed—an open box of medicine, and her bare canvas walls. A cockroach slowly crawls out of the shadows onto the wall, meandering about before disappearing when Mi-so returns to her seat. The overall disarray and barrenness of Mi-so's tiny apartment are far from a picture of domestic bliss. Mi-so's strength as a housekeeper implies that domestic work should be valued even if it is not exhibited in a traditional, familial context.

Mi-so's relationship also breaks traditional expectations of domestic union, as her inability to rely on her boyfriend Han-sol (Ahn Jae-hong) actually enables the film to reject both ideas of damsels in distress and the misogynist *kimchinyeo* label. Han-sol is an unsuccessful artist who can barely support himself, much less Mi-so. When the film first introduces Han-sol, he and Mi-so are shown playing a game. The two place their hands on an orange suitcase and both players try to slap the back of the other's hand faster than the opponent can react. Han-sol continuously slaps Mi-so's hands, and when she cries out in pain, he replies with a laugh, "We're playing for real. I'm not kidding, come on" (4:26). His refusal to take it easy on her represents their relationship as a whole, in which Han-sol does not help to cushion the hardships in Mi-so's life. The scene and their romance disprove the myth that women do not endure hardship because their husbands or boyfriends do everything for them. If anything, the film shows Han-sol as a somewhat minor factor in Mi-so's life. He cannot help Mi-so at all, even after she has become

homeless, and by the end of the film, he has decided to take a job in Saudi Arabia, leaving Mi-so for two years. Mi-so's nomadic life only concerns him when he learns that she spent one night at the apartment of her male friend Dae-young (Lee Sung-wook). The two discuss this while donating blood in order to buy movie tickets for a date, a scene that seems to laugh in the face of misogynists who claim that women make men pay for everything. Han-sol tells her "I'll just make a million won, and we'll get a place," essentially stating he can support her (39:07). However, this empty claim falls flat once Mi-so brings up his student loans. Yet, without providing any concrete solutions, Han-sol expresses such sadness over Mi-so living at Dae-young's place that she tells him she will not sleep there anymore. His attitude is little more than a nuisance to Mi-so's lifestyle, and his wish to provide for her is hopeless. Han-sol shows audiences that even if women in poverty wanted to rely on the men around them, they would not be able to do so.

Through each visit to a friend, the movie reveals that every side character's life is full of its own falsehoods or *yŏpki*-ness, and the film further normalizes Mi-so's honest hedonism. For example, two of Mi-so's friends—Jung Hyun-jung (Kim Gook-hee) and Dae-yong—are extremely unhappy with their living situations, each of which occurred in their attempts to achieve marital success. Hyun-jung lives with her irritable husband and his parents in a small apartment. She cooks for the entire family even though she is terrible at it. In regards to her neighborhood, Hyun-jung claims that if she had not married her husband, she "wouldn't even stop by this area" (22:15). She claims "marriage is like a disease," showing that though she meets social expectations, her life as a wife has been completely overtaken by what her husband and his family expects from her, a restrictive and melancholy situation that greatly differs from Mi-so's unconventional but freeing lifestyle. (27:55). Similarly, Mi-so's divorced friend Dae-yong visualizes another possible failure that can arise from chasing social acceptability.

After his wife leaves him stuck with a 20-year lease on the apartment she wanted them to live in, Dae-yong becomes depressed, letting his living room pile up with trash and failing to cook for himself. He becomes so reclusive that Mi-so has to lure him out of his room with a snack and a cigarette in order to have a real conversation with him. Despite their attempts to achieve social success, Hyun-jung and Dae-yong have not found happiness that rivals the enjoyment Mi-so experiences from her few vices.

Mi-so's certainty in her values enables viewers to see the friends who rebuke her lifestyle as more *yŏpki*-esque than Mi-so herself in their strained attempts to cover up their unhappiness while maintaining the status quo. When Mi-so meets Choi Mun-young (Kang Jin-ah) during her work break, for example, Mun-young puts the conversation on hold to set up an IV, claiming that "it's better than food" (17:26). Though Mun-young enters the scene excited and happy, once the needle is in her arm, the film cuts to a shot of her slouched in her seat, subdued and quiet. Mun-young's eccentric behavior further pushes audiences to identify with Mi-so, so that when the women discuss Mi-so's financial situation, audiences automatically sympathize with Mi-so over Mun-young's dishonest attempts to adhere to societal standards of success. Mun-young tells Mi-so it "seems like [she is] living in a fantasy" because she has not gotten a stable job yet (20:30). She does not acknowledge the structural causes of Mi-so's poverty, such as rising rent prices and cigarette taxes. However, in order to present herself as a well-behaved, successful woman, Mun-young has had to lie about her own actions. For example, when Mi-so asks if Mun-young has quit smoking, she replies, "Shh! Who said I ever smoked?" (20:15).⁹ Mun-young implies that Mi-so is foolish for mentioning Mun-young's smoking when in fact, Mi-so is simply recalling a true memory. Mun-young's lying seems even more bizarre given the IV bag hanging next to her head, as if to serve as an indicator that her addictive habits have not disappeared at

⁹ In Korea, smoking is primarily characterized as a signature of the working man, and women who smoke are considered dislikable or masculine.

all. They have simply mutated into a more socially acceptable form that Mun-young does not mind others perceiving. In comparison to Mi-so's self-assuredness, Mun-young's behavior seems *yŏpki*-esque in its rigid dishonesty.

Kim Ro-ki (Choi Deok-moon) acts as a similar representation of social norms, but his focus on marriage enables Mi-so to fight against ideas that women should efface themselves for the sake of family life. Ro-ki lives with his parents, who clearly hope to set their son up with Mi-so. While going to sleep in the same room, Ro-ki suddenly proposes to Mi-so. He claims that he wants to fulfill his parents' wish for a daughter-in-law, and she has no place to go. Mi-so replies that she is "just on the move at the moment," to which Ro-ki sarcastically says, "Boy, is it good to be young" (54:28). Mi-so asks, "Am I an object? I'm homeless but not mindless," pointing out Ro-ki's objectifying language and, further, society's expectations of women to give up their identities to find domestic happiness (54:50). Ro-ki simply replies that Mi-so is "not a kid anymore" and that she should give his offer sincere thought (54:56). His comments belittle Mi-so's conscious, purposeful lifestyle choices by equating her to a child who cannot think for herself simply because Mi-so cannot imagine marrying someone for the sake of satisfying others.

Ro-ki's sudden proposal establishes a sense of *yŏpki*-ness that is only heightened through cinematography and music during her brief stay in his parents' home. When Mi-so wakes up the next morning, the whole house is empty, and the family has locked Mi-so inside. After Mi-so realizes this, a series of comical, *yŏpki*-esque clips are shown as Mi-so recounts and imagines the previous night: a wide-angle lens focuses on Ro-ki's mother, his father, and then Ro-ki himself as they play music together to entertain Mi-so. The camera wavers while moving from character to character, and the edges of the frame are tinted slightly black as if to give the impression of a vignette. All three family members are smiling widely and almost insidiously. Next, the audience is shown a low-angle shot of Ro-ki's parents frantically and joyously throwing red peppers on

the ground of their spare room. They make up an excuse that they must dry the peppers in an obvious ploy to force Mi-so to sleep in Ro-ki's bedroom. The whole sequence is accompanied by a funky, whimsical track that heightens the *yŏpki*-ness of the parents' attempts to turn Mi-so into the family's daughter-in-law. Returning to Mi-so in the present, the camera follows her around the house as she desperately tries to find a way out. Because the camera moves with her, and the frenzied music emphasizes her frantic state of mind in trying to escape, the scene further identifies audiences with Mi-so and against those who claim her choices are irregular.

During Mi-so's last visit with her friend Choi Jung-mi (Kim Jae-hwa), the contrast between Jung-mi's polished, fabricated domestic life and Mi-so's loose honesty enables Mi-so to fight back against the idea that women should be demure rather than individualistic. Jung-mi is, by society's standards, the most successful friend: she lives in a gigantic mansion, she has a rich husband, and she has an adorable baby. However, her house and her mannerisms reveal that she has given up her own personhood to become socially acceptable. When the two women eat dinner with Jung-mi's husband (Kim Hee-won), the table is set with ornate plates of perfectly prepared steaks and shining wine glasses, setting the scene up as a stiff, polished environment. Jung-mi removes the bone from her husband's steak for him, hangs on to his every word, and often glances at him to check his reactions to what Mi-so says. Jung-mi is clearly worried about how her husband will perceive Mi-so's honesty, and this tension crystalizes when Mi-so says that in college, Jung-mi was "like fire" and played the guitar well (1:11:25). Jung-mi's husband, who did not know she played the guitar at all, sarcastically and with some displeasure comments, "A guitarist on fire should have fun, of course" (1:11:51). As the previously light, chiming background music transforms into deep violin notes, the film shows a close-up of Jung-mi's expression visibly darkening. The scene grows tense, and the friction between Jung-mi and her husband reveals that their supposedly happy life is actually filled with sharp boundaries and

judgment. The music and framing expresses the shame Jung-mi's husband puts upon her for having enjoyed herself in college—a shame to which Mi-so is oblivious.

Jung-mi's resulting confrontation with Mi-so reveals that Mi-so's sense of self-worth has evolved beyond Jung-mi's despite their vastly differing social statuses. And because, at this point in the film, the audience has already identified with Mi-so, viewers are pushed to seriously consider if Mi-so's self-assuredness is more valuable than Jung-mi's ability to garner societal praise. After dinner, the two women drink wine together on opposite ends of a long wooden table. When Mi-so asks why Jung-mi has chosen to sit so far away instead of in the seat beside Mi-so, Jung-mi says she is simply used to sitting this way with her husband. This small action reveals Jung-mi's strict adherence to decorum as opposed to Mi-so's preference for intimacy. Jung-mi then tells Mi-so, "It's pathetic that what you love the most is drinking and smoking" (1:13:41). She further claims that Mi-so is in the wrong for staying at her place for so long, asking Mi-so how she cannot possibly understand. Mi-so replies, "Because it doesn't bother me. I don't mind my friends staying at my tiny place" (1:14:35). This conversation encapsulates the radicalism of Mi-so's life: others see Mi-so as incompetent, irrational, or simply inexplicable for undervaluing her own possessions or for refusing to chase tangible success. However, Mi-so's friends think this way because they place their understanding of social propriety onto her lifestyle. On the other hand, Mi-so's will is strong enough to guide her in life, and so she exists outside of social norms, or perhaps flouts them simply by expressing her own personhood.

Because the film does not have a traditionally happy ending, Mi-so's story functions not as a life lesson for the audience but rather as an open contemplation of both the possibilities of living beyond social norms and the ability to accept others who do so. At the very end of the film, Mi-so's hair has gone completely gray. She continues to clean houses, but she has given up her medicine in order to continue smoking and drinking. Her college friends all reunite for a

funeral when one of Ro-ki's parents passes away, but Mi-so could not be reached because she can no longer afford a cellphone. Her inability to keep in touch with them is quite literally caused by her socioeconomic status, indicating how Korean society marginalizes and eventually completely denies space for those without enough money. Each of the friends recounts their experience of Mi-so visiting, and their narration plays over shots of urban Seoul as seen from the inside of a bus. The entire sequence emphasizes the extent to which Korea has transformed through modernization. The camera speeds by landscapes of apartment buildings seemingly stacked on top of each other and endless rows of cars crowding four-lane highways. While crossing a bridge on the Han River, the bus and the camera inside slow down to capture Mi-so walking along the bridge, smoking a cigarette. Amidst the fast-paced, capitalistic setting of urban Korea, Mi-so is the singular person stopping to take in the view, enjoying life at her own speed.

This self-paced lifestyle clearly comes at a cost, as the film's last shot shows Mi-so inside a red tent at the edge of the Han River, her new home. Though light from inside the tent illuminates her silhouette, viewers do not see her directly, keeping them from perceiving her emotions. The audience's identification with Mi-so is abruptly taken away, leaving viewers to interpret how successful Mi-so's life is and how success itself should be defined: has Mi-so simply become a financially irresponsible homeless person, or has she achieved a level of independence from Korea's restrictive society that would only be possible through her specific way of living? Mi-so is by no means thriving financially. However, she continues to live her life the way she pleases, and she is never shown in outright misery or despair over her choices. At the end of the movie, she still has a place to stay, a means to make money, and a hold on her own personhood. The film thus leaves it up to the audience to decide whether this ending is still a form of success worth celebrating. The last scene does not break its dedication to showing the realities of working class life in Korea, which would have had to occur if Mi-so had suddenly

solved her financial situation. Instead, Mi-so makes viewers consider her lifestyle as a serious, informed choice, enabling audiences to become more accepting of seemingly outlandish values that exist beyond social norms.

Microhabitat garnered over \$400,000 at the box office from about 60,000 viewers (“Microhabitat”). Though not a wild success among popular audiences, the film received critical acclaim at countless Korean film festivals, and director Jeon Go-woon collected several Best New Director awards for the movie. Jeon’s vision to explore the struggle of working, poor women in Korea captured critical attention. Her film effectively revealed the realities of life for women with low incomes and depicted an independent, self-assured female protagonist in her unique attempts to handle her financial struggles.

Realistic, unmarried Korean female protagonists explore the complexities of social life, socioeconomic struggle, and personal values all through their own self-motivated narratives. While *Work Later, Drink Now* focuses on social issues such as sex and work, and *Microhabitat* hones in on greater structural problems within Korea’s economy, both stories elevate their dynamic protagonists in ways that empower individualistic narratives in a largely restrictive, conformist Korean society. Mi-so, Ji-goo, Ji-yeon, and So-hee all act *yŏpki*-esque in their own ways, and their independent, unique personalities are precisely what enable complex storylines that revolve entirely around them and their desires in life. It is not unreasonable to demand such dynamism and intricacy from Korean dramas or movies because real Korean women constantly face new challenges and have to fight against obsolete social structures simply to exist in Korea. In other words, these seemingly *yŏpki* protagonists are actually more realistic in their approaches to portraying Korean women today than most Korean romantic dramas are. The stories discussed in this chapter include dimensions of women’s lives beyond love. And without such complexity in female characters’ lives, viewers of Korean media, both domestic and international, will

continue to expect women to conform to—and perhaps even to agree with—patriarchal gender norms that demand they live submissive, domestic lives. Progressive Korean shows and films focus, at their core, on emulating real life to the extent that its circumstances may illuminate the self-motivated thought processes and lifestyles of their female main characters.

Chapter Two

How Elderly Korean Women Can Claim the Spotlight

Societal perceptions of the elderly in Korea have recently shifted from indisputable respect to more complicated ideas of envy and even, at times, disgust. Confucian ideology, which heavily influences Korean social norms, elevates the elderly without question. This is evident not only in the honorifics used in the Korean language when addressing elders but also in familial values of filial piety. Adults are expected to live with or provide for their elderly parents long after marriage. And though less common now, traditionally, wives would move into their husbands' households to take care of the domestic responsibilities like cooking and cleaning. These traditions still hold for many Korean families, and couples who do not live with the husband's parents are expected to visit them for holidays, during which the wife essentially serves as a maid to her in-laws. The idea of respect for one's elders originates from the Confucian norm of the "lineage elder," a man chosen within the family based on "age and experience" who "wielded the greatest authority" in his line (Deuchler 9). This structure enabled eldest sons to take priority in the family because they would receive their fathers' "fief and rank" after the father's passing (Deuchler 132). Age was a deciding factor in the level of power an individual was due in society.

Despite these teachings of respect based on age, Confucian ideology still significantly marginalized elderly women's roles in Korean society. Older women are primarily given respect in terms of their positions within the family as mothers-in-law. According to Martina Deuchler, "the most authoritative position was held by the husband's father, or possibly the husband's grandfather; and his counterpart was the husband's mother, the wife's mother-in-law. The mother-in-law was the most important individual in the life of the young bride" (Deuchler 261-262). In other words, an older woman exhibited her power through her connection to her

husband, her ability to give birth to a son, and the dominance she exerted over younger women in her house. Confucianism caused this gender dynamic by dictating that “the relationship between son and parent comes first, before the relationship between husband and wife” (Sung 348). This influence was steeped even within the legal framework of Korean society, as, under *hojuje*, “after the father die[d], the eldest son [became] head of the family, even in official documents” (348). Thus, in Korean society, “hierarchy between men and women comes first, rather than the hierarchy between different generations” (348). Correspondingly, elderly women often exercise their power solely within domestic spheres over their daughters-in-law.

Within the past decade or so, the Korean elderly have become increasingly marginalized by younger generations that feel resentful of their wealth, wary of job market competition, and repulsed by physical aging. According to Hangsub Choi’s article, “A Sociological Study on the Disgust of the Young Generation toward the Elderly in Korean Society: Social Causes,” youths see elders as either outdated thinkers who no longer contribute to society or as hindrances to their employment search because of the rising retirement age. These negative perceptions began sometime after 2013, but the exact turning point in societal perceptions has not yet been defined (Choi 62). Structural changes further exacerbate these tensions, as the elderly population is expected to rise from 16 to 25 percent of the total Korean population by 2030 (Cho and Seo 26). According to a 2018 survey done by the National Human Rights Commission of Korea, almost 60 percent of youths believed elderly workers minimized job opportunities for youths, and approximately 80 percent self-reported biases against the elderly (Cho and Seo 44; National Human Rights Commission). In truth, the two age groups do not compete for the same jobs, but rather, “the number of jobs for the young generation has decreased, while the number of jobs for the elderly has increased” (Choi 73). In addition, youths conflate those in their 70s, “some of the poorest economically among many generations,” with those in their 60s, dubbed the “fortunate

generation” because many inherited enough wealth to attend college (Choi 67). This conflation compounds young people’s disgust towards the elderly across generations as youths hold on to false ideas about unearned financial luck and employment competition.

In this modern framework of disgust towards the elderly, women experience even further dislike and discrimination due to strict beauty expectations of youthful femininity. The country as a whole has increasingly viewed aging as inversely correlated with how attractive a person is, as is evident in Korea’s rapidly growing anti-aging and plastic surgery industry, which was nearly three times as large in 2019 as it was in 2015 (Choi 77). Korean society combines ideas of youthfulness with beauty, an inherently feminized ideal. Elderly women are clearly at a disadvantage because of this association, as “degraded skin and appearance arising from physical aging are triggers of disgust by the young toward the elderly” (79). Beyond seeing the elderly as reminders that aging is inevitable, Korean youths may find it difficult to think older women who look their age could also look beautiful.

Because of both Confucian familial norms and modern ideas of disgust toward the elderly, Korean film and television have largely focused on young protagonists and sidelined older characters. As adults grow older in Korea, their acceptable actions and lifestyles are increasingly restricted, and their power becomes more concentrated in the domestic sphere. Correspondingly, the elderly are confined to small, familial roles on-screen that primarily serve to heighten the drama of young protagonists’ lives. This is evident in common family dramas such as *Unstoppable High Kick*, which ran from 2006 to 2007 and gave rise to two successful sequel series. In such shows, elderly characters serve as backdrops for the more captivating love stories and daily lives of the protagonists, who are often their children or grandchildren. Famous actresses like Go Doo-shim—labeled “the nation’s mother”—and Na Moon-hee have entire acting portfolios built on their roles as grandmothers, elderly mothers, or mothers-in-law

(“Veteran Actress”). Their characters usually serve as a barrier to the drama’s main romance or as a mechanism to accentuate their children’s wishes to exhibit filial piety. The Korean drama industry’s obsession with romance further excludes the elderly from center-stage roles, as young people’s disgust towards aging seems to preclude the possibility that they would enjoy or relate to watching older people fall in love. Elderly women are thus left to chaste, asexual roles steeped in Confucian norms.

This chapter focuses on two feminist portrayals of elderly women: the 2021 film *Everglow* and the 2016 drama *Dear My Friends*. Through these examples, I argue that introducing romance into elderly women’s stories can enable these characters to drive their own narratives in the world of Korean entertainment. Though this approach diverges from the feminist agenda discussed in the previous chapter, reframing elderly women in the context of romance actually gives these women the agency to either enjoy a relationship, to demand respect from a significant other, or to live a full life without one. By normalizing love in elderly women’s lives, feminist portrayals can show that these women have self-motivated narratives, thus enabling them to reclaim their space on Korean screens and, subsequently, in public life. Progressive media expands expectations of elderly women’s lives to include love in order to argue that older women deserve the spotlight as much as any young female protagonist does.

Love as Empowerment in Elderly Women’s Stories

Everglow showcases an elderly woman experiencing love like any young woman might in modern society. Protagonist Go Jin-ok (Go Doo-shim) is the best *haenyeo* on Jeju Island.¹⁰ The film’s first scene swiftly establishes her as such: while other divers are just arriving at the

¹⁰ Haenyeos are female divers of Jeju Island famous for their abilities to free dive without any gear and to hold their breaths for long stretches of time. Haenyeos collect “90% of all shellfish exported from the island” (Song 3) and help sustain the island’s economy.

shore, Jin-ok appears fully prepared in her diving suit with an armful of gear. She casually chastises the women who came late before leading the other *haenyeos* to the sea. The camera moves with the group as they walk, but when Jin-ok pauses to breathe in the ocean air, it pauses with her. This scene simultaneously identifies viewers with Jin-ok and clearly pinpoints her as the protagonist. Her physical strength and swimming skills are so impressive they attract the attention of a broadcasting channel in Seoul that intends to profile her. At 70 years old, she falls in love with Han Kyung-hoon (Woo Ji-hyun), a producer of the channel in his 30s who comes to the island in search of her. The film paints their relationship as a meaningful, respectful bond through warm lighting and breathtaking sets that are reminiscent of typical Korean drama romances. Go and Woo's nuanced performances also establish a relationship dynamic in which Jin-ok is elevated, and her independence is prioritized. Plot devices further argue that Jin-ok is worth her center-stage position: by presenting her as the desired subject of a documentary series, the movie suggests that elderly women like Jin-ok merit more attention and praise in general.

Jin-ok is first established as a confident, capable, complex individual, and her position as such remains steady alongside the development of her love story, proving that sophisticated portrayals of independent women in love are more than feasible. Tellingly, she seems to exist outside of a familial structure: though she lives with an ailing male family member—whose relation to her remains unspecified—he is only shown in one brief scene, in which she feeds him porridge. Beyond this minute of screen time, Jin-ok's family is never shown, and the story focuses entirely on her life as a diver. This enables her to find agency in her own life while simultaneously rejecting both Confucian expectations and current, negative perceptions of the elderly: as a woman living a full life without family, Jin-ok exists beyond traditional norms. At the same time, her strenuous occupation's low income and undeniable importance to Korea's economy help her sidestep modern prejudices based on employment envy. The job of *haenyeos*

is growing less and less popular as islanders increasingly turn to the mainland for modern employment opportunities, but Jin-ok remains loyal to the position and helps sustain the seafood industry of her island. The job also pushes back against the more recent view of “ageing bodies” as “passive objects of care, a burden to the national economy or to families and grownup children” (Elfving-Hwang 6). Jin-ok’s complete self-sufficiency, signaled both through her job and through her disconnection from family, refutes both Confucian norms and modern conceptions of the elderly as inept.

Jin-ok’s power and status is further heightened by the film’s scenes of contrast between herself and Kyung-hoon. Kyung-hoon struggles to adapt to the fierce *haenyeo*’s tough attitudes and lifestyles. During their first meeting, Jin-ok emerges from the sea with little to no care for how she looks. Her net, full of the day’s catch, dangles over her shoulder, her swimsuit clings to her body. When she sits and takes her mask off, her wet hair dangles around her face. She rinses her mouth with water and spits. Kyung-hoon, attempting to establish camaraderie with Jin-ok, tries to take her net for her as they walk back to the main road. In doing so, he emulates both a dutiful son refusing to let his elder carry a heavy object and a masculine man who has to be physically stronger than women. However, Kyung-hoon actually proves too weak to handle the net’s weight, and his back bends nearly ninety degrees as he walks alongside Jin-ok, further cementing his role as one of subservience. The performances here clearly give Jin-ok autonomy and power while putting Kyung-hoon in his place for assuming she would require his assistance. Throughout the movie, Kyung-hoon continues to help Jin-ok with her nets and other materials, but on account of this scene, his offers to help are always depicted as deferential rather than officious. He usually approaches Jin-ok with a bowed posture and asks if he can help her. When she protests, he has to repeatedly request her permission, indicating that Jin-ok does not require the help, but she deserves it, both as his desired film subject and as an elder.

Through Kyung-hoon and Jin-ok's romantic relationship, *Everglow* suggests that elderly women should not be excluded from the love and attention that younger women receive. Though the film does not depict Jin-ok as overtly sexual, it also refrains from assigning expectations of chastity or asexuality. A clear turning point occurs when Jin-ok accidentally sees Kyung-hoon bathing. This scene reverses the gender dynamics of an old Korean folktale titled, "The Fairy and the Woodcutter." In this tale, a woodcutter spies on a fairy bathing, and her beauty entralls him. Artwork depicting this story often portrays the fairy in a pond, oblivious to the woodcutter nearby. *Everglow* turns this tale on its head by transforming Kyung-hoon into the naked, unwitting fairy and placing the masculine woodcutter role on Jin-ok. As Kyung-hoon stands in the bathroom with a shower head in hand, the camera clearly frames his upper body in a medium shot. Instead of a close-up of him from the neck up, which would give him some privacy, this framing turns his physical appearance into an object of attraction for both the audience and Jin-ok, establishing a female gaze. When Jin-ok enters, the film cuts to a shot of her framed in the doorway, looking at Kyung-hoon in shock. The camera is positioned just over Kyung-hoon's shoulder, but he fails to notice her. The audience's registration of Jin-ok's shock identifies viewers with her rather than Kyung-hoon. The camera slowly zooms in on Jin-ok before cutting to an even closer shot of her that blocks Kyung-hoon out, suggesting that her reaction matters more than even Kyung-hoon's nakedness. Her eyes widen, and she dashes out of the bathroom with her arms waving wildly. The next scene shows Jin-ok tossing and turning in bed, unsettled by the events of the day. She is once again framed in a doorway, drawing a parallel between this and the previous scene. By pairing the bathing scene with a bedroom scene, *Everglow* suggests that Jin-ok is far from the asexual representations of most elderly women in Korean media.

As the film continues and the two characters fall in love, the movie's mise-en-scene develops their relationship into a dreamy romance while simultaneously reversing gender roles to

continue empowering Jin-ok. For instance, in a scene between Kyung-hoon and Jin-ok, the two lay in a field with warm light shining down on them through the trees. The natural set design is nothing short of what a viewer would expect from a romantic drama. However, Kyung-hoon's positioning more closely emulates a traditionally feminine posture as he leans his head on Jin-ok and looks up at her. Jin-ok remains elevated above Kyung-hoon just as she was in the beginning of the film, when Kyung-hoon first met her and carried her net. In typical Korean dramas, gendered expectations of romance often encourage the man to lead the relationship and the woman to follow. However, in this scene, the characters' positioning shows that even after their relationship has begun, Jin-ok remains Kyung-hoon's superior. She has not been relegated to a lower status simply because she has taken on a feminized role as a girlfriend. *Everglow* thus tips the needle toward more even power dynamics in heterosexual romances by normalizing the appearance of a woman having more power than a man in a romantic relationship.

While *Everglow* does not feature a happy ending, this occurs not because of Jin-ok's age but rather because her identity as a *haenyeo* matters more than Kyung-hoon's love. In the scene preceding their breakup, Kyung-hoon hops into a taxi to see why Jin-ok has not arrived at the airport to leave for the mainland with him. He remembers an interview he conducted with her when he asked her how it felt to live a life constantly out at sea. Jin-ok says that even though she has grown tired of it, the ocean always calls to her, reaching its hand out. With a little smile, Jin-ok claims, "A *haenyeo* can't live if she has to leave the ocean. That's how she was born" (1:23:12). Recalling this moment in the backseat of the taxi, Kyung-hoon tears up but also chuckles a bit. This action reveals that while he feels heartbroken by the fact that Jin-ok will not leave her life in Jeju Island for him, he knows he must accept her decision and be happy for her. The film cuts from a close-up of Kyung-hoon that highlights his tender emotional state to an extreme long shot of Jin-ok's back as she swims out to the ocean. The shot's distance and her

positioning reveals that she has already started moving on, suggesting a level of maturity and independence within Jin-ok that Kyung-hoon cannot yet achieve. When he arrives on the shore, Jin-ok resurfaces briefly, and the two share a sad smile because they both understand without question that Jin-ok belongs on the island. Thus, though *Everglow* might have pushed even more boundaries through a happy ending, its conclusion ultimately honors Jin-ok's wishes in a way that her relationship with Kyung-hoon circumstantially could not. In the end, she does not bend to fit herself into the relationship, and Kyung-hoon does not expect her to.

Even with veteran actress Go Doo-shim, *Everglow* made little more than \$100,000 at the box office and reached a meager 15,000 viewers in theaters ("Everglow"). These numbers pale in comparison to Go's other films, such as *Exit*, *Good Morning President*, and *Family Ties*, which have made millions at the box office. *Everglow*'s unconventional age gap likely put off viewers who have most often seen Go play grandmothers or aging mothers in the backgrounds of their favorite dramas rather than the main love interest of a romantic film. However, the very existence of a character like Jin-ok in Korean theaters implies and actualizes a shift toward more progressive narratives for elderly women.

How *Dear My Friends* Encourages Grandmothers to Reclaim Their Personhood

While *Everglow* offers a blatantly unconventional subject and romance, the drama *Dear My Friends* deals with more familiar elderly characters and instead expands societal expectations of their lifestyles. Though the narrator of the drama, Wan (Go Hyun-jung), is a woman in her 30s, the more prominent characters are her mother Nan-hui (Go Doo-shim) and her mother's friends, whose ages range from their 60s to their 70s. As in *Everglow*, Nan-hui and her friends are subjects for a media product: Wan's upcoming book. Initially, Wan rejected the idea of chronicling her mothers' friends' lives. Acting as a stand-in for young audiences who feel

disgust towards the elderly, Wan proclaimed that no one would be interested in such a story. However, Nan-hui insisted that their stories are worth listening to, and the drama proved her right. The series features an ensemble cast of elderly actors and actresses who are easily recognizable as the grandmothers or grandfathers in many Korean TV shows. But in this drama, they take the spotlight, overturning misconceptions of elderly lifestyles as boring or mundane. Through episodes on life beyond marriage, unrequited love, and divorce, the show provides modern examples of elderly women who bend traditional stereotypes every day.

One friend, Moon Jeong-a (Na Moon-hee), provides a nuanced example of how elderly women in modern society can gain more autonomy and respect from those around them, starting within their own marriages. For decades on end, Jeong-a loyally served her husband Kim Seok-gyun (Shin Gu), raising three daughters with him while receiving constant rebukes from her in-laws for failing to provide a son. Until Seok-gyun's parents passed away, she and her husband lived in a house nearby so that they could fulfill their filial duties to them. Jeong-a never asked her husband for money because she knew he reserved it for his younger siblings, and she fulfilled almost every criterion for a faithful Confucian wife. Now, in old age, she earns money by cooking and cleaning for her indifferent children. Seok-gyun berates her whenever she speaks, constantly insulting her for spending too much money or for eating too much even though Jeong-a earns her own income and does all of the household's cooking. Her main joys are ones she specifically enjoys without Seok-gyun: spending time with her friends or enjoying her favorite bottle of beer alone.

A family tragedy finally inspires Jeong-a to get a divorce and forge a life for herself, and because of the hardships she has endured in her marriage, audiences root for Jeong-a instead of criticizing her for breaking up her family in her 70s. When Jeong-a's mother passes away, Jeong-a files for a divorce and moves out. In episode 11, Seok-gyun visits Jeong-a's new home

and angrily asks, “What did I do so wrong? My parents told me to look after my brothers. They told me to because I’m the eldest. That was their last wish. All I did was do what they said. What’s so wrong about doing what my parents told me to do?” (32:21) He deflects any blame he should acknowledge for being a cruel husband onto his filial duties, shouting, “In my life, my parents come first, and my brothers come second. What’s so wrong about that?” (33:33). Jeong-a replies:

If your brothers come after your parents, then go live with your brothers. Before my mom died, she told me to live a relaxed life. That’s why I left home. It was hard for me, so I sent my mom to a nursing home, and I let her die at the beach in the end. But I’m going to grant my mom’s dying wish no matter what. You’re not the only one. I love my parents, too! (33:39)

Through this dialogue, *Dear My Friends* turns Jeong-a’s decision to get a divorce at such an old age—a choice that would normally cause her to fall far outside traditional social norms—into a duty to fulfill as a *hyonyeo*, a daughter who properly respects and cares for her parents. This reframing better fits into Korean society’s expectations of women to always center their lives around family and elders. Jeong-a is still going against Confucian ideology by putting her own mother first, but this scene raises the question of why a woman is not allowed to prioritize her own family over her husband’s in the first place.¹¹ Moreover, the show in general garners sympathy for Jeong-a by emphasizing Seok-gyun’s cruelty toward her in contrast to her diligent attempts to be the perfect daughter-in-law. This scene suggests that now, at 70 years old, Jeong-a should have the chance to be a *hyonyeo* in her own right. Jeong-a is able to reclaim some autonomy both within her relationship and within her family in general through a divorce that has been more than earned.

¹¹ According to Confucian beliefs, “when a woman is married filial piety should be to her parents-in-law, rather than to her own parents” (Sung 346-347).

Though at first, Seok-gyun vows that Jeong-a will return to him and repent for her crime of leaving him, he gradually comes to realize that he is the one in need of her support, effectively reversing the narrative of helpless wives who cannot live without their husbands. In episode 13, when Seok-gyun attempts to make a basic stew, his uncertain actions in the kitchen reveal and emphasize his incompetence as a husband. He slaps a cube of tofu onto a cutting board, roughly cuts it into uneven squares, and splashes the pieces into the boiling stew, making small messes everywhere he goes. Clearly out of his element in the domestic, feminine setting of the kitchen, Seok-gyun is no longer able to boast any of his merits or put anyone else down. He must admit his failure to take care of himself, which is perhaps the ultimate shame for a man whose socialized role is to provide for an entire family. His incompetence is accentuated in comparison to Jeong-a's independent life, and their differences are exemplified in a scene in which she spots a job listing. A low-angle shot shows her standing at the top of a hill, elevated and almost triumphant in her victory of gaining freedom. She joyfully remarks that even if the ad is lying about the high pay, "and they just pay half, it's still more than 20,000 won" ("Episode 13" 37:40). Her realistic comment shows that though she is optimistic and happy to be on her own, she is also not entering single life with rose-colored glasses. Jeong-a knows the realities of the working world. Many women in Jeong-a's generation are stereotyped as uneducated, unemployed mothers who only live within their households. Jeong-a breaks this expectation by thriving on her own and appearing particularly well-adjusted in contrast to Seok-gyun's failure to be independent. She effectively pushes back against the narrative that women are the ones who need spouses to survive, and Seok-gyun's ineptitude further empowers her.

Seok-gyun approaches Jeong-a just after she spots the flier, and the scene's framing conveys the changed power dynamics between them. In the beginning of the drama, the two were often shown sitting across from each other or side-by-side. When Jeong-a's mother passed

away, Jeong-a was at times depicted sitting on the bathroom floor while Seok-gyun stood above her. In most instances, they were either on the same level or Jeong-a was placed below her husband. But now that the two are no longer together, Jeong-a walks in front of Seok-gyun. Their positions on the hill heighten the gap between them, with Jeong-a's head constantly framed above Seok-gyun's. At one point, Seok-gyun walks in front of her and tells her he has been fired. This action reveals his hope for some reaction of awe or sympathy from Jeong-a that would allow him to regain some power in their current dynamic. However, Jeong-a simply says, "That's good. Good riddance," while sidestepping him and reclaiming her space in front of him ("Episode 13" 38:11). Standing at a spot above Seok-gyun, she scolds him for his idea to collect paper to earn money because ethically, he should leave that opportunity for those in severe need of employment. She continues to walk several paces ahead of Seok-gyun, and he obediently follows, vowing not to collect paper. Through framing and dialogue, this scene reverses the characters' roles: Jeong-a is now the one who deserves more respect and can even dole out moral admonishments, while Seok-gyun must bite his lip against the criticism and obey her.

During their meal together, Seok-gyun attempts to make amends, but Jeong-a finally gets the emotional retribution she deserves. Seok-gyun tentatively brings up their unborn son, who did not survive Jeong-a's first pregnancy, and tries to apologize for neglecting Jeong-a to the point of miscarriage. Rather than hearing him out, Jeong-a flips the small dining table and yells at him, at long last expressing her resentment towards him for never taking care of her properly. Instead of defending himself or lashing out at her, Seok-gyun hears her out. This silence can be seen as Seok-gyun's ultimate act of repentance and his rejection of his previously prideful, patriarchal attitude. After Jeong-a is done yelling at him, he quietly and meekly begins cleaning up the spilled food, further emphasizing his wish to make amends and the level to which he has humbled himself. In the beginning of this episode, Seok-gyun started his day by reading a list of

commandments to be a good husband. This attempt turns Jeong-a, his wife, into a woman to be worshiped, and Seok-gyun's role as a husband into one that requires devotion. One of the lines read, "A husband should always lower his voice and talk kindly" ("Episode 13" 6:53). In response to this at the time, Seok-gyun said, "Bullshit. If a husband can't yell at his wife, where's the fun in that?" (7:01) But by refraining from his usual, defensive reaction in his conversation with Jeong-a, Seok-gyun obeys the commandment and enables a role reversal that reflects genuine remorse for his past. He sets an example for other Korean husbands who similarly mistreat their wives while Jeong-a shows audiences that the frustrations women experience from constant neglect merit true anger. The scene imagines a potential road to healing for marriages that are so imbalanced that women have had to harbor resentment instead of love for their husbands.

Dear My Friends' Depiction of Independence as an Elderly Woman

In contrast to Jeong-a's fraught marital life, *Dear My Friends* offers a portrayal of unmarried elderly women through Choong-nam (Youn Yuh-jung), a woman who fills her life with hobbies such as running her cafe and studying rather than marriage and family. Choongnam's friends speculate she has never been in a relationship at all, and though at times, she is depicted as a lonely woman, she is arguably not any lonelier than her friends, many of whom have gotten divorced or experienced their husbands' deaths. Moreover, Choong-nam has garnered a significant amount of wealth through her own intelligent investments, so she has even more autonomy and agency than her married friends. She also has more interests than the others: she attends classes in an attempt to get into college, and she patronizes a group of penniless academics. Though she did not receive an education while growing up, Choong-nam can make learning a part of her life in her old age largely because she does not have a husband or any kids.

Choong-nam flourishes through a self-sufficient life outside of a family structure and finds fulfillment through personal development.

By acting as a patron to her professor friends—a handful of well-educated younger men who, by Confucian standards, should hold more social power than her—Choong-nam reverses the narrative of older, powerful men who spend their money on younger women. However, at first, the professors are clearly swindling her: they use Choong-nam's benevolence to their advantage by forcing her to pay for their exorbitant alcohol fees and to buy their unsold art pieces. Choong-nam allows this because she wants to experience academic, intellectual conversations in exchange. Once she realizes that the professors truly do not care about her well-being, Choong-nam reigns in her kindness and punishes them severely. During lunch with the professors in episode 11, she uses one of the men's pottery pieces as a serving bowl. Though Choong-nam serves them, this domestic, subordinate act is used to mock the men who constantly exploited her. When her nephew breaks another pottery piece, supposedly worth 300,000 won (roughly \$300), she casually tells him to replace it with a three-million-won pot (roughly \$300,000). This display of wealth reminds the professors, rather rudely, that she is the one with power in their relationship. And as with Jeong-a, Choong-nam's repeated suffering at the hands of these selfish men enables audiences to root for her, making her revenge feel well-deserved. When she publicly humiliates the professors, she weakens their power over her and emphasizes her own autonomy through wealth. Instead of feeling unsettled by an upset in Confucian gender norms, viewers cheer her on and support her empowerment.

Choong-nam's happy ending concludes not with romance but rather with a complete acknowledgment of her higher moral status over the male professors. When the professors return to Choong-nam's home in episode 12, having finally received recognition as artists, they beg for her to sell or loan them back the pieces she bought from them. At first she refuses in order to

criticize the professors for their greed. She tells them that they have become obsessed with money and forgotten their true passions. Then, she says, “your biggest sin is that you failed to realize your self-worth. You shouldn't have been so quick to sell off your works” (25:13). When she says this, the camera shows a close-up of one of the professor’s faces as he turns, startled, to Choong-nam. Even within this confrontation, Choong-nam’s words about the heart behind his work clearly resonate with him. After this moral lesson, she exercises grace and clemency by informing them that she will in fact return their art free of charge. Choong-nam refuses to stoop to the professors’ level and make the situation about money. Instead, she focuses on the ethics behind the professors’ intentions and teaches them not to discredit themselves. Though wealthy, is devoid of greed and thus more mature and respectable than the men she sponsored for years.

Though *Dear My Friends* garnered, on average, only around five percent in viewership—meaning five percent of Korean households watched the show during its airtime—it received warm love from its fans and even critical acclaim. At the 2017 Baeksang Art Awards, the show took home the Best Drama Award, capsizing expectations of a win for *Goblin*, a wildly popular romantic drama (Chui). *Dear My Friends* also won Best Screenplay at both the Baeksang and the Korea Drama Awards. Its message about understanding the elderly and appreciating their narratives struck a chord with both critical and popular viewers. The show’s success is likely due in part to its reliance on subverting familiar drama conventions concerning elderly portrayals. *Dear My Friends* was just progressive enough to tip the needle against ageism without being written off as too radical by conservative Korean viewers.

Within the framework of romance and relationships with men, Jin-ok, Jeong-a, and Choong-nam provide empowered portrayals of elderly women. Jin-ok reclaims a position for older women in tender romances, whereas Jeong-a asserts that women deserve more respect both within and outside of their roles as wives, and Choong-nam offers a way for single women to

gain power in platonic relationships with men. By situating these women's stories within the context of romance, these feminist portrayals enable their protagonists to bend Confucian norms and expand current expectations for life as an elderly woman. *Everglow* and *Dear My Friends* prove that stories revolving around elderly female characters are not only entertaining but also thought-provoking in terms of their commentary on how Korean society marginalizes older women.

Chapter Three

Combating the Weaponization of Lesbian Love

Korean lesbians are perhaps one of the most overlooked and marginalized groups of women in terms of their portrayals in mainstream media. The majority of Korean society still views homosexuality as an abnormality, a moral sin, or even an unspeakable taboo, and any media that even acknowledges, without condemnation, life beyond heterosexual norms can be perceived as pro-LGBTQ+ and therefore inappropriate. For example:

In 2014 *It's OK It's Love*, a series by SBS (Seoul Broadcasting System), featured an episode in which a female doctor on a psychiatric ward says in passing, in reference to a transsexual patient, that homosexuality is simply a sexual preference or choice. This was perceived in some quarters as a statement that condoned homosexual love, despite the drama having no central gay characters. (Glynn and Kim 338)

Though this statement is not even an accurate perspective on LGBTQ+ issues—as it both conflates gender identity with sexuality and represents sexuality as a choice rather than an innate identity, a spectrum, or a social construct—the mere mention of queerness without a corresponding warning against it was enough to spark a demonstration “protesting the expression of such perceived pro-gay sentiment in television drama” (Glynn and Kim 338).

It is not surprising, then, that lesbian relationships have received little acknowledgement from mainstream media; while there have been few films and dramas depicting feminist single and elderly women, there have been even fewer representations of lesbian characters at all. Stories with lesbian women who drive their own narratives are usually sequestered to the smaller screen, often shown in short web series or unpopular art films. Mainstream media on the other hand may employ brief mentions of lesbian side characters who make no impression on the audience solely to move the plot of the heterosexual protagonists forward. In some cases, queer

behavior is even associated with recklessness or danger, and most of the few lesbian characters in Korean dramas have met gruesome or unhappy ends.

As discussed in the previous chapters, Confucian norms pushed women to focus on marriage and family, and this occurred solely within the realm of heterosexuality. Women had the important duty of bearing children—hopefully sons who would carry on the lineage name—and this was not possible without heterosexuality. For women, sex served solely as a means to consummate marriage. While men could and did have multiple lovers, as is evident in Korea's history of concubinage, women were not supposed to exhibit any sexual desire. Lesbianism was therefore a non-issue in Confucian society because it would imply that women had sexual urges beyond simply having children or satisfying their male partners. This thinking still pervades Korean society today, in which lesbian love is not viewed as a legitimate romantic attraction but rather as a mistaken phenomenon that primarily serves to threaten the patriarchal family system and social order. Heteronormativity dominates Korean media, and there are extremely few positive explorations into romances beyond those that occur between male and female characters.

However, same-sex relationships between women in Korea have always existed, with the first documented accounts in the media arising in the early twentieth century. New womanhood, a movement that spread from Europe into Japan before making its way to Korea through educated women who could access international texts (Moon 3), constituted “Korea's first-generation feminists who challenged Korea's patriarchal social order head-on” (Klein 36). New womanhood brought with it ideas of modernity and increased social status for women, and many Korean feminists began to fight for more equal family dynamics, which would free them up to enter public and political spheres in the same way that men did. During this era, some Korean feminists began lifelong, romantic partnerships with other women, often called a “Boston

Marriage” in America, through which a woman would embark on “a long-term, committed relationship with a woman who shared her home and her life” (Klein 43). A notable example is one of Korea’s first feminists, Helen Kim, and her lifelong relationship with Lee Jong Ai. Freed from the confines of heterosexual norms, Kim enjoyed a prosperous career in the public sphere, eventually becoming the president of Ewha College, which is now known as Ewha Womans University. Kim’s Boston Marriage signified the flourishing of female life that could occur beyond traditional family structures.

Though lesbian romances might have succeeded in real life, and more recent scholars are finding and acknowledging these examples, mainstream media throughout colonial Korea and into the Cold War often used lesbian love to symbolize the threat of the New Woman rather than to celebrate her. Modernization was a herald of achievement and economic success, but when it came to women, the general Korean public remained quite conservative in its wish for women to stay in traditional roles like the dutiful wife and mother. Women who “crossed gender boundaries in career, education, or lifestyle risked being smeared with rumors about their sexual lives” because the public viewed such women as threats to domestic and social order (Yoo 80). In fact, newspaper reports often associated new women with promiscuity or lesbianism not to progressively propose that women could have sex lives beyond one man but rather to imply that new women had loose morals and were not to be approved of. Those who opposed modernization and the growing influence of Western values also thought a problem with educating women was the growing schoolgirl culture and its opportunities for “intimate contact between girls, which might lead to lesbian tendencies and behavior” (Yoo 71). In other words, to the public, same-sex attraction was a sign that women were straying from heterosexual relationships not because the women themselves were queer, but instead because restrictive gender norms had simply driven “mistreated women into the arms of their female and American

counterparts” (Henry 19). Conservatives thought such deviations from straight romance were environmental or circumstantial rather than innate. Thus, in the era of new womanhood, lesbianism was used as a conceptual tool that signified a greater ideological shift in society instead of a sexuality. In feminist circles, this tool could encourage more female-centric ideas of love and life, but in conservative contexts, this tool indicated inappropriate or loose sexual morals.

In this chapter, I argue that progressive media showcases lesbian relationships in order to properly represent same-sex love between women as love in and of itself rather than to signify greater social movements, regardless of whether those movements are liberal or conservative. Though it is valuable for shows and films to acknowledge the hardships people with marginalized identities endure in real life, on-screen representations can be even more effective when they normalize minorities and their rightful spaces in mainstream media. If the only lesbian characters viewers can find on Korean TV are constantly suffering abuse or having to fight tirelessly for equal treatment, this signals to audiences that lesbians live unfortunate, abnormal lives that differ from Korean society’s perceptions of regular behavior. Of course, lesbian viewers can and usually have to read against the grain and use any mention of lesbians—in both real life and in the media—as “uncanny ways to imagine a community of like-minded subjects” (Henry 20). However, a more forward-looking expectation for lesbian portrayals does not demand that lesbian viewers or any viewers at all read against the grain.

Instead, liberal media representations give lesbian relationships the same merit as heterosexual ones, and in terms of Korean dramas and films, this often means giving the romantic protagonists their well-deserved happy endings. A signature genre convention of Korean dramas—and perhaps a reason for the genre’s massive popularity—is a predictably successful romance. While heterosexual protagonists meet this convention in almost every story

produced, lesbian partners are rarely given the same on-screen happiness. In my analysis of on-screen portrayals, I will be taking into account the traditional values of most Korean audiences to claim that the most progressive portrayals of lesbian love make definitive statements supporting the LGBTQ+ community. Unambiguously happy endings are needed when dealing with conservative viewers who may make every attempt to read against a homosexual narrative (by, for instance, claiming that two characters are simply close friends or by taking an unhappy ending as a show's moral lesson to viewers). In other words, while some audiences may still find empowerment in tragic endings or sexualized representations, my focus rests on the fact that most Korean viewers are still averse to understanding and accepting queerness, and so the most impactful portrayals are ones that can normalize lesbian characters for all audiences.

I will begin this chapter with a brief overview of the history of Korean media representations of lesbian relationships in order to trace public misconceptions of lesbian love stories to more recent portrayals on TV and Netflix. This chapter differs from the previous two in that a significant portion is dedicated to recounting the history of lesbian portrayals in the Korean public eye before arriving at the few promising characters I have found who move forward lesbian narratives in Korean society. I consider this context important to accentuating the advancements made thus far in Korean queer representations. Using this historical background, I will elaborate on how lesbian romances have often been dismissed by popular media as childhood curiosities or cautionary tales that solidify patriarchal, male-centered love. I will then argue that the most inclusive shows neither spectacularize nor diminish lesbian love stories. Instead, progressive portrayals grant lesbian characters the same happy endings heterosexual characters consistently receive, effectively assimilating lesbian women into the world of romantic Korean dramas and the greater setting of Korean entertainment overall. Normalizing

lesbian love can enable Korean society to gradually become less homophobic while simultaneously encouraging viewers to perceive female desire as driven by women rather than men.

Twentieth Century Depictions of Lesbian Love as Immature or Dangerous

In the colonial era preceding the Korean War—specifically the 1920s—lesbian relationships were perceived by the public as immature high school experiments that always amounted to nothing. Such relationships were “contained within the parameters of schools and dismissed [...] as a transient phase along the longer arc of female maturation” (Ha 147). In other words, lesbianism was a curious detour some girls took on the way to becoming real women who would return to heterosexuality. This perspective sees queer romance as “little more than a fashionable trend within schoolgirl culture in the 1920s, the proof of which was that, after graduation, most female students who had partaken in such relationships eventually married men and had children” (147). While straight romances presupposed “the danger of either becoming ensnared in a feudal family structure or ending up as a married man’s mistress,” (149) lesbianism was a “harmless phenomenon” (150) that existed to function in opposition to the norm of heterosexuality. In real life, lesbian relationships and love regularly lasted lifetimes, but in the public eye, same-sex attraction between young women was a liminal phenomenon that societal pressures would eventually fold under expectations of heterosexual marriage.

Wartime and instability in Korean society caused anxieties about the strength of traditional, heterosexual family structures; it thus follows that in the years after the Korean War, newspaper publications used lesbian romances to warn against such deviations from the straight and narrow path. Because feminists who could work and support themselves threatened patriarchal power dynamics, popular media had to signal that life without men was dangerous or

unsatisfying. According to Todd A. Henry, from the 1950s throughout the 1980s, newspapers focused on the “short and tragic lives” of lesbian women, aiming to provide a “moralizing guide for self-regulation” that would prevent women from “‘veering off track’ (*t’alsõn*), an ideological catchword popular during this period” (“Field” 19-20).¹² Such reports painted lesbian partnerships as “unsatisfyingly temporary and woefully unrealistic” bonds that “were predictably resolved using heteropatriarchal endings” (“Cautionary” 236-237). A notable example is a 1987 report on two relatively wealthy women, Yi Suk-hũi and Kim Yõng-mi, who dated for six years. The report stated that Yi “began to regret her decision about what the mass media pathologized as an ‘abnormal’ life, and eventually demanded a separation to marry a man” (237). The couple’s property disputes agitated their relationship’s messy end, ultimately causing Kim to use “the unofficial nature of their relationship—namely, that it was recorded neither in the family registry nor in the marriage registry” to claim ownership of their shared assets (237). These mainstream media representations sought to specifically denounce the legitimacy of lesbian relationships by highlighting the love stories that failed.

Male Presence in Lesbian Media

In more recent media, lesbian relationships have been used to gratify the male gaze. Gratuitous girl-on-girl kissing or sex scenes are countless in American entertainment, and though Korean media is much more chaste, a comparable equivalent to this catering to male audiences can be found in director Park Chan-wook’s 2016 film *The Handmaiden*. Set during the time of Japanese colonial rule, the film focuses on two women: Korean revolutionary Sook-hee (Kim Tae-ri) and Japanese royal Lady Hideko (Kim Min-hee). Sook-hee and Hideko fall in love with each other and eventually establish a happy life together by deceiving the men around them. The

¹² These reports “largely aimed at the libidinal energies of bourgeois men,” indicating a precedent of lesbian media representations being used to gratify the male gaze (“Field” 19).

film's primary antagonists are Count Fujiwara (Ha Jung-woo), who tries to use Sook-hee to trick Hideko into marrying him, and Hideko's Uncle Kouzuki (Cho Jin-woong), who forces Hideko to entertain his guests—all of whom are male—through performative readings of erotic novels. Though centered on two women who love each other, the world of *The Handmaiden* ironically emulates Uncle Kouzuki's male-dominated, erotic reading room more closely than a progressive world in which Hideko and Sook-hee can find their happy ending.

The film depicts an unexpected role reversal in which Sook-hee and Hideko gain power over Fujiwara and Kouzuki, and yet, the overall portrayals of Sook-hee and Hideko's love are still dominated by the male gaze. The first sex scene between the women begins with Hideko asking Sook-hee, "What do men want?" (42:51). She speaks specifically about male desires on their wedding nights and refers to Fujiwara, whom she plans to marry. Hideko claims that she knows nothing about sex—a claim that appeals directly to Korean social expectations of women to be virginal—causing Sook-hee to teach her how to kiss. Throughout the scene, Hideko and Sook-hee speak about how her wedding night will go. They use Fujiwara and the circumstance of the wedding as an excuse to have sex, but Fujiwara still takes up space within the scene, occupying what would otherwise be a sincere expression of private, intimate love between two women. The very last scene of the film is another telling indication of the male gaze: after the two women have escaped to China, they have sex using bells, a prop that reminds viewers of an erotic reading Hideko performed earlier in the movie. Though Hideko and Sook-hee end up together, by concluding on this scene, the film identifies viewers with Uncle Kouzuki's guests: a group of people viewing sex, performed by a woman and intended for a male audience. The film's main focus still rests on the male gaze that dominates Hideko and Sook-hee's lives. Thus, while *The Handmaiden* incorporates progressive thinking through its female protagonists who ultimately succeed in their personal missions, their stories remain defined by a male perspective.

The success of *The Handmaiden* indicates that there is clearly an audience for gratuitous lesbian romance even when placed within a story of female empowerment. The global box office total was 37 million dollars. However, perhaps because of its graphic sex scenes and overall illicit subject matter, Korean audiences only contributed two million dollars to this grand total, while international viewers made up the other 35 million (“The Handmaiden”). In this way, the film can still be said to push back against the boundaries of conservative Korean society. Its popularity may be due to the fact that it pushes these boundaries while continuing to gratify men and male desire.

It is worth noting that there is a greater focus on male same-sex attraction over lesbianism in Korean media. Gay male characters are a bit more common in mainstream films and dramas, though as with lesbian portrayals, their stories often end sadly (*Love Alarm*, *Prison Playbook*, *Life is Beautiful*). A significant drama genre consists of female protagonists who must disguise themselves as men in order to raise their social status or achieve professional goals (*Coffee Prince*, *You Are Beautiful*, *Love in the Moonlight*). These dramas often use gender-bending as a point of hilarity and direct the audience’s focus to the male love interest’s dizzying—but ultimately brief and temporary—questioning of his own sexuality. After the woman’s “physiological sex is unveiled,” order is restored, and “their love becomes ‘normal’—that is, heterosexual” (Kwon). This genre exemplifies the pervasion of the male presence into every sector of media. Even though the gender-bent female protagonist is the one with an intriguing secret, the most interesting or sensational part of these dramas is often the question of how her male counterpart will react. Few dramas, if any, feature a man masquerading as a woman for multiple episodes, perhaps because then the man would not be a viable heterosexual love interest. Many heteronormative audiences and creators find it difficult to even fathom love and

sexual desire between two women. This rings even truer in Korea, where socially acceptable women are chaste, and so the allure of viewing queer relationships lies primarily in male desire.

Other modern portrayals or views on same-sex relationships have failed to consider lesbian love seriously. This is likely a lasting effect of colonial schoolgirl culture, and it works to reinforce the misconception that a lack of a male gaze means a lack of sexual desire entirely. Some scholars even attribute the rise in male homosexual media representations to Korean women, citing a “local female fandom for gay media spectacles” (Kwon). These women are reportedly responsible for the success of homoerotic movies like *King and the Clown*, and they also enjoy international forms of gay media. Such women may “produce their own gay texts sexualizing gay identities” (Kwon) and earn the the label of “fanfic iban,” or fanfic lesbians who see queerness as a fascination rather than a true sexuality (“Beyond” 51). Women who are fascinated with gay life often create stories about male K-pop stars, which at their core reveal a heterosexual desire for “pretty, feminine men instead of tough, masculine men,” the latter of which are more often praised in Korean society (Kwon). In this example, homosexuality once again reinforces the legitimate attractions of heterosexual desire.

When such fan culture does include lesbians, it often focuses on female idols who participate in male-coded fashion trends without seriously exploring female sexuality. This pseudo-same-sex attraction can be seen in female fans who praise girl groups with tough appearances and “abrasive styling choices,” such as 2NE1, Mamamoo, and Red Velvet (Kelley). Aptly labeled “*ssen-unnis*,” a term that translates to “strong older sister” in English, these idols inspire “girl crushes” in female fans. The very phrase “girl crush” reinforces the idea that lesbian attraction is childish and temporary. The love and awe female fans have for these celebrities is turned platonic by the implication that these fans do not want to be *with* the idols romantically, but rather they want to *be* the idols themselves. And though *ssen-unnis* subvert traditional

expectations for femininity, they can also diminish space for actual queer attraction by turning queerness into a fashion trend. *Ssen-unnis* tend to “expose a misconception of power by appearing masculine,” borrowing the allure of male strength to attract female fans (Lee and Yi 27). This masculinization is taken to an extreme, at which point its use becomes little more than a trendy concept instead of a legitimate attempt to appear attractive to women. Ji-eun Lee and Hyangsoon Yi analyze this through 2NE1’s music video for their hit song “I am the Best,” which showcases the idols “with baseball bats, chains, and thick black gloves” (30). Later in the video, the women shoot blazing, gigantic guns, a blatant expression of “militarized masculinity” (30). Their male-coded aggression, while embodying the *ssen-unni* concept, turns queerness into a performance associated with wild or insane behavior. Several shots in the music video, for example, feature rapper CL in a straitjacket stylized with silver locks and chains. This proves that the *ssen-unni* concept prioritizes shock value over nuanced expressions of butch fashion.¹³

Negative Associations between Lesbianism and Tragedy or Doomed Romance

Misrepresentations of lesbian love in film can imply that homosexuality will lead to unhappy endings such as breakups, unfortunate socio-economic circumstances, or even ruinous, reckless lifestyles. In modern Korean media, lesbian romances are often delinquent aberrations rather than expressions of love. Movies often group homosexuality with other problematic behaviors currently plaguing Korean female teenagers, like running away from home, falling to drug use, or selling sex. The most recent example of this occurs in 2020 film *Young Adult Matters*, which follows a pregnant 18-year-old named Se-jin (Lee Yoo-mi) in her attempts to get an abortion. The film introduces Se-jin through an extremely problematic cutting scene—which

¹³ Other girl groups like TWICE and Red Velvet have borrowed the *ssen-unni* look for a few albums only to return to their regularly scheduled programming of girly outfits and upbeat, bubbly songs, further turning queerness into a trend.

Se-jin records and uploads to social media—so that right off the bat, audiences are cued in to feel alarmed but not necessarily empathetic towards her. Se-jin has little loyalty to anyone, and throughout the film, she remains carelessly nonchalant about serious circumstances like her pregnancy, theft, and the pedophiles around her. The only queer characters are Se-jin and her school bully who dies in a freak accident shortly after she is introduced. The two are in what can only be called a pseudo-relationship. They share a few kisses but otherwise spend little time together. Se-jin’s true sexuality remains unclear because her flippancy towards other people in general makes it difficult to believe she has any real feelings for the bully. After witnessing the latter’s abrupt and accidental death, for example, Se-jin simply continues on with her life. Though the movie shows Se-jin’s attraction to women early on, it does not develop her sexuality at all and in fact even implies that her queerness is just another self-destructive aberration.

Even those who are sympathetic towards lesbian youth in Korea rely on this narrative of pain and sadness caused by homosexuality. Though it is true that Korea makes it difficult for queer people to be out and proud, constantly associating queer narratives with unhappiness or tragedy is not progressive either. Rather than celebrating queerness, it signals to those who are in the closet that, perhaps, they should stay inside. This pitying stance effectively intertwines homosexuality “with an identity defined by ‘pain,’ and in doing so appeals to heterosexual, ‘normal’ citizens’ sympathy” (“Beyond” 53). Though progressive in its protagonists, *Work Later, Drink Now* is another example of this association between lesbianism and hardship. When Park Se-jin (Han Ji-Hyo), a student from protagonist Ji-goo’s (Jeong Eun-ji) teaching days, is outed as a lesbian at her school, she attempts to kill herself twice, and the second attempt is successful. Though the series offers viewpoints on Se-jin’s sexuality that are not entirely conservative—such as the idea that what may be considered backwards for some is straightforward for others—the

show still falls in line with other dramas that have sidelined lesbian characters and used their tragic endings to develop the heterosexual protagonists' plotlines.

Gentler stories that simply explore lesbian love often do not end happily, creating an association between homosexuality and doomed romance. These love stories can be destined to fail because of external, societal pressure that straight relationships do not endure or because of internal relationship tensions. The film *Moonlit Winter*, for instance, tries to delve into a lesbian protagonist's life but falls short of actively demanding better for the audience members who might relate to her. Though not a box office hit, *Moonlit Winter* did fairly well in terms of garnering attention as an art film, receiving numerous awards for its stellar acting, music, director, and screenplay ("Moonlit Winter (2019)"). The lesbian protagonist Yoon-hee is also played by Kim Hee-ae, a critically acclaimed and famous mainstream actress. The film gently explores Yoon-hee's life as a closeted, divorced mother whose sexuality is revealed to her daughter Sae-bom (Kim So-hye) when she reads a letter from Yoon-hee's old love interest, Jun (Yûko Nakamura). The movie's slow pace, beautiful soundtrack, and simple cinematographic choices establish a sense of calm in Yoon-hee's life that differs greatly from the self-destructive, chaotic tone of *Young Adult Matters*, enabling audiences to see queer characters with less reckless lifestyles. However, the movie focuses more on how Yoon-hee and Jun, who spend the majority of the film apart, are living now. The two women only meet for one extremely brief scene, in which they take a walk together at night. Afterwards, they return to their old lives so naturally that the film seems to suggest a happy ending between them was an impossibility in the first place. The movie ends without any indication that the women will stay in touch, and so their romance lapses back into a childhood memory. Movies like *Moonlit Winter* try to examine LGBTQ+ relationships from an open-minded lens, but such films can also further solidify negative perceptions of queer life as lonely and unfulfilling.

Progressive Portrayals of Lesbian Love on Smaller Screens

Though more recently, several small web series and short films normalizing lesbian romance have been released, these works are far from the mainstream market, and their audience reach is quite small. Most of these miniseries feature only three or so episodes and are broadcast on YouTube rather than Korean TV (*Afraid Of*, *Out of Breath*, *Am I the Only One with Butterflies?*). Though quite simple in their performances and cinematography, these web series use drama conventions of heart-fluttering, light-hearted romance to depict lesbian romances as ordinary. And while they recognize the realities of closeted life in Korea, they also prioritize realism by highlighting relatable scenarios like meeting people online or forming one-sided crushes. The web series *Am I the Only One with Butterflies*, for instance, portrays a female protagonist named Jung-ah (Jung Ah) who becomes infatuated with her boss Lee Ji-won (Lee Yu-ha). Though the series simply suggests a hopeful ending rather than definitively stating whether or not the two end up together, the show also portrays Jung-ah's crush on Ji-won through a natural, normalizing lens: in typical Korean drama fashion, a simple, romantic melody plays when Jung-ah first sees Ji-won, and from then on, her timid attempts to spend more time with Ji-won simultaneously inspire hope while developing uncertainty in the reciprocity of Ji-won's feelings. The overall structure, though short, follows the standard will-they-won't-they format of romantic TV shows. And the difficulty in finding out if Jung-ah's feelings are returned is not exacerbated by the fact that the two are women. Though Jung-ah expresses her feelings without much, if any, sexual implications, her attraction to Ji-won is undeniably romantic.

More successful, mainstream lesbian films starring renowned actresses usually use their characters' lesbian identities to enhance their struggles. *Hello Dracula*, for instance, is a two-episode JTBC drama that stars Seohyun, a member of the K-pop group Girls' Generation, whose stardom holds some power in bringing a lesbian storyline to the public eye. Though

Seohyun plays a lesbian protagonist, An-na, the show's tension lies on her strained relationship with her homophobic mother Mi-young (Lee Ji-hyun). In fact, An-na's sexuality almost serves more as a hardship for her mother than for An-na herself. The drama quickly and simply resolves Mi-young's opposition to An-na's sexuality, but by its end, An-na has split from her girlfriend, and she ends the brief series as a single woman. Similarly, the movie *A Girl at My Door* stars critically-acclaimed actress Bae Doona as lesbian police detective Lee Young-nam who moved to the countryside once her sexuality was exposed. Bae's portrayal of a lesbian woman is limited in its potential for progressive effect because the film trivializes her character's sexuality. Beyond the way Young-nam's queerness problematizes how others see her desire to protect an abused girl in town, the film does not explore her sexuality at all. In both cases, the stories' endings are not tragic or melancholic but rather ambiguous. Without a triumphantly happy conclusion for lesbian characters, creators can sidestep any firm portrayals of successful romance in the life of their lesbian protagonists. Shows that can explore lesbian relationships in progressive ways are sequestered to the smaller screen, often taking the form of brief web series with little viewership, while the more mainstream lesbian stories featuring famous actresses do little more than reinforce the idea that lesbians who are out will face undue struggles and hardships.

A Gradual Fight against Homophobia through Netflix

A few notable deviations from this trend have emerged through dramas that are jointly released on mainstream Korean TV channels and Netflix, the latter of which can enable dramas to liberate themselves from conservative Korean attitudes. Before Netflix, Korean dramas focused on capturing the largest share of households watching TV during their given airtimes, with typical ratings ranging from five to eight percent of all domestic viewers and stellar ones logging in at twenty or even thirty percent. However, today, dramas can attain popular success

even with ratings of one to two percent of the Korean population by making a name for themselves on Netflix. In fact, this often works as an active strategy for drama producers, who aim to create “content customized for Netflix or other buyers from abroad” due to both a lack of financing from domestic broadcasters and the fact that Netflix “is known to cover a large portion — sometimes even 100 percent — of the total production cost” of a given series (Dong). And because Netflix’s reach is international, Korean dramas have found success while appealing to audiences that may hold more liberal values than Korean households. Popularity overseas can also inspire Korean viewers to take pride in or enjoy shows that might have evoked disapproval if released only within Korea. *Squid Game*’s explicit sex scene, for instance, would have been enough to get the show cancelled by mainstream domestic channels if not, perhaps, for the international support it received.¹⁴ Netflix’s top ten list, which records the ten most-viewed releases each day, also indicates a level of global success that Korean ratings cannot capture. A disparity between Korean and international viewership might, as with *The Handmaiden*’s box office, indicate that a Korean drama is pushing boundaries that are not acceptable domestically but that remain fascinating to international audiences.

Mine, a 2021 drama produced by Korean channel tvN but distributed simultaneously to international viewers on Netflix, toes this line between national and global social norms by starring actress Kim Seo-hyung as Jung Seo-hyun, a closeted, powerful businesswoman. Seo-hyun runs her husband Han Jin-ho’s (Park Hyuk-kwon) family’s company. The two do not express love for each other, and the show blatantly establishes the fact that their marriage was for the sake of business. Seo-hyun does love and care for her stepson, but she has no children of her

¹⁴ A similar example occurs in *Itaewon Class*, which features a transgender side character who, though played by a cisgender actress, receives more screen time than trans characters have previously enjoyed in mainstream Korean television. *Itaewon Class* gained a massive following of fans, both Korean and international, hitting viewership ratings of over ten percent domestically (MacDonald).

own, and she fills her life with running the company. As in *A Girl at My Door*, Seo-hyun's lesbian identity enters the story at the plot's convenience, posing a threat to the polished, socially acceptable lifestyle she has curated for herself. However, unlike *A Girl at My Door*, *Mine* enables Seo-hyun to reclaim her narrative. Her coming out scene occurs in public, at a restaurant with her husband, during which she admits that the love of her life is a woman. In this scene, *Mine* imagines how women who have already established their place in society can step out of their heteronormative lifestyles and still gain acceptance from the people they are closest to. Jin-ho does not express any disappointment or anger and simply accepts Seo-hyun's true sexuality. In response to her plan to come out publicly in order to get ahead of any scandals, Jin-ho plainly states that Seo-hyun "sexual identity has nothing to do with [her] competence" and that the public should not judge her for her sexuality ("They All Lie" 29:22). Their healthy conversation sets a precedent for coming out scenes in mainstream Korean dramas.

Seo-hyun also receives love and support from others around her, such as in the series' final episode, when Mother Emma (Ye Soo-jung), a nun and close friend, accepts her sexuality. Mother Emma apologizes to Seo-hyun "on behalf of the world that forced [her] to stay in the closet," declaring that her sexuality is "not a sin, but [Seo-hyun] had to live [her] whole life hiding it... as if it were a sin" ("Glorious Women" 1:13:14). This scene signals to Christian, conservative audiences that they can accept lesbian women and that, in fact, they are in the wrong for conflating queer love with sin. Mother Emma explicitly tells Seo-hyun not to hide her sexuality any longer, and her power as a religious authority, even if only on-screen, enables viewers to rethink their preconceived notions about the relationship between religion and homosexuality.

As a mainstream drama, *Mine* goes quite far in its attempt to fight for a happy queer ending. One of the drama's final scenes shows Seo-hyun calling the love of her life and telling

her she will come visit her soon because she misses her. Without showing any explicit physical intimacy or even an on-screen reunion, *Mine* firmly and unequivocally tells viewers that the two women will reunite and have their happily ever after. This radical decision does not leave the show's stance on homosexuality up for interpretation. Instead, the drama blatantly stands on Seo-hyun's side and claims that she deserves romantic happiness, even if this does not occur in a heterosexual relationship. While airing on tvN, a Korean TV channel, *Mine* captured audiences of around six to ten percent of the total households watching television at the time (Dong). This statistic does not take into account the share of international audiences who enjoyed *Mine* through Netflix. Though the drama uses Seo-hyun's sexuality for plot purposes, and the show does not include many scenes of Seo-hyun and her love interest together, *Mine* still reached a bigger audience than many other shows with lesbian storylines have previously accessed.

Similarly, the 2021 drama *Nevertheless*, distributed by both Korean channel JTBC and Netflix, features a lesbian couple whose love story concludes triumphantly and peacefully. Yun Sol (Lee Ho-jung) and Seo Ji-wan (Yoon Seo-ah) are two art students and friends of the series' protagonist. Though they begin the show as best friends, moments of tension show that the two have feelings for each other. These scenes are exhibited in the same manner and tone as the drama's shots that insinuate romance between the heterosexual characters. For example, in one of the first scenes between the two, while Ji-wan draws Sol, Sol appears nervous when Ji-wan begins to compliment her appearance. A close-up of Sol shows her avoiding Ji-wan's eyes as the latter gently touches the former's eyebrow. While at first, viewers may be confused by Sol's discomfort with her closest friend, repeated instances of Sol's timid attraction to Ji-wan begin to establish a romantic framework for the two characters. At a party while playing spin the bottle, for example, Ji-wan enthusiastically and lightheartedly draws closer to Sol when the bottle lands on the two of them. However, Sol chooses to drink a glass of soju rather than kiss Ji-wan, and

she breathes a sigh of relief when her turn is over. Her wide eyes and nervous expressions indicate anxiety but not disgust. Throughout the series, when Ji-wan is not paying attention, the camera lingers on Sol, showing her looking at Ji-wan or smiling because of her. These shots take on the typical Korean drama convention of suggesting romance without using explicitly sexual scenes.

Similarly, though Ji-wan does not realize her own feelings for Sol until later in the series, her jealousy at Sol's getting closer with possible love interests reveals to viewers that Ji-wan actually reciprocates Sol's feelings. For example, when Ji-wan learns that Sol is going to lunch with Se-hun (Kim Mu-jun), she asks, "What's he up to this time?" correctly assuming that Se-hun must be interested in Sol ("There's No Such Thing as Love. Nevertheless..." 17:14). Knowing Se-hun's intentions, Ji-wan tags along to their lunch in order to prevent the meal from feeling like a date. The friction between Se-hun and Ji-wan in this scene makes it seem as though the two are competing for Sol's attention and creates a love triangle structure familiar to all Korean drama watchers. Using Se-hun, the show helps viewers visualize Ji-wan as a legitimate love interest for Sol.

Such heteronormative romantic cues help audiences catch on to the women's feelings for each other without relying on queerbaiting stereotypes. For example, *Nevertheless* avoids—or perhaps expands—the girl crush concept through its very specific stylization of Sol. In heteronormative terms, Sol can be understood as the more masculine person in the relationship, but her appearance is not overtly or blatantly male. Her hair is long, and she wears simple jewelry, a few female-coded factors that are not in opposition to her more male-coded blazers and loose-fit clothing. Rather, all of these aspects of her character design work together to express her entire aesthetic as a queer woman. Sol's behavior also falls in line with how heteronormative audiences might expect men to act in relationships: when sitting next to Ji-wan

in a restaurant, for example, Sol casually takes Ji-wan's purse and puts it on the windowsill for her. Then she places a sweater on Ji-wan's lap to make sure her legs are not cold ("There's No Such Thing as Love. Nevertheless..."). Sol often takes Ji-wan's bags for her or carries things for her, and these small mannerisms—as well as the fact that Sol only performs them for Ji-wan and no one else—show that her feelings for Ji-wan surpass that of platonic care for a friend.

As with Sol, Ji-wan's character design helps to expand conservative viewers' preconceived notions of how lesbians "should" look. In a heteronormative dynamic, Ji-wan can be said to be the girl in the relationship. She primarily wears lacey dresses, frilly blouses, and pink makeup. She is far more effusive than Sol and constantly showers her with compliments. Though her femininity can be seen as a mechanism through which viewers understand Sol and Ji-wan's relationship in heterosexual terms, it also helps audiences conceptualize the fact that gender expression and sexuality are not synonymous. In other words, queerness is not always expressed through short hair, masculine fashion, and tough behavior. Ji-wan's style helps viewers unlearn the idea that sexuality is a choice synonymous to putting on a certain outfit or choosing a specific hairstyle.

In terms of mainstream media, *Nevertheless* features one of the most blatant and successful lesbian love lines in Korean TV. In episode eight, Sol confesses her feelings to Ji-wan, and her language erases any possibility for viewers to assume the two are simply close friends. Sol tells Ji-wan she likes her, to which Ji-wan responds that of course she feels the same way. Then Sol says, "not as friends" and claims she knows Ji-wan does not reciprocate her romantic feelings ("I Know It's a Lie. Nevertheless..." 58:57). Ji-wan, confused, takes some time to figure out her emotions. However, in the next episode, Ji-wan reveals that her main fear is not her inability to reciprocate Sol's affection, but rather the idea that the two "will break up someday" ("I Know It's Over. Nevertheless..." 40:34). In what can be read as a rejection of homophobic

claims that lesbian love is temporary, Sol proudly declares that her “feelings will never change,” and the two share an embrace (41:11). The scene concludes the rocky times in their relationship and sets them on the path to their own happy ending.

Though a side plot to the main heterosexual romance, Ji-wan and Sol’s love story is revisited repeatedly throughout the series and receives closure. Their arc’s structure and overall place in the show’s character system is equivalent to that of the heterosexual romances in *Nevertheless*. All of their friends accept their love, and the main difficulty in their relationship is not the fact that the two are women. It is the fact that the two are already such close friends. In other words, the show does not require audiences to read against the grain to find an empowering lesbian romance. Their romantic arc is comparable to the other heterosexual relationships that blossom between friends in *Nevertheless*, such as the unlikely romance between close friends Oh Bit-na (Yang Hye-ji) and Nam Gyu-hyun (Kim Min-gwi). In the last episode of the drama, Sol, Ji-wan, and their friends all sit together at a bar. They talk about dating in a way that naturally includes the two women’s love for each other. As they share their opinions on romance, Oh Bit-na and Nam Gyu-gyun are always framed together in a medium shot. Similarly, Ji-wan and Sol are constantly shown in the same frame. They often sit so closely together that the camera cannot exclude their partner, indicating the intimacy between them. When Ji-wan places her hand on top of Sol’s, the camera focuses on a close-up of the two women’s hands, both of which have rings on the ring fingers. These cinematographic choices gently solidify Sol and Ji-wan’s relationship as true romance that is just as legitimate as that of any straight couple.

Perhaps the only other show that rivals *Nevertheless*’ focus on happy lesbian love is *Seonam High School Investigators*, a 2014 JTBC drama that featured Korea’s first on-screen lesbian kiss. Though positive in its portrayal of lesbians, the drama’s existence within a liminal, high school realm and its focus on the hardships the characters endure due to their sexuality

cause it to differ from *Nevertheless*' decision to portray Ji-wan and Sol's romance in the same manner as any other relationship. *Nevertheless*' power lies in its ability to imagine a more progressive future and actualize it, thus celebrating queer love by making it as ordinary and natural as heterosexual love. Moreover, while *Seonam High School Investigators* aired during a time when Korean TV had a largely domestic audience, *Nevertheless* is available on Netflix internationally, and its success indicates its ability to reach a global audience even with queer side characters who have a considerable amount of screen time. On several occasions, the show broke the Netflix top ten list in multiple countries, meaning that it was within the ten most-viewed shows on the entire streaming platform on a given day (Joh). The show's audience and its particular approach to normalizing Ji-wan and Sol's relationship make *Nevertheless* one of the most impactful portrayals of lesbian love in a Korean drama.

Happy endings matter when it comes to lesbian representations not only because they signify that lesbians and queer Koreans in general can find romantic success in life, but also because they reaffirm the fact that sexuality is not a temporary or immature choice. Conservative audiences and creators fail to understand that "a person's sexual identity can be affirmed and respected only if it is serious, not frivolous, and only when it is a matter of lifetime, not just fleeting fashion" ("Beyond" 55). *Nevertheless* and *Mine* both definitively declare that their lesbian characters deserve lasting happiness just like their heterosexual characters do. If shows intend to similarly include LGBTQ+ representation, they must commit to portraying lesbian love as legitimate in and of itself. Though sexuality is only one facet of a person's identity, it is a facet that, like gender, matters in every aspect of how someone is treated by others and how they view their opportunities in life. Using lesbianism as a childhood memory or a brief plotline complication brings no further progression in how Korean society perceives queerness than the perspectives that denounce same-sex attraction as a schoolgirl curiosity or a fashion trend.

Conclusion

What This Paper Hopes for the Future of Korean Media

To conclude the most massive academic undertaking of my undergraduate career, I have to justify, both to my reader and to myself, why I have just written 70 pages on what is still a niche entertainment genre to many American audiences, and why I have decided to focus, within this niche, on some of the most underrepresented character types I could find.

If it was not yet obvious, I am a Korean American woman, and growing up, I first watched Korean dramas on my grandparents' TV. Though they lived in America, they received about ten Korean channels on their old television, and that was all I needed to see, for the first time ever, Korean celebrities on-screen. Though the women looked unrealistically beautiful and, at times, almost concerningly slim, this was still better than the meager representation I found on American channels, so I remained fascinated by Korean TV.

Soon, my sister showed me to the world of online streaming websites like Viki and DramaFever, the first of their kind to bring Korean dramas to international audiences through the internet. Though filled with ads and unclear in terms of their legality, these websites were as revolutionary to me in the early 2010s as Netflix is now. Through these sites I finally began watching full dramas instead of catching brief snippets whenever I found myself at my grandparents' house. And I quickly realized that watching three dramas was almost equivalent to watching all of them. Every popular Korean drama I could find followed the same script. The female protagonists were nearly interchangeable in their personalities, their socioeconomic statuses, and even their appearances. I found this sameness in Korean music as well, where “videos showing girl groups in uniform performing in perfect sync abound,” and “the girls look like mere marionettes” (Maliangkay 91). I remained interested in Korean media, but whenever people told me they enjoyed listening to K-pop or watching kdramas, it felt strange to imagine

the vast difference between the Koreans they saw on their laptops and the Korean they experienced in person when they talked to me in middle school gym class. This strange feeling was compounded by the fact that racial minorities in America are often tokenized to the point where one person of an ethnic identity represents, for all Americans, that entire ethnicity. In other words, it often felt as if all my middle school classmates knew of Korea was the stunning actor Kim Soo-hyun, the amazingly talented Girls' Generation, and me. I could not figure out how to bridge the gap in their minds from what they saw online to what actual Koreans could be like. Thus, the pervasion of Korean pop culture into American media was always prevalent in my life, but it rarely served as an empowering circumstance. More often than not, it enabled tokenization, due in part to the homogenous representations of Korean women in Korean media itself.

So while I always enjoyed Korean music and kept up with some of my favorite Korean celebrities, I did not actually recognize the merit of social commentary in Korean media—until 2019, when I sat down in Coolidge Corner Theater in Brookline, Massachusetts, and watched a fully Korean movie more fascinating, provocative, and complex than any American film I had yet seen: *Parasite*. *Parasite* emphasized the intelligence and resourcefulness of its young female protagonist Ki-jung (Park So-dam) over her sheer beauty. *Parasite* featured actors and actresses with monolids that had not been “corrected” to fit Korea’s beauty standard of round, doe-like eyes. *Parasite* depicted a strong mother who was not thin and beautiful but rather intimidating and powerful, a mother who dominated over her meek husband and made the decisions in her household. And through *Parasite*, I became hooked on the idea that Korean stories, Korean actors, and Korean filmmakers, coming from a society that is perhaps more conservative than America, could showcase complex female characters who do not cling to traditional femininity.

While embarking on this thesis, I found myself drawn to Korean female characters who were not necessarily strong in terms of physical ability or even occupation; instead, I wanted to

find the women who would expand the very definition of a Korean woman in the minds of all audiences. This approach led me to characters like So-hee and Mi-so who live and enjoy their *yŏpki* lifestyles to the fullest. It brought me to the power Jin-ok and Jeong-a exhibit in their ability to reevaluate, even in their 70s, how they want to live. And it helped me find the pure happiness that exists in Sol and Ji-wan's romance, legitimate and complete in its own right. All of the characters I have analyzed expand, in their own ways, the norms that exist in viewers' minds when they turn on the TV and see a Korean woman.

This is not to say that these portrayals or any piece of Korean media as of yet has fulfilled all of my hopes for a completely progressive, feminist, realistic representation of women. Most Korean women on TV and in movies are still impossibly slim and prioritize romance in life. Even the characters I mentioned above perpetuate some Confucian expectations. In my opinion, the most feminist portrayal possible in Korean media would not require its female characters to bend social norms or to exist beyond them. Rather, such a portrayal would actively try to shatter the hold Confucian and conservative ideology has on Korea by visualizing a world in which society does not push any expectations of marriage and family onto women at all. I will be the first to admit that such a portrayal is unlikely to come within the next few decades. A representation as radical as this could also be too far from the truth of both Korean and global society, as all popular entertainment still focuses disproportionately on romance. Thus, if a Korean show that fulfills all of my desires for feminist media were to be released right now, it would likely make little actual impact in changing social norms the way the characters I examined do. However, the seeds of such progressive thought certainly exist in Korean society, and some of them have already blossomed into the key scenes and dialogue I have discussed within this thesis.

In just the past few years of my collegiate career, Korean media has undergone a transformation from completely sanitized, censored content to immensely successful stories that actively criticize social injustice, elevate marginalized characters, and fight for a more equitable society. The emergence of more feminist protagonists has signaled an important shift in the way American and global audiences will perceive Korea, Korean women, and me, a Korean American woman. Because the tokenization of minorities in America causes singular stories to represent a greater populace, every Korean story released on Netflix disproportionately affects how Koreans are perceived in this country. Previously, I thought that fighting back against patriarchal norms or misogynistic stereotypes would be nearly impossible given Korean society's conservative values. International streaming services like Netflix would have to flood the market with progressive Korean media in order to create characters diverse and nuanced enough to avoid tokenization. This seemed like an unrealistic dream given Korea's factory-like drama industry, which recycles the same cookie-cutter characters to be played by new actors each year. And yet, this dream is not so far from the current landscape of Netflix today; as of January, Netflix "launched more than 130 Korean titles," and it plans to release 25 more within the year (Brzeski). This level of pervasion into the international entertainment market will hopefully enable scholars to view Hallyu not as a trendy wave but as an era with no clear end in sight. And the success of Netflix shows like *Squid Game* might also encourage Korean writers to veer toward more controversial, progressive material.

I want, of course, to also be realistic about Korean media portrayals and the actual landscape of Korean society. As of my writing this conclusion, South Korea has a president-elect who won by capturing the votership of anti-feminists in his avowal to abolish the nation's gender ministry (Shin). Korean same-sex marriage is still illegal, Korean dramas still disproportionately employ actresses below thirty, and feminism is still branded as misandry when discussed by the

Korean public. In trying to find progressive examples for my thesis, I had to bypass the majority of Korean entertainment available because so many dramas and films depict women from quite misogynistic perspectives.

And yet, shows like *Thirty-Nine* and *The One and Only* continue to come out on Netflix every week, focusing almost solely on the complexity of Korean women's lives. Though they may not always feature the most progressive storylines, and their plots still focus disproportionately on romance, dramas like these two recent releases do feature several dynamic female protagonists who have their own personalities, interests, and lives beyond fulfilling social expectations. *Thirty-Nine*, for example, begins with a narrative voiceover that claims the three main characters likely will not get married or have children. This expository comment lays out for viewers that they should expect a story driven by young women who live for themselves and their own goals. The show even includes some witty comments that blatantly provoke conservative audiences who might judge the women's actions. For instance, in the very first episode, the three female protagonists end up at a police station. When one protagonist's boyfriend comes to pick them up, he asks in a disappointed tone, "Aren't you guys turning 40 soon? Who in the world said you become wiser when you turn 40?" ("*Thirty, Nine*" 21:40). The answer is, as it turns out, Confucius. The three women proudly exist beyond Confucian social restrictions, and their mere presence as characters in the Korean drama world tips the scale toward more progressive representations of modern Korean women.

Despite the conservative values that seem to live and breathe within every piece of Korean media, I remain optimistic about the nation's progression toward a more feminist entertainment industry. The recent success of Korean stories with social commentary signals to Korean writers that they can create content that does not adhere to Confucian ideals. Instead, they can normalize previously outlandish or unacceptable lifestyles by portraying progressive

characters who live for their own goals in life. And as the Hallyu wave continues to flourish and transform through international streaming services, more characters like the women I described in this thesis will take their rightful places on-screen as protagonists and drivers of their own narratives. The progressive portrayals I have analyzed and the overall rise of Korean media's popularity have more than sustained my hope that someday soon, I will be able to find a feminist story that fulfills my every wish for realistic representations of Korean women.

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