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2021

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Masculinity, Queerness and Nationalism in South Korean Variety TV

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Film & TV

by

Grace Hyunju Jung

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Masculinity, Queerness and Nationalism in South Korean Variety TV

by

Grace Hyunju Jung

Doctor of Philosophy in Film & TV

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Chon Noriega, Chair

I analyze four Korean variety programs known as “yenŭng” that air/ed on public and cable networks from 2005 to 2020. While drawing upon my ethnographic research into the production culture for these programs, I argue that the yenŭng genre articulates three distinct yet interwoven perspectives on social and familial relations within the nation: (1) a national cosmopolitan ideology of gender equality that contributes to the nation’s self-image as a developed state grounded in democratic values, (2) hegemonic standards of patriarchy, heteronormativity, nationalism, and misogyny through the active exclusion of women as well as hyper-masculinist and militaristic production cultures on set, and (3) a consistent queering of gender “norms” that destabilizes notions of gender equality and of gender constructs. As each chapter builds on the last, this dissertation offers a socio-historical overview of the Korean television industry as a state institution and gendered infrastructure in a moment of social crisis and transition, proposing yenŭng as a queer genre and cultural concept in national television.

This dissertation of Grace Jung is approved.

Jasmine Trice

John Caldwell

Suk Young Kim

Chon Noriega, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

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Acknowledgements

Nothing I ever write is solely my own effort. My writing is part of my social interactions including casual and deep conversations I have with the people I enjoy sharing ideas with and hearing from. For that, I would like to thank my colleagues at UCLA who've made my time here as a graduate student so rewarding including Kris Jones, Sungmin Jung, Hyun Jung Chi, Hee-jin Lee, Maarika Rickansrud and Jin-Aeng Choi. I want to thank Caitlin McCann, Monica Sandler, Bryan Wuest, Karmen Crey and Saundarya Thapa for always taking the time to answer my questions. Thank you to Todd Kushigemachi, Kwanda Ford and Leah Steuer for your insights whenever I needed to work out new ideas and for listening when I needed to talk. I want to thank Min Joo Lee and Stephanie Chang for their dedication and follow-through during our dissertation writing group sessions. Thank you for your notes.

I am most grateful to my professors at UCLA. Thank you to my advisor Chon Noriega for always inspiring me to become a better thinker and for his strong support throughout my dissertation writing process. I want to thank my committee members John Caldwell, Jasmine Trice and Suk-Young Kim. It was such a privilege working under your tutelage. I also thank Namhee Lee for letting me take her rigorous seminar that opened my eyes to an entire area of Korean studies that has now become a foundation in my work. I am grateful to Kathleen McHugh for taking the time to conduct an independent study with me, and for the warm words of encouragement over the years. I greatly appreciate Kristy Guevara-Flanagan for being a wonderful teacher, artist and activist. I admire your dedication to community-building and I learned entirely new skills from taking your classes and working with you. Thank you to Vivan Sobchack for your wisdom, support and guidance. Thank you to my UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television family especially Amber Ha and Shirley Kim-Ryu, whose films and outlook I admire. Thank you to Bambi Haggins, Ji-yoon An, Jin-hee Choi, and Yuki Nakayama for our conversations which I always enjoy. Thank you to Ellen Scott for being a great listener.

I send my love to my New York family for your support during my transition to LA and throughout my graduate school career. My gratitude and love to Jason Huettner, Miao Wang, Eunice Lau, Bernadette Siddiqi, Rubi Siddiqi, Thomas Bucher, Billy Neo, Miru Kim, Seung Jung Kim, LJ Kim, Molly Young-kyoung Lee, Shinho Lee, and Felicia Kittles for keeping New York great. Thank you to Professors Mark Hussey, Karla Jay, Charles North, Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, and Helane Levine-Keating for their support and encouragement since I was an undergrad and all the way through my transition into becoming a graduate student.

Thank you to my Berlin family—Julieta Degese, Tobias Hauser, Erika Ratcliff, Marisa Llamas, Christoph Schmid, Anja Wutej, Ben MacLean, Shani Moffat, Steven Ney, Kate Cheka, Dharmander Singh, Neil Numb, Ankur Midha, Alexandra Norton, Esra Blackrock and loads of others. You all make Berlin feel like home.

Thank you to my Seoul friends—Jung Yoon Choi, Sue Choe, Jamie Han, Sue H. Choe, Yena Choi, Marty Silva and Ji Hyun Kim. Thank you to my family members in New York, Busan, Ulsan, Incheon, Gosung, Hapcheon, Miryang, and Seoul.

Last, but not least, thank you to my LA family. Thank you to Kristen Lundberg, Ai Yoshihara, Natisha Anderson, Sam Oh, Peter Kim, Wendy Wilkins, Alexis Bradby, Connie Shin, Diana Hong, Dante Chang, Jean Chang, Kimberly Clark, Joe Wong, Lizzy Cooperman, Aidan Park, Mina Joo, Kenisha Bell, and too many others to name.

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- — —. “Stand-Up Comedy, the TV Industry & Toxic Masculinity in Korea.” Media Industries Conference. King’s College, London, April 2020. Paper accepted; conference canceled due to COVID-19.
- — —. “Recovering the TV Career of Korean American Comedian Johnny Yune on NBC, 1978-1980.” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Denver, April 2020. Paper accepted; conference canceled due to COVID-19.
- — —. “The Queer Politics of Korean Variety TV: State, Industry & Genre.” UCLA Queer Grad Student Conference. University of California Los Angeles. January 2020.
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Introduction

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary project that combines television, gender, sexuality and global media studies to examine different forms of masculinity in popular contemporary South Korean (hereafter Korean) entertainment programs that blend reality TV, talk and game variety shows collectively known as *yenŭng*.¹ These shows generally lack a consistent format and are centered on celebrities.² I analyze four Korean variety programs that air/ed on public and cable networks from 2005 to 2020, and illustrate how each program has a state function that emulates a national cosmopolitan ideology of gender equality and contributes to the nation's self-image as a developed state that upholds democratic values while also contradicting said values through nationalistic agendas and maintenance of patriarchal ideology. As each chapter builds on the last, this dissertation offers a socio-historical overview of the Korean television industry as a state institution and gendered infrastructure, and defines *yenŭng* as both a genre and cultural concept.

I argue that while the shows enforce hegemonic standards of patriarchy, heteronormativity, nationalism, and misogyny in its conception through active exclusion of women, as well as toxic-masculinist production cultures on set, *yenŭng* as a genre of television consistently displays queer and destabilized images of gender “norms.” As Lynne Joyrich claims, television is the place for the ordinary—“the very determinant of the mainstream”—while “queer is defined precisely as the subversion of the ordinary, as the strange, the irregular, which would

¹ The Korean Romanization in this project follows the McCune Reischauer system save for people's names; “*yenŭng*” is pronounced *ye-neung* (ye'num).

² Sookeung Jung, “Dynamics of a Periphery TV Industry: Birth and Evolution of Korean Reality Show Formats,” PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2019, 153-154.

seem to necessitate some sort of disruption to ‘our regularly scheduled programming.’”³ Thus, rather than search for queer-identifying figures on these programs based, I argue that Korean variety shows exhibit queerness beyond the scope of sexuality. In fact, in lieu of the missing and erased queer figures on mainstream television, queerness is highly present on Korean TV through the *yenŭng* genre as a camp aesthetic. As Susan Sontag mentions, “Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism.”⁴ Camp is style. As Fabio Cleto contends, camp is indefinable and resists definition; slipperiness and mutability give camp its substance; camp and queer became “intertwined” because both terms are polyvalent and associated with the failure of stability.⁵ Instability is a constant in queerness, and I add *yenŭng* to this mix. Not only does *yenŭng* as a genre have queer and camp sensibilities but it is also difficult to nail down a single definition, which is why this dissertation builds on its definition chapter by chapter.

While *yenŭng* is defined by its instability, it also has the generic ability to destabilize assumed socio-cultural “norms” of Korean society. The baseline of comedy in all *yenŭng* programs is not only a facet of its camp attributes, but also a queer strategy that processes Korea’s patriarchal heaviness that oppresses any threat to its patrilineal heteronormative order. In a country that has just one openly gay celebrity, it would be impossible to state that queer identities do not exist, and yet they do not come out for fear of backlash. In this highly oppressive state, there is a need to recognize queerness where possible. *Yenŭng*’s constant destabilization of gender, sexuality, customs and hierarchy make Korean variety TV queer.

³ Lynne Joyrich, “Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows and (Main)streams,” *Cinema Journal*, 53 (2) 2014, 133-139, 134

⁴ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and The Performing Subject: A Reader*, 53-65, edited by Fabio Cleto, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 54.

⁵ Fabio Cleto, “Introduction: Queering the Camp,” *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and The Performing Subject: A Reader*, 1-42, edited by Fabio Cleto, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 7 and 12-13.

These family-oriented weekend programs that iterate state-approved prescriptions of socio-cultural norms are, in fact, expressing queerness at all times. Each chapter teases out the threads that make this web of contradictions while closely analyzing how gender gets (de)constructed on these shows.

De-Westernizing the Field & Recognizing the Understudied

I was in the early stages of developing this project when a tenured academic asked me: “Are you going to teach in Korea?” I quipped that I would not, but her question stays with me, and this project is, in part, an answer to the larger question of how to de-Westernize media studies and our thinking when it comes to non-Western texts in the context of Cinema and Media Studies as a field in North America and beyond. Considering the globalized nature of media consumption through “transnational corporate networks” that have expanded the horizon of distribution and spectatorship, and transformed the public sphere as we know it, Miriam Hansen places a call for new “theories of reception and identification different from those predicated on classical Hollywood cinema and the American model of mass culture.”⁶ Hansen’s call dating back thirty years ago suggests a reconsideration of two things: the first is the mode of spectatorship and the second is who the spectator is by bringing the focus onto the “socially marginalized and diverse constituencies” now that globalized media consumerism has “irrevocably changed the terms of local and national identity.”⁷ The question of who is viewing what “on the periphery” comes up frequently in Cinema and Media Studies.⁸

⁶ Miriam Hansen, “Early Cinema, late cinema: permutations of the public sphere,” *Screen* Vol. 34, No. 3, Autumn 1993, 199.

⁷ *Ibid*, 210.

⁸ *Ibid*.

Plenty of scholars have shown us through their work that Korean history and cultural studies are intertwined with America's. Rachael Joo intersects Western assumptions of Asian American masculinity with national media constructions of Korean masculinity.⁹ Joo's anthropological study has an answer to the common stereotype of Asian male bodies which is disparaged by the Western gaze. Ki-sung Kwak's 2012 monograph on the democratization of Korean media offers a comprehensive overview of how mass media changed in the Republic of Korea (ROK) during the years of military rule under Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, which were heavily influenced by US McCarthyism.¹⁰ While Kwak's focus is mostly on Korea's print press history, he also provides a thorough overview of Korean broadcasters' history and the eventual rise of commercial and cable networks following the 1987 democratization of the ROK. Given the US's involvement in the Korean War (1950-1953) followed by the ROK military's aid to the US in the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and Iraq War (2003-2011) as well as the continued political and economic US-ROK relationship maintained today, discussions of Korean media and history are part of the American discourse. In fact, the reason for America's K-pop fandom and Netflix buying so many K-dramas each quarter has everything to do with a not-so-distant past when America pressured Korea to open its markets for foreign investments and globalization; this was part of the conditions for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout that Korea received following the 1997 IMF Financial Crisis along with freeing its markets marshaling the nation into a neoliberal era. Lastly, as texts on global media and labor show, Hollywood media does not always come with a "Made in the U.S.A." label.¹¹ It is well-established that cultural

⁹ Rachael Joo, *Transnational Sport: Gender, Media, and Global Korea*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Kwak, *Media and Democratic Transition in South Korea*, (New York: Routledge 2012).

¹¹ Hye Jean Chung, *Media Heterotopias: Digital Effects and Material Labor in Global Film Production*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson,

flow is not “unidirectional” from the global “north” to the global “south.”¹² Media activity functions multi-directionally and transnationally; global cultural diversity must be acknowledged.¹³

Despite Hansen’s call dating back three decades ago, the pattern that exists in Cinema and Media Studies scholarship today is that the same call gets repeated in the concluding paragraphs of many Anglo-American media studies texts. The authors of such works repeat a tautological argument that problematizes a mainstream text and faults the media industry’s white, hetero cis-masculinity as the problem and demand greater diversity of media studies as media scholars.¹⁴ At a Society for Cinema and Media Studies Scholarly Interest Group virtual event moderated by Bambi Haggins on June 17, 2020 featuring Jeremy Butler, Alfred L. Martin and Nick Marx and their latest respective works on television comedy, scholars lamented in the Zoom chat that the panel’s textual focus was North Ameri-centric. My dissertation is, in part, an answer to these heaves of sighs by focusing on an understudied subject. My interest lies not only in texts and industries that are alternative to Hollywood films, but also types of shows that are generally neglected by media scholars such as game, reality and talk show television, which are

Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor (Oakland: University of California Press 2016); Aynne Kokas, *Hollywood Made in China*, (Berkeley: UC Press, 2017).

¹² Ulf Hannerz, “Notes on the Global Ecumene,” *Public Culture*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring 1989, 66-75.

¹³ For more on the de-westernization of media studies, see James Curran and Myoung-jin Park, eds., *De-westernizing Media Studies*, (New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁴ See the concluding paragraphs in Evan Elkins “*Cultural Identity and Subcultural Forums: The Post-network Politics of Adult Swim*,” *Television & New Media*, 2014, Vol. 15, Issue 7, 595-610, Barbara Klinger, “Becoming Cult: *The Big Lebowski*, Replay Culture and Male Fans,” *Screen*, Spring 2010, Vol. 51, Issue 1, and Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

also arguably “peripheral” texts relative to K-pop and cinema which receive far more attention.¹⁵

The peripheries I work with are geographic, social, and cultural as well as generic and industrial.¹⁶

In the field of Korean studies, my dissertation broadens the discourse by considering unscripted television, industry, queerness and comedy. In the field of Cinema and Media Studies, this dissertation considers non-Anglo-American media texts, and corrects the field’s blind spot that persists when it comes to “other,” “alternative,” and/or “subaltern” media. The increasingly borderless nature of Korean content distribution indicates that the global nexus of media must be evaluated in order to understand our world, cultures and societies more thoroughly.

Masculinity & Comedy

Masculinity is commonly explored in Korean media studies, however, it is often restricted to meditations on its “crisis” particularly in film. Kyung Hyun Kim’s *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* explores the crisis of Korean masculinity in realist cinemas between the 1980s through the late 1990s, which present male protagonists in a perpetually dejected state. Kim contextualizes broken maleness in modern Korean history by linking it to the nation’s near century-long period of trauma, poverty and political instability through colonial occupation (1910-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953), military dictatorships (1963-1987), and the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (IMF Crisis). Se Young Kim addresses gender crisis in his examination of the male protagonists’ *ressentiment* illustrated through violence in Korean films from the late

¹⁵ For more on high and low cultural theory vis-à-vis television, see John T. Caldwell, “Televisuality as a Semiotic Machine: Emerging Paradigms in Low Theory,” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Summer 1993, 24-48.

¹⁶ By “generic” I mean in terms of genre.

1990s into the mid-2000s.¹⁷ According to Kim, male violence in these films are reflective of East Asia managing economic collapse following the Asian Financial Crisis followed by globalization and neoliberalism. My dissertation expands the scope of gender analysis to Korean television beyond tropes of masculinity-in-crisis and trauma. By looking at unscripted television vis-à-vis film, I examine Korean masculinity's potential for catharsis, recuperation and reinvention by way of comedic variety television shows and their queerability. The shows' destabilizing capability produces potential for expanding definitions of gender, sexuality, and nation.

I do not reject earlier analyses of Korean cinema, however, there is an imbalance when it comes to the type of masculinity that scholars dwell on. Korean films that receive the most attention by English-language scholars as well as international film markets are those that feature the most aggressive, misogynistic and violent forms of Korean maleness. Most of these films and their auteurs have been categorized as "extreme" Asian cinemas which have captivated mainly the white cis-male cinephiles in the early 2000s.¹⁸ Cinemas from the 1950s to the 2000s analyzed by Korean film scholars typically focus on a very upset male protagonist who takes his rage out on women and/or children, leading to their harm or demise. These are exemplified in Hong Sang-soo's films, who essentially makes the same movie ad infinitum that rationalizes male abuse of power through infidelity, rape, abandonment, and manipulation at the expense of younger women's emotional, mental and physical soundness. Hong's films regularly excuse male abuse by crediting women for their strength to endure it. Other Korean filmmakers whose films regularly get invited to major film festivals like Na Hong-jin, Kim Ki-duk and Park Chan-

¹⁷ Se Young Kim, "'If I catch you, I'll kill you': *The Chaser*, South Korean serial killer cinema and the crisis of sovereignty," *Screen*, 62, 1, (2021): 20-36.

¹⁸ Daniel Martin, *Extreme Asia: The Rise of Cult Cinema from the Far East*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

work also commonly feature abused or dead bodies of women and children. Meanwhile, scholars overlook other dimensions of Korean masculinity performed by comedians, actors, musicians and athletes found in the localized non-fiction television genre—yenŭng. Another framing of national culture can be achieved once we take these dimensions into account. My interest in the humorous male figure in unscripted Korean TV is part of the same spectrum as that of the violent male figure regularly found in Korean cinema. While my work is a continuation of Korean media studies thus far, I am keyed into the queerness of the yenŭng genre. The queer aesthetic and style of yenŭng trouble the male/female gender binary by producing resistance, liminalities and abnormalities that disrupt heteronormativity, gender “normativity” and nationalistically-motivated patriarchal standards. Korean variety TV therefore retains queer potentiality beyond just the textual; the industrial production process also enables yenŭng to be what I call “genre-queer.” Recognition of yenŭng’s genre-queer essence offers a new pathway into considering Korean variety television specifically but also television studies as a whole. Going beyond queer representation on television, an understanding of how a television genre may be queer through its multi-mediated, hybridized, indefinable and excessive qualities can offer productive ways of considering television studies in the context of Korea as well as queerness. Such explorations are necessary when regarding Korean variety shows because of their homosocial tendencies in casting, and given how most popular programs feature exclusively men.

But why have these televised men gone overlooked? Television scholars in the US and UK spent a great deal of time arguing that television studies is a legitimate form of critical

scholarship.¹⁹ This is mostly due to television's long and persistent curse as "a vast wasteland" cast by Newton Minow's 1961 speech in the US.²⁰ Other scholars spend their time wondering why television keeps getting separated from art, film and all that is serious.²¹ Yet other television scholars have begun labeling certain categories of television as "prestige," and mine television shows for elements that may be recognized as "highbrow" or "quality."²² Even still, academia maintains the myth that violence and aggression require serious viewership with an appreciation for intellectual realism as arthouse cinema, which is why Korean films that fetishize violence directed by men like Kim Ki-duk, Hong Sang-soo, Na Hong-jin and Park Chan-wook regularly get invited to tier one international film festivals, e.g., Cannes, Berlin, New York, Toronto, AFI, and Venice, and even win awards like the Palm d'Or and multiple Oscars as in the case with Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019). According to this myth, however, the man in Lee Chang-dong's *Peppermint Candy* (1999) who stands screaming with his arms wide open before an oncoming train is a serious text that begs critical analysis but the man on TV who fills a swim cap with

¹⁹ Jeffrey Sconce, "What If? Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries," *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 93-112; Jonathan Gray, "Entertainment and media/cultural/communication/etc. studies," *Continuum*, 24:6, 811-817.

²⁰ Christopher Anderson, "Hollywood in the Home: TV and the End of the Studio System." *Modernity and Mass Culture* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991): 80-103; Timothy D. Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Lynn Spigel, "Live From New York—It's MoMA!: Television, The Housewife, and the Museum of Modern Art," *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 144-177.

²¹ See Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, (London: Routledge, 1992).

²² McCabe, Janet and Kim Akass. Introduction. *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, 1-12, eds. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, (London: IB Tauris & Co Ltd., 2007); Michael Mario Albrecht, *Masculinity in contemporary quality television*, (New Brunswick: Routledge, 2016); *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century*, (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

water and drops it on another man's head is not serious, therefore not intellectual, thus not an appropriate topic for academic discussion.



Figure 1. Peppermint Candy (1999), Lee Chang-dong

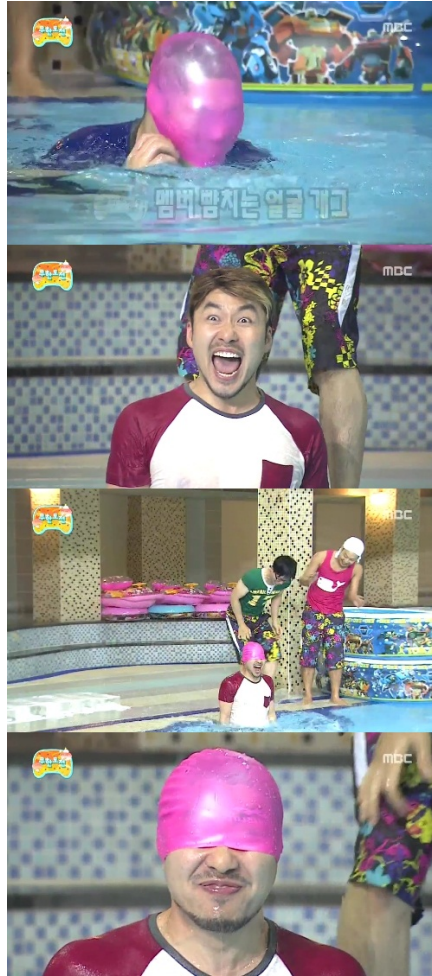


Figure 2. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.

I place my observations of the eccentric, laughable and uninhibited male figure in dialogue with the one in perpetual crisis. Formation of any identity is never static. The man in anguish is not too far from the man laughing. They are both menaced and share the same history and socio-political milieu. Emotional responses like crying and laughing, in fact, share a very blurred emotional boundary. The blurred affective response thus blurs the lines of generic categories as well. This dissertation explores Korean history, culture, media and gender through new avenues. I analyze state broadcasters' programs, policies and industry culture to understand the state's institutional aims when constructing a heteronormative family. Why are networks so

obsessed with shows about fatherhood and maleness in general? How do variety shows reify gender norms and expectations, and in what ways do they also break them?

Unfortunately, another reason why this project's focus on masculinity is relevant in today's discussion of Korean television studies is because of the numerous arrests and scandals of young male K-pop singers who regularly appeared on *yeonŕng* programs. While these men have found fame through their music, their careers went beyond just music and they were cast as entertainers on unscripted television programs like *2 Days 1 Night* (2007- , KBS), *I Live Alone* (2013- , SBS) and others. K-pop is studied widely at institutions around the globe; it is a popular topic of study due to student demand, but what about these stars and their problematic behaviors as well as problematic fandom? The political protests and activism sparked by the #MeToo movement in Hollywood in October 2017 spread globally and reached Korea with #MeTooKorea in early 2018. This does not mean that Korean feminists and activists have not been fighting for equal rights before this event; due to Hollywood's attention to predatory behavior, outcries against male perpetrators of sexual abuse have been taken more seriously since then, and led to greater investigations, arrests, and resignations.

Sex scandals in Korean entertainment have always existed but women were misconstrued by the press as blackmailers, not victims of sexual abuse. It was not until white female celebrities in Hollywood gave Tarana Burke's 2007 hashtag greater prominence that women's outcries against sexual assault were taken more seriously. The movement exposes issues of white feminist privilege through the weight of #MeToo's cultural value as a white American movement; while the global impact of #MeToo as social media activism led to treating the words of sexual assault victims with more seriousness, it still demonstrates global and racial hierarchy:

“[I]s #MeToo a white women’s movement?”²³ While it is plain that women of all ethnicities experience sexual assault, the media coverage of #MeToo, per Ashwini Tambe, was mostly centered on white women. Rosemary Clark-Parsons writes that “#MeToo’s politics of visibility too often slip into what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls *economies of visibility*, individualistic systems of exchange in which representation in consumer culture is positioned as the height of empowerment.”²⁴ Given the cultural currency of white female Hollywood celebrities, the media paid greater attention to the movement, and when it spread globally, Korean media also paid closer attention to local women’s accusations of sexual assault, and the efforts of local feminists and humanitarians. This dissertation was written in real-time with the exposés of Korean politicians and entertainment industry workers, so it addresses these issues throughout the chapters.

Korean Television Studies

Korean media studies, much like American media studies, was begun by literary scholars. In 2004, Kyung Hyun Kim published a monograph on Korean cinema based on psychoanalytic theory entitled *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*.²⁵ A number of edited collections on Korean cinema followed thereafter. In 2005, Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann produced an edited collection of Korean melodrama which includes one chapter on the serialized Korean

²³ Ashwini Tambe, “Reckoning with the Silences of #MeToo,” *Feminist Studies*, 44(1) 2018: 197-203.

²⁴ Rosemary Clark-Parsons, “‘I SEE YOU, I BELIEVE YOU, I STAND WITH YOU’: #MeToo and the performance of networked feminist visibility,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 2019: 1-19, 4-5

²⁵ Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

TV drama *Sandglass* (SBS, 1995).²⁶ That same year, Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer published *New Korean Cinema*.²⁷ Media scholar Frances Gateward published a collection of essays dedicated to Korean film in 2007 entitled *Seoul Searching*.²⁸ Most of the essays are close textual analyses of Korean films from the 20th century. In 2010, Jinhee Choi, a film studies scholar, released a monograph entitled *The South Korean Film Renaissance* which explores the history of Korean film production companies which stem from the food industry with conglomerates like Lotte and CJ, and how these corporations paved the industry's way into prestigious Western film festivals and international markets such as Japan, Hong Kong, and eventually the US thus elevating Korean cinema's cultural status.²⁹ As a follow-up to his first monograph, in 2011, Kyung Hyun Kim produced a second book entitled *Virtual Hallyu* which focuses solely on films that have made waves beyond Korea.³⁰ Similar to his first book, Kim employs a great deal of psychoanalytic theory in his reading of films by auteurs like Im Kwon-taek, Hong Sang-soo, Lee Chang-dong and Park Chan-wook, but pays some attention to box office numbers and the films' international circulation and reception.

Now that Korean cinema had been properly introduced to the (English-speaking) world, scholars began shifting into specific genres and the films' transnational dimensions. In 2013, an edited anthology dedicated strictly to Korean horror films was produced by Alison Peirse and Daniel Martin featuring some of the same few authors who reappear in the Korean film discourse

²⁶ Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann, eds., *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema*, edited (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

²⁷ Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer, eds., *New Korean Cinema*, (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

²⁸ Frances Gateward, ed., *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

²⁹ Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

³⁰ The book begins with a foreword written by American auteur Martin Scorsese—a fan of Korean cinema.

such as Julian Stringer, Hye Seung Chung, David Scott Diffrient, and Robert L. Cagle. Chung and Diffrient co-wrote *Movie Migrations* in 2015, which takes Korean media's global prominence into consideration in the post-Gangnam Style era.³¹ The book meditates on the influences that Korean cinema has taken from its neighbors and occupiers such as Japan and the US, which brought the nation to its present-day position as a cultural influencer in the world. In 2012, Chung published an auteur studies text on the controversial figure Kim Ki-duk by tracing his career through an analysis of his internationally favored films.³² Korean auteur studies continued into 2014 with Steven Chung's auteur-driven monograph on the postwar filmmaker Shin Sang-ok.³³ In line with all other early works of Korean cinema, Chung relies heavily on modern Korean history and film theory to produce a nuanced textual analysis of Ok's films while illustrating the filmmaker's career in the context of Korea's modernization history.

Scholars known mostly for their literary work were also writing on Korean film. Kelly Y. Yeong published *Crisis of Gender and the Nation in Korean Literature and Cinema* in 2011.³⁴ Theodore Hughes published *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea* in 2014. Both books rely on high theory related to colonialism, post-colonialism, trauma as well as modern Korean history (for the most part surveying the colonial period and the Korean War) in their textual analysis of early Korean films. Textual analysis is the dominant methodology occupying Korean

³¹ Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient, *Movie Migrations: Transnational Genre Flows and South Korean Cinema*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

³² Hye Seung Chung, *Kim Ki-duk*, (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2012).

³³ Steven Chung, *Split Screen Korea: Shin Sang-ok and Postwar Cinema*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

³⁴ Kelly Y. Jeong, *Crisis of Gender and the Nation in Korean Literature and Cinema*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011).

film studies today. Many of the scholars who write on Korean cinema come from East Asian studies backgrounds with an emphasis on Korean literature and history.³⁵

Many Korean film studies scholars spilled over into hallyu studies—the study of internationally popularized Korean cultural products including all media. Since hallyu studies is more than just film studies, its scholarship is more diverse in terms of scope, method, and the kinds of media considered. In 2014, editors Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe published *The Korean Popular Culture Reader* which features essays by communications and visual arts scholars who write on everything from cinema to cuisine, sports, and K-pop.³⁶ In 2015, Sangjoon Lee and Abé Markus Nornes produced an edited collection entitled *Hallyu 2.0* which features essays on K-pop, K-drama and Korean cinema as well as the local and global reception of these cultural products through social media and mobile technology.³⁷ However, neither anthologies include any essays on yēnŭng, and television is still marginal in both collections with greater emphasis placed on film and music.

K-pop studies is an enormous field of study in popular culture and area studies today. Many scholars mention that they found their interest in K-pop through their undergraduate students in North America. K-pop studies is, in part, a result of student demand. JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay edited a collection entitled *K-Pop—The International Rise of the Korea Music Industry* in 2015. Suk-Young Kim's *K-pop Live*, which is another text devoted to K-pop studies, integrating interviews, archival research and fandom studies was published in 2018.

³⁵ Hye Seung Chung and Diffrient are exceptions to this trend.

³⁶ *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, edited by Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

³⁷ Sangjoon Lee and Abé Markus Nornes, eds., *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2015).

Korean television studies is increasingly gaining traction, albeit with limited academic attention. Two books on Korean television were published recently in 2019 and 2020—an edited anthology and a monograph. The anthology *The Rise of K-Dramas* edited by JaeYoon Park and Ann-Gee Lee includes essays couched cultural studies, analyzing K-drama and its transnational reception through fandom, tourism, format sales and political economy. Discussions on Korean variety shows, however (and not unexpectedly), is beyond the scope of Park and Lee’s project.

Hyejung Ju’s monograph *Transnational Korean Television* is a communications study on Korean media’s flow across overseas markets in both Eastern and Western circuits, and how K-dramas are received especially among American audiences. Ju also gives insight into the K-drama industry’s evolution due to the growing transnational reception of these programs. Ju’s study includes analyses on digital audience reception, global media convergence, and format trading of Korean dramas. Ju’s monograph offers data from a quantitative communications-based research as well as global media industries’ inter-relationships between broadcasters, production houses and streaming outlets. *Transnational Korean Television* offers a detailed breakdown on the history of K-drama’s developmental and export history, however, an exploration of Korean reality and variety shows is marginal relative to her attention to serialized fiction. Ju does, however, map out the format sales of *yenŭng* programs in the international market, particularly in China and the US. Ju’s text offers a rubric to understanding Korean broadcasting, narrowcasting and streaming from an industrial perspective, providing a much-needed foundational information to making sense of Korean television’s transnational flow in terms of production, distribution and reception. With that said, any textual analysis of said content is missing. A broad analysis of flows and markets do not effectively explain the lasting and widespread power of these Korean screen forms and their producers, nor do they adequately

contribute to the critical work of humanities scholarship to understand and address modern-day Korean society's social malaises in the form of discrimination and self-destruction.

Former Korean television industry worker Sookeung Jung's 2019 doctoral dissertation "Dynamics of a Periphery TV Industry" takes a similar approach to Ju's. Jung provides a useful survey of Korean reality television shows and its history, and, much like Ju, covers the concept of flow in terms of both television and global mobility as well as transnational format sales of Korean variety shows. For this reason, I will not be discussing TV flow in relation to transnationality, nor will I dwell on international format sales, seeing as Jung's dissertation and Ju's monograph cover these arenas extensively. Jung's historiography of Korean reality TV includes variety programs; her method combines archival research with production culture studies through interviews of her former colleagues at broadcasting stations in Korea, and their published autobiographies which include these industry workers' own definitions/theories, categorizations and analyses of Korean TV. Jung (much like Ju and Ki-sung Kwak) also includes a great deal of primary data through charts and graphs to illustrate costs, import/export trends, and other empirical quantitative analyses. Kyung Han You's 2014 mass communications dissertation "Entertaining Politics" studies the inception and evolution of Korea's political entertainment on television and radio, which similarly includes a great deal of quantitative data to illustrate the rise of political entertainment as a result of profit-driven commercial sectors which has the potential to undermine the subversive work that they do. You's methodology integrates archival work with critical industry studies and analysis of political economy starting from Korea's modern colonial era. A discourse of Korean television is starting to bud in academia between Jung and You's dissertations as well as Ju's recently published monograph. These recent scholarships offer exceptionally useful maps of the institutional behaviors of

Korean TV more broadly, and are informative as descriptors, but are light in terms of cultural criticism. My own work offers a baseline of foundational Korean television history for frame of reference. Its central focus is a Marxist cultural inquiry where I observe and question patterns and conflicts that emerge within and behind these shows to further our understanding of Korean variety entertainment's significance on a state, social, and individual level. I take a qualitative approach towards understanding Korean television as content and format, and less so as a technology to begin a dialogue on how it impacts our knowledge of gender, sexuality, nation-state, citizenship, hegemony, celebrity and genre. Social science's broader focus on contexts avoids attempts at resolving the nation's fundamental ideological problems which are visible in how the industry and nation uses the primetime screen. In this regard, communication and flow dodge critical analysis and theories on popular culture that function as problem-solving operations. Close textual analysis of Korea television is thus instrumental in unpacking how the Korean nation thinks whether it be rationalizing forms of labor, how it perceives itself, how it projects its self-perception to the world through television, perceives others outside of its national borders, perceives "others" within its national borders, how it situates itself within the global economic order, etc. Attention to screen practice and how Korea normalizes its policies (vis-à-vis the television industry and nation) in the face of its deep historical tensions is necessary to understand distribution of power within contemporary Korea through its cultural context. Such Foucauldian research practices are lacking in the social sciences which is why this project couples screen analysis with an industry study.

The Korean Variety Show A.K.A. *Yenŭng*

Korea's television history emerges from a transnational convergence of Japanese colonization, the "cold" war and US military presence in the form of the United States of America Armies Government in Korea (USAMGIK). USAMGIK had authority over the newly named ROK shortly after the nation's division at the 38th parallel in 1945. Korean film history reviews the Republic of Korea's Army Motion Picture Production Center's (AMPPC) role in the ROK's film production from 1948 through the 1970s but rarely discusses its anti-communist propaganda that also aired on Korean television. The AMPPC was influential in producing anti-communist films that also impacted news and serialized dramas and movies for television.³⁸ The AMPPC's military propaganda on the ROK's screens both big and small is what led to the recruitment of Korean soldiers to fight for America's cause in the Vietnam War (1955-1975).³⁹ The first television sets made their way into Korean homes in 1956 with the launch of a commercial broadcasting station HLKZ-TV operated by the Korean division of the electronics company Radio Corporation of America (RCA) known as (KORCAD). Besides producing electronic goods such as the radio, television and vacuum cleaner for American households since 1919, the RCA also collaborated with the Navy in 1938 in the development of drone technology,⁴⁰ and again in 1948 to develop flying bombs (e.g., "Gordon") just after WWII.⁴¹ The experimentation, use and development of flying bombs, cruise missiles, and unmanned aerial

³⁸ Sunyoung Park, "The History of the Military Film Industry – From the inception of military films to the ROK Army Motion Picture Production Center (1948-1979)," *International Journal of Korean History*, 24(1), 2019: 111-152.

³⁹ Sun-young Park. 2020. "Two Wars and the Formation of Collective Memory - The Development and Utilization of the Military Film Industry During the Vietnam War," *Literature Lab*, 71: 187-224

⁴⁰ John F. Keane, Stephen S. Carr, "A Brief History of Early Unmanned Air Aircraft," *Johns Hopkins APL Technical Digest* (2013) 32: 558-557, 563.

⁴¹ Albert Abramson, *The History of Television 1942-2000*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 29.

vehicles (UAVs) increased throughout the Korean War (1950-1953), and great deal of UAV weaponry was used by the US military during the Vietnam War.⁴² RCA technology's transnational reach in Korea is tied to American militarization that spread both bombs and television across Asia. As an object, television has been feminized in media history; but taking these material histories of Korean television into account links this typically masculine industry of the military to the industry of the feminized object, and within that industry, hypermasculinity, economic imperialism, and foreign military dominance are ever-present.

Aside from HLKZ-TV, the only other station in existence in Korea was the American Forces Korean Network (AFKN) which launched in 1957 and catered to the 60,000 US military recruits and staff serving in the ROK.⁴³ Not many Korean households, however, could afford to own television sets at the time because the nation was still recuperating from the war. In 1961—the same year that Park Chung-hee came into power through a military coup—a public broadcasting station HLKA-TV for the network Korea Broadcasting Station (KBS) was established. Korea's first television station was presented as a “Christmas present” to the people from the government, ushering the nation into a modern era of entertainment and culture. The Park Chung-hee regime claimed that television was a symbol of Korea's “cultural modernization” but it was mostly a tool to disseminate the military dictator's propaganda.⁴⁴ By 1964, there were 32,402 television sets in throughout the country.⁴⁵ Despite ex-pat Americans

⁴² John F. Keane, Stephen S. Carr, “A Brief History of Early Unmanned Air Aircraft,” *Johns Hopkins APL Technical Digest* (2013) 32: 558-557, 568.

⁴³ Yoo, Y.C., “Political economy of television broadcasting in South Korea,” *Elite media amidst mass culture: A critical look at mass communication in Korea*, edited by Chie-woon Kim & Jaewon Lee, 191-213, (Seoul, Korea: Nanam, 1994), 198-200.

⁴⁴ You, *Entertaining Politics: Exploring Historical Transformation of Production, Distribution and Consumption of Political Entertainment in Korea*, 87; Sookeung Jung, 84.

⁴⁵ You, *Entertaining Politics: Exploring Historical Transformation of Production, Distribution and Consumption of Political Entertainment in Korea*, 84.

being the target audience, local Korean viewers began tuning into imported American entertainment through AFKN such as *The Tonight Show* (1954—, NBC).

The first comedic variety show produced in Korea is *Comedy Go-Stop* (1961, KBS) which took influence from vaudeville and American slapstick comedy but it was canceled in less than a month of its airing.⁴⁶ In 1969, MBC produced *Laughter Brings Good Luck* to great success which ran till 1994. Sookeung Jung credits this achievement to MBC employing “the best comedians and writers of the day and...focusing on sketch comedy and vignette rather than singing.”⁴⁷ Other networks imitated this format due to its great popularity. Another early musical variety show *Show Show Show* (1964-1983, TBC-TV and KBS-2TV) saw massive success by gearing its production towards a mainstream audience with singing, dancing, magic acts, miming, acrobat and comedy.⁴⁸ *Laughter Brings Good Luck* and *Show Show Show* were “models to mold new and diverse television entertainment programs” for Korean broadcasters in the future.⁴⁹ In 1980, color television reached Korean homes. KBS produced *Youthful March* and MBC produced *Young 11* which were weekend variety shows geared towards family audiences, and this quality is maintained in weekend variety shows to this day. Color TV motivated producers to create “new aesthetics and rhetoric” to appeal to a broad audience with “movie-like spectacles....”⁵⁰ This lineage explains the excessive graphics, sound effects, and over-the-top aesthetic of contemporary Korean variety shows.

⁴⁶ Sookeung Jung, 98.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 98.

⁴⁸ Yong-Gyu Park, “The Rise and Fall of Television Musical Variety Show in Korea: Focusing on the ‘Show Show Show’ on TBC-TV,” *Journal of Korean Contents Association*, 14 (2014): 52-63.

⁴⁹ Sookeung Jung, 100.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 102.

1997's IMF Crisis and its impact on Korea's economy, culture and society left the country in a state of shock. Between 1997 and 1998, the nation saw a spike in suicides, unemployment and depression. Television networks were careful in their response to the country's recession and state of mourning lives and jobs; a number of *yenŭng* programs were halted in 1998, and in its place, K-dramas that emphasized a strong family unit, endurance and warmth proliferated.⁵¹ Ad revenue also dropped by a third, and the television industry was forced to restructure itself from a vertically integrated unit that handled production and broadcasting in one setting to hiring independent production studios that worked in tangent with broadcasters. The 1999 Broadcasting Act led to media deregulation.⁵² As a result, more channels came into being including cable and satellite; a pressure to fill timeslots and the demand for a greater diversity of programs led to a great deal of imitation.

Korean producers needed more hands-on experience to create new programs so they turned to Japan. During the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945), Korean media took influence from Japanese books, records, and movies; Korea first encountered Western media through Japanese translations. But in the post-WWII years, Korea banned Japanese cultural products including media due to anti-Japanese sentiments carried over from the colonial period. In the meantime, the Korean TV industry needed models for producing and programming TV. As a result, many Korean TV producers went to Japan from the 1960s through the 1980s to study Japanese broadcasting and find what they could copy.⁵³ In the 1990s, Korean TV producers flew to Japan for the weekend to sit inside hotels and watch Japanese variety shows for hours before

⁵¹ Ibid, 107.

⁵² Daeho Kim and Seok-Kyeong Hong, "The IMF, Globalization, and the Changes in the Media Power Structure in South Korea," *Media and Globalization: Why the State Matters*, eds. Nancy Morris and Silvio Waisbord, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 77.

⁵³ Konshik Yu (President, KBS America). In-person interview, Los Angeles. Feb. 10, 2017.

flying back to Korea to hold a meeting by Monday on what they observed.⁵⁴ This resulted in a great deal of plagiarizing Japanese variety content including games, gags, effects, and the general format itself.⁵⁵ Korean producers even copied gestures, layouts, production/set designs and story concepts.⁵⁶ The extent of these imitations which encompass embodied forms of mimicry are examples of Homi Bhaba's concept of "colonial mimicry" which reveals Korea's desire for gaining cultural status in the world similar to its former colonizer but through "a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power."⁵⁷

Egregious instances of plagiarism ended when Japanese producers sued Korean producers for copyright infringement, and as Korean audiences began to access Japanese shows via satellite, and notice that local programs were plagiarizing and producing unoriginal material. The burgeoning of Korean variety programs in the new millennia was also due to its cost-efficiency over K-drama production; while episodic dramas and variety show budgets vary depending on the scale of production, generally, an episode of serialized narrative content costs approximately \$500,000 an episode while *yenŭng* costs approximately \$100,000 per episode.⁵⁸ This is why at each network today, while about a thousand K-dramas are in a stage of development or production, there are about two thousand *yenŭng* programs underway.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Dong-Hoo Lee, "A Local Mode of Programme Adaptation: South Korea in the Global Television Format Business," *Television Across Asia: Television Industries, Programme Formats and Globalization*, eds. Albert Moran and Michael Keane, 36-53, (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 38.

⁵⁶ Sookeung Jung, 125.

⁵⁷ Homi Bhaba, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 28, (Spring, 1984): 125-133, 126.

⁵⁸ Konshik Yu (President, KBS America). In-person interview, Los Angeles. Feb. 10, 2017.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

In 1998, President Kim Dae-jung began to lift the ban on Japanese products in Korea, but there was still a dearth of TV content; meanwhile networks needed to fill time slots; the new millennium became a golden age of cost-efficient comedic studio variety shows featuring comedians such as Yoo Jae-suk, Lee Hwi-Jae, Kang Ho-dong (formerly a wrestler), Shin Dong-yup, Lee Young-ja, Song Eun-yi, Kim Sook, and a host of others in addition to young celebrity guests—mostly singers and actors. Korean variety programs have given into high stylization over the years as domestic and foreign state policies impacted the industry and market. Between 2006 and 2012, television producers experimented by hybridizing reality TV with variety show elements. *Infinite Challenge* became a sensation and the “model case” for such hybridized variety programs thereafter.⁶⁰

Yenŭng programs that emerged in the new millennia are characteristically excessive in materiality; there is an excess of postmodern materials such as plastic for props, set design and costumes, as well as frequent use of cellular devices for tag-team games (therefore more use of postmodern “material” such as 2G, 3G, 4G and LTE data). For instance, the corner *Crash of the MCs* (2002-2003) on KBS’s Sunday variety show *Super TV Sunday is Fun* (1998-2003) included punishments by inflicting physical pain on one another’s wrists or arms by flicking their 3G cellphone antennae. Yenŭng also includes excessive use of water (pools, bath houses, hoses) as well as excessive eating. Yenŭng programs are the predecessor to mŏkpang [mukbang] videos) commonly found on YouTube and social media today; “mŏkpang” is an abbreviated portmanteau of the words “mŏkta” (to eat) and “pangsong” (broadcasting); “mŏkpang” is more popularly transliterated as “mukbang” in the mainstream. Entertainers who produce mŏkpang videos typically eat an enormous portion of food in one sitting for viewers to watch. Korean ASMR

⁶⁰ Sookeung Jung, 119.

videos are also an extension of *yenŭng* in their shared use of postmodern materials such as plastic and silicone with hyperbolized effects through sound and visuals all for spectacle and an affective impact. In the early 2000s, the excess found on these *yenŭng* programs were (perhaps forced or aspirational) indicators that Korea had successfully climbed out of its recession and achieved an economic status that allows indulgence, gluttony, and wasteful consumerism. Similar to how Park Chung-hee called television the symbol of Korea's modernization, these material excesses on *yenŭng* programs symbolized Korea's triumph of overcoming a continental financial crisis, which is an illusion that masks its dependence on a foreign economy via the IMF bailout. The satirical humor and self-directed *schaudenfreude* indicate an awareness of the nation's confoundedness and clumsiness in midst of all the newness of modernization, technological advancement, and economic stability that came with outside help.



Figure 3. Infinite Challenge, Kim Tae-ho



Figure 4. Infinite Challenge, Kim Tae-ho

Yenŭng features primarily male celebrities who found fame as comedians, actors, athletes, anchors, and musicians. These contemporary urbanites of Seoul are placed at the center of popular reality shows that encourage coupling and reproduction in a nation where women are statistically less inclined to do both.⁶¹ While reasons for this may vary, for the most part, young women avoid marriage in order to live a life free from the pressures of childcare and domestic responsibilities. Curiously, the advocates of heteronormative family values are found in a form of television that is tied to kitsch and camp performances which frequently disrupt gender “norms” through the constant potential of queerness. Korean variety shows’ ambiguity as a genre—sitting in between categories or being what I call a genre-queer hybrid of reality TV, melodrama, comedy, talk show, improv, sketch, etc.—allows us to anticipate its queerness through its unstable, excessive, and camp qualities. Thus, as each chapter demonstrates, while the content of these yenŭng programs may be problematized for their issues related to exclusion

⁶¹ Su-jin Park, “One Out of Seven Young Koreans Not Interested in Marriage,” *Hankyoreh*, Apr. 15, 2018, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/840587.html.

(based on gender, ethnicity and sexuality), the genre itself maintains a queer aesthetic through its non-stasis—its *variety* identity.⁶²

Comedy is the foundation of all *yenŭng* programs and with it comes great possibility for destabilizing constructed identities. *Yenŭng* is encompassed by classic variety show elements such as musical performances, sketch comedy, talk show banter, and ad-lib, as well as reality TV, and quiz/game shows. Gender-mixing, bending and crossing occur regularly on these shows (about as regularly as they did on *The Texaco Star Theatre* [1948-1956] with Milton Berle). While I note that *yenŭng* programs consistently favor homosocial casting (male) which results in a marginalization of female comedians, it is also significant that *yenŭng* allows for a non-sexualized queerness to always be present on public broadcast programs.

As Alexander Doty describes, queer readings “result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along.”⁶³ Although Korean variety shows do not incorporate obvious qualities that would at first-glance be recognized as queer, the genre works as a queer text through its consistently homosocial casting, frequent cross-dressing and cross-gender play, and for featuring female comedians who do not conform to the heteronormative conventions of desirability that cater exclusively to hetero cis-male gaze. The term “queer” is favored for its flexibility and boundlessness while the scholar also sets parameters for how they use the term in their work. “Queer” is characterized as elastic, mobile, indeterminate and arising during moments of ambiguity.⁶⁴ Korean variety shows’ ambiguity as a genre allows us to anticipate its queerness

⁶² Claire Colebrook, “Queer Aesthetics,” *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, eds. E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, 25-46, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011).

⁶³ Alexander Doty, 1993, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 16.

⁶⁴ Annemarie Jagose, 1996, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, (New York: NYU Press).

through its unstable, excessive, and camp qualities. In cinema, Ungsan Kim defines queerness as “a stylistic and formalistic attitude that disrupts or alters cinematic conventions” that work in conjunction with filmic elements of “non-normative sexual desires.”⁶⁵ Kim acknowledges that the terms “queer” let alone “queer cinema” are unstable and always changing. Judith Butler observes that *queer* must remain open and cannot ever be “fully owned” so that it may evolve constantly into useful political applications.⁶⁶ Industrial queering is taking place through Korean variety shows regardless of the crew and cast members’ awareness of said enactment as well as the audience’s awareness of queer engagement with television. The elements of *yenŭng* may be read as queer through their characteristics, and this visual display on Korean television is a response to the same-sex repression of Korean society.

Yenŭng is regarded differently from documentaries (film and television) because it is characterized as “entertainment,” whereas documentaries are recognized for their “serious” edge. Stylistically, formally and aesthetically, *yenŭng* differs from standard American and British reality shows in that *yenŭng* has laugh tracks, CGI, sound effects, and subtitles to enhance emotional (usually humorous) impact. They imitate studio recordings before a live audience but have neither in their production. In this way, *yenŭng* emulates live performances’ theatricality which is in line with the tradition of vaudeville and variety shows that were staged and filmed before a live audience. Korean *yenŭng* is conscious of the live audience watching at home as well as the state censors (the Korea Communications Commission [KCC]) who approve or disapprove of certain images, actions and language for broadcast television.

⁶⁵ Ungsan Kim, 2017, “Queer Korean Cinema, National Others, and Making of Queer Space in *Stateless Things* (2011), *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*. 9 (1): 61-79, 62.

⁶⁶ Judith Butler, 1993, “Critically Queer,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1: 17-32, 19.

Yenŭng programs are typically hosted by comedians in a homosocial group; for instance, popular shows like *2 Days 1 Night*, *Infinite Challenge*, and *Ask Us Anything* (also known as *Knowing Bros/Men on a Mission* [2015- , JTBC]) feature an all-male cast. All-female yenŭng programs such as *Sisters' Slam Dunk* (2016-2017, KBS) and, the *Infinite Challenge* spin-off, *Infinite Girls* (2007-2013, MBC) had a much shorter run compared to their male counterparts. Because these shows are segregated by gender, queerness is always present through homosociality's queer potential, complicating heteronormative standards that state broadcasters favor through their preference for family-friendly content. But this remains in tension with heteronormativity which is a strong socio-cultural undergird.

Lynn Spigel calls the sitcom the perfect “middle-ground aesthetic” that fuses vaudeville and theatrical realism aimed towards the family audience.⁶⁷ In Korea, yenŭng blends vaudeville-influenced variety stylings with contemporary reality television techniques. These shows dominate weekend evening slots, and target the family audience. Unlike the melodrama and realism of Korean cinema which reproduce the trope of male crisis, these variety shows flex, disrupt and complicate masculinity through comedy. With that said, some things stay the same; even in comedy, Korean entertainment exhibits national past traumas to avoid cultural amnesia, thereby adhering to the state broadcaster's preference for maintaining nationalism.

There are a couple of reasons for the popularity of these shows. The first has to do with celebrities and the tabloid nature of these programs; TV viewers are interested in celebrity paratexts including gossip columns about who they are dating or married to, and what their children look like, just as they are interested in what movie stars are like “in reality” when they

⁶⁷ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 144.

appear on variety shows.⁶⁸ The other has to do with popular culture in general, which is driven by a desire to achieve affective pleasure which leads to spending long hours on and off line watching cat videos, or following “cute Asian babies” on Instagram.⁶⁹ Television’s televisuality—the means in which television attempts to hold the viewer’s attention for as long as possible—has transferred (transmediated) onto the social media realm where increasing evidence shows that these networking media platforms are designed to be addictive and keep viewers engaged at all times.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ See Jonathan Gray, *Shows Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, (New York: NYU Press, 2010); Denise Mann, “The Spectacularization of Everyday Life: Recycling Hollywood Stars and Fans in Early Television Variety Shows,” *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, edited by Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 41-69.

⁶⁹ See Radha O'Meara, "Do Cats Know They Rule YouTube? Surveillance and the Pleasures of Cat Videos," *M/C Journal* [Online], Volume 17 Number 2 (10 March 2014); Jessica Gall Myrick, “Emotional Regulation, Procrastination, and Watching Cat Videos Online: Who Watches Internet Cats, Why and to What Effect?” *Computers in Human Behavior*, 52 (2015), 168-176; Judd Apatow, *The Return*, Netflix, 2017.

⁷⁰ Blackwell, David, Carrie Leaman, Rose Trampusch, Ciera Osborne, and Miriam Liss. "Extraversion, neuroticism, attachment style and fear of missing out as predictors of social media use and addiction." *Personality and Individual Differences* 116 (2017): 69-72; Leong, Lai-Ying, Teck-Soon Hew, Keng-Boon Ooi, Voon-Hsien Lee, and Jun-Jie Hew. "A hybrid SEM-neural network analysis of social media addiction." *Expert Systems with Applications* 133 (2019): 296-316.



Figure 5. Infinite Challenge, MBC.



Figure 6. The Return of Superman, KBS.

PDs, the Industry and Politics

Korean producing-directors (PDs) who have the role of showrunner on these programs often rationalize their work as progressive. These PDs are the same individuals who participated in recent labor strikes (2012 and 2017) requesting the president of their networks (appointed by the Korean President or board members) to step down due to disruptive management and interference that suppress freedom of speech. The PDs believe that they are achieving something beyond the conservative scope of the Korean government which heads the broadcasters through

appointed board members. While the PDs are forced to comply with specific broadcasting policies that the KCC enforces, they do have creative opportunities that grant them progressive means of dismantling restrictive standards. For instance, after the sinking of the Sewol ferry on April 16, 2014, in which 304 people, including 250 high school students, died due to the captain and crew members' negligence, the celebrity fathers on *Dad! Where Are We Going?* appear wearing yellow ribbons to commemorate the victims who died in the capsizing. While the yellow ribbons appear on MBC, KBS's *The Return of Superman* shows no celebrities wearing the yellow ribbon. This is where the two broadcasters exhibit their differing nuances as institutions. On deregulated (cable) channels such as JTBC, the coverage of the Sewol Ferry tragedy was covered all the more, giving the network a much-needed boost in its ratings considering the very low amount of coverage of that story on KBS and MBC news.⁷¹ The yellow ribbon, which is a symbol of commemoration of the victims who were mostly children, is also that of dissent as it is tied to massive protests and demonstrations against former ROK President Park Geun-hye for her administration's negligence and absence during a national crisis.⁷² With that said, many PDs maintain conservative rationales that lead to misogynistic and trans/homophobic content as well as an abusive production culture on set. Thus, how "progressive" is applied to Korean TV PDs is also unstable, prone to re-reading, reappropriating, and adapting based on the polity in question; PDs can perform progressivism but queer the generalized liberal understanding of "progressive" by removing it from applications of sexuality or gender, and reserving their liberal stances solely

⁷¹ Soomin Seo, "South Korea's Watergate Moment: How a Media Coalition Brought Down the Park Geun-hye Government," *Journalism Practice*, 2020, 1-18, 10.

⁷² Heo Seung, "Yellow Sewol Ribbons Have Become a Symbol of Rebellion," *Hankyoreh*, Apr. 22, 2015, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/687972.html; In 2018, documentary short entitled *In the Absence* was produced by Yi Seung-jun and Gary Byung-Seok Kam, and was nominated for an Oscar at the 92nd Academy Awards.

for specific rights and benefits that they pick and choose, such as removing certain leaders from their post for suppressing free speech. In this way, the PDs enable the government's conservatism which favors heteronormativity over the rights of women and queer citizens, complicating their "liberal" stance.

The focus period of this dissertation is currently known as the era of "Korean Wave 2.0" or hallyu 2.0, when the international popularity of Korean cultural products is at a highpoint. This era began around 2005 with the rise of social media that promulgated hallyu content such as music, TV shows, film, food, makeup, etc. around the world.⁷³ Whereas hallyu 1.0 describes solely the popularity of Korean dramas and music in Asian regions, hallyu 2.0 encompasses an expanded overseas hyperconsumerism across all the continents and of all Korean products facilitated through social and digital media innovations—the period of media convergence.⁷⁴ Media convergence today, as emphasized by Hyejung Ju and Sookeung Jung, is not only about the flow of content across multiple platforms but also about the convergence of nations, cultures and communities through said content and the dialogue around it. But how does Korea interpret itself as a nation through television? Before we ask questions of global mobility and transnational flow, how does Korea perceive itself and emit that perception onto the world? Programs like *yenŭng* that are typically produced with the local audience in mind as its primary viewer and those abroad as its secondary viewer include many self-reflections on Korea as a nation state and what constitutes a citizen, and my dissertation analyzes how this occurs and what purpose that serves.

⁷³ See Sangjoon Lee and Abé Markus Nornes, eds., *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2015).

⁷⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

Methodology and Chapter Overview

Methodologically, this project applies production culture studies approaches such as observation, immersion and interviews, textual analysis supported by theories of gender, sexuality, genre and nation, and analysis of cultural reception. A couple monographs that this project models after are both authored by anthropologists. Purnima Mankekar's *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics* and Rachael Joo's *Transnational Sport* connect the significance of nation-state and gender politics with textual analysis of select media and cultural immersion. Whereas their method as anthropologists involved several years of ethnographic work, I committed three months of on-site research in Seoul between November 2018 through January 2019 as a media studies scholar with an interest in how power functions behind the scenes of these shows. While Mankekar's work involves audience studies to analyze cultural reception, my own reception method compares my analysis against the voices of local cultural critics in Korean newspapers, magazines, and academic journals that describe these programs. Through this, I offer a broad picture through a top-down analysis of the Korean television industry in relation to the state. With that said, I also include a bottom-up analysis by weaving in industry discourse for a multidimensional understanding of the system.

The interviews and fieldwork I conducted follow the production culture studies model as established by John Caldwell, which has expanded into the global arena by Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor, Vicki Mayer, Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson in their edited anthologies.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, eds., Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks and John Caldwell, (New York: Routledge, 2009); *Production Studies, The Sequel!: Cultural Studies of Global Media Industries*, edited by Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor and Vicki Mayer, (New York: Routledge, 2016); *Precarious*

Similar to how these scholars conduct their research through immersion at an office or a production set to observe power dynamics, I treated the sites I visited as cultural spaces with their own hierarchy and rules to understand how gender difference impacts labor, and remained mindful of how job titles and one's identity influence answers to my questions. One strategy established by production culture studies is to read against the grain of what above-the-line personnel (e.g. executives, producers, directors) say given their tendency to self-screen when discussing their work in efforts to maintain a positive brand identity/image. While Sookeung Jung's work also includes a great deal of interviews and insights from published autobiographical interpretations and definitions of the Korean television industry from the PDs' perspectives, she mainly focuses on above-the-line personnel. As a result, a critique of the industry itself is largely absent. To avoid this issue, I pay close attention to the professionally-conscientious answers given by PDs and writers who are still working at TV networks. I also interviewed former industry workers who have left their jobs and are more apt to speak on the difficult aspects of their jobs which led to their eventual resignations; my interviews with these individuals include an array of industry workers such as PDs, announcers, and performers (comedians). These interviewees offer frank insights about their work experience, which depict a militaristic hierarchy and deeply rooted culture of misogyny that exist in the TV industry's set and office culture. I am, thus, including and examining the popular critical establishment/sector as if it were a component of Korean production.

Lastly, through textual analysis, I take a critical approach to reading specific programs and episodes of Korean variety shows to address issues of gender (masculinity), sexuality

Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor, edited by Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

(heteronormativity and queerness), television as a tool for nationalistic agenda set by the nation-state, and what significance this has in an increasingly diversifying demographic of Korean citizenship, and the parameters of genre. As the dissertation progresses, each chapter builds on the last to define the Korean variety show within a historical context as well as its relationship to existing comedic genres such as clowning, vaudeville, and variety. Each chapter includes two parts, and they apply different modalities of analysis including televisuality, production culture, gender segmentation in labor. Some chapters lean more towards one modality than the other two but typically all three are applied for an interdisciplinary analysis of each program.

Chapter one focuses on Korea's two public broadcasters—the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC)—to analyze two kinds of shows that air on KBS, as well as shame and suffering as markers of a national identity. Part one examines how Korean child-care reality/variety programs are reshaping contemporary masculinity and fatherhood. This section analyzes public TV's construction of family men through two popular unscripted series centered on male celebrities and their children on *Dad! Where Are You Going?* (2013-2015, MBC) and *The Return of the Superman* (2013- , KBS), wherein celebrity dads look after their children for forty-eight hours while the wives/mothers take time away from the family for either work or pleasure. These shows articulate Korea's aspiration towards a Hollywood media constructed Western exemplary of fatherhood by breaking from the earlier generation's ideals of paternity characterized through a self-directed orientalist perception as the "distant patriarch" that is incapable of effective communication, affection and emotional openness towards his wife and children. It also exhibits an internalized

hierarchy where Korean masculinity is self-subordinated against hegemonic white masculinity.⁷⁶ To have an entire show built around men who fail and to put it in forms of competitions and comedy raises questions of shame, nation ideal, and negotiations of gender. The programs are further constructed to satisfy the imagined female gaze. Although the celebrity's wives and their children's mothers are not present onscreen, the editing, effects and subtitles frame the scenarios around the female (mother's) look of approval or disapproval thus queering the viewing subject's position regardless of their gender and parental/marital status. I argue that in a nation panicked by a population crisis due to record-low birth rates every year, these shows are biopolitical and designed to encourage heteronormative coupling and reproduction among modern Korean women who refuse to lead a conventional lifestyle involving marriage and child birth in pursuit of a career and freedom. Said programs are modern ideations that repackage Korean masculinity into desirable, readymade fathers and husbands for female consideration.

Part two focuses on KBS's popular talk show variety program *Happy Together* (2001—), which regularly features Korean pop (K-pop) idols who share stories of the Korean music industry's dark side including debt, dislocation, mutilation and starvation. These narratives are rearticulations of the nation's past injuries from Japanese colonization (1910-1945), Korean civil war (1950-1953) and militarized modernity/industrialization (1963-1987). Despite Korea's recent success in becoming a major player in the international market and growing economy, melodramatic narratives of suffering continue to crop up in Korean television. This segment analyzes the function of the talk show's melodramatic narratives which normalizes star abuse in neoliberal Korea. By employing this melodramatic narrative of suffering through candid

⁷⁶ Nadia Y. Kim, "'Patriarchy is So Third World,': Korean Immigrant Women and 'Migrating' White Western Masculinity," *Social Problems*, 2006, 53 (4): 519-536, 520.

anecdotes of forced dieting, plastic surgery, sleep deprivation, dislocation from homes, separation from families, and a cycle of debt, *Happy Together* draws audience sympathy while reinforcing the neoliberal capitalist logic for why these forms of abuse are justified—even necessary—in order to reach stardom and financial reward.

Chapter two analyzes *Infinite Challenge* to explore how *yenŭng* constructs masculinity to reinforce nationalism, and how that nationalism emerges through narratives of both colonial victimhood and socio-economic triumphalism while omitting stories of Korea's own culture of ethnic racism against migrant workers from Southeast Asia living as precarious citizens. Part one is an overview of undesirable masculinity through the cast members who present themselves as losers and wimps. The production frequently employs images of the cast members crying to generate a realness and intimacy for viewers while also utilizing male tearfulness as a means to remasculinize the wimpy male comic into a heroic national. Part two segues more deeply into how *Infinite Challenge* functions as a nationalist text that replays Korea's historical narrative of colonial victimization while also presenting Korean television as a popular global (hallyu) text consumed by non-Korean viewers thus exercising both hallyu and victimhood nationalism. This chapter demonstrates the cultural significance of *yenŭng* TV for Korea from MBC—a commercially-funded public broadcaster. I provide a brief historical overview of MBC to illustrate the embedded state motives on its programs due to the broadcaster's close structural ties to the government. For cultural and industrial contexts, I include interviews I've conducted with staff at DramaFever which illustrates why a national text that is popular to its locals does not translate as effectively transnationally. DramaFever was a New York-based niche subscription video-on-demand streaming company that specialized in Korean television shows, and a subsidiary of Warner Bros., which, as of October 16, 2018, has shut down. The company's

closure was swift and sudden, to the point of subscribers issuing complaints as to what will happen to the money they are owed for the monthly fee they've paid. The shutting down of a niche streaming company backed by a major American parent company such as Warner Bros. also brings into question mainstream (white) Hollywood's handling of non-American content and its smaller distributors. I also include information collected from academic and industry seminars I attended in the US and Korea for further insight on issues of Korean adoption as well as minority representation on Korean TV.

Chapter three examines the impact of cable television in Korea through variety shows, and this chapter shifts into a mode that is different from the previous two chapters by emphasizing industry discourse, the local press, and state rhetoric (e.g. the Broadcasting Act, military law). Part one of this chapter is a discursive queer political discourse on the Korean cable television industry. It analyzes state laws that apply to the Korean military as well as broadcasting which demonstrate intolerance of queer identities. A close examination of the state organization Korea Communications Commission (KCC) which is responsible for TV censorship and specific exchanges within the industry itself reveals that there are limits to the state's concern over fair and equal treatment of female and queer citizens. Meanwhile, the variety genre itself is highly subversive and frequently employs highly queerable subjects onscreen. Queerness is hypervisible through variety show gimmicks, mise-en-scene and homosocial casting which temporarily allow all identities to transgress their social prescriptions through cross-gender performance. The first section investigates the KCC's accusations of homophobia and sexism against the JTBC program *Ask Us Anything*, which conflict with the state's own inconsistency in protecting the rights and representation of marginalized identities. Part two of chapter three analyzes the same program and how cable networks permit "fallen" male stars of the Korean

television industry to make a return to the small screen after having “done their time” away from entertainment to “self reflect” on their criminal past. Beloved male entertainers with a marred past routinely make their return to television on Korean cable networks such as JTBC and not public or commercial networks. This section explores masculinity in the context of failure, comedy and redemption, and how cable enables television personalities associated with scandalous pasts to make their return by harnessing their controversies as part of their contemporary star persona.

Chapter four relies heavily on fieldwork to map the landscape of stand-up comedy and alternative spaces for comedians, especially those who have faced gender discrimination and/or harassment in the television industry and left. This chapter is notably different from the previous three chapters as I follow an ethnographic approach by generating a thick description per Clifford Geertz (via Gilbert Ryle) of the live stand-up comedy culture in Korea between late 2018 through early 2019, and generally avoid any deep textual analysis of specific content; instead, I read the local comedy culture itself. I analyze how subjects come together, what unites them and creates discord among them, and what enactments of “coloniality of power” and decoloniality are visible within these socio-cultural pockets.⁷⁷ With that said, the chapter does include a great deal of historical context on Korean stand-up comedy and *yenŭng*, and how they are interlinked. I spent three months in Seoul attending comedy shows and interviewing Korean comedians and former Korean TV industry workers as part of my fieldwork; my analysis is therefore primarily on the conversations among and between comedians, the audience’s reaction to comedians and their material, as well as descriptions of hierarchy and rationales from the television industry that carry

⁷⁷ Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America.” *Nepantla: Views from South*, 2000, 1(3), 533-580.

over into the live stand-up spaces. Part one documents the backstory of sketch comedians, announcers, and producers who left the television, and some who now pursue stand-up comedy in live spaces in Seoul. The account of how Korean comedians start their careers offers cues into local television networks' militant and hierarchical infrastructure. Leaving broadcasting for live performance offers a cathartic pathway for comedians—both male and female—to escape militant and patriarchal male toxicity in the workplace. With that said, the issue now is whether this pathway is economically sustainable given the lack of fiscal infrastructure or an ecosystem like the television industry has. While there is a social liberation for stand-up comedians who leave the television industry, they remain in a state of great financial precarity, and a return to television becomes inevitable. Part two explores the English-language comedy scene in Korea and its genealogy linked to American militarism and the English language teachers (ELTs) who are white, hetero and cis-male. Through interviews with bilingual Korean female comedians, I illustrate how these women practice affective resistance against hegemonic masculinity through stand-up comedy. I include interviews of white hetero cis-male English teachers who work in Asia and pursue open mic comedy, bilingual Korean comics, and queer comics. I integrate anthropological studies conducted on the English education system in East Asian countries, modern Korean history, as well as gender (masculinity) and race (whiteness) theory to illustrate the climate of the English-language stand-up comedy scene in Korea and how it relates to a broader history of racialized and gendered politics between Korea(ns) and America(ns). I argue that the English language stand-up comedy scene in Korea is tied to the nation's historical encounter with white masculinity in the form of foreign military presence and ex-pat English language teachers, and describe how the bilingual (English and Korean) female stand-up comedians of Seoul are reclaiming spaces, voices and history through their acts as a practice of decolonization.

I began writing this dissertation during a time of great political and social tumult in both the US and Korea from 2016 through 2020. During that time, numerous political events and movements took place: the ROK's first female President Park Geun-hye was impeached and imprisoned; the UK withdrew itself from the European Union (Brexit); Donald Trump became President of the US which was followed by the Women's March, #MeToo movement and #BlackLivesMatter protests; in 2018, the US media extensively covered the DPRK's nuclear testing activities causing increasing anxiety among Americans; shortly thereafter, ROK President Moon Jae-in and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) leader Kim Jong-un held their first in-person meeting, making a historic walk across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) at the 38th parallel live on television; in 2020, more #BlackLives Matter protests took place in midst of a global COVID-19 pandemic, as well as another contentious general election. Because I was writing during times of great political unrest and change on a global scale, this project contains a strand of activism. Some of it is an impact of the times I am writing from, but the other reasoning for this is because I find the critical work of Korean popular culture studies highly insufficient.

In her influential monograph *Service Economies*, literary scholar Jin-kyung Lee writes:

In the complex and contradictory terrain of South Korea, where multiple historicities and heterogeneous spaces coexist, it has become increasingly difficult to separate the forces of oppression and resistance, as they have become entwined with each other; the legacies of coloniality and neocoloniality have become indeterminate in that they have rearticulated themselves in both directions, replicating colonial power as well as anticolonial resistance.⁷⁸

The US's hegemonic influence over developing nations, and the similar socio-political malaises that are present in the ROK such as racism/colorism, anti-immigrant sentiments, classism, neoliberal attitudes, etc. require questioning, and television is one way in.

⁷⁸ Jin-kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010), 231.

In my research, my challenge was to find my bearings as a scholar to present this contemporary history while remaining mindful of my own identity as a Korean-born American émigré and a cis-female feminist with a past as a former worker in the film and television industry. I was seeing and learning things that were disturbing yet familiar, and encountering people who were pushing back, and I felt an alignment with them. I had to continually remain self-conscious of my position as well as my cultural, social, and political identity as I interviewed, researched and wrote. I present this project with an awareness that my position shapes my arguments and my observations throughout.

Chapter 1: Gender Expectations and Neoliberal Narratives of Suffering on Yenŭng

Part I: Aspirational Paternity and the Female Gaze on Korean Reality-Variety TV⁷⁹

Korea's national image presently suffers in international media due to its cultural misogyny.⁸⁰ Korea is widely critiqued for its poor ranking in gender equality despite competing in the global capitalist economy as a democratic and cosmopolitan society that values equal rights. In 2018, Korea ranked 115th among the 149 countries that participated in the World Economic Forum; the pay gap between Korean men and women is also significant, as women earn only 63 percent of what their male counterparts bring in.⁸¹ The Korean state, however, has a great deal to gain from dual-income hetero households that share domestic tasks between partners. Recent studies show that Korea's low fertility rate is directly linked to household gender inequality; in family dynamics, the likelihood of a second birth is found to be significantly higher when the father plays an integral role in childcare and home maintenance.⁸² Studies of hetero couples that share domestic labor also show an increase in its per capita income per household, demonstrating the public's economic benefit of gender equality that originates in the private domain.⁸³ The Korean government has been expressly concerned over the national

⁷⁹ A shorter version of the first section of this chapter is published in *Media, Culture & Society*.

⁸⁰ Se-Woong Koo, "South Korea's Misogyny." In: *The New York Times*, June 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/13/opinion/south-koreas-misogyny.html> (accessed Mar. 5, 2019); Claire Lee, "Misogyny in Korean online communities a serious concern: report," *Korea Herald*, Oct. 8, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180731000789> (accessed Mar. 5, 2019).

⁸¹ Moxy Ying, "This Fund Manager Wants to Prove Gender Equality is Good for Profits," *Bloomberg*, Dec. 30, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-30/fund-manager-in-korea-wants-to-prove-gender-equality-can-pay-off> (accessed Mar. 1, 2019).

⁸² Heo Yoon, "Misogyny in the Era of 'Daughter-Fools' – Korea's Masculinity in the 2000s Seen Through the Transformation of the 'Father Figure,'" *Journal of Popular Narrative* 22, 4 (2016): 279-309.

⁸³ Jinyoung Kim, Jong-wha Lee, and Kwanho Shin, "Gender Inequality and Economic Growth in Korea," *Pacific Economic Review*, (2016): 1-25.

birthrate decline in the last two decades. In 2020, Korea—yet again—recorded the lowest number of births in its history. The decline has been steady and consistent over the last twenty years. Korea has one of the lowest birth rates yet the highest suicide rate in the world, and the government increasingly expresses concern over the growing elderly population that is bound to outweigh the number of youths. In efforts to address this, the Korean government is assessing various means of combatting this population crisis, and as this part of the chapter demonstrates, that also includes public broadcast entertainment.⁸⁴

Between 2013 and 2018, nearly three dozen unscripted shows related to new fatherhood or a repurposed masculinity were or still are on air across public, commercial and cable networks but it started in January 2013 with a reality format of variety TV entitled *Dad! Where Are We Going?* which became a hit on Korean public broadcaster MBC.⁸⁵ *Dad!* features six male celebrities and their children (ages four to eleven) who go on a trip and spend a night away from their homes. Nine months after *Dad!* debuted, KBS aired a childcare reality-variety program entitled *The Return of Superman*.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ju-Eun Song, Jeong-Ah Ahn, Sun-Kyoung Lee, and Eun Ha Roh, “Factors Related to Low Birth Rate Among Married Women in Korea,” *PLoS One*, 13, 3, (2018): 1-11.

⁸⁵ *Dad! Where Are We Going?* abbreviated to *Dad!* hereafter.

⁸⁶ *The Return of Superman* abbreviated to *Superman* hereafter.



Figure 7 *The Return of Superman*. KBS.



Figure 8 *Dad! Where Are We Going?* MBC.

Similar to *Dad!*, *Superman* focuses on celebrity dads who look after their children for a period of forty-eight hours while their wives take a break away from home. *Dad!* showcases the celebrity father's interaction with his child outside of the home through outdoor activities, and *Superman* focuses on the celebrity's home life with his child through observational footage. Both *Dad!* and *Superman* became instant hits and achieved high ratings. Some cultural studies scholars write that *Superman* portrays a "new masculinity" through light entertainment to illustrate how modern Korean fathers do not subjugate their wives to patriarchal oppression by actively partaking in

domestic and childcare labor.⁸⁷ I, however, argue that the programs do consist of patriarchal messages through conventional gender assignments and expectations that are visible via Asian variety television elements such as subtitles, sound effects, CGI, music, as well as the shows' paratexts such as ads.⁸⁸

I explore Korean reality-variety TV and its local function as well as its "interplay" within the global context through distribution.⁸⁹ These reality-variety shows have didactic value to the state in their ability to instruct citizens on ideal gender "norms" while retaining their ability to represent the nation as socially progressive thus influencing how the rest of the world imagines Korea.⁹⁰ Anglo-American scholars often study reality TV through Foucauldian frameworks of governmentality and neoliberalism because of the texts' design for moral instruction that lead to self-regulation and lateral surveillance among viewers (with the exception of Joshua Gamson who uses Foucault's repressive hypothesis to describe daytime television to address issues of sexuality and agency).⁹¹ My argument is supported by these studies seeing as unscripted Korean TV also constructs idealized gendered citizens. With that said, Anglo-American definitions of reality TV are limited when describing hybrid Korean reality-variety programs. One major difference between Korean and Anglo-American reality shows is that most British and American

⁸⁷ Muri Iryanti, Aquarini Priyatna, and RM Mulyadi, "The Construction of Fathers New Masculinity in South Korea Variety Show *Superman is Back*," *Humaniora* 8, 4, (2017): 339-348, 343.

⁸⁸ See Jonathan Gray, *Shows Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts*, (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

⁸⁹ Toby Miller and Marwan Kraidy, *Global Media Studies*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, 159.

⁹⁰ Shani Orgad, *Media Representation and the Global Imagination*, (Malden: Polity Press, 2012).

⁹¹ Galit Ferguson, "The Family on Reality Television: Who's Shaming Whom?" *Television & New Media* 11, 2 (2010): 87-104; Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); Brenda R Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Joshua Gamson, *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

reality programs feature ordinary civilians whereas Korean reality-variety shows exclusively feature celebrities and their private lives. In order to address the cultural nuances of Korean reality-variety shows, I rely on existing studies of Japanese variety shows for conceptual terms. This is due to the limited literature on Korean variety shows in addition to the fact that Korean variety shows have absorbed a great deal of influence from Japan in the 1990s.⁹² With the exception of a couple articles on hybridized Korean reality shows, a consideration of the specificities of the variety genre and its effects are sparse.⁹³ The following case studies are meant to broaden the reach of Korean TV studies, speaking to scholars in television and global media studies as well as East Asian and Korean studies. The purpose of this chapter is to diversify media and gender studies discussions of the “female gaze” and “female spectatorship” through non-Anglo-American case studies.⁹⁴

⁹² Dong-Hoo Lee, “A Local Mode of Programme Adaptation: South Korea in the global television format business,” Albert Moran and Michael Keane (eds), *Television Across Asia: Television Industries, Programme Formats and Globalization*, (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 36-53.

⁹³ Woori Han et al, “Gendering the Authenticity of the Military Experience: Male Audience Responses to the Korean Reality Show Real Men ,” *Media, Culture & Society*, 39, 1 (2017): 62-67; Kyoung-Lae Kang, “Talking Hospitality and Televising Ethno-national Boundaries in Contemporary Korea: Considering Korea TV Shows Featuring Foreigners,” *Television & New Media* 19, 1 (2018): 59-74; Dong-Hoo Lee, “A Local Mode of Programme Adaptation: South Korea in the global television format business,” Albert Moran and Michael Keane (eds), *Television Across Asia: Television Industries, Programme Formats and Globalization*, (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 36-53; Yoon Tae-il, et al, “When Old Meets New: An Analysis of Korean Traditional Narrative in the Contemporary Reality TV Show Infinite Challenge,” *Acta Koreana*, 20, 2 (2017): 423-448.

⁹⁴ Caetlin Benson-Allott, “No Such Thing Not Yet: Questioning Television’s Female Gaze,” *Film Quarterly* 71, 2 (2017): 65-71; Kevin Goddard, “‘Looks Maketh the Man’: The Female Gaze and the Construction of Masculinity,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 9, 1 (2000): 23-39; Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Korean Child-care Reality-Variety Show AKA *Yuga Yenŭng*

Since the early 2000s, an advent of soft masculinity began to circulate internationally through K-dramas. “Feminized males” or “kkonminam”—a portmanteau of “flower” and “man” that refers to “pretty men”—became mainstream terminology as a result of beautified masculinity popularized by serialized TV shows.⁹⁵ Soft masculinity became a notable pattern through handsome male protagonists who woo their female companions into commitment with their genteel mannerisms—a stark contrast from the military hardness that defined Korean masculinity up until that point. But this does not suggest non-hetero sexualities per Western assumptions; as Joanna Elfving-Hwang contends, the kkonminam’s soft masculinity is more about “maintaining carefully groomed appearances” and this includes hard (muscular) bodies: “[P]opular culture representations of masculinity in Korea have afforded male characters a significant degree of fluidity and flexibility in terms of the aesthetics without linking fashion or use of makeup to a specific sexual orientation.”⁹⁶ Sofia Murrell’s exploration of the kkonminam shows that the term encompasses a multidimensionality ranging from looks (aesthetics), social expectations, morality, and consumption, and how the kkonminam outside of idealized media images are actually found to be not-so-gentlemanly after all, and often found to be manipulative or emotionally abusive, thus complicating the definition of kkonminam entirely.⁹⁷

In general, however, the binary contrast of soft masculinity was deliberately produced by TV against “hard masculinity” in efforts to diversify as well as soften the image of Korean

⁹⁵ Hyunji Lee, “A ‘real’ fantasy: hybridity, Korean drama, and pop cosmopolitans,” *Media, Culture & Society*, 2018, 40 (3): 365-380, 371.

⁹⁶ Joanna Elfving-Hwang, “The Aesthetics of Authenticity: Corporate Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Television Dramas,” *Asia Pacific Perspectives*, 2017, 15 (1).

⁹⁷ Sofia Murrell, “Portrayals of ‘Soft Beauty’ Analyzing South Korean Soft Masculinities in Media and in Real Life,” eds. JaeYoon Park and Ann-Gee Lee. *The Rise of K-Dramas*. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company), Kindle Edition.

masculinity for overseas consumption; Korean men in K-dramas became caretakers who can “selflessly sacrifice his own welfare” for the sake of his love interest.⁹⁸ Domestic fathers are an example of soft masculinity in the reality-variety text. Textually, these reality dad programs pick up where the K-dramas leave off on the finale episode with a happily-ever-after ending where the male and female protagonists tie the knot. These *yenŭng* programs on celebrity fathers function as a continuation of that media fantasy, where the male protagonist goes on to become a helpful and dedicated partner to his real wife and family.

Both *Dad!* and *Superman* are idealized public television fantasies of family men through the “yuga *yenŭng*” (child-care reality-variety) genre centered on male celebrities and their children. Korean entertainment attempts to reshape contemporary local masculinity through such programs. “*Yenŭng*,” which literally translates into “entertainment,” is used interchangeably with “variety show” among Korean viewers and producers. Korea began to adopt American reality TV as a format in 2009.⁹⁹ With that said, reality TV is also “a particularly mercurial and polysemic genre.”¹⁰⁰ The transnational genre mashup of reality and variety program elements has birthed a new form of programming in Korea referred to as “kwanch'al *yenŭng*,” which literally translates into “observational entertainment.” Kwanch'al *yenŭng* is a hybridization of the reality show and variety show, thus becoming the reality-variety show. The specific trend of kwanch'al *yenŭng* programs that focus on celebrities and their children are referred to as “yuga *yenŭng*” or “childcare variety.”

⁹⁸ Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 45-47.

⁹⁹ Dal Yong Jin, *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 59-63.

¹⁰⁰ Miller and Kraidy, 159.

Both *Dad* and *Superman* are examples of Korean “telemodernity” as described by Tania Lewis *et al*, which indicates an aspirational condition of modernity channeled through Asian lifestyle TV shows that encourage self-improvement through instruction on how to acquire “good taste, appropriate consumption, optimally functioning relationships, [and] proper gender....”¹⁰¹ As programs that air on public broadcast networks, these shows have the added burden of public responsibility.¹⁰² The shows, in so far as they are comedic, also have instructional value, and may be characterized as an extension of infotainment. For instance, *Superman* includes textual features such as a small fact box that appears at the bottom of the screen with specific childcare tips on how to handle unruly behavior in public or the benefit of sending children out on an errand to help them develop a sense of fiscal responsibility. These tips are offered by the programs to guide Korean parents on how to optimally raise their children. At first glance, *Dad!* and *Superman* appear as state means of promoting household gender equality by instructing men on the do’s and don’ts of childcare and domesticity. With celebrity dads as role models that non-celebrity dads can aspire to, these programs feature men taking part in activities that have typically been defaulted to women. Both shows, however, have been criticized by scholars for falling back on familiar gender assignments.

Korean academia is highly critical of both programs’ confused message regarding gender. Mira Kim claims that *yuga yenyŏng* makes domestic chores appear like “play” among fathers and their kids while omitting women’s perspectives on the heavy reality of such duties (labor).¹⁰³ Ji-

¹⁰¹ Tania Lewis, et al, *Telemodernities: Television and Transforming Lives in Asia*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 7-8.

¹⁰² Ki-Sung Kwak, *Media and Democratic Transition in South Korea*, 7; Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers Like You: How Public TV Failed the People*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 130.

¹⁰³ Mira Kim, “New Types of Masculinity Represented in TV and Its Limitations: Focusing on Weekend Variety Programs,” *Journal of the Korea Contents Association*, 14, 1 (2014): 88-96.

Ah Hong critiques such programs for legitimizing the fathers' blunders when handling childcare and domestic tasks, which reaffirms the idea that such tasks are not natural to men.¹⁰⁴ Heo Yoon notes that although these celebrity dads appeal to feminists through their willingness to take on housework, the fact that such tasks are temporary for fathers while permanent for women reinforces sexist gender assumptions.¹⁰⁵ Ran Lee and Seon Gi Baek argue in their semiotic analysis of *Dad!* that although it encourages an equal distribution of childcare labor between mothers and fathers, gender stereotypes stemming from patriarchal assumptions are persistently assigned onto the children which compromises the show's progressive message.¹⁰⁶ Korean media scholars are well aware that these programs are counterproductive to the nation's efforts in combatting gender disparities; their analyses, however, fall short on recognizing how the shows are utilized by the state to correct the nation's low birth rate by targeting female audiences in hopes to persuade them into heteronormative coupling and motherhood.

Foucault states that bio-power manifests at the meeting point of politics and economics, specifically over population concerns; institutions that retain and wield bio-power include the army and schools, but also public forums.¹⁰⁷ TV has been interpreted by governments as a reliable and efficient public apparatus to influence actions and conduct of citizens.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Ji-Ah Hong, "Yuga riölit'i p'ürogüremüi chinhwawa sahwoechök ümi [The Development of Yuga Reality Programs and its Social Implications]," *Broadcast Trend and Insight*, 1, 1 (2015): 41-48.

¹⁰⁵ Heo Yoon, "Misogyny in the Era of 'Daughter-Fools' – Korea's Masculinity in the 2000s Seen Through the Transformation of the 'Father Figure,'" *Journal of Popular Narrative*, 22, 4 (2016): 279-309.

¹⁰⁶ Ran Lee and Seon Gi Baek, "Fatherhood Representations of Childcare Entertainment Reality Programs – A Semiotic Study on a Reality Program, 'Where Are We Going, Dad?' of MBC," *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association* 16, 1 (2016): 107-120.

¹⁰⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Vol. 1*, translated by Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978, 1990), 140-141.

¹⁰⁸ Miller, *Technologies of Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

Heteropatriarchal military power employed by the Park Chung-hee (1963-1979) and Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988) administrations built the Korean public broadcasters' infrastructure, and designed a cultural policy for gendered nationals. From the 1960s through the 1980s, men were placed in the public sphere through military, science, technology and engineering job assignments while women were placed in the domestic sphere as household managers responsible for rearing a family.¹⁰⁹ More women pursued education and careers in the 1990s but the IMF Crisis of 1997 resulted in many female layoffs, and women were once again forced indoors to become wives and mothers.¹¹⁰ With that said, the reverse is also true; due to the economic crisis and layoff of many husbands/fathers, numerous housewives went out to find work. The work that these housewives found, however, were typically pink-collared "low-pay service work" in retail, domestic labor, insurance.¹¹¹

These gender expectations continue to have a stronghold over Korea on public television. Shows like *Dad!* and *Superman* are multi-coded to fulfill different purposes depending on the audience's proximity to the state. For domestic viewers, the shows reiterate state-constructed gender expectations from the modernization period (1960s through 1980s) which are framed as proper conducts of good "cultural citizenship."¹¹² Similar methods have also been used by governments in India and Egypt where television programs promote idealized notions of "good"

¹⁰⁹ Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹¹⁰ Hye-Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient, "Forgetting to Remember, Remembering to Forget: The Politics of Memory and Modernity in the Fractured Films of Lee Chang-dong and Hong Sang-soo," *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema* edited by Frances Gateward, (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), 115-140, 125.

¹¹¹ Sumi Kim, "Feminist Discourse and the Hegemonic Role of Mass Media: Newspaper discourse about two South Korean television dramas," *Feminist Media Studies*, 8, vol. 4 (2008): 391-406, 395.

¹¹² Miller, *Technologies of Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

and “modern” citizens.¹¹³ Meanwhile, these same shows attempt to present Korea as a gender-progressive and democratic nation through contemporary reality-variety shows that are accessed internationally through over-the-top (OTT) streaming sites. Both *Dad!* and *Superman* have a massive international following online through niche content subscription sites, YouTube, pirating, and format sales for overseas remakes. In Korea’s global presentation to the world, these shows superficially package the nation as gender progressive. Korean telemodernity achieves global attention while preserving a separate biopolitical agenda for its local female audience.

I foreground textual analysis of the shows within the context of contemporary Korean social issues stemming from gender politics while emphasizing the public broadcaster status of KBS and MBC which greatly influences how the programs construct family men in order to enhance its population by enticing women into considering conventional heteronormative expectations such as marriage and childbearing. Much like reality shows or “lifestyle” programs found in India and China, Korean TV promotes its ideal citizen through the media regardless of whether or not such standards are achievable in the given socioeconomic conditions of most Korean families.¹¹⁴

The significance of international audiences who view episodes of *Dad!* and *Superman* online with subtitles in English, Chinese and other languages cannot be overlooked. Rachael Joo, who analyzes Korean televised sports and gender formations of Korean celebrity athletes,

¹¹³ Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹¹⁴ Tania Lewis, et al, *Telemodernities: Television and Transforming Lives in Asia*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

contends that the muscular body of male athletes embody “ideas of global Koreanness” which represent vigor and international desire for local and diasporic Koreans.¹¹⁵ (Joo’s interpretation of muscular male bodies further complicates the hard/soft binary understandings of Korean masculinity as mentioned earlier.) My own interest in the international impact of global Korean TV is broader as I question how the nation projects its preferred national image of masculinity to the world. This global projection contains a self-imposed Orientalist shame that stems from internalized Asian stereotypes produced by the dominant Western discourse, which constructs Korean men as emotionally unavailable, especially in comparison to white men. Locally, however, this shame is postured on TV as a form of atonement as the male Korean celebrities featured on these shows attempt to become better husbands and fathers to set an example for male viewers; the programs’ expectation that such images may entice Korean women into marriage and reproduction is evident in the texts’ construction of the female gaze through voiceover narration, CGI, subtitles, and other added effects commonly found in Asian variety shows. First, an understanding of the Korean public broadcasting system’s infrastructure can help uncover how the state influences its viewers through TV.

Korea’s Public Broadcasting Systems

All media systems must be understood within their national context.¹¹⁶ When it comes to TV, national context is all the more significant because of the state’s power to grant licenses and regulate broadcast policies. The Korean TV industry is steeped in a masculinist history of

¹¹⁵ Rachael Joo, *Transnational Sport: Gender, Media, and Global Korea*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 101.

¹¹⁶ James Curran and Myoung-jin Park, “Introduction: Beyond Globalization Theory.” *De-westernizing Media Studies* edited by James Curran Myoung-jin Park, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1-15.

militant violence which influences the patriarchal undertone of many current programs.¹¹⁷ The Korean public broadcast history is imbricated in a tumult of Japanese colonization (1910-1945), civil war (1950-1953), and the military dictatorships of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. KBS and MBC's operations and programs are largely shaped by the chaotic political conditions from which they originate.

Prior to becoming a state public broadcaster, KBS was founded during the Japanese occupation to transmit Japanese war propaganda to Korean civilians over the radio alongside educational, cultural and entertainment programs in the Korean language "designed to strengthen Korean cultural identity and economic autonomy" by "so-called cultural nationalists" who were careful not to directly challenge Japanese colonial rule.¹¹⁸ This concept of strengthening Korean culture without any direct political criticism of the government is upheld at KBS to this day, and its infrastructural design represses political dissent. For instance, the KBS board of directors and president are appointed directly by the Korean President. All of the programs that are produced and aired on KBS must to adhere to government restrictions and policies enforced by the Korea Communications Commission (KCC).

KBS officially became a public service broadcaster in 1973 and remained a state apparatus for disseminating Park Chung-hee's propaganda during his presidency. Uniform programming was pushed by the Ministry of Information (MOI) to only include news, documentaries and cultural programs that "highlighted national identity" during prime time between 20:00 and 21:00, illustrating the broadcaster's active contribution to the state's

¹¹⁷ I return to this idea in the chapters that follow through examples found in the Korean television industry's production culture.

¹¹⁸ Michael Robinson, "Broadcasting, Cultural Hegemony, and Colonial Modernity in Korea, 1924-45," *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 55-69, 55.

homogenous nation and identity formation based on a military ideology.¹¹⁹ The Park administration officially deemed KBS a public service broadcaster because it needed to find a consistent source of funding that maintains its propaganda tool.¹²⁰ When KBS became a public service broadcaster, it began to collect license fees from households that owned television sets, which by 1973, had reached approximately one million—a sufficient enough number for the broadcaster to sustain itself.¹²¹ Sookeung Jung states that this license fee structure is what makes Korean public broadcasting a “public service.”¹²² This system remains in effect to this day. KBS is funded by government subsidies and licensing fees, which are collected from the monthly electric bill of households that own television sets. ₩2,500 has been fixed price per television-owning households since 1981 but this was raised in 2014 to ₩4,000. The hike was made to combat its high dependence on commercial revenue. In spite of being a public broadcaster, 41% of KBS’s revenue comes from commercial advertisements; the KCC raised the licensing fee on the condition that KBS end all commercials by 2019, although this did not take place.¹²³ As of 2017, the fee is down to ₩3,000. KBS today has two terrestrial channels: KBS-1 for national news and culture-centric shows that air without commercial interruption, and KBS-2 for popular family programs such as serialized dramas and *yenŭng* programs which air with commercial breaks. The history of KBS-2 is also rooted in military authoritarian rule which continued through the 1970s and 80s.

¹¹⁹ Ki-Sung Kwak, *Media and Democratic Transition in South Korea*, 15.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 14.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 15.

¹²² Soo keung Jung, 84.

¹²³ Baek Byung-yeul, “People don’t want to pay more for KBS,” *The Korea Times*, Mar. 3, 2014, accessed Nov. 10, 2016,

http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2014/03/116_152608.html.

In 1980, the Basic Press Law was enforced by Chun, making it illegal for anyone to criticize the government or the martial law. It also forced all existing broadcasters to be absorbed by KBS under the auspices that the merger would provide “better-quality programming for the general public,” although, in reality, it was to centralize information control to Chun’s authoritarian regime.¹²⁴ Several watershed moments throughout the 1980s changed the Korean public’s relationship to the media; the Kwangju Uprising, the build up towards the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, and the rise of the middle class demanding democracy resulted in the 1987 media democratization. These changes, however, had little impact on the broadcasters’ overall infrastructure, which maintained its customs devised by the totalitarian military regimes of Park and Chun. Just like KBS, MBC maintains close ties to the state. MBC came into formation in 1969 as a commercial broadcaster but was subject to heavy government scrutiny through monthly broadcasting activity reports; MBC was also required to align its political interests with Park to remain in operation. The Foundation for Broadcast Culture (FBC)—a government-owned public corporation—currently holds the majority of MBC’s shares, and the board members of the FBC are appointed by the KCC. Given these structural conditions, programs that air on KBS and MBC are shaped by what the state imagines the public’s needs are; such projections are visible in entertainment including *yuga yenŭng*.

Both *Dad!* and *Superman* have *vérité* and guerilla-style filming techniques of reality TV as cameras follow the subjects wherever they go. The stylized crosscut editing between characters that capture reaction shots, added sound effects, laugh tracks, subtitles, and CGI enhance the comedic aspects of the show; they also, however, include a message directed towards an imagined female audience through its diegetically constructed gaze. Such aural and

¹²⁴ Ki-Sung Kwak, *Media and Democratic Transition in South Korea*, 17.

visual elements commonly found in Korean variety programs contain the public broadcasters' ideology regarding gender roles in society.

The Female Gaze & Variety Genre Construct a New Masculinity

The female gaze, based on Laura Mulvey's influential theory of the male gaze, is a contested concept.¹²⁵ Caetlin Benson-Allott critiques the mainstream press's declaration that popular Hollywood TV has achieved the female gaze with the increase of female showrunners—a declaration that overlooks the fact the female gaze is overwhelmingly defined by white cis-female hetero perspectives. In this way, Benson-Allott questions the possibility of the female gaze altogether because its existence depends on the logic that all female gazes are one and the same thereby erasing racial and sexual difference; I would add that this assumption also ignores cultural, class and generational differences.¹²⁶ Kevin Goddard claims that the internalized social expectations of one's own gender leads to a stereotypical performance of that gender when one senses the gaze of the opposite sex.¹²⁷ Goddard's essentialist and heteronormative assumptions on gendered gazes is problematic precisely because of the issue of erasure that Benson-Allott points to, but his argument encapsulates the underlying determination of shows like *Dad!* and *Superman*, which conceives its target audience as female. Both *Dad!* and *Superman* diegetically imagine the female gaze—specifically the mother's gaze—via mise-en-scene, which they achieve through variety genre techniques such as voiceover narration, subtitles, sound, music, CGI, and crosscut editing.

¹²⁵ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 1989).

¹²⁶ Caetlin Benson-Allott, "No Such Thing Not Yet: Questioning Television's Female Gaze," *Film Quarterly* 71, 2 (2017).

¹²⁷ Kevin Goddard, "'Looks Maketh the Man': The Female Gaze and the Construction of Masculinity," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 9, 1 (2000): 23-39.

The variety aesthetic per Henry Jenkins is “fragmented, frenetic, and emphatic,” and aimed at “crude shock to produce emotionally intense responses” from the audience.¹²⁸ Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik observe that variety TV shows are marked by reflexivity to cue audiences into the fact that such programming is specific to TV.¹²⁹ In Korean variety TV, a commitment to narration or argumentation is not readily apparent; instead, *yenŭng* programs typically include laugh tracks, CGI, subtitles, sound effects, music cues and a host to guide the viewer. Its diegetic elements, which are staple to Korean variety programs, not only give the shows their generic identity but also help deliver the programs’ ideological message.

Variety TV attempts to cover all the bases as a fragmentary mode. The content is often a display of visual, aural, or emotional excess, and they share some aspects of melodrama per Linda Williams’s description.¹³⁰ For instance, there are some episodes in both programs where comedy is abandoned for weepy sentimentality through music and close-ups of the fathers’ faces when they become emotional. Tania Modleski claims that TV programs are theoretically produced with the maternal or the “distracted viewer” in mind who juggles multiple tasks at once to match the “rhythm” of the homemaker.¹³¹ David Morley makes a similar assessment that women are more prone to moving around the house conducting chores while the TV is on.¹³² (Female) TV viewers, however, are not by default distracted viewers. As John Caldwell argues,

¹²⁸ Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachios Nuts?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) 62-63.

¹²⁹ Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 201-202.

¹³⁰ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly*, 44, 4 (1991): 2-13.

¹³¹ Tania Modleski, “The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women’s Work,” *Regarding Television. Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, Ann E Kaplan (ed), (Los Angeles: University Publications of America, 1983), 67-75, 74.

¹³² David Morley, *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 141-143.

the assumption of glance theorists that television viewership is innately distracted overlooks the fact that “television works hard visually” to keep its audience focused.¹³³ This is most certainly the case with Korean variety TV, where excessive sound and visual effects attempt to hold the viewer’s attention or emphasize a significant moment; with that said, the distracted viewer is also tended to given the programs’ constant replays of certain moments that are highlighted for televisual emphasis.

Dad! integrates many games and quizzes that allow celebrity fathers and their children to compete against other father-son/father-daughter teams. The soap opera-like narrative plotting in *Superman* weaves together multiple storylines of several different families through crosscut editing, subtitles, and voiceover narration in each episode. Visual excess manifests through the typographical subtitles on *yenŭng* programs which have origins in Japanese variety entertainment that Korean producers imitated in the 1990s in efforts to produce cost-efficient and diverse content for domestic viewers.¹³⁴ The excessive textual displays that appear throughout Korean and Japanese variety shows are called “telop” (“teroppu”) in Japanese, which capture the subject’s emotions and words for impact.¹³⁵ In Korean, telop is called “chamak” which translates as “subtitles” or “caption.”¹³⁶ The chamak on *Superman* are superimposed over the children’s faces as a commentary or reaction that the production imagines would be the viewers’ reaction to any ignorant comments or behaviors that the fathers exhibit. The viewers are positioned as critics

¹³³ John Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 27.

¹³⁴ Dong-Hoo Lee, “A Local Mode of Programme Adaptation: South Korea in the global television format business,” Albert Moran and Michael Keane (eds), *Television Across Asia: Television Industries, Programme Formats and Globalization*, (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 36-53.

¹³⁵ Ryoko Sasamoto et al, “Telop, Affect, and Media Design: A Multimodal Analysis of Japanese TV Programs,” *Television & New Media* 18, 5, (2017): 427-440.

¹³⁶ I use “chamak” interchangeably with “subtitles” hereafter.

who can find humor in the fathers' shortcomings; this implies that the viewers are knowledgeable in childcare practice to know when and how the fathers falter, and in this sense, viewers are ascribed the mother's gaze.

On episode 5 of *Superman* (air date Dec. 29, 2013) comedian Lee Hwi-jae takes care of his infant twin sons Seo-eon and Seo-jun while his wife is away for forty-eight hours. After Hwi-jae finishes bottle feeding both babies, Seo-eon continues to cry. Hwi-jae wonders aloud why the baby keeps crying while trying to pacify him with a diaper change. Finally, when Hwi-jae gets another bottle and feeds Seo-eon, the baby calms down. In a medium shot of Hwi-jae standing over Seo-eon with his other twin son in his arms, he says, "You were throwing a fit all because you didn't get enough milk?" The editing cuts to a close-up of Seo-eon's face and a small chamak appears like a comment bubble from the infant's mouth: "I've been telling you all along!" Then an off-screen woman's voice narrates over a brief montage of Seo-eon kicking, squirming and crying: "The clumsy dad didn't know that the amount of milk he gave was insufficient." The montage of clips include a chamak that highlights Seo-eon's movements as he cries and crawls towards a bottle while Hwi-jae misses all the signals. The chamak, or telop, is used in order to "manipulate" audiences and their responses.¹³⁷ The chamak functions not only as the children's voice which they themselves cannot voice because of their inability to speak, but also speaks from the position of a critical audience who is imagined as the absent mother. The show replaces the absent mother with a chamak that speaks from a mother's authority. It is further notable that the voiceover narration on *Superman* is delivered by a woman.

¹³⁷ Ryoko Sasamoto et al, "Telop, Affect, and Media Design: A Multimodal Analysis of Japanese TV Programs," *Television & New Media* 18, 5, (2017): 427-440, 437.

In the first several episodes of *Superman*, the voiceover narration was delivered by prominent actress Chae Shi-ra who is herself a wife and a mother of two children. Chae was later replaced with Jung Hye-young—another TV and film actress who is married to Sean Noh of the Korean hip-hop group Jinusean and is a mother to four children. Jung, unfortunately, is more renowned in the press for her marriage to Noh and motherhood than her own right as an actress. Not only does the narrator function as the surrogate mother, but she occasionally appears in a small screen at the top or bottom corner wearing headphones while peering into a separate screen where she sees what the audience sees. This small screen is called a “wipe” (“waipu”)—the Japanese term that describes a screen-within-a-screen.¹³⁸ Whenever the narrator appears in the small screen in *Superman*, she assumes the voice of authority and the maternal voyeur who comments with either approval or disapproval of the father’s interaction with his children as she monitors the same footage that the audience sees on television. The narration and the narrator’s appearance in the small screen are similar to the chamak in that all of these elements purposefully shape the viewer’s opinion on what separates a proper father from a clumsy one. The celebrity fathers in both *Dad!* and *Superman* are infantilized by the structure of the female gaze which is visible in the programs’ mise-en-scene. Technical choices such as the chamak, voiceover, and small screen, which are common in East Asian variety shows, construct this gendered authoritarian presence.

On *Superman*, the constructed female authority is legitimated by the voiceover narrator’s own identity as a mother, which is highly reductive considering Chae Shi-ra and Jung Hye-young’s accomplished careers as actresses. This also calls into question the possibility of an

¹³⁸ Patrick W Galbraith and Jason G Karlin, “Introduction: The Mirror of Idols and Celebrity,” Patrick W Galbraith and Jason G Karlin (eds), *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1-32, 16.

actress's career after she gets married and has children. Does an actress's casting change once she enters motherhood? Casting actresses who are mothers in their private lives naturalizes them to their assigned gender roles. Actresses like Kim Hye-ja vocalized her discontent with the industry relegating her to supporting roles as she aged, getting cast as an aunt or mother rather than the lead.¹³⁹ Meanwhile, male alums of these dad shows continue their *yenŭng* careers in shows centered on cooking like the *Dad!* alums have; anchor Kim Sung-joo and former soccer athlete Ahn Jung-hwan hosted JTBC's *Please Take Care of My Refrigerator* (2014-2019) which centered on celebrity chefs making meals for celebrity guests who brought in their fridge to reveal on television.

The mother's gaze is constructed in *Dad!* in the form of a *chamak*, which makes judgment calls whenever the fathers exhibit shortcomings. *Dad!* also has a voiceover narrator but he is a male celebrity, and the voiceover functions more as a means of exposition or moving the story forward by connecting plot points between episodes, and lacks the didactic component that *Superman* has. With that said, both shows imagine female spectatorship, and the *chamak* instructs viewers on how to build patience for these fathers' blunders. This is evident through superimposed chiding or internal "apology" monologues placed over the fathers via *chamak*, CGI, sound effects and music. Thus, both programs produce an ideological message aimed at a female audience through the variety show's generic capabilities.

Considering these variety-reality shows' ultimate baseline which is comedy, it is almost necessary for fathers to consistently remain incompetent. The show would otherwise have no punchline. The emphasis throughout both *Superman* and *Dad* is for the most part fatherhood, and

¹³⁹ Kim Hyo-eun, "In with the old, out with the new," *JoongAng Daily*, Apr. 17, 2012. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=2951603>, accessed Aug. 6, 2020.

television fervently promotes the ideal Korean father image while emphasizing that men in the current generation are different from before, offering single hetero female viewers a reason to consider marriage and child birth.¹⁴⁰ This logic beckons female spectatorship. On both *Dad!* and *Superman*, the fathers express a range of emotions including sadness, anger and joy, and frequently shed tears. These shows imagine their appeal to female desire by highlighting the emotional openness and affectionate capabilities of these male celebrities as husbands and fathers.

On episode 104 (air date Dec. 21, 2014) of *Dad!* entitled “Vacation Trip,” famous character actor Sung Dong-il—the oldest member of the cast—and his six-year-old daughter Bin take a trip to Japan. Bin, who is known for her hyperactivity, cannot sit still during the long train ride. When Bin suddenly props her seat up, Sung loses his temper. While exploding in anger, Sung knuckles Bin on the head with his fist. The camera closes in on the child’s face frozen in fear. Sung then tells her to sit by herself and moves to the opposite side of the train car to cool off. While Bin sits alone and rests her head on the armrest, playful sound effects cue over each of her movements to lighten the scenario. The camera captures Sung in a medium wide shot as he sits alone, staring out the window. Subtitles that read like thought balloons appear over his head: “Should I have been more patient? Was I too harsh?” The next shot is a close-up of Bin sleeping on the armrest of her seat with her hair fallen over her face. Melodramatic music cues in as Sung’s arm appears and he places Bin’s head over his lap. As Sung strokes Bin’s hair with his hand, the camera slowly zooms into his face and a *chamak* appears—“Sorry feelings rush in”—

¹⁴⁰ There were a handful of variety and reality shows centered on motherhood as well but they were all canceled after a few episodes, or, in the case with *Birth of Mom*—a pregnancy-focused show—it aired on KBS1 for fifty episodes—which indicates that this is a show dedicated to Korean culture, and not necessarily entertainment. The logic here is that when motherhood is involved, it is no laughing matter; the show is dedicated to instructing and educating viewers.

along with a dreamy sound effect. Although Sung is never shown actually apologizing to his daughter for his violent outburst, the camerawork, editing, music and subtitles all frame Sung in an affectionate light and fill in his unspoken apology to indicate that he recognizes his earlier behavior as a mistake. Ultimately, the variety show deems Sung's actions as forgivable, and he is depicted as a father who is tolerably and expectantly incompetent, therefore endearing.

Through variety show editing techniques, effects and subtitles, a mother's gaze is constructed and imposed upon the viewer regardless of the viewer's gender, marital status or opinion towards Sung. This is the queering effect of *yenŭng*; it genders the viewer as a wife and mother regardless of the viewers' actual gender and parental and/or marital status. Effects like the *chamak* not only shapes the narrative but also shows how MBC controls the discussion on what constitutes acceptable fathering through this constructed gaze. Considering MBC's public broadcaster status and close ties to the KCC and FBC, such messages may be interpreted as state ideology. The viewfinder in *Dad!* constructs the mother's gaze by showcasing the fathers' shortcomings while begging the (female) viewers' patience and soliciting praise for the milestones that men have reached thus far. Notably, there was no actual footage with an exchange of apology, forgiveness and reconciliation between Sung and Bin. These were filled in by the show's CGI, *chamak*, music cues and sound effects. The question of what constitutes an apology and what meaning and purpose the ritual of an apology has when toxic masculinity is inflicted onto a girl or a woman must be raised, but the instruction on this and its impact on child development are absent.

Korean Telemodernity: Aspiring Towards White Paternity

Korean communications scholar and former TV producer Sook Jung claims that reality-variety programs are favored by audiences for appearing as close to the real as possible with little to no premeditated or feigned gags.¹⁴¹ As established earlier, the variety genre facilitates the construction of the imagined female gaze in yuga yenŭng, but the shows' reality TV aspect must also be addressed. Whenever corporate and state agenda meet TV, discussions of governmentality become unavoidable. Reality TV can "build national identity."¹⁴² Reality TV studies over the past two decades explicate how governmentality shapes citizenship through shame. Brenda Weber utilizes Foucault's theories of governmentality and surveillance in her examination of makeover reality TV and how it shames viewers into self-improvement.¹⁴³ Galit Ferguson notes how family-centered reality programs shame families on TV with the purpose of shaping parents and children into better citizens. The shame that is at work in *Dad!* and *Superman* is two-prong.¹⁴⁴ The first is on par with Weber and Ferguson's description of reality TV's function of governance; these shows have the potential to shame men into becoming more active family members. The second, however, which is the focus of this section, is a self-inflicted shame deriving from an internalized Orientalist discourse linked to Western hegemonic assumptions of Asian men.

Although *Dad!* is a variety show, the concept originates from a place of personal "trauma" experienced by the producer/director (PD) of the show Kim Yoo-gon.¹⁴⁵ In an

¹⁴¹ Sook Jung, *Yenŭng k'ont'ench'ŭ sŭt'orit'elling* [*Yenŭng Contents and Storytelling*], (Seoul: Communication Books, 2015).

¹⁴² Miller and Kraidy, 146.

¹⁴³ Brenda R Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

¹⁴⁴ Galit Ferguson, "The Family on Reality Television: Who's Shaming Whom?" *Television & New Media* 11, 2 (2010): 87-104.

¹⁴⁵ "PD" is a Korean TV industry terminology that abbreviates "producer-director." The PD essentially plays the role of "showrunner" in a television production.

interview, Kim explains how the concept came to him during the MBC labor strike in 2012, which forced him to spend long hours at home.¹⁴⁶ It was then that Kim sensed how awkward it felt to be at home with his nine-year-old son. Kim claims that he was shocked to learn that he'd become a stranger to his own family, citing the word "trauma" several times to describe his experience. After the strike ended, Kim returned to his post at MBC and pitched a variety show premised on middle-aged celebrity fathers proving themselves to be worthy members of the family. As part of his research, Kim met with Kwon Oh-jin—a child education specialist and instructor at a center for training fathers. Kim learned that when a father and child are isolated on an island overnight, the child naturally becomes dependent on the father and this forces a dialogue between the two. The overnight retreat idea became the premise of the show that led to the production of *Dad!* which aired every Sunday night at 5PM on MBC from 2013 through 2015. The show is a tool that helps fathers overcome the "trauma" of realizing their distant, strained or non-existent relationship with their children. The fact that Kim went to a training school for fathers to gain insight on how to produce this program speaks volumes on its underlying thesis: Korean fathers today are inadequate, and they know it. The challenge to the cast members on *Dad!* is learning to overcome their flaws as Korean men and transform into "good" fathers. But what brought on the feeling of inadequacy among Korean fathers in the first place?

Conceptually, the father-training school that Kim visited is an extension of the Duranno Father School which was established in Seoul in 1995 by the Duranno Bible College. The Father School's education program is modeled after the Christian ministry's twelve-step recovery

¹⁴⁶ YJ Kwon, "Ch'akhan Yenŭngŭro Sŭngpu 'Appa! Ŏdika?' Kim Yoo-gon [Success Through 'Nice *Yenŭng*,': Dad! Where Are We Going? Kim Yoo-gon PD]," *Donga*, Mar. 25, 2013, <http://woman.donga.com/3/all/12/145535/1> (accessed Mar. 12, 2017).

program for alcoholics and drug addicts. The addiction that Korean men are being trained to break away from through Duranno's program is toxically masculine behaviors that have caused rifts in their relationships with their wives and children. The Father School's website claims that fathers today have lost their place in the family and the Father School will restore their authority but without the abusive patriarchal heavy-handedness that they've previously been defined by. In their ethnographic study of the Father School, sociologists Allen Kim and Karen Pyke find that the school and the movement it embodies attempt to "elevate" Korean maleness by promoting an aspiration towards white masculinity; in doing so, however, they reproduce Orientalist views of themselves as restrained and stoic Asian fathers who fail at effective communication with their loved ones.¹⁴⁷ This self-directed Orientalism is further noted by the researchers through the Father School's denigration of Confucianism, blaming it for the broken lines of communication between themselves and their families, and deeming it a regressive ideology.¹⁴⁸ The Father School program contrasts images of cruel and violent Korean fathers to scenes from mainstream American Hollywood films filled with tender moments between white men and their white families to make Korean fathers feel inept.¹⁴⁹ Emphasizing male Korean shame is a major component in this operation. The same self-inflicted sense of patriarchal shame is at the core of *Dad!* and *Superman*.

¹⁴⁷ Allen Kim and Karen Pyke, "Taming Tiger Dads: Hegemonic American Masculinity and South Korea's Father School," *Gender & Society*, 29:4, 2015, 509-533, 518, 529.

¹⁴⁸ Kim and Pyke, 518.

¹⁴⁹ Kim and Pyke, 521.

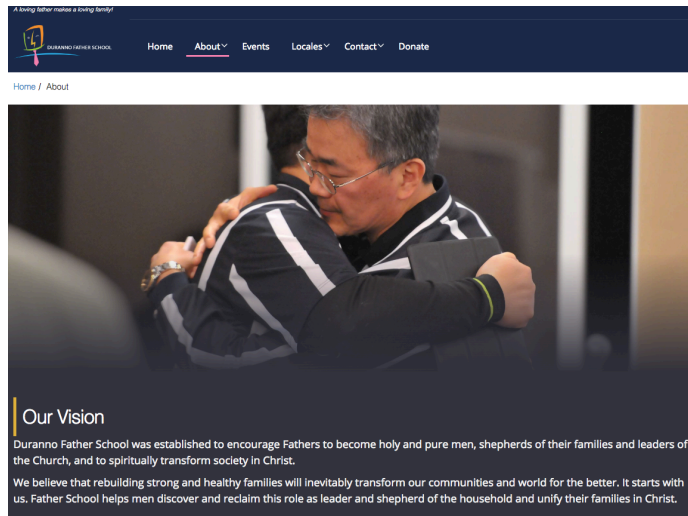


Figure 9. Duranno Father School.



Figure 10. Duranno Father School.

In episode two of *Dad!* (air date Jan. 13, 2013), TV host Kim Sung-joo prepares breakfast for his son nine-year-old son Kim Min-guk. While fumbling with the simple task of warming up

prepackaged instant food on the stove, Kim turns to the camera in direct-address and admits: “This is the first time I’ve ever prepared a meal for Min-guk.” A chamak appears below a close-up of Kim’s face: “The first time he’s ever prepared a meal in nine years.” Kim’s statement functions as an unspoken apology, and the domestic fathering that Kim performs on camera is an atonement for his shortcomings. In episode 87 of *Dad!* (air date Sept. 14, 2014), actor Ryu Jin tells his six-year-old son Lim Chan-hyung to come to the kitchen and witness his grandfather do the dishes for the first time in his life. The sound effects, laugh track, and chamak all tease the old man’s patriarchal backwardness. The grandfather is framed as an agent of the “previous” generation—one that is no longer in mode in present-day Korea, thus playing out local telemodernity. The scene is instructive to its viewers in two ways; it lampoons the older man for living by outdated and regressive gender assignments while presenting Korea as a nation that has now overcome gender disparities. Ryu sets himself apart from his own father by underscoring the generation gap that stands between them through laughter and soft ridicule.

Contemporary ideations of American masculinity have a similar trend of breaking away from the previous generation of fathers, particularly in serialized cable TV programs. Amanda Lotz and Michael Albrecht both discuss contemporary TV masculine identities on critically-acclaimed cable shows, and the common motif of male protagonists struggling against the values that their own fathers held.¹⁵⁰ The celebrity dads in *Dad!* and *Superman* aim to break from Confucian definitions of paternity which are limited to breadwinners and patriarchal family heads. Both shows exhibit a stark contrast between generations by highlighting the binary of old

¹⁵⁰ Amanda Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century*, (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 74; Michael Mario Albrecht, *Masculinity in Contemporary Quality Television*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 99.

fathering (Confucian patriarchy) and new (reformed fatherhood modeled after Anglo-American standards). In episode 62 of *Superman* (air date Jan. 15, 2015), the triplets Daehan, Minguk and Manse are sent to a day school run by a strict Confucian headmaster. The three-year-old triplets cry whenever the headmaster—a middle-aged man in traditional Korean garb—addresses the children in a firm tone. The children’s fearful reaction to the headmaster’s strict methods indicate that they are not used to such treatment at home; this is further evidence that Korean parents today do not raise their children with harsh authoritarian methods. Through this mild denigration of Confucianism, Korea’s achievements in modernity are highlighted on TV for domestic and international viewers.



Figure 11. *The Return of Superman*. KBS.

This negative-positive binary that separates Confucian masculinity (past/traditional) from white masculinity (present/modern) does not always demean Confucian values. Whenever a Confucian value appears in a nationalist context, it retains its significance to the state. Filial

piety—a Confucian value that the state relies on for biopolitical purposes—is a necessary part of Korea’s social foundation. In episode 45 of *Dad!* (air date Nov. 10, 2013 “Twentieth Trip”), the school master teaches the triplets Confucian proverbs that emphasize filial piety and the “proper” ways of addressing their father. Filial piety is important to the Korean state given the increase in the nation’s elderly population in conjunction with the nation’s annual decline in younger population; it is further important to the state given the insufficient pension that the government provides for the Korean elderly. Meanwhile poverty among Korea’s elderly is a major issue causing other social problems such as a high suicide rate and spike in sexually transmitted diseases due to prostitution within communities of senior citizens.¹⁵¹ As the Korean government grapples with these social issues, it increasingly relies on existing traditional values such as filial piety so that children of the elderly may provide for their parents thereby lightening the financial burden on the government via welfare. With that said, such cultural expectations have an ambivalent relationship to actual laws, and are not necessarily enforced among senior citizens and their children. Instead, these values are played repeatedly on television as social reminders to public television viewers by featuring cute young children who are just starting to learn such values with the future of senior citizens in mind. As such, aspects of governmentality are witnessed on these shows, and the neoliberal logic of placing responsibility of upright citizenship onto the individual is evident. The government’s paranoia and anxiety over the rising number of senior citizens, dropping population of the youth therefore less workers who can contribute to the nation’s economy and help fund the government’s welfare system with social security for the

¹⁵¹ Desmond Ng, “Granny prostitutes reflect South Korea’s problem of elderly poverty,” *Channel News Asia*, Jan. 29, 2017, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/granny-prostitutes-reflect-south-korea-s-problem-of-elderly-pove-7562324>, accessed Oct. 29, 2019. For a narrative feature film depiction of this phenomenon, see *The Bacchus Lady* (2016) directed by E J-yong. CGV Arthouse. Seoul.

elderly whose longevity is increasing every year are visible on these shows.

Dad! and *Superman* are nationalist texts that preserve aspects of Confucianism that ultimately reinforce its patriarchal ideology by framing it nostalgically. Both shows reveal that when and where convenient, Confucianism and its patriarchal influences are not abandoned at all but in fact encouraged as they serve a state purpose with neoliberal aims.



Figure 12. *The Return of Superman*.

Conclusion: Female Spectatorship, Consumption Goods, and Bodies of the State

Nationalism in *Dad!* and *Superman* is not only equated with good parenting and filial piety, but also reproduction. In episode 116 of *Superman* entitled, “I Love You, I Love You, I Love You!” (air date Feb. 14, 2016), which is the final episode featuring the triplets, actor and father Song Il-gook explains: “There are many viewers who felt compelled to have children after seeing this show and became parents.” The show presents itself as having a direct positive impact on the

Korean population, and heterosexual coupling and reproduction are reaffirmed. Moments of Korean nationalism in *Superman* and *Dad!* are favored by public broadcasters like KBS and MBC, as well as the governmental infrastructures that they embody, because of their ability to shape public consciousness and individual conducts that benefit the state. Such moments are examples of cultural citizenship fostered through televised governmentality. RW Connell calls the state a “masculine institution”: “[T]he state organizational practices are structured in relation to the reproductive arena.”¹⁵² Thus, it is only natural that the state has patriarchal expectations of its society and citizens.

In the late 1980s, Singapore attempted to remediate the nation’s low birth rate problem by promoting male reform, but this attempt has been critiqued for the state’s backhanded misogyny.¹⁵³ Similarly, Korean public broadcasters produce and air programs that repackage Korean men into readymade fathers and husbands for local female consideration as part of the nation’s pronatal agenda. A part of this method involves showcasing aspects of Korean paternity that aspire towards “exemplary” fatherhood lived out in Western (white) examples found in fictional Hollywood films. The format for *Dad!* was sold to the Hunan Television network in China and began airing remake episodes in October 2013.¹⁵⁴ It was also sold to Japan and Vietnam. As these Korean television programs get sold mostly to other Asian countries, and an internalized orientalist narrative gets perpetuated throughout Asia.

¹⁵² RW Connell, *Masculinities*, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995), 73.

¹⁵³ Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, “State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore,” *The Gender/Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, Political Economy*, edited by Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 107-121; Michelle M Lazar, “Performing State Fatherhood: The Remaking of Hegemony,” *Feminist Critical Discourse: Gender, Power and Ideology in Discourse*, edited by Michelle M. Lazar, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 139-163.

¹⁵⁴ Xinxin Jiang, “Parenting Practices and Gender Roles in the Modern Chinese Family: Interculturalism in *Where Are We Going, Dad?*, *Television & New Media*, 1, 16 (2018): 1-16.

In conjunction with this inferior self-perception, the programs diegetically qualify or disqualify acceptable conducts of Korean fatherhood through editing, effects and subtitles which function as the wife's/mother's gaze in place of her physical absence. Both shows position imagined female viewers as wives and mothers, placing an expectation on cis-female viewers to eventually fulfill their biological duty to the state. Any socially progressive agenda that these shows initially present are compromised through this ultimate reduction of the female body: "Delegitimized as citizens, women are bodies carrying wombs and labor power."¹⁵⁵ The fathers on *Dad!* and *Superman* regularly express their gratitude towards their wives for their roles which they consistently cite as childbearing, birthing and rearing. Despite these childcare variety shows' superficial attempt to present household labor in egalitarian terms, they fall back on state-constructed gender binaries that restrict women's bodies to the domestic space and reduce them to "breeders and household managers."¹⁵⁶ This is especially visible in the advertisements that the celebrity dads and their children appear in.

Both *Dad!* and *Superman* imagine a "female spectatorship" through household and childcare products that the shows promote through sponsorships.¹⁵⁷ Stacey's description of female spectatorship is, in part, defined by consumerism; women filmgoers see then imitate their favorite stars by purchasing the same fashion and makeup. Female spectatorship is similarly imagined in TV shows through endorsement deals. All of the celebrity dads and their children on *Dad!* and *Superman* have endorsement deals for household and family products. Mixed martial

¹⁵⁵ Seungsook Moon, "Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea," *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* edited by Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge, 1998), 33-66, 58.

¹⁵⁶ Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 12.

¹⁵⁷ Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

arts fighter Choo Sung-hoon and his daughter Sarang from *Superman* are found smiling in a kitchen for a filtered water dispenser ad. Sung Dong-il and his son Joon from *Dad!* are in a pizza ad where a fictional mother is smiling in the background, out of focus. Actor Song Il-kook and his triplets Daehan, Minguk and Manse are in commercials for probiotic supplements, fruit juice, a minivan, air conditioner and dehumidifier. All of the subjects are associated with gendered goods that are geared towards the household manager—the mother including the minivan, which is often associated with white upper middle class “soccer moms,” echoing the aspirational whiteness attempted by Korean men at the Duranno father school.¹⁵⁸

Determining the consumer’s gender, however, becomes complicated when considering the amount of processed and packaged foods that the fathers in *Dad!* rely on to cook. In many of the episodes, the fathers are expected to prepare a meal for their children but, often times, the production crew provides them with prepackaged items such as canned tuna, processed meat, jarred sauces and a great deal of instant ramyun—most of which are on the show as embedded marketing. In fact, singer Yoon Min-soo and announcer Kim Sung-joon of *Dad!* signed an endorsement deal with the food conglomerate Nongshim for a Chapagetti and Neoguri ramyun advertisement campaign because the children on the show once ate a combination of the two instant noodles—“Chapa-guri”—which the fathers proudly made to great praise from their kids, demonstrating the reality show’s paratextual moments via synergy between branded products and a television network funded primarily by ads (in this case MBC).¹⁵⁹

In an episode of *Superman*, “The Power of Fatherhood” (air date Dec. 20, 2015) the still camera installed inside the kitchen of Lee Hwi-jae captures the comedian standing over the stove

¹⁵⁸ Lisa Swanson, “Complicating the ‘Soccer Mom’,” *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 80, 2 (2009): 345-354.

¹⁵⁹ The Chapa-guri became popularized in the mainstream by *Parasite* (2019).

preparing food for his three-year-old twin sons Seo-jun and Seo-eon who occasionally walk over and tug on his pant leg, demanding his attention, cuing the laugh track. Hwi-jae continues to concentrate on his cooking until he finally serves the hungry boys. Seo-jun and Seo-eon empty their bowls of black bean noodles, making their father smile. Colorful balloon texts appear below the smiling children, echoing their commentary such as, “It smells delicious,” and, “It tastes good.” The children approve of their father’s cooking. Hwi-jae’s meal is a success. The children finished eating, so the father’s task to get them fed is complete. The only discrepancy is Hwi-jae’s comment: “Don’t tell your mother that you ate this”—a comment clearly aimed at cuing the laugh track, seeing as everyone tuning into the show, including the twins’ mother, knows that they just ate instant noodles. Hwi-jae’s remark implies that Seo-jun and Seo-eon’s mother would not approve of this meal due its lack of nutritional value, and being wheat-based with high fat and sodium content. Regardless of the imagined mother’s approval, the audience sees that the children like what their father made, and that the father can cook, and this sufficiently merits praise.

In this sense, these shows construct fathers as incompetent cooks by default and reimagine them as savvy consumers who know how to purchase goods that can make up for their shortcomings in the kitchen. The parental skills associated with the mother are being swapped out for consumerism. The mother is, therefore, replaceable through purchased goods. Any challenges that parenting may present such as the inability to cook can be remediated through consumer spending, thus reifying masculinity with financial competence. Just like the fathers in *Dad!* and *Superman* can provide meals for their kids, fathers watching at home can practice good parenting as consumers, and good consumerism is equated with good parenting. The fathers on *Dad!* and *Superman* are praised for their “cooking” skills and their ability to feed their children

through positive affirmation from the narrator, CGI, sound effects, etc., or they are infantilized and made to appear endearing under the (queered) mother's gaze in their attempts to "cook," when, in fact, these men are really just reheating prepackaged food items. A discerning parent, however, would be concerned to see their growing child eat overly processed foods that are high in sodium and saturated fat, and offer little nutritional value.

The aspirational paternity and partnership that these Korean celebrities strive for are connected to the WASP-y postwar capitalist construct of masculinity that fits neatly into the economic efficacy of the nuclear family and companionate marriage which are ideological paradigms imbricated in consumerism. While televisual consumerism and housework typically fell on the shoulders of women particularly in 1950s suburban white America, these aspects have been reappropriated to construct the ideal contemporary Korean fatherhood. In that regard, an internalized white gaze is also noticeable.

Fatherhood studies scholar Ralph LaRossa claims that although the US has long been promoting "new" fatherhood from the 1960s to the 80s through periodicals that construct fathers as domestic helpers, many of them did not place the same amount of childcare obligations on the fathers as they did on mothers.¹⁶⁰ LaRossa critiques these periodicals for their failure to promote an equal distribution of childcare labor between parents by excluding the responsibility of a child's nutrition from his purview. A similar critique may be applied to *Dad!* wherein good parenting is equated with simply providing a meal without any consideration given to the nutritional value and how the food might impact the child's health. *Dad!* forgoes any discussion

¹⁶⁰ Ralph LaRossa, "The Culture of Fatherhood and the Late-Twentieth-Century New Fatherhood Movement: An Interpretative Perspective," *Deconstructing Dads: Changing Images of Fathers in Popular Culture*, ed. Laura Tropp and Janice Kelly, (New York: Lexington Books, 2016), 3-30.

on the child's nutritional health which implies that such obligations are to be handled by his better half—the mother. The logic here is that dads are there for treats and play, while nutrition and education are left for mothers to shoulder. The temporary conditions of pleasures such as tasty meals and fun activities further indicate that a father's level of involvement short-term and playful, whereas motherhood, due to the grave responsibilities associated with it, such as health, is long-term and serious.

Despite gender roles and expectations being redesigned on public television, many contemporary Korean women today refuse conventions such as marriage and child-rearing in pursuit of careers and self-filling lifestyles.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, although men in Korean society feel the pressure to undergo gender reform, many social circumstances stand in the way of fulfilling any expectations of ideal paternity. Sue Moon and Jongtae Shin's research shows that Korea's long work hours and the lack of sufficient paternal leaves conflict with men's desire to become better family men.¹⁶² In July 2018, President Moon Jae-in issued a law to reduce Korea's workhours to 52 per week.¹⁶³ Since 2006, the government has spent over a billion dollars on various campaigns dedicated to encouraging coupling and reproduction.¹⁶⁴ In July 2018, the

¹⁶¹ Jesook Song, *Living On Your Own: Single Women, Rental Housing, and Post-Revolutionary Affect in Contemporary South Korea*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014); SJ Park, "One Out of Seven Young Koreans Not Interested in Marriage," *Hankyoreh*, Apr. 15, 2018, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/840587.html (accessed Mar. 1, 2019).

¹⁶² Sue H. Moon and Jongtae Shin, "The Return of Superman? Individual and Organizational Predictors of Men's Housework in South Korea." *Journal of Family Issues*, 39, 1 (2018): 180-208.

¹⁶³ Jung-a Song, "South Korea to Cap Working Week at 52 Hours." *Financial Times*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/54379f02-7db1-11e8-bc55-50daf11b720d> (accessed Aug. 13, 2018).

¹⁶⁴ Ju-Eun Song, et al, "Factors Related to Low Birth Rate Among Married Women in Korea." *PLoS One* 13, 3, (2018): 1-11.

number of Korean fathers taking paternity leave increased to 66%.¹⁶⁵ In January 2019, President Moon urged citizens to show more “respect for women” as part of the pronatal campaign.¹⁶⁶ These efforts, however, continue to define women by their reproductive function and fail to tackle the rampant misogyny in Korean society—the details of which the following chapters show. They also fail to address intersectional issues such as where and how children born from migrant brides fit into the equation, and if Korea is socially prepared to address issues of racial difference in its non-homogenous society; the lack of international coupling on these programs save for when one parent is white and the other is Korean raises questions of discrimination and ethnonationalism with a preference for whiteness (ie, Australian native Sam Hammington on *Superman* and former soccer player Park Joo-ho and his Swiss-German wife Anna Park’s children on *Superman*) versus the invisibility of Brown and Black bodies (Southeast Asian and African parents) on said programs.¹⁶⁷ Korea’s nationalist obsession with heteronormative coupling and reproduction delegitimizes queer coupling, leading to further oppression in a country that already struggles with homophobia and transphobia. Children born out of wedlock and their single mothers are also stigmatized, and the law banning abortion in Korea was only

¹⁶⁵ Yonhap, “Number of fathers taking paternity leave jumps 66% on-year in H1,” July 23, 2018, *The Korean Herald*, <http://m.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180723000561#cb>, accessed Oct. 29, 2019.

¹⁶⁶ South China Morning Post, “South Korea’s new solution to address plummeting birth rates: showing respect for women,” *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 4, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/2180645/south-koreas-new-solution-address-plummeting-birth-rates-showing> (accessed Mar. 1, 2019).

¹⁶⁷ Ji-Hyun Ahn, Chapter 5, “Televising the Making of the Neoliberal Multicultural Family,” *Mixed-Race Politics and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in South Korean Media*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Katharine HS, Moon, “Korea Should Face its Demographic Crisis Head On,” *Brookings*, June 18, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2015/06/18/korea-should-face-its-demographic-crisis-head-on/> (accessed Jan. 27, 2017).

recently overturned in April 2019.¹⁶⁸ These realities are evidence for how Korea is more concerned with changing women's attitudes about marriage and children rather than targeting gender discrimination in the workplace and society overall. Until the state recognizes its civilians for their humanity rather than their biopolitical value, these artificial campaigns designed to bait women back into the domestic sphere will continue to lead to dead ends.

¹⁶⁸ South China Morning Post, "South Korea's new solution to address plummeting birth rates: showing respect for women," *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 4, 2019; Joyce Lee and Josh Smith, "South Korea court strikes down abortion law in landmark ruling," *Reuters*, Apr. 10, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-abortion/south-koreacourt-strikes-down-abortion-law-in-landmark-ruling-idUSKCN1RN0H9>, accessed May 23, 2019.

PART II: Neoliberal Melodrama on the Variety Talk Show *Happy Together*

Part two of this chapter explores the neoliberal ideology in KBS's variety talk show and how it fits into the Korean mediascape as a larger entity. This section continues to build upon the established definition(s) of what *yenŭng* is while exploring its slight variations depending on the format, host, producer, network, audience's cultural taste, time period, etc. *Happy Together* is a comedic talk show format *yenŭng* (variety talk show) that interviews actors and K-pop singers while digging deep into their personal lives; celebrities take the time to go beyond their exterior image and reveal their human interiority. This show connects the discourse of Korean television and entertainment studies to the existing corpus of literature dedicated to Korean media vis-à-vis trauma and the context of its modern history. A great deal of scholarship in Korean film and cultural studies is frequently conducted in the context of trauma and suffering. This discussion revived in the wake of the Sewol Ferry capsizing and the death of hundreds of students due to the negligence of authorities.¹⁶⁹ This section of the chapter extends the existing discourse of Korean media studies, which is primarily on film, while integrating how television as a medium and comedy as a genre reiterate Korea's modern history of suffering from separation, dislocation, starvation, and exploitation. What function or value does a celebrity's discussion of suffering and trauma have in contemporary Korean television? What purpose does emotional openness and stories of suffering have on a comedic variety program? What value do talks of gendered trauma have in the Korean media ecosystem? In what ways do these narratives of trauma and suffering reflect or echo Korea's past during colonization, war and its early stages of industrialization?

¹⁶⁹ Hyekyung Woo, Youngtae Cho, Eunyoung Shim, Kihwang Lee, and Gilyoung Song, "Public trauma after the Sewol Ferry disaster: the role of social media in understanding the public mood," *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 12, no. 9 (2015): 10974-10983.

How does this reflection contribute to a government's national agenda for breeding a discourse around victimhood and victimization of Koreans through public broadcasting? Is Korea's toxic masculinity a byproduct of its modern achievements and neoliberal policies? In efforts to answer these questions, I argue that neoliberal politics are present in popular Korean variety show narratives which illustrate where Korea stands in the capitalist global hierarchical order.

The ROK currently boasts a “middle power” status as both a “newly developed nation” and a global leader, standing between nations like the US and others still in the nascent stages of economic and political development.¹⁷⁰ Given Korea's rapid maturity in a span of five decades, cultural and social consequences of these radical alterations became inevitable. In his dissertation, Se Yeong Kim analyzes news coverages of the first serial murders that took place in Korea in the mid-seventies, and the two thrillers based on them—*Memories of Murder* (2003) and *The Chaser* (2008). Kim observes that the emergence of a serial killer is an “advanced nation disease” or *sŏnjin'gukpyŏng*—a social malady that results from modernization—and that the media “elevates the acts of these individuals to a very particular type of crime that is specific to an advanced nation.”¹⁷¹ Sociologist Kyung-Sup Chang's influential study shows Korea's “compressed modernity”—a concept that the ROK advanced so quickly economically that it is socio-culturally still catching up to its modern developments while struggling with frictions that transpire in the process of change. Drawing from Chang's study, Kim provocatively contends that there is a perverse national pride underlying what created the phenomenon of the serial killer; the phenomenon itself is a sign of modernity—a mark of the nation's advancement and

¹⁷⁰ G. John Ikenberry and Jongryn Mo, *The Rise of Korean Leadership: Emerging Powers and Liberal International Order*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 7.

¹⁷¹ Se Young Kim, “Crisis in Neoliberal Asia: Violence in Contemporary Korean and Japanese Cinema,” diss. University of Iowa, 2016, 230-232.

entry into the global economy.¹⁷² This suggests that Korea embraces social ailments that stem from being a developed country despite the damage inflicted upon civilians on a micro-level; such social ailments are to be expected if the nation is to advance. Contemporary Korean television programs also reflect themes of *sŏnjin'gukpyŏng* through coerced and self-inflicted violence which are bureaucratized and hyperrationalized as necessary and justified labor that lead to economic success. But where does this come from?

The Korean War (1950-1953) resulted in a great deal of media that meditate on the nation's divide. In her monograph, Sheila Miyoshi Jager paints a chronological overview of Korea's nationalism and its development in the modern era through civilian gender formations. Jager points to how female virtue as defined by Confucius (chastity, and reserving her sexuality solely for her husband) and love between a man and a woman became an allegory for a divided nation that pines for reunion: "[T]he longing for national reconciliation was identified with the romantic urge to come together as one people, one family, much like a wife who wishes to reconcile with her lost husband."¹⁷³ This allegory is applicable to serialized Korean television dramas (K-dramas) as it was once highly prevalent in shows with storylines often involving incest or suspected incest between lovers. There would also be a love-triangle quarrel over one woman between two men who are either related by blood or incredibly close friends suggesting fraternal friction. But since the early 2000s, there has been a gradual evolution in storytelling tropes. Just a quick glance at the arc of popular K-drama tropes since the mid-1990s and early 2000s, e.g., *Sandglass* 1995, SBS), *Goodbye My Love*, (1999, MBC), *Autumn in My Heart*

¹⁷² Chang Kyung-Sup, *South Korea Under Compressed Modernity: Familiar Political Economy in Transition*, (New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁷³ Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea: A Genealogy of Patriotism*, (New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 61.

(2000, KBS), *Stairway to Heaven* (2003, SBS), *I'm Sorry I Love You* (2004, KBS) to shows produced in the 2010s illustrates how national qualms stemming from post-war symptoms (tropes of impossible romance [read unification]) due to incest resulting from secret affairs or fatality through an incurable disease inherited from family) have been left behind for first-world concerns such as office politics (*Incomplete Life* [2014, tvN]), female insecurity around weight (*Oh! My Venus* [2016, KBS]), female anxiety over facial appearances (*She Was Pretty* [2015, MBC]) and hypercompetitiveness among wealthy helicopter parents seeking an elite education for their children (*SKY Castle* [2018, JTBC]). Such first-world concerns spill over onto popular public broadcast talk shows like *Happy Together* where K-pop stars discuss their hardships about breaking into and surviving show business through a narrative that dwells on third-world suffering such as hunger, dislocation, and powerlessness in the face of injustice. I argue that the exchange of young pop stars' emotional labor between the television and music industries contains a geopolitical state agenda affirmed by neoliberal logics in the mode of melodrama.¹⁷⁴ The stars' narratives of suffering on variety talk shows have exchange value between media industries and the state in their ability to kindle audience sympathy through relatability, legitimization of abuse, and reinforcement of capitalist hierarchy as an unquestionable principle in the path towards financial gain. In the entertainment business, abuse gets normalized as discipline, labor, and the pathway to achieving stardom, and *Happy Together* plays a role in this normalization.

¹⁷⁴ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 9n: "I use the term *emotional labor* to mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*."

Despite Korea's triumph in becoming a major global player in the international market, melodramatic narratives continue to infiltrate talk show television. *Happy Together* regularly features K-pop idols who share stories of the music industry's dark side including debt, dislocation, starvation and mutilation. These stories are rearticulations of the nation's past injuries from Japanese colonization (1910-1945), civil war (1950-1953), militarized modernity/industrialization (1963-1987), and national financial anxieties (1997) but reframed today through a neoliberal context in an economically stable contemporary Korea. *Happy Together* frequently focuses on star abuse through frank stories of suffering due to managerial neglect, forced dieting, coercion into plastic surgery, sleep deprivation, dislocation from homes, separation from families, and poverty, which tap into the nation's past while justifying them in the name of capital order maintained by democracy. Through these candid reflections, *Happy Together* draws audience sympathy while reinforcing that abuse as part and parcel to reaching stardom and financial reward.

Korea is currently flexing its soft power through cultural innovations in media, tech, food, fashion and cosmetics (hallyu products). The most significant hallyu industries today are media—music, film and television. The hallyu phenomenon has been studied from theoretical, industrial and cultural perspectives by a number of area studies and media studies scholars.¹⁷⁵ What's missing from the discourse, however, is a critical study of yenŭng. K-pop stars—especially boybands and girl groups—regularly appear on hit yenŭng programs like *Running Man* (2010- , SBS) and *Ask Us Anything* where they have the rare opportunity to make a lasting

¹⁷⁵ See *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, edited by Sangjoon Lee and Abé Mark Nornes, (University of Michigan Press, 2015); *K-Pop—The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry*, edited by JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay, (New York: Routledge, 2015); *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, edited by Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe, (Durham: Duke University, 2014).

impression as an individual by exhibiting their personalities and sharing their life stories. Yenŭng programs frequently intersect the music and TV industries, making it a major part of the hallyu entertainment ecosystem. As mentioned, Korean broadcasters develop approximately 2,000 yenŭng programs annually—twice as many as serialized dramas.¹⁷⁶

Industrially, yenŭng is simplified as “entertainment” or “variety” by US streaming platforms specializing in Korean TV content, such as Viki, DramaFever, OnDemandKorea and, most recently, Netflix which categorizes it as “International Reality, Talk & Variety Shows.”¹⁷⁷ This section expands the scope of research on popular variety talk shows as a case study to review the socio-political significance of hallyu narratives of suffering. I analyze the star abuse narratives that crop up in *Happy Together* to determine the value such industry reflexivity has for both the show as well as the stars’ managing agency, reflecting a symbiotic relationship between the television and music industries. I also integrate industry discourse through interviews with KBS television industry workers including the head producer of *Happy Together*.¹⁷⁸ I analyze the industrial motivations behind yenŭng programming while drawing insight from the entertainment industry’s labor practices. I place these insights in dialogue with textual analysis of select *Happy Together* episodes that detail the K-pop industry’s labor to gather a layered perspective of the visual hallyu ecosystem. My reading is informed by sociological and anthropological theories of

¹⁷⁶ Konshik Yu, in-person interview at KBS America, Los Angeles, Feb. 10, 2017.

¹⁷⁷ Netflix has been acquiring Korean variety content since summer 2017, and has recently been producing original Korean yenŭng content; Peter Frater, “Netflix Signs First Korea Variety Show ‘Busted!’” *Variety*, Sept. 27, 2017, <http://variety.com/2017/digital/asia/netflix-signs-first-korea-variety-series-busted-1202574198/>.

¹⁷⁸ See John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks and John Caldwell, (New York: Routledge, 2009); *Production Studies, The Sequel!: Cultural Studies of Global Media Industries*, edited by Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor and Vicki Mayer, (New York: Routledge, 2016).

media, labor, and neoliberalism in Korea. In my findings, the normalization of strenuous work conditions found in the music industry are mirrored by the television industry. My research illustrates the social consequences of these narratives which claim familiar forms of “third world” suffering as non-negotiable conditions of media industry labor, which is also reflected more widely in modern-day Korean society as a whole.

Korean media and culture studies are frequently conducted through theories of neoliberalism. Part of the reason for this is the timing of when Korea’s media industries came to rise alongside cultural policies that were in effect at the time; between 1999 and 2003, the Korean government invested in the Korean film industry; during this time, Im Kwon-taek won the Best Director award for *Chihwaseon* (2002) at the Cannes Film Festival. Korean consumerism and spending increased in the 1990s as importation of foreign goods rose. A more practical reason for the common application of neoliberal theory in Korean media studies is due to the frequent focus on Korea’s political economy; this naturally steers the study towards an overview of watershed moments in Korean geo-politics such as Kim Young-sam’s segyehwa (globalization) policy of 1995, the IMF or Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, and Roh Moo-hyun’s signing of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement between 2006 and 2007.¹⁷⁹ I encountered some

¹⁷⁹ Ji-Hyun Ahn, *Mixed Race Politics and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in South Korean Media*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018); Patty Jeehyun Ahn, “Harisu: South Korean Cosmetic Media and the Paradox of Transgendered Neoliberal Embodiment,” *Discourse*, 31, 3, 2009: 248-272; Jenny Wang Medina, *From Tradition to Brand: The Making of ‘Global’ Korean Culture in Millennial South Korea*, dissertation, New York, Columbia, 2015; Joanna Elfving-Hwang, “Aestheticizing Authenticity: Corporate Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Television Dramas,” *Asia Pacific Perspectives*, 15, 1, 2017: 55-72; Jungmin Kwon, “Co-modifying the Gay Body: Globalization, the Film Industry, and Female Prosumers in the Contemporary Korean Mediascape,” *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 2016: 1563-1580; Nancy Abelmann, So Jin Park and Hyunhee Kim, “College rank and neo-liberal subjectivity in South Korea: the burden of self-development,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 10, 2, 2009: 229-247; Se Young Kim, “Crisis in Neoliberal Asia: Violence in Contemporary Korean and Japanese Cinema,” diss. University of Iowa, 2016, 230-232; Dal Yong Jin, “Cultural politics in Korea’s contemporary

scholars at Korean media studies conferences in recent years who claim that neoliberalism is overused. With that said, neoliberalism remains an applicable framework when navigating contemporary social problems because said problems persist without solution and mostly stem from political injustices tied to government welfare and discrimination. Neoliberalism is a useful entry point to expand Korean media studies while accounting for political, economic, and social themes of discussion. In fact, given its wide use in the Korean media studies discourse as well as its prevalence in Anglo-American reality television studies, it is impossible to ignore.

Neoliberalism as a theory has a flexible application to media studies more broadly that encourages a dialogue on global media objects transnationally and transculturally. I therefore use it as the underlying foundation for this part of the chapter and its critique is a lasting motif throughout the rest of this project.

Neoliberal Korea

Neoliberal rationality emphasizes the free market with limited regulation for furthering business competition and enhancing capital while individuals have the freedom of choice as consumers and citizens to live their best lives without state intervention. The ROK's transition into a neoliberal age, however, required a great deal of state meddling just after the Korean War. In the 1960s and 70s, President Park Chung-hee's military authority steered Korea into a developmental state of "peripheral' Fordism" through export-led industrialization.¹⁸⁰ A

films under neoliberal globalization," *Media, Culture & Society*, 28, 1, 2006, 5-23; We Jung Yi, "Melodramatic Tactics for Survival in the Neoliberal Era: Excess and Justice in *The Heirs* and *My Love from the Star*," *Journal of Korean Studies*, 23, no. 1, 2018, 154-173.

¹⁸⁰ Byung-Doo Choi, "The Advent of Neoliberalism and Urban Policy in Its First Phase," *Locating Neoliberalism in Asia: Neoliberalizing Spaces in Developmental States*, edited by Bae-Gyoon Park, Richard Child Hill and Asata Saito, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 97.

developmental-state model was put in place to rebuild the war-torn nation's economy through heavy and chemical industries. The Park regime enforced state policies and provided subsidies that directly benefitted major conglomerates now known collectively as the *chaebol*. The developmentalist practices of this era led to increased urbanization and a mass migration from rural areas into cities. The second phase of military rule with President Chun Doo-hwan had continuations of developmentalism, however, the administration's formation through Park's assassination, military coup d'etat followed by corruptions linked to chaebols, the 1980 Kwangju massacre, and heavy media censorship that suppressed any critique against the government turned the nation rife with protests. In June 1987, democratization was finally achieved.

Byung-Doo Choi lists the factors that led to the advent of neoliberalism in Korea: "globalization of capitalism, the disintegration of the Cold War system on the global level, the maturing of the Fordist economy, and the collapse of the military authoritarian regime on the national level."¹⁸¹ David Harvey notes that this is when wages rose and organized labor unions emerged in Korea albeit while facing government subjugation.¹⁸² In the early 1990s, President Kim Young-sam envisioned Korea's "first world" status through the *segyehwa* (globalization) initiative, which liberated chaebols from economic regulations. The administration also relied on them for the future of Korea's globalization. Hyun-Chin Lim and Jin-ho Jang claim that Kim's "hasty" political and economic restructuring motivated by the desire to reconstruct Korea's global image eventually led to the 1997 Asian financial crisis.¹⁸³ The nation fell into further

¹⁸¹ Choi, 95.

¹⁸² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 110.

¹⁸³ Hyun-Chin Lim and Jin-Ho Jang, *Development and Society*, "Between Neoliberalism and Democracy: The Transformation of the Developmental State in South Korea," Vol. 35, No. 1, 2006, 1-28, 11, 14.

economic turmoil because the International Monetary Fund (IMF) encouraged Korea “to raise interest rates to defend its currency” which led to multiple chaebol bankruptcies, drops in wages, and spike in unemployment.¹⁸⁴ The Korean government turned to the US and IMF for a bail-out. Following this economic collapse, neoliberal reform began to take shape in 1997 and throughout the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998-2003) under IMF’s guidance. This resulted in further deregulation and heightened local competition to boost the domestic economy but to the detriment of the working and middle classes.¹⁸⁵ Segyehwa initiatives also included cultural and social changes. Such neoliberal policies continue to remain in effect today influencing powerful entertainment management companies that are responsible for the careers of young entertainers. I demonstrate how neoliberal policies directly impact individuals through the music industry’s management system of young artists.

A History of Asian Variety Show Nostalgia

Happy Together began to air during a critical period in Korean history—in the post-media democratization era (after 1987) as Korea emerged out of the ashes of the IMF/Asian Financial crisis of 1997 and with the helping hand of domestic conglomerates (chaebols) that led the nation into a globalized future. Consumer spending slowly increased again during this time, and television played a large role in the normalization of spending once more. This period is also when Korea’s broadcasting system began to integrate cable and subscription based television, and networks were pressured to distinguish themselves from others with the increased

¹⁸⁴ Harvey, 111.

¹⁸⁵ Woongjae Ryoo, “The Public Sphere and the Rise of South Korean Civil Society,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 2009, 39:1, 23-35, 29.

competition. The earliest episodes of *Happy Together* invited celebrity entertainers such as actors, singers, and comedians for interviews to draw in viewers.

Nostalgia, youth, and connecting to a common base point was the primary source of production and costume concept with the emcees (comedians) and celebrity guests dressed in high school uniforms on *Happy Together*. Visually, the high school uniform is a fitting means of connecting with older generations who wore high school uniforms as well as current high school goers who are required to wear uniforms. The high school classroom as a stage setting and high school uniforms as costume choices are very common in Korean variety shows. The school-themed set design is recycled frequently across many shows and networks, but has a specific origin. The live sketch variety show *A Gust of Laughter* (*Hanbat'ang Usūmū-ro*, 1991-1993, KBS) included a segment (referred to as a “corner” [k'onō] in the Korean industry) called “Pongsunga School” (“Pongsunga Haktang”) from 1991 to 1992 featuring sketch or “conte” (k'ongt'ū) comedians Oh Jae-mee, Lee Chang-hoon and Kim Hyung-gon to great popularity.¹⁸⁶ The “Pongsunga School” corner went on hiatus in 1992 due to Kim Hyung-gon taking a break from show business due to his health.¹⁸⁷ The “Pongsunga School” corner was later revived on the live variety sketch show *Gag Concert* (1999-2020, KBS) summoning a nation’s favorite 1990s sketch segment with its classic characters Maeng-gu and Osōbang. These characters were based problematically on the ableist concept of the “village idiot” in a school setting with a chalk board and teacher standing on the far left of the stage and desks and chairs placed in a row facing the board with students.

¹⁸⁶ K'ongt'ū is comparable to sketch comedy.

¹⁸⁷ “Today’s TV Info” (Onūrii tv Ch'ongjōngbo), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, Jan. 7, 1992.



Figure 13. *A Gust of Laughter*. KBS.



Figure 14. *Gag Concert*. KBS.



Figure 15. *Heroine 6*. KBS.



Figure 16. *Ask Us Anything*. JTBC.

The sketches were based on antics between Maeng-gu and Osöbang, and their silly interactions with the other students. The comedy involved wordplay and the punchline always fell on Maeng-gu’s display of idiocy. The “pabo” or “idiot” character comedy of Maeng-gu has a predecessor from the 1980s in the form of Young-gu played by Shim Hyung-rae in the corner “Youngu ya Youngu ya” on the sketch variety program *First Street Humor* (*Yumö Ilbönji*, 1983-1992, KBS). Given the character’s massive popularity, Shim Hyung-rae later played Young-gu in a 1989 film *Young-gu and Daengchiri* directed by Nam Gi-nam. Thus, despite the short run of “Pongsunga Hakdang,” the character of Maeng-gu contains the intertext and nostalgia of Young-gu from an earlier sketch variety show that summons the memory of the earlier generation of viewers. While Young-gu on the variety show is lampooned for his dimwittedness, the Young-gu character’s origin is actually from a serialized television drama *Journey* (*Yöro*, 1972, KBS), and the character involved a dramatic performance by actor Jang Wook-jae; *Journey* ran 211 episodes from April to December 1972 to great popularity with ratings of up to 70%. The corner “Pongsunga Hakdang” on *Gag Concert* contains the nostalgia and fandom of three decades of audiences and several generations of television viewers who are familiar with Young-gu; there is a nation-specific identification in Korean variety shows that utilize the school setting gimmick.

Using a classroom as the stage setting in variety shows, however, is not limited to Korea. Japanese variety shows also commonly use the school as a set and school uniforms as costume design. Korea's history of school uniforms is tied to a transcultural web intertwined with British, Japanese and American history. In 1886, during the Meiji Restoration, one of the cultural concepts the Japanese adopted from the British includes the school uniform. In the same year, American missionaries went to Korea and had female students wear the same hanbok as a school uniform.¹⁸⁸ Male students wore uniforms in 1898 to Pai Chai University (also known as Baejaehakdang). Korean college students were given hanbok dresses as school uniforms at Ewha Women's University as part of their financial assistance.¹⁸⁹ In 1907, Sookmyung Women's University implemented a code for Western-style school uniforms for students. Following the Japanese protectorate treaty over Korea in 1905 and its annexation in 1910, the Korean school system modeled after Japan's. In 1939, male students were ordered by the Japanese to wear military uniforms to conduct their studies and training. In 1969, a standard policy was placed in the ROK and all students both male and female were required to wear school uniforms that dictated their outfit, hairstyle, shoes, and bags. In 1983, the policy was liberalized by the Ministry of Education, and schools were allowed to select their own uniform design to stand apart from other schools, leading to a robust competition in the school uniform market. In the 1990s and 2000s, K-dramas focusing on coming-of-age narratives featured popular actors in

¹⁸⁸ Judy Park, "Do School Uniforms Lead to Uniform Minds: School Uniforms and Appearance Restrictions in Korean Middle Schools and High Schools," *Fashion Theory*, 17 (2), 159-177, 164.

¹⁸⁹ Miao Yu, "Brief Analysis on the Design of School Uniforms in Films and Television Programs," International Conference on Arts, Design and Contemporary Education (Moscow, Russia: Atlantis Press, 2016), 610.

fashionable school uniforms that set trends.¹⁹⁰ There were numerous serialized narrative programs set in schools featuring beloved stars in uniforms including *Me* (1996, MBC), *School* (1999, KBS), *Successful Story of a Bright Girl* (2002, SBS), *Age of Innocence* (2002, SBS), *Sang Doo! Let's Go to School!* (2003, KBS), *Sweet 18* (2004, KBS), *Hello My Teacher* (2005, SBS), *Sassy Girl Chun-hyang* (2005, KBS), *Eighteen and Twenty-nine* (KBS, 2005), *Princess Hours* (2006, MBC), *I am Sam* (2007, KBS), *My Mom Super Mom* (2007, KBS), *Get Up* (2008, MBC), *Jungle Fish* (2008, KBS), and *Boys Over Flowers* (2009, KBS) just to name a few.¹⁹¹ This trend also applies to Korean variety shows like *Happy Together* (season 1). Thus, there is a commercial significance to the prevalence of school settings for entertainment programs.

Due to the dearth of scholarship on this topic outside of fashion theory, I had a chat exchange with PhD candidate Yuki Nakayama at the University of Michigan's Department of Film, Television and Media whose dissertation research is on Japanese variety television. In our Twitter messenger chat (complete chat is available in the appendix), we speculate on the pervasiveness of the classroom setting and school uniforms in Japanese and Korean variety shows and why they are so common. Nakayama's theory for the perpetual use of school uniforms on variety shows rests on aesthetic, visual and cultural motivations which indicate familiarity of these settings, clothes, and environments to the audience and no explanation is needed; they are immediately recognizable to that local culture and across all audiences and therefore accessible.¹⁹² I agree with Nakayama's rationale, and I add cultural nostalgia which

¹⁹⁰ Judy Park, "Do School Uniforms Lead to Uniform Minds: School Uniforms and Appearance Restrictions in Korean Middle Schools and High Schools," *Fashion Theory*, 17.2 (2013): 159-177, 165.

¹⁹¹ Lim Song-mi and Lee Mi-suk, "A Study of School Uniform Design in the Mass Media," *Journal of Fashion Business*, 14.2 (2010): 179-193.

¹⁹² Yuki Nakayama and Grace Jung. Twitter Messenger. Sept. 10, 2019; the complete conversation is available in the Appendix.

further breeds familiarity and a sense of intimacy between viewers and celebrities through television, as the mode of speech by these celebrities becomes informal; this erases social and cultural hierarchies based on age, status and job titles. Through these informal means of addressing one another in performances that combine sketch and reality elements, the star image of these celebrities becomes more amicable, producing an affective resonance of closeness for the viewer through comedy and candidness. The school setting is also associated with the viewers' period of innocence prior to when they had pressing responsibilities such as jobs and parenting. The perpetual visual insertion of uniforms in comedy programs also work as a critical commentary on militaristic social ordering in Korean society which these shows disrupt with gags, jokes, and comedic transgressions. The uniforms act as a prop for queering military masculinity for young men who are about to face their conscription duty and for men who have already served; the uniform's presence on screen is a visual manifestation that gestures towards conformity and familiarity but also break down hierarchy and order when the characters in said uniform do not behave uniformly. In addition to this, however, these uniforms are gesturing towards another grave reality for all students; the uniforms that they wear to school and as K-pop stars or comedians are allegoric of their lived realities which show that militaristic hierarchy and expectations are found in every facet and point in their lives as a student, a soldier, a K-pop star, an office worker, etc. Thus, uniforms conjure a dynamic visual representation of the Korean lived experience but stretching across all stages of life ranging from their teens all through their late adulthood where order and social expectations which cultural customs, economy, and the government dictate.

The school setting and uniform as classic Asian variety show gimmicks engage a broad audience base who share the same past time as youths in school. Television idealizes youth and

nostalgia as a time of innocence, joy and freedom, constructing a national memory of school years as a playful period that can be easily adapted for comedy. As mentioned earlier, school as a production and costume design is culturally specific and transnationally recognizable. In the case with Korea, the “Pongsunga Hakdang” backdrop was initially conceived as a classroom set in the Japanese occupation period (1910-1945). Part of the reason why Korea and Japan share a similar point of nostalgia is because of Japan’s imperial influence over Korea including the design for educational institutions as well as the Western school uniform handed down from Britain to Japan to Korea as well as from the US to pre-war Korea; school uniforms are worn in both North and South Korea. These designs are now a part of the television audience’s past and present in the ROK, and continues to be used in variety shows to this day like in the case with *Ask Us Anything*. The primary function of using the school gimmick is to target as well as construct nostalgia of a wide audience.

Melodramatically Happy Together

The variety talk show *Happy Together* airs every Thursday night at 11:00PM KST on the nation’s public broadcaster KBS. *Happy Together* is, in part, a result of the hallyu phenomenon that started in the 1990s with the massive success of the hip-hop boy band Seo Taiji & Boys whose fandom is regarded as the “template for the idol mania that soon began to define the *hallyu* era.”¹⁹³ As government censorship of the media became lax, innovative musical acts like Seo Taiji & Boys saw both domestic and international popularity—the first of its kind where music was recognized as a lucrative export. Such successes in the music industry discouraged government interference in the booming market which helped the nation’s economy and global

¹⁹³ Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, location 444/11544, Kindle Edition.

image. The Korean middle class began to rise alongside youth culture consumerism. Students could now afford to buy music, visit a *norebang*¹⁹⁴ and follow fashion trends set by their favorite K-pop idols such as hairstyles, accessories, clothes, mode of speech, etc.¹⁹⁵ *Happy Together* first aired on November 8, 2001. In the early years of the show, costumes and production designs emulated youth culture through Korean high school uniforms and the *norebang* production design to connect with younger audiences.



Figure 17. *Happy Together*, KBS.

With the rise of materialist youth culture emerging in the 1990s also came intense local fandom, but boybands and girl groups of the 1990s went through taxing efforts to preserve the occultism that stemmed from their stardom. For instance, Seo Taiji himself admits to maintaining his celebrity mysticism in the 90s in an interview on *Happy Together* episode 368 (39:37). On episode 453, co-host Jun Hyun-moo mentions how members of the boy band H.O.T. who debuted in 1996 were so anxious as to not break the occultism surrounding their star image that if they were appearing on a show at KBS, they would use the restrooms at MBC beforehand. On

¹⁹⁴ Karaoke room.

¹⁹⁵ Roald Maliangkay, "The Popularity of Individualism: The Seo Taiji Phenomenon in the 1990s," *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, (Durham: Duke University, 2014), digital, 6570/11544

the same episode, Bada, a former 1990s girl group member of S.E.S., admits that she did not drink water if there were large crowds to avoid being seen going to the toilet (59:32). A *yenŭng* program such as *Happy Together*, however, is the one place where celebrity mysticism shatters, and stars are no longer one dimensional fantasy images appearing in a commercial, music video, drama or film. Celebrities exhibit their human dimensions through frank conversations about their personal lives on television, moderated by hosts. This closeness and intimacy between the fan/audience and celebrity is heightened today through celebrities' use of social media, as fans can now follow their personal content to stay apprised of their lives. Unscripted television's reflexive and mediated access to celebrities has a seamless interconnection to how social media functions today; unscripted television is the format that lays a foundation to this kind of celebrity access through media pointing to an evolution of not only communication technologies but also fan cultures.

The motivation for tuning into a show like *Happy Together* is to learn something about idols that would otherwise go unseen. *Yenŭng* has the ability to humanize these unattainable objects of fantasy. The whole concept of *yenŭng* as an access to what was previously off-limits is an apt metaphor for socioeconomic mobility granted by neoliberal propensities; what was once inaccessible is now accessible through consumption culture as a result of decades of economic evolution from developmentalism to neoliberalism which brought Korea the global status that Kim Young-sam once envisioned; for example, citizens can now purchase a smartphone and log into social media apps (e.g. Instagram, Twitter, TikTok) to follow their favorite celebrities' personal lives "behind the scenes." This encourages the logic that celebrities' private lives are part of their consumption habits; the consumer/fan is entitled to this access through purchase. In the 21st century, Koreans have entered an age of materialism that the nation has never

experienced before, which requires adjustment to the new dynamics of a neoliberal economy, as well as the side effects of a society that has undergone compressed modernization. As Choi pointedly observes, “[T]he neoliberal state tends to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to serve capital accumulation while ignoring human well-being.”¹⁹⁶ This is how narratives of neoliberal suffering emerge on *Happy Together*, and they are told by celebrities in the most familiar mode of storytelling—melodrama.



Figure 18. *Happy Together*. KBS.

Generically speaking, cinematic melodrama refers to a narrative coupled with music that elicits an emotional effect from the viewer.¹⁹⁷ In the context of television studies, feminist scholars have analyzed the gendered aspect of serialized melodrama—soaps—as a woman’s genre because the narratives are woman-centered and spectatorship is also dominantly female; soaps allow the spectator to masochistically relate to the heroine in the content as well as hold

¹⁹⁶ Byung-Doo Choi, “The Advent of Neoliberalism and Urban Policy in Its First Phase,” *Locating Neoliberalism in Asia: Neoliberalizing Spaces in Developmental States*, edited by Bae-Gyoon Park, Richard Child Hill and Asata Saito, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 111.

¹⁹⁷ John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style and Sensibility*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 7.

off on the resolution for as long as one can.¹⁹⁸ This aspect of serialized melodrama is also characteristic of the variety talk show in that there are never really any resolutions to the episodes that the celebrities describe on television; while the viewers can see that the celebrity has overcome their obstacles and achieved success by being on television and discussing their hardships openly today, the repetition of systematic suffering shows signs of slowing down; in fact, in a neoliberal economy, suffering is rationalized as necessary. The next episode of *Happy Together* will once more contain a similar narrative of suffering with different celebrities; this expectation, in addition to stirring music cues and close-ups on celebrities' faces whenever they shed tears, make the variety talk show *Happy Together* similar to serialized melodramas. We Jung Yi claims that Korean melodrama as both film and TV articulate the suffering caused by Korea's modernization; Yi argues that the melodramatic mode in Korean TV dramas are an affective means and a "tactic" for dealing with economic injustices in Korea.¹⁹⁹ My own analysis is a continuation of Yi's claims but in the realm of variety talk shows, arguing that the melodramatic mode found in *Happy Together* is a moral code that reaffirms neoliberal logics that heavily sympathizes with the victim through tear-jerker moments but without placing any blame onto a villain causing this pain; in fact, the villain is a faceless system and excused as blameless by never being publicly identified.

Joshua Gamson's work *Freaks Talk Back* is essentially a synthesized marveling of the televisual grotesque—weird, queer, excessive, destructive and over-the-top—displayed on daytime talk TV. In fact, Gamson's work conceives of talk shows as inherently queer for their

¹⁹⁸ Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres: Melodrama, soap opera, and theory," *Screen*, 25, no. 1, 1984, 18-28.

¹⁹⁹ We Jung Yi, "Melodramatic Tactics for Survival in the Neoliberal Era: Excess and Justice in *The Heirs* and *My Love from the Star*," *Journal of Korean Studies*, 23, no. 1, 2018, 154-173.

excessive parading of emotions and high camp disorders. Linda Williams would agree with Gamson to the effect that melodrama is about being moved to “powerful sentiments” albeit while rounding out its definition with other qualities of melodrama she notes in classical Hollywood cinema and canonical American literature such as realism and its moral function.²⁰⁰ The queering effect of yening subsists in the celebrities’ very act making dissenting comments about the system in their acknowledgment of the pain and suffering they must go through in order to do their jobs. Moments of crying, or laughing at the expense of the music industry’s authority figures (management CEOs and managers) are liberatory instances of escape and relief from their labor pains. The text and the conditions of its production make queering necessary in order to articulate the status quo while at the same time destabilizing it. Mechanisms of boundary issues such as humor and expressions of pain (exposure of the industry’s unjust mechanisms) push people beyond conventions of talking and listening; the queerness of these discussions is how they reveal problems of the media industries without directly pointing a finger of blame at any specifics. This is done tacitly within the melodramatic mode’s moralizing function that reveals issues without actually showing any particulars, nor asking the question of who should be held responsible, or even making any calls for change.

²⁰⁰ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White From Uncle Tom to OJ Simpson*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12.



Figure 19. *Happy Together*. KBS.

The Moral Code of a Talk Show's Neoliberal Melodrama: All Victims, No Villains

Conceptually, *Happy Together* is comparable to American late night variety talk shows such as *The Tonight Show* (1954- , NBC) and *Late Night* (1982- , NBC) franchises in that they all have a main host and a sidekick/co-host. The first variety talk show ever produced and aired in Korea is the *Johnny Yune Show* (1989-1990, KBS), and the stage set up mirrored a lot of what American late night talk shows have such as a male comedian as the host sitting behind a desk next to a couch for his guests while accompanied by a band.²⁰¹ Throughout the 1990s into the early 2000s, a number of Korean variety talk shows began to emerge following this format but taking on different gimmicks with hosts wearing costumes, multiple co-hosts appearing alongside the main host, or games played by celebrity guests. Entertainment programs were no longer taped before a live audience, and editors implemented laugh tracks for efficiency. *Happy Together*, which started to air in 2001, had hosts dressed in high school uniforms to appeal to a youthful audience while also conjuring a nostalgic relatability for all viewers in a school setting—the idea that they are all friends with one another and with viewers at home. Making

²⁰¹ Dong-ryul Noh, In-kyu Park, Mi-young Oh and Kyoung-soo Hong, *Understanding Television Studies*, (Seoul: Bookie, 2015), 108.

these celebrities relatable for the spectator is, again, similar to serialized soaps where viewers identify with the heroine in the plot. *Happy Together* invites celebrity guests such as pop idol singers and actors to talk about their personal lives and play games with the host and co-hosts to either win prizes or face punishment. Some celebrity guests are asked to perform special talents such as a song and dance, or a comedic impression (*sŏngdaemos*).



Figure 20. *Happy Together*. KBS.

But unlike *The Tonight Show* or *Late Night*, *Happy Together* does not film before a live studio audience accompanied by a band. Programs that emphasize solely laughter and entertainment, according to Dong-ryul Noh et al., tend not to last because audiences seek content they can relate to beyond just fun and games, like heartfelt storylines that go beyond a star persona or image.²⁰² Thus, *Happy Together* also shares similarities with American daytime talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986-2011, WLS-TV, CBS), and *The Maury Povich Show* (1991- , NBC) which invite American civilians to discuss their emotional personal stories. Although *Happy Together* is a nighttime talk show that exclusively features celebrity guests and is hosted by popular comedian Yoo Jae-suk alongside several comedic sidekicks/co-hosts, it contains daytime

²⁰² Dong-ryul Noh, In-kyu Park, Mi-young Oh and Kyoung-soo Hong, *Understanding Television Studies*, (Seoul: Bookie, 2015), 112.

talk show qualities such as a keenness towards tapping into the celebrity guests' emotional vulnerability. Despite its comedic quality, *Happy Together* frequently showcases highly melodramatic narratives related to the guests' mental, emotional and physical anguish that expose the tenebrous aspects of the entertainment industry.

The talk show contains a medley of sensational components such as pop culture and tabloid but, most significantly, melodrama.²⁰³ Williams describes melodrama in all its formations, ranging from books to visual media, as “crucial to the establishment of moral good.”²⁰⁴ Melodrama can effectively elicit viewer sympathy towards the virtuous and upright protagonist who is harassed by a villain, whose immorality is more than apparent.²⁰⁵ The melodramatic mode instructs viewers on the moral codes of who is right and who is wrong. These modalities are also present in daytime talk shows.



Figure 21. *Stairway to Heaven*. SBS.

²⁰³ Jane Shattuc, *The Talking Cure: TV, Talk Shows and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

²⁰⁴ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White From Uncle Tom to OJ Simpson*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*,15.



Figure 22. *The Maury Povich Show*. NBC.

Sociologist Kathleen Lowney’s study of American daytime talk shows observes that the victims’ “pain becomes the central narrative of these shows.”²⁰⁶ The spectacle of the “sinner”—or the “victimizer”—going head-to-head with the “aggrieved victims” draws in viewers.²⁰⁷ The daytime talk show host makes disapproving comments aimed at the victimizer to further highlight the victims’ virtues and inculcate a moral order. Lowney observes that victims have a right to “articulate their concern and pain” through their “linguistic privilege” on these programs before they eventually ask the victimizer (e.g., an alcoholic family member, abusive partner, trouble-making teen, etc.) “to change for the better.”²⁰⁸ The victims’ linguistic privilege is what makes these talk shows so popular. Audiences can easily sympathize with the victim while scorning the victimizer. In this way, Williams’ melodramatic mode is in function on daytime talk shows. But on *Happy Together*, there is no victimizer available for the audience and the host to chastise because they are not invited, nor are they named or heavily discussed.

²⁰⁶ Kathleen Lowney, *Baring Our Souls: TV Talk Shows and the Religion of Recovery*, (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1999), 41.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 18.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 76.

The K-pop stars who appear as guests on *Happy Together* share melodramatic stories of forced dieting, forced plastic surgery, sleep deprivation, dislocation from homes, separation from families, and deep debt. These stories clearly signify the idols as victims in the talk show's moral order. However, the villain/victimizer is entirely missing in the narrative. Although the managing agency's exploitative system and the government's failure to effectively regulate labor must be addressed, it is impossible to deem these actions as morally wrong according to Williams' mode since the face of neoliberalism is unidentifiable, therefore not apparent.

Actress and singer Jang Nara's career was at its peak in 2002 with her hit song "Sweet Dream" and the two popular dramas she starred in that same year—*Successful Story of a Bright Girl* (SBS) and *My Love, Patzzi* (MBC). Jang was twenty-one-years-old at the time. On *Happy Together* episode 402, Jang explains how early on in her career, her schedule prevented her from sleeping for five days straight which led to episodes of psychosis and memory loss.²⁰⁹ Jang suffered long term work-related injuries to her mental health because of the job demands and still suffers from anxiety and a panic disorder. While Jang tells her story, the co-hosts reaffirm her with comments like, "You must've felt like a slave to your work," and, "You must've felt like a work machine."²¹⁰ Suffering and pain play a moral role in melodrama, and produce a conservative narrative: "The key function of victimization is to orchestrate the moral legibility crucial to the mode [of melodrama], for if virtue is not obvious, suffering—often depicted as the literal suffering of an agonized body—is."²¹¹ Williams recognizes the moral power that

²⁰⁹ "Happy Together - Jang Nara, Seo Inguk, Choi Wonyoung & More! (2015.07.09)," *Happy Together*, KBSWorldTV, YouTube, July 9, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZiivOGOf_E, translation by author.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White From Uncle Tom to OJ Simpson*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 29.

melodrama flaunts, and its ability to organize certain categories of character into common sense terms of good and bad. Common sense reproduces a social reality and creates mainstream ideas, conventions and traditions thereby upholding and securing hegemonic systems as Kara Keeling shows by way of Gramsci.²¹² As Jang tells her sad story, however, she does not point a finger of blame onto anybody. Instead, she offers a justification for her suffering and upholds the system: “Our agency had no choice but to do this. We had nothing. We had no celebrities, no funding. No one in our agency was famous and no one had any connections. It was all up to me to make the earnings.”²¹³ Jang not only delivers her story with smiles and wry laughter but also bookends her melodramatic narrative with gratitude for all her success, as well as how she understands the demands of the industry, thus reaffirming neoliberal requirements of sacrifice in the name of capital and business, and placing her needs second. Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn observe: “The rendering of the unconscious into words and representations can be understood as both cathartic and healing but also as a defense mechanism in which intellectual discourses smooth over disturbing violent emotions.”²¹⁴ As such, Jang’s narrative is a complicated melodramatic testimony that at once exposes the entertainment industry’s dark side while also problematically giving the illusion of the subject’s recovery from trauma as well as a justification for it. Abiding by Williams’ melodramatic mode, the virtuous heroine and victim is Jang. However, Jang skirts any details on who her abusers were by mitigating the job abuse as a job expectation. The victim is virtuous but the victimizer is never mentioned. In this way, the melodramatic mode that should

²¹² Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 31.

²¹³ "Happy Together - Jang Nara, Seo Inguk, Choi Wonyoung & More! (2015.07.09)," *Happy Together*, KBSWorldTV, YouTube, July 9, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZiivOGOf_E, translation by author.

²¹⁴ Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), 111.

delineate a clear victim and villain is replaced by the neoliberal mode that erases the villain; there is only the self who is responsible for the self, and therefore to be blamed when that self gets injured. Seeing as Jang is now an accomplished performer with financial success, her victimhood as an industry laborer is rationalized as part of the job. I elaborate on this idea further with case studies of young K-pop idol members and their stories.



Figure 23. *Happy Together*. KBS.

Stars as Ordinary

The production design of *Happy Together* changed several times over the years but each speak volumes in terms of the dialogue the production wishes to facilitate. As mentioned earlier, the initial set design of *Happy Together* was a re-creation of a norebang which emanates youth culture but it also suggests privacy as an enclosed space with padded walls.²¹⁵ A norebang is a room for only designated participants who share an unspoken agreement of safety and privilege to express unbridled behavior without judgment in the name of fun. It is a social setting designed for cutting loose and exhibiting vulnerability by singing but only within the confines of that space and before specific individuals invited to witness and participate. Similarly, *Happy*

²¹⁵ “Norebang” is Korean for “karaoke” room.

Together is a “liminal space” where celebrities reveal their human conditions and discuss their inner most feelings to the hosts of the show and viewers at home.²¹⁶ Stars converse like regular people. They sometimes eat on set while telling funny, embarrassing and sad stories. But the minute they leave the show, the stars reoccupy their routine of fame and celebrity. *Yenŭng* exhibits a star’s liminality—a “breach” from the normal social order that separates the fan from the celebrity.²¹⁷

The confines of *Happy Together*’s liminality, however, is highly regulated by the television and music industries. This regulation is maintained by the show producers and writers who always interview their guests prior to filming. In an interview with *Happy Together*’s main producing-director (PD) Park Ji-young, who was with the program since its inception, she explained that pre-production first begins with an interview of the guests: “Some are stories that the guest wants to tell. Others are stories that the writers excavate through questions. We collect any details related to the guest’s current circumstances, talents, and anything that is interesting or entertaining.”²¹⁸ The writers then generate questions for the hosts to read from their cue cards based on the information they collected. Park explained that producers always discuss with the stars’ managing agencies on what details to air. Park further indicated that although there are no set rules for the producers to follow, if any contention results from a star’s overexposure, then the production team does everything it can to resolve things with the agency through direct dialogue. These production concerns indicate the show’s producing staff and music industry’s mutual interest in managing what the stars can say on television. K-pop agencies are careful not

²¹⁶ Nick Couldry, “Ritual and Liminality,” *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 31.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, 32.

²¹⁸ Park Ji-young, email interview, Feb. 2, 2017, translated by author.

to disclose anything on issues such as forced dieting or little to no compensation unless they are in a tightly controlled environment that can best accommodate them such as a *yeŋg* program like *Happy Together*. Then what value does the K-pop stars' narrative of suffering have for the music and television industries?



Figure 24. *Happy Together*. KBS.

In 2008, *Happy Together*'s set design changed from a norebang to a sauna where hosts and guests wore cotton T-shirts, shorts and towels commonly worn in the co-ed area of public Korean spas. The sauna set design, which maintained the longest look of the program up until 2015, also has specific codes of conduct and connotations. Spatially, the sauna conjures vulnerability through implied nudity; beyond the co-ed space, there are public bath areas separated by gender where people bathe, shower and receive spa treatments. When celebrities enter the sauna setting on *Happy Together*, they are expected to metaphorically bare themselves before the audience. Saunas are also a place for casual conversation between friends and strangers alike. It is also where people go to sweat out toxins and find therapeutic healing. The *Happy Together* set is a "safe space"—another liminal space—where stars can find therapeutic release by venting their frustrations. With that said, Mimi White reminds us: "The modes of

therapeutic discourse constructed through television and other media, fully implicated in consumer culture, participate in the production of social and cultural identities.”²¹⁹ On *yenŭng*, the celebrity is the consumer product. Viewers are not just consumers of their music. They consume the star’s social life by tuning into *Happy Together*. A star’s image becomes entirely human and relatable once they share their private suffering: “[A]iring dirty laundry is still largely coded as *ordinary* even when famous people are involved because, more often than not, it serves to prove just how ordinary—how like the rest of us—they are.”²²⁰ The celebrity’s relatability enhances fan appreciation and facilitates a sense of closeness or intimacy between the star on television and viewer at home. This, in part, reveals the rationale for why the agencies pre-approve the idols’ stories of industry suffering. By appealing to audience sympathy utilizing melodrama and naming all the tragic consequences of their star life such as debt and hunger, the idols reach out for viewer support to help their careers. The affective appeal or affective “selling out” becomes a strategy for profiteering or fostering a following. The melodramatic moral order is replaced by neoliberal rationale. All that is left is affect—the artist’s appeal to the viewer. The immorality and inhumaneness of the agencies themselves are not a part of the equation. In the neoliberal sphere, victimization is a non-issue, and victimhood only has meaning if it can prove its monetary worth.

Indentured Servitude, Dislocation, and Hunger

²¹⁹ Mimi White, *Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American Television*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 19.

²²⁰ Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002), digital, 287. Emphasis in the original.

Although star abuse in the K-pop system is common knowledge, no one in the industry speaks on these accounts outside of a controlled environment like on the set of *Happy Together*—especially litigation-sensitive issues like “slave contracts.”²²¹ In a brief interview with John Seabrook who wrote the article “Factory Girls” for *The New Yorker*, when asked if anyone would speak to him about slave contracts, he responded, “No, people won't talk about that stuff. No way.”²²² Seabrook conducted his research on slave contracts solely through published sources, but the concept of slave contracts is an open secret.²²³ Entertainment management companies treat bodies as business properties. Korean commercial and film producer Joonhan Lee compares the agencies treatment of K-pop stars’ bodies to real estate: “Agencies buy low and sell high.”²²⁴ At the beginning of every potential idol’s career, they sign a contract as a “trainee”/yönsüpsaeng with the agency. When these idol trainees leave their homes and families, and enter dorms to begin their training, the understanding is that the trainee has been selected by the agency to foster their talent, given their potential; it is viewed as an investment by the agency. In reality, as contractually dictated, the agency does not pay for the trainees’ room and board; these costs are taken out of the trainees’ accounts as a “negative balance” much like a credit card. The trainees do not receive payment for their work as backup dancers to artists who have established careers, which is why some K-pop contracts have earned the nickname “slave contracts.” The indentured servitude design of the K-pop system has direct parallels to what Korean prostitutes were subject to in US military bases also known as *kijich'on* camps in the

²²¹ Jihyun Kim, “The Other Side of K-pop and Korean Music: Labor Abuse,” *Korea Expose*, Sept. 28, 2017, <https://www.koreaexpose.com/k-pop-korean-music-musicians-labor-abuse/>.

²²² John Seabrook, email interview, Nov. 6, 2016.

²²³ John Seabrook, “Factory Girls,” *The New Yorker*, Oct. 8, 2012.

²²⁴ Joonhan Lee, phone interview, Oct. 20, 2016.

1960s and 70s.²²⁵ In 2009, the Fair Trade Commission (FTC) in Korea developed a “model contract” in response to the the boyband TVXQ’s lawsuit against their agency for its unfair thirteen-year contract, which the court ruled in favor of the artists.²²⁶ Contract improvements and systemic changes in the industry, however, are slow and the stars’ managing agencies are still vertically integrated (attorney, manager and agent at one company), controlling all aspects of the artists’ careers thus removing any form of check and balance.



Figure 25. *Happy Together*. KBS.



Figure 26. *Happy Together*. KBS.

²²⁵ See Katharine HS Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in US-Korea Relations*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

²²⁶ Lucy Williamson, “The dark side of Korean pop music,” *BBC*, June 15, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13760064>.

On *Happy Together* episode 309, boy band members of B2ST²²⁷ who debuted in 2009 explain how even after releasing their album, their accounts contained a negative balance.²²⁸ This is because artists are not entitled to royalties unless a minimum of fifty thousand albums is sold.²²⁹ Considering the number of recruits and the years of training that is required, the cost would make the system financially impossible unless this money was recouped by the artists' free labor. But neoliberal logics excuse those in power of these industries who maintain that the trainees cannot be victims because they have *willingly* signed on to be a part of it all. Committed to their namesake, episodes of *Happy Together* never end on a sad or angry note. In the same episode featuring B2ST, after the members air out their stories of cramped living situations with nothing to eat, and training while incurring debt to the very company they've been selected by, the young men conclude with remarks on how they've made their money back, live in a roomier apartment and eat better meals.²³⁰ This narrative reflects the ideal K-pop success story with a moral instruction on how to survive the system.

What gets left out of this narrative is that ninety-seven to ninety-eight percent of the trainees never actually make it as an artist.²³¹ If the idols who do make their debut wind up paying off their debt by working one to two years, one must wonder what happens to the debt for those who are dropped by the agency or quit after years of training. Furthermore, the terms

²²⁷ The band changed its name to "Highlight" in 2017.

²²⁸ "Beastly idol vs. beast special with B2ST!" *Happy Together*, KBS World TV, YouTube, Aug. 14, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeSMJc6C2Zg>.

²²⁹ Euny Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation Is Conquering the World through Pop Culture*, (New York: Picador, 2014), 122.

²³⁰ "Beastly idol vs. beast special with B2ST!" *Happy Together*, KBS World TV, YouTube, Aug. 14, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeSMJc6C2Zg>.

²³¹ Inkyu Kang, "The political economy of idols," *K-Pop: The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry*, edited by JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 63.

“training” and “trainee” obfuscate reality, which is that these trainees are in fact minors working in the music industry which has no set regulations on labor, nor a labor union that binds artists together across all agencies so that they can battle out industry-related issues of exploitation and abuse. The young idols-to-be may be training to become stars but their time is still dedicated to learning how to fulfill tasks required by the companies that hired them. Teenaged artists-in-training claimed to have worked over eight hours a day as well as nights and weekends.²³² If the trainees are living away from their homes and constantly monitored by their managers then they are technically never not working. Their life is their job. Maintaining their celebrity identity at all times is their work. Of course, the trainees’ grievances are not even viewed as such so long as the agencies uphold the neoliberal reasoning that they have signed onto it willingly, been selected among millions who want the same opportunity, that they should only have gratitude for it all, and that their success or failure is completely up to them.

Voluntary Starvation and Self-Alienation

On *Happy Together* episode 444, Girl’s Day member Yura mentions how her agency forced her and fellow girl group member Hyeri to diet when they were teenagers. The young women explain how their manager would weigh them on a weekly basis and restrict them from eating junk food which they found ways of circumventing by sneaking out in the middle of the night to binge on street food. Yura tells a story about the time she was chastised by her manager for sneak-eating popcorn by hiding it under her tongue, turning her anecdote on starvation and micromanagement into a funny episode for the hosts to laugh at. This micromanaging, they claim, led to greater stress and more weight gain. Yura then turns to the camera in direct-address

²³² Ibid.

and says, “There’s something I want to say to all agency CEOs. All the upcoming idols, our juniors, are managing their weight. I wish you’d let them manage that on their own. When managers restrict them from eating, it makes them want to eat even more. The added stress causes more weight gain.”²³³ Then Hyeri adds, “As soon as the agency stopped [micromanaging our weight], we lost it. The weight came off easily.”²³⁴ Although the narrative starts out as a wakeup call coming from empowered and accomplished young women prepared to offer some words of advice to the agencies, in a matter of seconds the conversation reaffirms the management’s mission in getting girl group members to meet the industry’s body standard issued by a patriarchal institution.



Figure 27. Happy Together. KBS.

²³³ “Happy Together – Stars of the Spring Special,” *Happy Together*, KBS World TV, YouTube, April 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWLw2ocaaRg>.

²³⁴ Ibid.



Figure 28. Happy Together. KBS.

Yura then goes on say that she’s taken out insurance for her legs, which is worth \$500,000. Hyeri adds that the insurance company does not insure all legs but only those that meet certain criteria. Hyeri and Yura close their anecdote on a note of success with how they’d won over the patriarchy by conforming so well to its standards that they are even able to ascribe monetary value to their asset body parts. Yura’s anecdote is an example of neoliberal feminism which is a feminism “unmoored from any notion of *social* inequality” and does not present the issues of patriarchal dominance nor any solutions to it.²³⁵ Yura’s narrative ends by complete self-objectification of her own body, reinforcing the model K-pop success story. Per sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, the emotional laborer “can become estranged or alienated from an aspect of self—either the body or the margins of the soul—that is *used* to do the work.”²³⁶ Female empowerment is reduced to capital empowerment on this episode of *Happy Together*. Feminist ideology is replaced by a self-administered objectification and alienation affirmed by capitalist logics. The display of female K-pop stars who have internalized female gender and market

²³⁵ Charlotte Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 64.

²³⁶ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 7.

expectations per capitalist-patriarchal suggestions are transformed through neoliberalism; compromising the self for capital gain gets equated with feminism.

The music industry remains unperturbed when idols openly share these dark anecdotes because the dark side is already familiar to the mainstream through news. When I asked why stories related to forced dieting are so prevalent on *Happy Together*, Park said that she found them harmless: “These stories can be appreciated through laughter which is why I think the stars discuss it openly.”²³⁷ While a story on forced starvation of teenagers and young women should raise eyebrows, it loses its impact and shock value through repetition on television, and eventually gets normalized. Objectification of female bodies and hunger are common in stories that stem from the nation’s history of sex slavery during colonial occupation, WWII, and the Korean War. The nation’s past hunger is being rearticulated in the form of coerced-dieting. The nation’s past of female objectification and abuse through sex slavery (colonial era and WWII) and prostitution (Korean War and post-Korean War period) has transformed into self-objectification through neoliberal reason in the current era. As Patty Jeehyun Ahn observes, “[U]nder neoliberal regimes of governmentality, female consumption habits have become post-colonial indices of modernity and agency that successfully reassign problems of violence and poverty away from the nation-state and the historical debris of empire onto the responsibility of the individual feminine subject.”²³⁸ Any responsibility that may befall the state considering KBS’s status as a public broadcaster that contributes to the normalization of female body objectification is turned into the responsibility of the female subject herself, much like in the case with singer/actor Jang Nara.

²³⁷ Park Ji-young, email interview, Feb. 2, 2017, translated by author.

²³⁸ Patty Jeehyun Ahn, “Harisu: South Korean Cosmetic Media and the Paradox of Transgendered Neoliberal Embodiment,” *Discourse*, 31:3, 2009, 248-272, 262.

According to Andrea Muehlebach, neoliberal morals produce “a particular kind of public, one that is conceptualized in voluntaristic and affective terms, that is, as emanating from individual, spontaneous will and desire (*volere*) rather than collective deliberation and action.”²³⁹ As former K-pop trainee Sarah Wolfgang puts it, the industry is “a prison you decide to walk into.”²⁴⁰ The neoliberal rationale thrives by emphasizing voluntarism and insisting that there can be no losers in a free market: “[F]ree exchange [is] a transaction from which both parties necessarily [benefit], since nobody would voluntarily engage in an exchange from which they would emerge worse off.”²⁴¹ However, this argument does not take into consideration the very young age of these stars when they initially commit to these contracts or the great power imbalance between the client and agent. Nor does it admit that the young stars are forced to diet and undergo cosmetic procedures through industry pressure.²⁴²

²³⁹ Andrea Muehlebach, *The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 44.

²⁴⁰ Alexandra Young, “K-poparazzi,” *Radiolab*, Feb. 24, 2016, <http://www.radiolab.org/story/kpoparazzi/>.

²⁴¹ Simon Clarke, “The Neoliberal Theory of Society,” *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, edited by Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston, (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 50-59, 50.

²⁴² Hip hop artist Jessi explains that she’d undergone plastic surgery because her agency suggested it would help her be more photogenic: “Happy Together – Suzy, Jessi, Seo Woo & More! (2015. 04.23),” KBS World TV, *YouTube*, Apr. 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LZXP9gs5D0>.



Figure 29. Happy Together. KBS.

When I inquired as to why management agencies pre-approve stories of forced dieting to be aired on the program, Park responded, “[The agencies] can take a joke.”²⁴³ In Park’s view, these comments are made in jest and not to be taken seriously despite how prolific this narrative is. These stories, according to Park, are meant to entertain. This joke, which is about a performer having to conform their body to the expectations of the medium is meant to entertain; the finished product of the body that is performing entertains through live concerts, televised concerts, acting appearances in film and serialized TV dramas, music videos, etc., but the story about the punishment of that body which works towards conformity in order to perform is also entertainment by way of *yenŭng*. The root meaning of *yenŭng* is, in fact, entertainment.

But Park’s comment is also a testament to the TV industry’s recognition of the music industry; given the amount of influence that the Korean music industry has both domestically and globally, stories like these have little to no impact on the agencies’ images; K-pop stars and their music are worshipped by an international fandom of billions from every continent. The Korean music industry is fully aware of its global popularity, and the high number of desperate youths eager to join the competition towards stardom despite their awareness of its arduousness which have been aired ad nauseum on television, newspapers and blogs. Suffering is the norm.

²⁴³ Park Ji-young, email interview, Feb. 2, 2017, translated by author.

Suffering is a job expectation. These stories of suffering have become naturalized through public television, and those who wish to compete and be the last one standing in spite of their knowledge of these realities exist by the millions.

Bourdieu states, “The neoliberal program draws its social power from the political and economic power...[which] run no risk of having eventually to pay the consequences.”²⁴⁴ As mentioned earlier, the face of neoliberalism is unidentifiable therefore the system continues to thrive as its inhumane actions go unspecified, unaddressed and unquestioned. The one that pays those consequences, however, is the body—the life—of the performer towards the purpose of expanding the notion of entertainment into the area of suffering. The whole idea of media is self-effacing. The audience is asked to find entertainment in the cruelty that happens leading up to the moment when the star appears on stage to sing and dance, and that cruelty is now content in the package of *yenŭng*.

Stress Aesthetics That Legitimize Quality

Caldwell’s term “stress aesthetics” used in the context of the film and television industry is a visually manifest philosophy that when the creator is stressed, creative breakthroughs are achieved.²⁴⁵ Inkyu Kang calls the head of SM Entertainment Lee Soo-man’s haughty declaration, “Even America has been unable to establish a management system like ours” a form of

²⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “Utopia of Endless Exploitation The Essence of Neoliberalism: What is Neoliberalism?” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro, 1998.

²⁴⁵ John Caldwell, “Stress Aesthetics and Deprivation Payroll Systems,” Petr Szczepanik, and Patrick Vonderau, *Behind the Screen: Inside European Production Cultures*, (New York: Palgrave-McMillan, 2013).

“hyperrationalization”—a “pillar of capitalism.”²⁴⁶ Although the K-pop industry has structural and ethical problems, Lee’s commitment to stress aesthetics is facilitated by neoliberal rationalizations of productivity and efficiency, just as Hollywood industries thrive on the work of individuals who receive little to no pay on the basis that they are privileged to be on site where they gain behind-the-scenes access to the industry and learn “this secret to stress as artistry.”²⁴⁷ The ideology of stress aesthetics is maintained in the Korean television industry as well. The workload on the set of *Happy Together* is rigorous. Park explained, “Filming [one episode] takes up to six hours and post-production requires twelve hours of work per day for three days. The main producer puts in another six to seven hours for final editing.”²⁴⁸ Park works anywhere between four to sixteen hours a day, five to six days a week. In both the music and television industries, there is an unquestioned acceptance of tough working conditions as the norm. Beyond this, the workload described by Park also demonstrates stress aesthetics by also becoming a subject of entertainment as content; while there is the Romanticized notion motivating stress aesthetics that the artist under duress is able to produce a great work of art, stress aesthetics can also be understood as mere aesthetics *of* stress whereby the suffering is art. There is edification in watching the stress, and *yenŭng* queerly presents that to the viewer; the audio-visual suffering is part of *yenŭng*’s aesthetic. This stress aesthetic is enabled by *Happy Together*’s tendency to lean on the histrionic displays that occur because of the constant presence of melodrama; as Williams mentions the spectacle of excess—“displays of primal, even infantile emotions”—in a

²⁴⁶ Inkyu Kang, “The political economy of idols,” *K-Pop: The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry*, edited by JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 62.

²⁴⁷ Caldwell, 97.

²⁴⁸ Park Ji-young, email interview, Feb. 2, 2017, translated by author.

melodrama are “circular and repetitive.”²⁴⁹ In a sense, queerness lends itself to melodrama in that the display of one’s pathos takes place publically and the exposure of the entertainment industry’s exploitative measures are on blast albeit highly controlled by the production staff and music industry’s managing team. But this display speaks to the queer community as well; for instance, there’s a pattern in the gay community of heralding female celebrities who have a troubled history, e.g., Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland. Gay comedian Matteo Lane insists that Lindsay Lohan’s Instagram account is more entertaining than *Game of Thrones* because “gay men love nothing more than a messy white woman. White women, if you are out and you are drinking, and all of the sudden these gay men show up around you and they’re like, ‘Yas, queen, yas!’ It’s a bad sign.”²⁵⁰ While gay men adored figures like Judy Garland for her stardom, they also related to her despair and self-destruction—her own aesthetics of stress.

Stress aesthetics and narratives of suffering also produce the illusion of quality. For instance, in Jennifer Kang’s analysis of the show *The King of Mask Singer* (2015- , MBC), she argues that the idols can make themselves appear legitimate and deserving of their popularity by confirming that they “survived the competitive trainee program and possess the talent needed to be notable singers.”²⁵¹ The idols break free of the notion that they are nothing more than merely pre-packaged, manufactured goods produced by the K-pop idol system by claiming certain cultural knowledges and demonstrating that they are, indeed, qualified as stars through the ritual of suffering. As Couldry describes, rituals “formalize categories, and the differences or

²⁴⁹ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly*, 44, 4 (1991): 2-13, 3.

²⁵⁰ Matteo Lane, *The Comedy Line Up*, Netflix, Season 2, episode 2, 2018.

²⁵¹ Jennifer M. Kang, “Rediscovering the Idols: K-Pop Idols Behind the Mask,” *Celebrity Studies*, 8:1, 2017, 136-141, 139.

boundaries between categories, in performances that help them seem natural, even legitimate.”²⁵²

The suffering ritual is a form of quality check for audiences to know that the star-product is, indeed, legitimate, and worthy of their consumption while also validating the star’s entitlement to success and fame. Variety television’s neoliberal discourse accommodates rationales that transfigure suffering into honor and merit.

Respecting the Neoliberal Order & Discarding Morals Through Comedy

On *Happy Together* episode 398, the Yoo Jae-seok tells the boyband Big Bang that their success appears to have begun from the moment they debuted. To this, GD and Taeyang fall back on the standard underdog story of having to separate from their respective families as young boys to live together in cramped dorm rooms with mice and a negligent manager who did not stock up their fridge regularly. The young men explain how they were ages twelve and thirteen at the time returning home to no food after long hours of physical training.²⁵³ When comedian/co-host Jo Se-ho asks if they received a stipend, the young men shake their heads ‘no.’ GD explains how they were not allowed to visit their families’ homes as they pleased. The members openly discuss their humble beginnings when they suffered bouts of hunger, isolation and neglect without ever faulting the actual agency itself. Here, again, there are victims but no victimizers. Big Bang’s story of hunger and separation from families harkens back to post-war poverty and dislocation of Korean refugees. However, unlike their previous generations, these members voluntarily entered the violent rite of the star-making passage. No discussion of victimizer or villain takes place because, abiding by the neoliberal logic, there is no one to blame

²⁵² Couldry, 27.

²⁵³ “Big Bang Special,” *Happy Together*, episode 398, YouTube, KBS World TV, June 11, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xb3rIaOOMr8>, translation by author.

but the self when the self is responsible for its own care.²⁵⁴ In place of colonial/postcolonial and war/post-war suffering, the ROK's youth now suffer from the commercialization of their bodies for the sake of entertainment.



Figure 30. Happy Together. KBS.



Figure 31. Happy Together. KBS.

²⁵⁴ Julie Cupples and Kevin Glynn, "Neoliberalism, Surveillance and Media Convergence," *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*, edited by Simon Springer, Kean Birch, Julie MacLeavy, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 175-189.



Figure 32. Happy Together. KBS.

Without complaining about their agency, GD remarks: “The CEO [Yang Hyun-suk] wasn’t someone we could go and meet just because we wanted to.”²⁵⁵ GD’s comment that they could not see the CEO back then as they pleased given their trainee status reinforces the industry’s hierarchy as a given. Similarly, neoliberalism has always been a “set of discourses, political rationalities, [and] formations of common sense” that favored corporations over individual lives.²⁵⁶ The underlying message is that the capitalist order must be respected and never questioned. The repetition of these dark industry narratives normalizes its stressful conditions: “‘Normality’ is a product of power-bearing prescription.... Normalization is thus central to both the mobilization of power and the stabilization of order within...societies.”²⁵⁷ Normalization on *Happy Together* is always reinforced by the “talk-show-host-judge” or, in this case, the nation’s beloved comedian Yoo Jae-seok.²⁵⁸ The show is tightly controlled by the producers, writers, and the public broadcaster which is regulated by the state, but most

²⁵⁵ Big Bang Special,” *Happy Together*, episode 398, YouTube, KBS World TV, June 11, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xb3rIaOOMr8>, translation by author.

²⁵⁶ Cupples and Glynn, 175-176.

²⁵⁷ Kevin Glynn, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American TV*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 186.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 187.

importantly by the host's comedic timing. No matter how tragic these stories get, there is always the safety net of comedy to lighten things up. The campy nature of the set design, the CGI, sound effects and canned laugh tracks are all used to efface any sense of culpability from the agents who cause the K-pop idols' distress. As Susan Sontag observes: "Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness."²⁵⁹ Camp humor and excessive stylization relieve the awkward tension between the laborer (K-pop star) and the owner of production (agency). Sorrow is always funny in retrospect. Yoon et al observe that this cycle of sorrow and laughter is a rotational device used on comedic variety television to "avoid a moralistic tone."²⁶⁰ *Happy Together* guests offer melodramatic stories to engage audience sympathy but the heaviness gets interrupted by comedy which then discards any message on morals in the end. Instead, the narrative concludes with neoliberal reasoning that upends any antagonistic views of the capitalist infrastructures and their owners. As mentioned earlier, the set of *Happy Together* is a liminal space that lacks judgment and promotes safety for *everyone* including the institutions and industries responsible for idol suffering.

Additionally, GD's statement clearly distinguishes a trainee's status from an established star's—a testament that only capital success grants access to directly communicate with the CEO. The members of Big Bang and YG Entertainment's CEO Yang Hyun-suk share a relationship that is not granted to just anyone but earned through the merits of financial success. On this episode, the members of Big Bang share stories about the intimate relationship between themselves and Yang to demonstrate how they've earned their keep at their managing agency by

²⁵⁹ Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and The Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto, 53-65 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 120.

²⁶⁰ Tae-il Yoon, et al, "When Old Meets New: An Analysis of Korean Traditional Narrative in the Contemporary Reality TV Show *Infinite Challenge*," *Acta Koreana*, 20:2, 2017, 423-448, 436.

emerging as an asset at the other end of the suffering ritual. The message here is that there is a process to finding one's place in the industry, and the guests and hosts all contribute to justifying the stars' wealth by shedding light on the intense labor they've suffered to achieve it. Ideologically, this is completely in line with the American-Christian-capitalist's "pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps" logic—the more you suffer, the greater the reward. The members of Big Bang separate their celebrity status from that of ordinary civilians by declaring that the work of a star is different. Although the star's persona becomes accessible through *yenŭng*, once they leave the liminal space of *Happy Together*, the distance between the star and viewer returns. There is a pride stemming from having survived the idol military-training process: "Militarizing production culture also draws out clear contrasts between the production cadets inside the unit and those civilians outside of the unit looking on from afar."²⁶¹ This naturalizes economic and class distinctions through the neoliberal validation of a star's suffering ritual which is framed differently from that of the average person.

Gender Violence, Toxic Korean Masculinity and #MeTooKorea

Ahn So-jin who had trained to become a member of the girl group KARA committed suicide at age 22 in February 2015 when she did not make the cut.²⁶² Kim Jonghyun—a beloved member of the boyband SHINee—committed suicide at the age of 27 in December 2017 to the shock of fans around the globe. Sulli—a former girl group f(x) member turned solo artist and actress—committed suicide in October 2019 at the age of 25. On November 24, 2019, K-pop star

²⁶¹ John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and TV*, (Durham: Duke University, 2008), 133.

²⁶² "K-Pop Star Ahn Sojin Dead From Apparent Suicide at Age 22," *Pop Dust*, Feb. 25, 2015, <http://www.popdust.com/k-pop-star-ahn-sojin-dead-from-apparent-suicide-at-age-22-1890530786.html>

Goo Hara was also found dead by suicide. All of the singers were described by their managers as depressed, but in Sulli's case, there are records that expressed her grievances of facing gender discrimination like when she chose not to wear a bra in a public space and was met with harsh criticism from the online community.²⁶³ Sulli has been in the Korean entertainment business since age 11, which means she has been subject to the same kinds of demands that other K-pop stars faced. As she gained success, Sulli became an advocate for the abortion law in Korea, and expressed a feminist-inspired defiance towards gender oppression by occasionally going braless in public and addressing older people in entertainment by their first names, which is widely considered disrespectful in Korea according to its hierarchical sociocultural norms. While in the instance of idol training, both male and female trainees suffer the ritual of overworking and slave contracts, the pressures of plastic surgery, sex appeal to a pedophilic male gaze, and coerced dieting are heavier on girl groups. While anti-fandom, harassment, and cyberbullying of pop stars occur across all identities, female stars are more often attacked for not conforming to patriarchal Korean expectations of femininity. Media coverage surrounding Sulli's suicide faults social media's anti-fandom and cyberbullying, but even in this instance, it is hard to identify specific names and faces of the victimizer from a sea of negative internet commenters just as it is difficult to hold any specific identities accountable for the bureaucratic system of star abuse within the K-pop industry.²⁶⁴ Furthermore, the press's emphasis on "toxic fandom" overlooks the systemic gender discrimination and toxic masculinity within the Korean entertainment industry

²⁶³ Justin McCurry, "K-pop under scrutiny over 'toxic fandom' after death of Sulli," *The Guardian*, Oct. 18, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/oct/18/k-pop-under-scrutiny-over-toxic-fandom-after-death-of-sulli>, accessed Oct. 30, 2019.

²⁶⁴ Haeryun Kang, "How a K-pop star's death reveals the truth about our society," *Washington Post*, Oct. 15, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/10/15/how-k-pop-stars-death-reveals-truth-about-our-society/>, accessed Nov. 9, 2019.

that is headed by male CEOs, managers, and agents who create an environment that likens the military much like the training they were required to undergo due to the conscription law.

In October 2017, as Tarana Burke’s #MeToo hashtag activism (originally conceived in 2007 in Alabama) began to go internationally viral in addressing workplace sexual harassment in the US, Chinese American Los Angeles native Amber Liu—a member of the K-pop girl group f(x) known for her androgynous tomboy appearance—joined the conversation via Instagram: “[Sexual harassment] happens everywhere, even here. I want to add my voice as well. Not only from what I have experienced but also from what I have seen my friends and loved ones have to go through...and because it’s so common, I hate to say it.. the feelings become so numb and we all felt that we just had to ‘deal with it.’”²⁶⁵ However, it took another three months before #MeToo began to catch on in Korea.

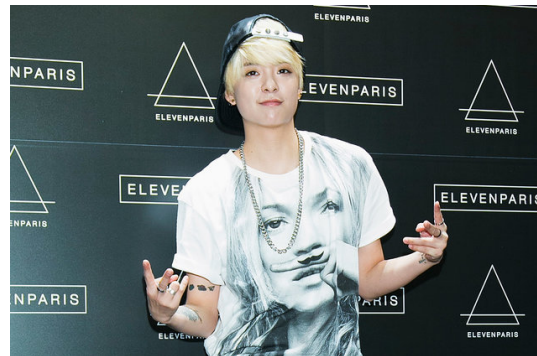


Figure 33. Amber Liu of K-pop girl group f(x).

On January 29, 2018, public prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun gave an interview on JTBC news stating that she had been groped at a funeral by a senior justice ministry official Ahn Tae-geun. Seo mentioned that the #MeToo movement had inspired her to share this incident and to stand up against sexual violence. Since Seo’s interview, others have also been using #MeToo to share

²⁶⁵ Amber Liu, @ajol_llama, Instagram, Oct. 19, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BacDW3EF6K5/?utm_source=ig_embed

their stories of harassment and call out male celebrities who have committed offenses. Chairwoman Lee Mi-kyung of the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center stated in January 2018: “The Korean media outlets, the prosecution and businesses are all linked, and female actresses and artists are often pressured to trade sexual favors for career advancement.”²⁶⁶ In a complete transcript of the interview, Seo notes how infuriated she was when she learned that people who were present at the dinner table and witnessed the groping said nothing to address it in the moment, nor did they follow-up to check in with her later.²⁶⁷ Max Weber describes the state’s bureaucratic structure as follows: “The individual bureaucrat is, above all, forged to the common interest of all the functionaries in the perpetuation of the apparatus and the persistence of its rationally organized domination.”²⁶⁸ The silence, disregard and willful blindness to harassment are problems that perpetuate these kinds of incidents, thus normalizing them as acceptable social behavior in the workplace. Furthermore, the shape of these apparatuses, which are dominantly cis-male and heterosexual, allow the “common interest” to be in favor of male and hetero interests. Anything that disrupts such interests, like resistance in the form of female empowerment, gets pushed out, dismissed or rejected. In the same way, the function of the music and television industries is to preserve and protect hetero-cis-maleness at the expense of identities that differ from such. The reticence in response to abuse is found in the form of sympathetic comments from the *Happy Together* hosts to the celebrity guests who speak on

²⁶⁶ Jo He-rim, “Korean celebrities find it difficult to break silence on sexual exploitation,” *The Korea Herald*, Jan. 29, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180129001049>

²⁶⁷ Youjin Lee, “The Prosecutor Who Exploded #MeToo in Korea: The JTBC Interview with Seo Ji-hyun,” <https://www.aprilmag.com/2018/02/06/the-prosecutor-who-exploded-metoo-in-korea-the-jtbc-interview-with-seo-ji-hyun/>.

²⁶⁸ Max Weber, “Bureaucracy,” *An Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, eds. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, (Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 49-70, 62.

them, and those who speak on these instances in the past tense but without naming specific victimizers or abusers; their silence is an acceptance of abuse as part of the system's norm.

Incidents of sexual harassment and/or assault of female K-pop stars, as Amber Liu mentions, are common; Liu states that it has reached a point where she's seen her female industry colleagues become "numb" to them. This numbness is an indication of a person's adjustment to something that one should not grow accustomed to, just as toxicity is something that enters the body but also what one tries to consciously detox from; toxicity (to use the metaphor of alcohol) is also something that one builds a tolerance to; greater intake of alcohol increases one's tolerance to it over time, and, in some cases, causes addiction.

The numbness that Liu refers to is a form of estrangement from the self; such estrangement does not occur overnight but through a long and slow process; small steps towards self-alienation begin with internalizing abusive conditions and learning to devalue one's self-worth in order to remain in the industry. Vivian Sobchak states, "[T]he normative practices of our culture estrange us *phenomenologically* from our own bodies and the bodies of others."²⁶⁹ Yura of Girl's Day has learned to accept the commodification of her own body (taking out an insurance policy on her legs); K-pop stars have learned during their trainee years to deprive themselves of food, sleep, and self-acceptance (undergoing plastic surgery or body transformation per suggestions by their agencies). In light of the recent sex scandals, what came as a shock to the fans that follow K-pop stars and the media associated with them, should not at all be shocking considering every star's beginning: learning to adjust to abuse while also learning how to abuse. Furthermore, sexual abuses of the industry are completely erased from television

²⁶⁹ Vivian Sobchak, "Is Anybody Home?: Embodied Imagination and Visible Evictions," *Carnal Thoughts*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 204. Emphasis in original.

shows like *Happy Together*. Descriptions of industry suffering are limited to dieting, poverty, debt, dislocation, and mutilation (plastic surgery). But sexual harassment and rape, which are just as common in entertainment, are never mentioned on TV. Therefore, *yenŭng* limits its aspects of entertaining suffering aesthetics to presentations and discussions of everything but sexual violence. While starvation and mutilation are viewed as accepted forms of entertainment and entertainment labor, sexual services (exploitation, rape, harassment) are not included as part of content. This distinction is made by the media industries through self-censorship with the awareness of KCC's pattern of censorship and Korean socio-cultural dictates of never mentioning sex in public or on television, but as modern Korean history indicates, sexual enslavement during colonization and WWII followed by sexual labor during the Korean War and to present day to American GIs is a reality; plenty of newspaper headlines have also shown that sexual exploitation is rampant in the industry. These are all products or results of demands from an industry. To turn a person into a product in front of the camera requires starvation and mutilation; sexual harassment and rape, however, are subjugations of womanhood within the entertainment industry's system, demonstrating the cruelty of the industry's means of employing women. Thus, the forms of cruelty associated with gendered and sexual labor are nothing to be entertained by or even tolerated enough to be televised, which is not to say that they do not take place. Such gendered cruelty imbued by a patriarchal right by male members of authority within the industry are left out by *yenŭng* programs, and it is the line where the appropriate response of laughing or even crying stops.

In March 2009, actress Jang Ja-yeon who was popularized through the hit TV show *Boys Over Flowers* (KBS, 2009) committed suicide, leaving behind a note that detailed the sexual exploitation and abuse she suffered at the hands of her agent Kim Sung-hoon. Jang's letter

accuses Kim of physical abuse, forced drinking against her will and being coerced into having sex with up to 40 different entertainment executives, members of the press (newspapers), directors and politicians. Jang's agent and the agency's CEO faced a few months in prison, probation and community service following the investigation on her death. In 2018, the case was reopened at the urge of citizens following the #MeTooKorea movement.

Within the indices of neoliberalism, acts of coercion or being willed into an activity that one does not want to partake in does not get recognized as force (harassment, assault, blackmail, rape, etc.) because the argument stands that each individual is responsible for her own self. Such retorts as, "No one forced you to sit there and drink. No one forced you to sleep with these men. No one forced you to be in this business," are in line with the idea that when someone becomes victimized, only the self is responsible and no one else is to be blamed. Certain social structures and gendered customs in Korean business settings keep women out. The question of whether female stars are invited to share the same kind of bond or relationship with male CEOs of management agencies like Yang Hyun-suk of YG Entertainment with the members of Big Bang must be raised. While the members of Big Bang and Yang Hyun-suk had a mentor/mentee relationship bordering on a brotherhood, female stars were often met with the expectation of sexual services. Yang, in fact, dated a former K-pop trainee at YG Entertainment; his now wife Lee Eun-ju, who is 12 years his junior, was 20 when Yang began to date her in secret for nine years. The couple wed in 2010, but Yang first met Lee when she was in middle school, and recruited her as a trainee when she was 16.²⁷⁰ Despite the predatory aspects of this, Yang continued to appear on television as a judge on competition K-pop variety shows such as *Super*

²⁷⁰ Koreaboo, Dec. 11, 2018, <https://www.koreaboo.com/stories/netizens-disapprove-yang-hyun-suk-love-story/>, accessed Dec. 4, 2019.

Star K (2009— , Mnet) and *K-Pop Star* (2011-2017, SBS). His casting on family-friendly TV shows is a part of the neoliberal normalization of the entertainment industry's questionable ethics and morals.

In part one of this chapter, I mention the Father School and its 12-step program structure where fathers learn to detox from toxic masculinity. Hegemonic North American masculinity includes some toxic qualities as part of its characteristic such as dominance, motivation towards status, winning, violence, homophobia and womanizing.²⁷¹ Examples of toxically masculine traits that the Father School mention include withholding affection, emotional aloofness, unavailability (physically, emotionally and mentally), being critical, yelling, and being abusive towards his wife and children. Toxicity in these aspects often arise as actions in relation to others within a family unit. Outside of the family unit, however, toxic masculinity is found within interpersonal—usually romantic and/or sexual—relationships. In March 2019, male musicians/K-pop stars such as FT Island's Jung Joon-yung and Choi Jong-hoon, Big Bang's Seungri, Highlight's (formerly B2ST) Junhyung, Roy Kim and Eddy Kim have been arrested and/or called in for questioning on various allegations of sexual misconduct ranging from drugging and raping women to sharing illicit videos and photographs taken of women in intimate acts without their knowledge, and corruption such as gambling (gambling is illegal in Korea) and police bribery.²⁷² The illicit photos and videos were shared within a Kakao messenger group chat among these young men.

In the late summer of 2016, singer and variety entertainer Jung Joon-young was accused by a woman for filming intimate acts with a hidden camera without her consent. Jung was removed

²⁷¹ Mahalik, J. R., Locke, B. D., Ludlow, L. H., Diemer, M. A., Scott, R. P., Gottfried, M., & Freitas, G. (2003). "Development of the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory." *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 4, 3–25. doi:10.1037/1524-9220.4.1.3

²⁷² I discuss gambling as an indictment in chapter 3.

from his variety television appearances including the long-running weekend variety program *2 Days 1 Night*. Later that fall, the victim withdrew the accusation, and Jung held a press conference stating that the filming was consensual, and that she was a disgruntled ex-girlfriend—a media narrative pathologizing the female victim as irrational, and discrediting/vilifying her as a blackmailer. Less than five months later, Jung was back on all the programs he had taken a break from including *2 Days 1 Night*, and was warmly greeted back onto set by his fellow cast members, crew and fans. Three years later, investigative journalist Kyung Yoon Kang exposed the circle of male celebrities who shared footages and photographs of women—including female K-pop trainees—they had intimate relations with taken from hidden cameras; one of these men included Jung who had been acquitted of the same crime in 2016. Jung admitted to secretly filming his partners without their knowledge when evidence was brought forth leading to his indictment in March 2019. Jung has since retired from the entertainment business and the show *2 Days 1 Night* was briefly taken off the air after a successful 12-year run. Jung’s indictment is also tied to his association with the influential boyband member Seungri of Big Bang. Seungri’s club Burning Sun has been linked to drugging and raping women and corrupt ties with the local police.²⁷³

Gender discrimination, the devaluing of women, and misogyny are normalized in the form of entertainment. There are cultural teachings within *yenŭng* history that carry familiar technical aspects that are issues today. Hidden spy cameras or “spycams” in Korea have the nickname “molk’a” named after a popular 1990s comedy segment hosted by veteran comedian Lee Kyung-kyu on MBC’s weekend variety show *Sunday Sunday Night*, modeled after *Candid Camera* (1948-2004, ABC, NBC, CBS). *Mollaek’amera* (abbreviated as *Molk’a*) was a beloved

²⁷³ DS Kim, “Initial Reporter of Seungri and Jung Joon Young Case Reveals Her Investigation Process,” *Soompi*, Mar. 13, 2019, <https://www.soompi.com/article/1309978wpp/initial-reporter-of-seungri-and-jung-joon-young-case-reveals-her-investigation-process>, accessed Oct. 31, 2019.

yenŭng comedy segment where Lee pranked celebrities who were filmed without their knowledge and put in uncomfortable positions, similar to *Punk'd* (2003-2007, MTV) by Ashton Kutcher, which also pranked celebrities (unlike the *Jamie Kennedy Experiment* [2002-2004, The WB] which pranked civilians). *Mollaek'amera* ran from 1991-1992 then made a return in 2005-2007, but is considered a classic comedy segment on a weekend family variety show. The exploitative and illegal mol'ka (hidden cameras/spycams) are discreetly installed in women's toilets and inside motel rooms such as sockets, TVs and hairdryers, where footage of people get livestreamed online and sold to subscribers. Over 6,000 cases were reported in 2017 alone, and in 2018, tens of thousands of Korean women participated in a street protest against these digital sex crimes with the campaign "My Life is Not Your Porn."²⁷⁴

The website sora.net was a site that uploaded and shared videos and photographs of women who did not consent to being filmed or photographed; most of the content was shared by current or former male partners of these women as a form of revenge porn and gamification among users who were asked to "rate" women's body parts.²⁷⁵ Although the users are primarily male, the people who ran the site were not all men; a woman identified as "Song" was the co-founder of the site and sentenced to jail while the other people involved in the business had already fled the country.²⁷⁶ Toxic masculinity is, therefore, not limited to physiology or anatomy. It is a condition that transcends the bounds of the body and gender identification; it is a social condition enacted through objectification, exploitation and monetization, which are the same

²⁷⁴ Kimberly Lawson, "'My Life is Not Your Porn': Women Lead Historic Spy Cams Protest in South Korea," *Vice*, June 11, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ywex7v/south-korea-spy-cam-women-protest-porn, accessed Oct. 31, 2019.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ BBC, "South Korea porn: Co-founder of the Soranet site jailed," Jan. 9, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46810775>, accessed Oct. 31, 2019.

social conditions found in the K-pop world that are normalized and rationalized as “business.” This business includes unequal power dynamics and misplaced blame which extends from neoliberal logics that control the victim by questioning their own agency in the matters of their victimhood—questions of what or how their actions or words enabled their injury. Additionally, K-pop stars’ scenarios and stories are echoes of post-Korean war and neocolonial indices that contribute to this lineage of toxic masculinity that transcends physiology; for instance, the people who worked in Korea’s prostitution businesses around US military bases as club managers or madams were mostly women, and they often took advantage of or mistreated their female sex workers.²⁷⁷ What is disturbing about the sharing, viewing and rating of the objectified women’s bodies is the gamification associated with the process, much like how *yenŭng* programs include gamification as part of their format, e.g., quizzes, games, questionnaires, competitions, etc. The act of filming these women without their consent, then editing, uploading and streaming (broadcasting) them online to then have the content rated by strangers is a gamification of the objectified female body. There is an alienation from the actor and the action in this process just as the person committing such acts is disassociating the humanness from the female body.

Happy Together captures close-ups of celebrities when they express emotion over their victimization now and again, but never lose sight of the fact that all of it is entertainment, and made for the audience’s pleasure. These exploits of suffering found on Korean media ultimately serve to entertain; suffering and victimization are already normalized on television, and it comes as no surprise that further victimization, exploitation and abuse conducted through *molkg’a* are also viewed as normal pleasures and part of a game. In fact, journalist Kyung Yoon Kang notes

²⁷⁷ Katharine Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in US-Korea Relations*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 21.

that the male K-pop stars like Jung Joon-young and Seungri treated the sharing of these illicit photographs and footages as part of a “game.”²⁷⁸ Gamification of female objectification and rape is also found in American college fraternity settings where men play drinking games and invite women to participate in order to use “alcohol as a weapon against sexual reluctance.”²⁷⁹ Thus, misogyny is normalized as play within toxic masculinist settings through the use of games.

Jung Joon-young and Seungri were stars especially well-known for being on *yenŭng* television due to their playful and charming persona. They were not only well-versed in their performance as entertainers but also in the production of game and quiz shows which involve basic know-how of use of space, cameras, blocking, editing, etc. The variety family entertainment methods used in a classic *yenŭng* program such as Lee Kyung-kyu’s *Molk’a* have been adapted into a darker application among these male K-pop celebrities to exploit their victims of sexual assault. As mentioned in chapter one, many K-pop stars began their journey in the entertainment business as children, and, often, away from their families. Thus, CEOs and managers become parental figures and mentors. Based on how these men in the K-pop industry behave, these mentor figures share a responsibility in enabling such behaviors. While public broadcasters like KBS and MBC have celebrities playing the role of the “ideal father figure” on *Superman* and *Dad!*, men in authority positions within the industry are surrogate father figures who mentor the young trainees. In August 2019, Yang Hyun-suk was arrested on charges of

²⁷⁸ C. Hong, “Initial Reporter of Chatroom Case Talks About Hearing Victims’ Testimonies,” *Soompi*, Mar. 14, 2019, <https://www.soompi.com/article/1310460wpp/initial-reporter-of-chatroom-case-talks-about-hearing-victims-testimonies>, accessed Nov. 9, 2019.

²⁷⁹ Robert A. Rhoads, “Whales Tales, Dog Piles, and Beer Goggles: An Ethnographic Case Study of Fraternity Life,” *College Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research, and Implications for Practice*, eds. Shaun R. Harper and Frank Harris III, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 258-275, 268.

offering prostitution services to entice potential investors and gambling.²⁸⁰ Yang's arrest charges of sex trafficking and corruption are similar to his mentee Seungri's charges of sex trafficking and gambling. Seungri's club Burning Sun was also investigated for drugs, rape, and prostitution.

In what ways is the #MeToo movement indicative of Korea's first world status? Having #MeToo problems points to issues found in corporate and capitalist settings. Is there a warped pride over this? The #MeToo movement has been adopted by Korean feminists and women's empowerment groups, but the media did not pay close attention to these issues until white women in Hollywood brought sexual violence and coercive transaction to the fore. As Ashwini Tambe takes note that white women's pain is the center of most US media coverage of the movement, and reminds us of America's history of lynching Black men due to false allegations made by white women as well as present-day issues of Black men being disproportionately incarcerated.²⁸¹ The centralization of white celebrity women's pain in the #MeToo movement also illustrates global hierarchy. Locally, Korean women have been fighting issues gender inequality for ages, yet it took the efforts of white women in Hollywood and American media's coverage of the #MeToo movement to get the Korean press to take Korean women's workplace grievances seriously. Sex scandals associated with hallyu actors in the past were dismissed as blackmailing. Korean media's adoption of women's issues in the last two years is another way of marking its first world status seeing as the #MeToo movement in Korea or #MeTooKorea is a

²⁸⁰ Tamar Herman, "YG Entertainment Founder Yang Hyun-Suk Booked on Suspicion of Arranging Prostitution Services," *Billboard*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/international/8520430/yg-entertainment-founder-yang-hyun-suk-prostitution-charges>, accessed Nov. 9, 2019.

²⁸¹ Ashwini Tambe, "Reckoning with the Silences of #MeTooAuthor(s)," *Feminist Studies*, 44 (1) 2018: 197-203, 200

social ailment (*sŏnjin'gukpyŏng*) that plagues the entertainment industry (K-pop industry) and other white collar settings (law). The question must be asked as to whether or not this is an extension of the misplaced pride that the Korean print media recorded in its sensational journalism of the nation's first ever serial killings discovered in the 1980s. Evidence of K-pop's first world status and glamor is also recognizable in its continuation of modeling its star system after old Hollywood's—the kind that victimizes, abuses and strangles its stars. As Richard Dyer states, “the idea of tragedy and suffering being endemic to Hollywood was commonplace.”²⁸²

What must be asked here is whether or not, on a psychic and emotional level, Korea has escaped the routine of suffering it has dealt with during the colonial, civil war and military dictatorship eras; while forms of suffering like starvation, dislocation, separation, mutilation, and exploitation may be past times, they still continue in the present times but have been reinterpreted as labor as well as entertainment in an advanced nation under a neoliberal ordinance. As for whether or not sexual violence also falls under the regime of entertainment labor, I would argue that given the evidence, yes; what's presented overtly on *Happy Together* is the frequency of dieting and surgery for the means of enhancing sex appeal as stars; these are necessary aspects of K-pop stars' labor reserved primarily for women who are required to conform to the industry's standards that feed a patriarchal expectation. Per these recent exposés, most of the victims of these scandals tied to Seungri, Jung Joon-young and others were young female K-pop trainees. The only difference here is that sexual violence does not become content—at least not on *yenŭng*, but it is prevalent in the press.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, if the first incidents of mass murder were an indicator to Koreans of its “first world” status, and sensationalized by newspapers with a

²⁸² Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 50.

twisted sense of pride through its repetition, one must ask if these narratives of K-pop sufferings are not in line with that same sense of misplaced pride given its repetition ad nauseam on television with no intervention, and in the press but without legal ramifications. The mass murderer from the 1980s also had no face for thirty years, and was the inspiration to Bong Joon-ho's film *Memories of Murder* (2003); quite similar to the scenarios herein, there were many victims but no victimizer. The trend of faceless victimizers, however, is starting to wane through the exposing of predators in the industry albeit without always facing any legal charges. In September 2019—three decades after the murders—a man in his 50s currently facing prison time for the rape and murder of his sister-in-law in the 1990s was identified as the rapist and killer of up to ten female victims whose ages ranged from teens to their 70s. Due to the statute of limitations, however, the murderer will not be indicted for his crimes.²⁸³ Furthermore, given the high burden of proof for sexual allegations, Yang and Seungri will not face charges of sex trafficking and harassment.

Conclusion

Happy Together's show producers write questions that probe the harrowing aspects of the industry but they never question the machine that produces hallyu's stardom because that would mean to question not only the industry that benefits the show through consistent material but also the state that they live in.²⁸⁴ In 2005, the Korean government invested one billion US dollars to support the K-pop industry.²⁸⁵ In 2013, the Korean government spent approximately \$300

²⁸³ Danny Kim, "Korean Serial Killer Who Inspired Bong Joon-ho's 'Memories of Murder' Identified After 30 Years," *The Hollywood Reporter*, Sept. 20, 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/memories-murder-serial-killer-identified-30-years-1241310>, accessed Oct. 31, 2019.

²⁸⁴ Hong, 128.

²⁸⁵ "Soap, sparkle and pop," *Economist*, Aug. 9, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21611039-how-really-uncool-country-became-tastemaker-asia-soap-sparkle-and-pop>.

million in promoting K-pop globally through subsidies and tax breaks.²⁸⁶ As long as the hallyu machine remains lucrative to the state, and maintains its global status, the odds of effective legislative change to protect young stars from labor exploitation and abuse are bleak.

Contemporary rituals of suffering must be questioned in order to end its long routine dating back to the colonial era, war, and military dictatorship. But the detachment and disassociation from rituals of suffering is impossible because suffering is fetishized and indulged on television. In the instances of corporate (domestic) and state facilitated exploits and abuse, there is no victimizer who is named or discussed, but an indulgence—perhaps even an over-indulgence—of suffering onscreen; while *Happy Together* as a program facilitates the normalization of K-pop labor's suffering and abuse, as mentioned, these exploits are also common knowledge and thoroughly covered in print media as well as blogs, magazines, social media and screens. These stories are content that the consumer has the right to access through purchase.

Stories of suffering told by K-pop stars born in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s are familiar abject Korean narratives commonly linked to foreign occupation, war, and economic depression. The cause for these stresses today, however, is Korea's capital advances in the international neoliberal order. Exceptional stories of K-pop prosperity perpetuate the myth that stardom is within one's reach, especially when such unreachable icons appear on a show that distorts the boundary between fantasy and reality to recite familiar narratives of misery that the country's employees and students experience in their day-to-day. The music and television industries' faith in stress aesthetics propagates that poor labor conditions are part and parcel to the process of becoming an artist. The assiduous delivery of *sŏnjin'gukpyŏng* anecdotes on *Happy Together*

²⁸⁶ John Lie, *K-pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2014), 119.

eclipses the grim consequences following the nation's neoliberal reform. As Aihwa Ong observes in her synthesis of neoliberalism in East Asia, the rapid capital development and globalization has not produced the same level of concern or institutions for human rights.²⁸⁷ Korea's deregulation policies in the labor market resulted in a major underclass of "low-income self-employed" workers living in precarity; these groups remain vulnerable to bankruptcy with little to no chance of social mobility.²⁸⁸ Such dismal realities are what brought over two million young Koreans from a population of fifty million out to K-pop auditions in 2013.²⁸⁹ This suggests that a third of Korea's youth have dreams of making it as a pop star.²⁹⁰ According to Inkyu Kang, students in the ROK are fostered under paranoia over the nation's small size and its lack of natural resources: "The neoliberalization of Korean society has turned its people's time-honored obsession with education to a different level. Now Korean youth compete to death—literally. ... Korean youth have only two options: the classroom or the stage."²⁹¹ The Korean education system's rigor and conduciveness to stress is comparable to that of the K-pop industry. In fact, the country is adept at rationalizing its exploitative labor conditions for all its populations. Harsh working conditions of the idol life are mirrored by non-celebrity lifestyles of students and workers in all sectors of contemporary Korean society. Stress aesthetics and a hierarchical militarized routine are not limited to media industries; stress is the Korean way of life. The ritual of suffering is found in every facet of contemporary Koreans' work life. In 2018,

²⁸⁷ Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as exception: mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 23.

²⁸⁸ Yoonkyung Lee, "The Birth of the Insecure Class in South Korea," *East Asia Forum*, Apr. 15, 2015, <http://www.easiaforum.org/2015/04/15/the-birth-of-the-insecure-class-in-south-korea/#more-45937>.

²⁸⁹ Hong, 126.

²⁹⁰ Index Mundi. South Korea Age structure. 2019. https://www.indexmundi.com/south_korea/age_structure.html, accessed Nov. 10, 2020.

²⁹¹ Inkyu Kang, 61.

the OECD ranked Korea third for the working the longest hours in the world, and for nearly 15 years now, Korea has consistently recorded the highest if not one of the highest suicide rates in the world.²⁹² The number one cause of death in Korea for people between the ages of 10 and 30 is suicide.²⁹³ Increasingly, young Korean women who work in entertainment are a part of these statistics, which begs the question of how entertaining stress aesthetics in entertainment really is.

²⁹² Oliver Smith, “Which Nationalities Work the Longest Hours?” *Telegraph*, Feb. 7, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/nationalities-that-work-the-longest-hours/>

²⁹³ Kim Young-ha, “South Korea’s Struggle With Suicide,” *New York Times*, trans. Jenny Wang Medina, Apr. 2, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/03/opinion/south-koreas-struggle-with-suicide.html?_r=0

Chapter 2: Masculinity and Nationalism in the *Kungmin*'s TV Show *Infinite Challenge*

This chapter analyzes *Infinite Challenge* as a real-variety genre through gender politics, descriptions of excess (emotional and material), and nationalism to unearth sociopolitical meaning from a variety program that left a major impact on the Korean mediascape and yenŭng history. Part one of this chapter delves into masculinity in the form of losers and wimps, and their frequent images of crying; the show and MBC reframe their moments of tearfulness to reconstruct a nationalist male hero particularly within the context of international competition and sports. Part two argues that *Infinite Challenge* functions as a hallyu and victimhood nationalist text to maintain Korea's colonial and neocolonial histories in relation to Japan and the US, however, it overshadows the nation's own hegemonic emergence over developing nations and ethnically non-Korean ROK citizens such as migrant workers.

This chapter integrates an interview I've conducted with a former staff writer of *Infinite Challenge*—Park Ji-min.²⁹⁴ Unlike the other interviews I've conducted with female TV industry workers (as seen in chapters three and four), Park still works in yenŭng television as a writer, therefore her answers were significantly more reserved and conscientious, with greater emphasis placed on descriptions of the workplace and its day-to-day functions rather than a critique of the industry overall. Part of the reason for this is because the Korean TV industry is a small and tightly knit community where people know one another: "Because a yenŭng writer works on a freelance basis, we find work through personal contacts and public notification. It's more common to find work through contacts and acquaintances."²⁹⁵ Korean variety show writers are not represented by any guilds, unions or agencies thus making their jobs all the more unstable.

²⁹⁴ Per the interviewee's request, the name of this person has been changed for privacy purposes.

²⁹⁵ Park Ji-min. Email interview, May 9, 2019.

Due to the precarity of Park's work as a freelancer beholden to interpersonal relationships, she is less inclined to critique the industry she is still a part of; such is the way that industry laborers become regulated in Seoul as well as in Hollywood: "The complicated network of authorial labor defining Hollywood knows from these regularized incursions just how precarious practitioner futures will be."²⁹⁶ It is common knowledge in the television industry that these relationships are fragile, and a great deal of care and caution go into maintaining them through lip service, gifts (bribes) and socializing, creating more opportunities for fraternization and abuse of power. With that said, Park's interview offers a descriptive insight on the workflow behind the scenes of *Infinite Challenge*.

²⁹⁶ John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 220.

Part I: Tearful Remasculinization: From Gender Failures to National Heroes on *Infinite Challenge*

On episode 4 (airdate May 14, 2005) of *Infinite Challenge*, the six male cast members are challenged to scoop out buckets of water from a tub in a public bathhouse faster than a drain can vacate another tub. Comedian Jeong Hyeong-don turns to the main host Yoo Jae-suk and asks, “Where exactly are we supposed to find the meaning behind these weekly challenges?” Jae-suk responds facetiously, “You must find that meaning on your own. We can’t tell you that. We’re busy as it is with the mission.” Indeed, what is the meaning of these self-administered challenges on a Korean variety show? What is the end goal of these sadistic and masochistic missions that these men take on? What are the stakes?



Figure 34. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.

Infinite Challenge which aired every Saturday night on MBC is one of the most popular weekend variety shows recorded in Korean television history that consistently held high ratings. The show evolved over the years while winning massive favor with audiences before the program’s head PD Kim Tae-ho resigned from the show, effectively ending its run in March

2018.²⁹⁷ While the intellectual property (IP) belongs to the broadcasting network where production takes place, the show is strongly affiliated with the PDs who are involved; in fact, the PDs frequently make appearances on the show themselves in a highly self-referential manner thus branding the show, demonstrating a showrunner's influence and status. For instance, the first season of *2 Days 1 Night* on KBS is strongly affiliated with PD Na Young-seok and the popularity of that show is largely attributed to Na's comedic sensibilities, industry reputation, interpersonal relationship with cast members, and directorial choices.

Infinite Challenge stood out from other variety programs by not maintaining a formula other than being unscripted and having an all-male cast.²⁹⁸ The show is premised on an “anything goes” concept, and the members' missions vary. The title *Infinite Challenge* suggests that these men can take on numerous challenges without fail, conjuring the “übermensch” without delivering such a mensch.²⁹⁹ The underlying concept of *Infinite Challenge* is to see if these men are “man enough” to take on any challenge, but the given tasks are far too absurd or difficult for them to realistically execute.

The word “tojŏn” (挑戰) in the show's title translates as “challenge,” and literally means to take on a challenge until one succeeds, implying that failure is not an option. Therein lies the comic relief; the bar for assigned tasks are set so high that no one can actually complete them, e.g.

²⁹⁷ PD Kim and the show's main emcee Yoo Jae-suk eventually reteamed to make the show *Hanging Out With You* (MBC, 2020—) also known as *How Do You Play?* (MBC, 2020—).

²⁹⁸ An exception to the all-male cast was when female comedian Jo Hye-ryun who appears on just five episodes in 2008. Another exception is when female comedian Hong Jin-kyung appears on the “Sixth Man” special while crossdressing as a man in order to be taken into consideration in the team's selection process for a sixth member. In the chapter three, I elaborate more on female comedians who deliberately exhibit themselves as genderless or asexual in order to be accepted into a masculinist comedic environment.

²⁹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. Adrian Del Caro, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5.

defeating a washing machine's spin cycle by squeezing out water from clothes with their bare hands, pulling an A380 Boeing airplane with their hands, attempting to become a runway model in Milan, etc. Despite being set up for failure, the men accept the challenges and repeat their actions ad infinitum with hope for success. The show manages the audience's expectations of these men who openly cut one another down for being fearful, crass, fat, ugly, short, immature, unlikeable, etc. The show expects these men to fail at their missions because they are far from ideal—the opposite of an übermensch. In fact, they are doomed to fail no matter what.

Persistent optimism in pursuit of success despite destined failure is a key tenet of clowning. Professional LA-based clown and comedian Natisha Anderson describes clowning as follows: “Clowning celebrates failure. The clown will go on stage with a goal to succeed—to win the audience's favor—but they'll trip and fall, or something immediately goes wrong in their act. That's their failure. And the clown has an intense vulnerability. As soon as they come out, they have to make eye contact with everyone. And even though they just failed, they have to keep going, and try to succeed. The point of the act isn't success. The point is the experience—the journey of constant failure that the clown takes you through. Clowning is about having a collective experience together.”³⁰⁰ The failure Anderson mentions here is “the flop.”³⁰¹ Take the Spymonkey clown troupe for example; in their act *Moby Dick* (2009), a clown tries everything he can to go up the stairs, but he keeps falling.³⁰² The clown's earnest desire to go up the stairs and his consistent inability to do so by tripping, sliding, rolling, and crawling keeps the audience laughing. This is the “journey” that Anderson mentions. The tenet of celebrating failure, or making the clown's

³⁰⁰ Natisha Anderson, phone interview, June 17, 2020.

³⁰¹ Lucy Amsden, “Monsieur Marcel and Monsieur Flop: failure in clown training at Ecole Philippe Gaulier, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 8(2): 129-142.

³⁰² Spymonkey, “They don't have stairs where he comes from (from *Moby Dick* 2009),” Jan. 7, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=523006025089111>, accessed June 17, 2020.

failure the main goal of the performance with an earnest desire to succeed, is upheld in *Infinite Challenge*. Not only are the comedians on *Infinite Challenge* persistently facing their challenges with an end goal to succeed while making audiences laugh at their failure to live up to the challenge, they are also embodiments of failures in the form of wimps and losers.



Figure 35. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.



Figure 36. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.

In the US, the archetype of the wimp emerged in the 1980s as masculinity was defined by right-wing rhetoric championing characteristics opposite of the wimp e.g., machoism, bullying and violence in the name of fearmongering against queer identities and immigrants, as well as creating fear of being reproached for being a man with such qualities. The wimp came to be as neither something to be desired nor a substitute for toxic masculinity.³⁰³ Donna Peberdy states that the wimp exists because of the dichotomous and interdependent relationship it has with the “wild man”; the wimp is the counterpoint of the wild man who can withstand nature’s challenges. The wimp in this “bipolar” construction of the wild man (hard) versus the wimp (soft) per the 1990s mythopoetic men’s movement is an undesirable construct of masculinity because it opposes all the desirable male traits and is thus feminine.³⁰⁴ So the wimp construct

³⁰³ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 292-298.

³⁰⁴ Donna Peberdy, *Masculinity and Film Performance: Male Angst in Contemporary American Cinema*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 98-106.

emerges in reaction to an imagined construct of women; for instance, men who hit women are identified as wimps because, per RW Connell, “Women are presumed unable to compete in the masculine world of violence and are no legitimate participants in the exchange of physical aggression.”³⁰⁵ If physical violence makes a man unable to compete against a woman for fear of being called a wimp, does verbal violence in the form of cyberbullying level the playing field? Is he who partakes in online misogyny a wimp or is he remasculinized through his actions?

Woori Han et al’s study of online comments in response to the Korean variety show *Real Men* (MBC, 2013-2016) shows that local men attempted to “recover” and “restore” hegemonic masculinity through misogynistic comments against women because of their “heightened sense of anxiety over the loss of male privileges” in a society where gender equality is still a major struggle.³⁰⁶ Between the year 2005 and 2006—right around the time *Infinite Challenge* began to air on network television—a sexist term called *toenjangnyŏ* appeared in the Korean discourse via online trolling in comment sections and blog posts.³⁰⁷ *Toenjangnyŏ* literally translates as “soybean paste girl” and the term is a sexist slur that criticizes Korean women who seek out luxury products from the West; as Jee Eun Regina Song puts it, these women are “gold diggers of Western goods and lifestyles.”³⁰⁸ The moral panic over Korean women’s desire for modern trends were policed in the late phase of the colonial era by the imperial government once Japan entered WWII; any money that colonial women had to spare in pursuit of modern consumption

³⁰⁵ RW Connell, *Masculinities*, 100.

³⁰⁶ Woori Han, Claire Shinhea Lee, Ji Hoon Park, “Gendering the authenticity of the military experience: male audience responses to the Korean reality show *Real Men*,” *Media, Culture and Society*, 2017, 39 (1): 62-76.

³⁰⁷ Soo Ah Kim, “Misogynistic Cyber Hate Speech in Korea,” *Feminism Research*, 2 (2015): 279-317.

³⁰⁸ Jee Eun Regina Song, “The Soybean Paste Girl: The Cultural and Gender Politics of Coffee Consumption in Contemporary South Korea,” *Journal of Korean Studies*, 19(2): 429-448, 444.

were expected by the imperial government to be put to the empire's war efforts: "Female aspirations for expensive Western dresses, hair perms, and heavy makeup were now considered 'indulgent' and 'disgraceful' proclivities that had to be 'rooted out at once.'"³⁰⁹ The monitoring over where and what women spent their money on was of concern in case it was not put to something that aided a national (patriarchal) cause. Sociologist Ch'oe T'ae Söp links the origin of the term *toenjangnyö* to Korean men's sexual and fiscal frustrations because of Korean women who date white and Black men; according to these Korean men's assumption, while white and Black men benefit by having sex with Korean women without feeling the social and financial obligation to pay for the date, Korean women continue to expect Korean men to take on the financial burden on dates.³¹⁰ The belief that men are experiencing reverse gender discrimination in private spheres in Korea has led to a sketch segment on *Gag Concert* entitled *Nambowon* in which three comedians play men's rights activists shouting slogans pertaining to hetero relationships. Claire Shinhea Lee and Ji Hoon Park's analysis of the show demonstrates that the show's topics focus on female consumption of goods, e.g. "double espresso in coffee shops, being fussy about drinking only French wine, and enjoying original musicals. This resonates with the postfeminist discourse that locates women's power in domains of consumption, leisure, and luxurious lifestyles."³¹¹ This commentary, however, does not accurately portray the misogyny and gender inequality that women still face in society, nor does it include underprivileged (fiscally and educationally) women's positions; "In this way, *Nambowon*

³⁰⁹ Shin-ae Ha, trans. Kyunghee Eo, "The Wartime System and the Symptomacity of Female Same-Sex Love," Todd A. Henry, ed. *Queer Korea*, 146-174, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 152.

³¹⁰ Ch'oe T'ae Söp, *Han'guk, Namja*, (Seoul: Ŭnhaengnamu, 2018), 202.

³¹¹ Claire Shinhea Lee and Ji Hoon Park, "'We need a committee for men's rights': reactions of male and female viewers to reverse gender discrimination in Korean comedy," *Asian Journal of Communication*, 2012, 22(4): 353-371, 358.

negates the presence of the inferential and institutional sexism prevalent in Korean culture and society.”³¹²

Korean male frustration stemming from feelings of ineptitude and emasculation under the shadow of American hegemonic masculinity looming over the nation contribute to the materialization of a sexist term like *toenjangnyō*.³¹³ While hegemonic masculinity has another connotation and set of politics with regards to white men in relation to Black men, in the context of Korea, hegemonic masculinity include Black and white male bodies.³¹⁴ The term *toenjangnyō* indicates Korean men’s insecurities when confronted by Western masculinity and economy, and the target of their attack is women. This reactive misogyny to one’s own emasculation falls in line with the construct of the wimp or loser in Korea.

The term “loser” (루저) entered the mainstream Korean media discourse in 2009 when a female college student appeared on the variety talk show *Chatting with Beauties* (KBS, 2006-2010) and said that men who are shorter than 180 centimeters are “losers.”³¹⁵ The woman’s comment was immediately met with backlash on the internet; trolls not only disclosed her home address and shopping habits, but also criticized her for making a “*toenjangnyō*” comment that insults Korean men. The years between 2000 and 2007 was a crucial period in Korea as it began

³¹² Claire Shinhea Lee and Ji Hoon Park, “‘We need a committee for men’s rights’: reactions of male and female viewers to reverse gender discrimination in Korean comedy,” *Asian Journal of Communication*, 2012, 22(4): 353-371, 359.

³¹³ Hegemonic masculinity “embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” RW Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

³¹⁴ See Ji-Hyun Ahn, *Mixed-Race Politics and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in South Korean Media*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) 92.

³¹⁵ Park Min-young, “‘Loser’ girl in hot water,” *The Korean Herald*, Mar. 30, 2010, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20091113000069> accessed June 11, 2020.

to slowly recover from the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. Part of the reason why Koreans sought Western goods was to participate in “global modernity” through aspirational consumption.³¹⁶ The images of women’s excessive spending habits on luxury items and expensive coffee from Starbucks were a sore reminder of Korea’s recent economic failure, and the nation’s continued inability to measure up to the hegemon’s idealization of manhood identified by “good looks, an appropriately muscular body, tallness, a white but tanned skin, blue eyes, blonde hair, straight teeth, etc.,”—an ideation, as Ch’oe mentions, that is rare to come by even from where it originates, such as white communities.³¹⁷



Figure 37. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.

In the face of painful emasculation due to fiscal and physical insecurities, a show centered on wimps and losers became the nation’s greatest success. For nearly a decade and a

³¹⁶ Jee Eun Regina Song, “The Soybean Paste Girl: The Cultural and Gender Politics of Coffee Consumption in Contemporary South Korea,” *Journal of Korean Studies*, 19(2): 429-448, 431.

³¹⁷ Ch’oe T’ae Söp, *Han’guk, Namja*, (Seoul: Ŭnhaengnamu, 2018), 75.

half, *Infinite Challenge* led viewers to embrace a new kind of masculinity—the wimpy buffoon that audiences can connect with. As a program concept, *Infinite Challenge* is built around six “losers” or, as called in Korean, *tchijiri* (찌질이). Korean film critic Oh Dong-jin writes that *Infinite Challenge* gave hope to people who felt like wimps by parading six “idiots” on television every week.³¹⁸



Figure 38. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.



Figure 39. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.

³¹⁸ Oh Dong-jin, “muhandojōni 1pak2ire millinūn iyu?” Pressian, Feb. 20, 2008, <http://www.pressian.com/news/article/?no=87435>, accessed Dec. 13, 2019.



Figure 40. Infinite Challenge. MBC.



Figure 41. Infinite Challenge. MBC.

Furthermore, *Infinite Challenge* offers a humorous relief through ridiculous displays of how capitalism functions by frequently breaking game rules and cheating as the games are rigged with punishments and rewards. For instance, in the Alaska special (air date Feb. 10, 2007) the production staff leave out seven desserts for the members and their celebrity guest Cha Tae-hyun to grab randomly; some of the desserts are spiked with salt while others are normal treats, showing that winning or losing depends on the luck of the draw. In another game, the members compete with one another to see who can break through a giant ice cube the fastest to reach a banana frozen in the center. But even after the winner reaches the banana first, the other members attack him to steal it for themselves. These arbitrary setups, the chaotic disregard for rules, and attempts to dominate one another physically to take the reward for himself are not only narrative devices of conflict used to engage viewers through humor and tension but are also

critiques that mock and muddle Korea's neoliberal systems of meritocracy, capitalism, and the individual's onus of responsibility.

Seeing celebrities make fools of themselves on television offers an affirmation for viewers. The men on *Infinite Challenge* not only play silly games for frivolous awards (snacks, bragging rights), but also display a great deal of tear-shedding. At first glance, the numerous scenes of crying on *Infinite Challenge* by male comedians seem like a transgression of typical gender standards for men; the show, however, fetishizes male crying. In fact, the tears shed by these wimpy male comedians have a restorative quality as they represent sacrifice, pain and nationalism through their commitment and dedication to sports and public entertainment for local and diasporic viewers. Through tears, these inept male comedians are transformed from buffoons to national heroes.

Korea's First Real-Variety Show and its Stock Characters

Infinite Challenge is a self-proclaimed novel genre—Korea's first ever “real-variety show.” Real-variety is a portmanteau of “reality” and “variety” that combines the reality TV format with Asian variety show sensibilities and aesthetics of excess (sound effects, music cues, gamification, costumes, hair and make-up, gags, slapstick comedy, etc.). According to Kyung-han You, the real-variety show emerged in Korea between 1997 and 2007 when television entertainment was depoliticized and a shift occurred from “the traditional comedy show” to reality based variety shows distinguished by comedians selected by networks in the “open-recruiting system.”³¹⁹ This system has been in place since the 1980s for the three big networks in Korea (KBS, MBC and SBS)

³¹⁹ Kyung Han You, *Entertaining Politics: Exploring Historical Transformation of Production, Distribution and Consumption of Political Entertainment in Korea*, PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2014, 154.

to recruit in-house comedians for their sketch variety shows. By the 1980s, comedy programs became heavily family-oriented, and the weekend family variety genre emerged. *Sunday Night (Ilbam)* began airing on MBC in 1981 every Sunday night. MBC also aired another weekend variety show *Saturday! Saturday is Fun* since 1985. MBC's *Sunday Night* competes directly with KBS's *Happy Sunday* (1994—) and SBS's *Good Sunday* (1995—). Popular weekend reality-variety shows like *2 Days 1 Night*, *Infinite Challenge*, and *Running Man* emerged from these weekend variety show time slots as program segments.

Korea forged its way towards globalization between the mid-90s and the new millennium. President Kim Young-sam's *seguehwa* (globalization) policy encouraged networks to align their profit-minded goals with the future of *hallyu* in mind as they entered a new era of entertainment TV; "[T]he real variety show became an effective vehicle for indirectly advertising *hallyu* exports by creating cooperative business relationships among visual production and distribution companies, music companies, and broadcasting companies."³²⁰ In fact, most if not all entertainment or *yenŭng* programs during this period were part of the Korean mediascape's ecosystem that invited celebrity guests onto the show to promote a new album, serialized television drama, or film. Game-variety shows like *X-Man* (SBS, 2003-2007) and *Running Man* regularly feature celebrity guests who make an appearance to promote their latest project. Variety talk shows like *Happy Together* mentioned in chapter one is also an example.

All television programs must make economic sense to the network in order to remain on air. *Infinite Challenge* is an entertainment program that keeps the public interest in mind because MBC is technically a public broadcaster, but it relies on ads for funding. MBC frequently emphasizes "strong self-consciousness of public interests and social contribution" while also

³²⁰ Kyung-han You, 156.

maintaining its commercial viability.³²¹ MBC's corporate information on its website declares itself "the No. 1 broadcast network in Korea in terms of *reliability, popularity* and *influence*."³²² In the entertainment category, it states that "MBC has been playing its role as a member of the [sic] society by providing entertainment programs for fun and the public good."³²³ These corporate articulations indicate MBC's awareness of the public and its dedication to producing content that viewers can rely on for more than just laughs. With that said, it is hard to gauge any political or ideological perspectives from such a frenetic format of television that remains generically queer (unstable) at all times. These formats reject narrative and any form of logical argumentation. Instead, *yenŭng* uses stock characters that offer some kind of social framing within which it makes sense to people. Although *yenŭng* productions hire writers, there isn't much "writing" taking place; writers on *yenŭng* sets are more or less production assistants (PAs). Stock characterization does not require a writer as it is immediately recognized as fitting within a social universe and moral framework outside of any narrative.

Infinite Challenge lays claim to the "real-variety" *yenŭng* format on an episode aired on March 4, 2017, where the show's main emcee Yoo Jae-suk states: "The term 'real-variety' is something we mentioned casually on the side, and it became the concept of this show."³²⁴ Other industry-related sources such as IMDb also state that *Infinite Challenge* is the "first 'Real-

³²¹ Yoon, Tae-il, Sae-Eun Kim, Sooah Kim, and Byung-Woo Sohn. "When Old Meets New: An Analysis of Korean Traditional Narrative in the Contemporary Reality TV Show *Infinite Challenge*," 430.

³²² "About MBC," MBC, <http://aboutmbc.imbc.com/english/corporateinfo/brief/index.html>, accessed Mar. 12, 2017, emphasis by author.

³²³ "Entertainment," MBC, <http://aboutmbc.imbc.com/english/mbcprogram/entertainment/index.html>, accessed Mar. 12, 2017.

³²⁴ *Infinite Challenge*, "Infinite Challenge Legends: Real Variety Special." Kim Tae-ho, MBC, Mar. 4, 2017.

Variety' show in Korean television history.”³²⁵ Since its inception in 2005, members of *Infinite Challenge* repeatedly claim the show to be the “nation’s first ever real-variety show” at every opportunity they can to emphasize that what viewers are seeing is a not premeditated or scripted show but reality as-is, and therefore unique from all other variety programs. Strategically, this works in the network’s favor. There is the budgetary aspect; whenever anything goes wrong during a shoot, the host can emphasize the program’s “realness” or “reality” aspect as a real-variety show, allowing producers to keep the take and continue filming; there is also a comedic element to these bloopers that privilege viewers into the actual production of the show. Much like clowning, there is no fourth wall on *Infinite Challenge*. In fact, the show thrives on precisely this; because “reality” is so important to the show’s concept, the cast members are often not told as to what their next mission is. Former staff writer of *Infinite Challenge* Park Ji-min explains, “We typically started filming without revealing the concept for that day so we would occasionally omit any prior explanations as well.”³²⁶ The main reason for starting to film cast members without giving them the cue that sound and cameras are rolling, or giving them any explanation about the day’s task is to capture the cast members’ real reactions to their shocking assignments. Candid actions and reactions are the onscreen gems that producers want to capture on a real-variety show.

There is an enormous emphasis on the celebrity’s private lives on these shows: “Korean audiences like to identify and feel familiarity with celebrities by peeking into their everyday

³²⁵ “Infinite Challenge (2005): Plot Summary,” IMDb, accessed June 6, 2017, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4546568/plotsummary?ref=tt_ov_pl.

³²⁶ Park Ji-min. Email interview, May 9, 2019.

lives.”³²⁷ The production staff of *Infinite Challenge* regularly push boundaries when it comes to revealing the cast members’ private lives. Per Bhatktin, “[M]aking-public of specifically nonpublic spheres of life...is one of the more ancient functions of the fool.”³²⁸ The effect of this is a sense of intimacy or closeness that audience members feel when watching celebrities on TV. The show simulates prying into the personal lives of the cast members, sometimes calling a member on the phone without him knowing that he is being filmed and recorded for broadcast to capture a candid reaction or informal mode of speech including cursing. *Infinite Challenge* continuously states that it is the “nation’s first ever real-variety show,” and when something goes awry during production, the main emcee Yoo Jae-suk bows and begs for the viewer’s understanding, claiming that the sloppiness in production is “because we’re a real-variety show.” Yoo’s comment here acts as a form of self-branding that allows the program to can stand out among competing *yenŭng* programs on other networks. (In fact, the KBS show *Sponge* [2003-2012] was a competing program that aired at the same time and on the same day of the week as *Infinite Challenge*; the members of *Infinite Challenge* frequently called attention to this as part of their excessively self-referential style, and would teasingly tell one another to go to *Sponge* instead.) Furthermore, any accident or error on set becomes fodder for entertainment rather than an issue where the staff would have to reshoot. Stylistically and fiscally, a real-variety show is a sensible and advantageous genre for networks to produce.

³²⁷ Yoon, Tae-il, Sae-Eun Kim, Soah Kim, and Byung-Woo Sohn. “When Old Meets New: An Analysis of Korean Traditional Narrative in the Contemporary Reality TV Show *Infinite Challenge*,” 430.

³²⁸ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bhatktin, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, “Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel,” *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 161.

For instance, *Infinite Challenge* included a special entitled “Cancellation” (air date: Aug. 13, 2011) because, although the cast members and production staff all met on the day of their weekly shoot (Thursday), the original mission concept was abandoned due to weather conditions and a neck injury that cast member Jeong Jun-ha sustained. In this episode, the members and staff meet at an empty MBC studio completely stripped of any set design, production theme or concept. While the cameras are rolling, the members and writing staff have an open meeting to discuss what they should do about production; the members shout out random ideas. Yoo Jae-suk suggests that they pay homage to the most popular studio game shows from the early 2000s such as *Achieve the Goal Saturday* (MBC, 2000-2002) and *X-Man* (SBS, 2003-2007)—both of which were hosted by Yoo himself. The *Infinite Challenge* members each call their closest celebrity friends and invite them guerilla-style to join them for an impromptu quiz/game show. Thus, the baseline of *Infinite Challenge* is also improvisational (improv). Much like improv comedy, the production and cast members all function on a “yes-and” mode to create impromptu scenarios. The cast members’ dialogue is also improv-based seeing as there isn’t a scripted dialogue for them to deliver.



Figure 42. Infinite Challenge. MBC.



Figure 43. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.



Figure 44. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.

On *Infinite Challenge*, reflexivity, self-referentiality and over exposure of its construction are signature styles that make its generic identity. In a way, a show like *Infinite Challenge* is a collection of solely paratexts, and has no primary text of its own because it is in a mode of constant satire, parody or lampooning. Thus, relevance and timeliness are part of its construction. For instance, when the Na Hong-jin horror film *The Wailing* (2016) was released, *Infinite Challenge* filmed a haunted house summer special that captured the scared reactions of the cast members who

each dressed like the characters of the film. The program is known for doing this with not just films but also hit television shows. In some instances, the cast members dress up and parody real people they've met on the show, especially if they exhibit funny or memorable characteristics. *Infinite Challenge* not only functions as a paratext of existing media from the zeitgeist but also as a paratext of itself.³²⁹ Thus, analysis of Korean variety TV is a form of audience and reception study of popular Korean media.

So then what is the main text? The *Infinite Challenge* cast members are the text. The members embody the text as a celebrity type and stock characters or through their particular relationship to one another; their reactions to the people, setting and situations become extensions of that text (themselves). These personas are cultivated consciously and maintained throughout the show, and the relationship dynamics on the show also contribute to the text, therefore the text is never closed (always open and continuing until he dies) and there is no longer a story or a consistent narrative. Any story or narrative is replaced by temporary skits, games, missions, or the like that carry on for an episode or several episodes until they move onto the next item. The program produces stock-characters from the members of the show and present them regularly; the members' personalities, faces, actions, and jokes are instantly recognizable based on the audience's prior knowledge of these figures as celebrities. These stock characters require no explanation and are placed into arbitrary situations (albeit with some aspects of preplanning by the production staff); these situations can be competitive, absurd, cruel, ridiculous, etc. The one consistent through line of these situations is that they cause some sort of discomfort for the characters.

³²⁹ For more on paratexts, see Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

Stock characterization goes back to Ancient Greek New Comedy, which utilized masks to exhibit recognizable personas, but also in traditional Korean performances that blend oral storytelling with music and dance such as *t'al chum*.³³⁰ For instance, on *Infinite Challenge*, given Myoung-soo's prickly personality, the members can generally predict what his response will be like in any given situation. On one episode, all the members are animated into clay-mation characters based on their physical appearance and personalities (air date April 21, 2007 and July 7, 2007). In the "As you please" special (air date Sept. 1, 2007), the members swap characters amongst themselves and play one another based on their own interpretation of what the other person is like. When Jae-suk takes on Myoung-su's persona, he lies down frequently, interrupts the flow of dialogue by randomly dancing, dominates the frame by standing close to the camera and obscuring others, makes irrelevant remarks, and behaves needlessly aggressive or violently towards other members. In this instance, Jae-suk's performance is a satire of Myoung-su's persona (star text). These characters exist as texts that are continuations of themselves who are known by a society that recognizes their celebrity.

Each member's stock character is an amalgam of their own personalities with affected aspects of their brand identities such as comedic voices, faces, behaviors, attitudes, catch-phrases, etc., and this stock character is the primary text of the show which the viewers return to see every week. The viewers turn to the show seeking their favorite comedians who are the show's consistent text. If a show has no storyline then viewers must invest elsewhere, and that becomes the cast members themselves—the main text. There is no story but when viewers return to the show each week, they recognize the same characters thereby witnessing a form of continuity. This is why

³³⁰ P.G. McC. Brown, "Masks, Names and Characters in New Comedy," *Hermes*, 115:2 (1987): 181-202.

towards the last few years of the show (2014 onwards) after several of the main cast members dropped out due to illness or run-ins with the law and got replaced, the show could not maintain the same level of popularity and eventually led to its cancelation in March 2018.

Over the show's thirteen-year-run, *Infinite Challenge* had different cast members come and go but there are seven members who maintained the longest tenure on the show; these include Yoo Jae-suk, the main emcee of the show, as well as the leader of the group who is known for opening and closing the show in direct address to viewers with a greeting while shouting, "Mu-han-to-jŏn!" ("Infinite Challenge!"). Jae-suk is known for his friendly personality, quick wit, and mediation between members when there are disagreements or tension. When the show began to air in 2005, Jae-suk was already the main emcee on other very popular shows—*Happy Together* on KBS and *X-Man* on SBS (later *Family Affair* [2008-2010] followed by *Running Man*). Since 2000, Jae-suk received numerous emcee awards for his comedic prowess and hosting ability. Because of this, Jae-suk holds the nickname "the nation's emcee" (*kungmin emcee*) albeit rivaled by Kang Ho-dong.³³¹ Jae-suk's right-hand man is Park Myeong-su known for his curmudgeon attitude. He is also the oldest of the group and often referred to as the older brother on the show, but also teased for behaving immaturely for his age. Haha (Ha Dong-hoon) is a reggae musician and comedian with a childish persona, crackly voice and short stature. Haha is envied by the other members for being favored by Jae-suk due to his adept sense of humor. Jeong Hyeong-don—a comedian with sketch comedy background—is often mocked for being too reserved for a comedian, and not contributing to entertaining discussions; the group teases him for his awkwardness and for frequently excusing himself to the toilet. Comedian Noh Hong-chul is known for his loud voice,

³³¹ I will elaborate on the *kungmin* later in this chapter and how it relates to viewers in building a nationalist perspective and how it defines or limits viewership when *Infinite Challenge* gets broadcast or streamed outside of Korea.

blonde hair, goatee, and hyperactive personality; he is referred by the group as a “psycho” (dorai/돌아이) due to his extreme suggestions that push the envelope to the point of absurdity.

Jeong Jun-ha is a comedic actor and the sixth member of the show; he became popular through his appearance on the sitcom *High Kick Through the Roof* (MBC, 2009-2010), and has a great deal of live musical performance experience; on *Infinite Challenge*, he is known for his tall and heavy-set body and a dimwitted personality; the other members frequently tease him for his large stature, slowness, poor sense of judgment and an overly sensitive personality; Jun-ha’s main talent on the show is eating a lot of food at a very fast pace. Finally, Gil (Gil Sung-joon)—the vocalist of the hip-hop band Lee Ssang—joined the program in 2009; initially, the members played off of his unpopularity among his anti-fans. Many viewers commented on the show’s website as to just how much they disliked Gil because he did not mesh well with the other cast members. The members also teased him for not being funny. The meta narrative surrounding Gil’s incompetence on the show became a punchline to his *Infinite Challenge* persona throughout his tenure until April 2014 when he was removed from the show after facing drunk driving charges. Because *Infinite Challenge* is a real-variety show, the cast members’ personas and life events become the primary text while the show’s content which frequently involve parodies of popular texts from the zeitgeist (news, trends, movies, TV shows, etc.) become a quilt of paratexts. *Yenŭng*, therefore, relies on improv, parody, tabloid, bloopers, and the comedians’ persona.³³²

Infinite Challenge is a variety show known not only for its consciously inconsistent format but also for the way it develops show ideas. Park Ji-min explains:

Infinite Challenge is different from other programs in that the concept and theme change on a weekly basis, so when we develop a concept, we remain open to all possibilities at the meeting. For instance, we consider the things that the cast members said while

³³² I will elaborate on the star persona as text in the chapter 3.

filming, and expand on it into a project, or explore a trendy issue that contemporary and upcoming generations are interested in. Each member has their own interest which he'll share with a PD and writer, and suggest it as an idea. We don't limit work to just the meeting session. We'll make small talk over meals and discuss—"this seems fun nowadays"—and sometimes that becomes a project concept as well.³³³

Show ideas came to rise from random places such as passing remarks that cast members said or during a casual chat over meals among staff. What makes a variety show a variety isn't just the content of the program but also its method of production. The ever-shifting and unpredictable quality of *Infinite Challenge* is what gives the program its essence as a variety genre, and the cast members' centrality (the text) is what engages viewers emotionally. This genre quality is also what gives the text—on the surface—its queer trait, and the bombarding of information into a single program to the point of overload has a resistant quality to carrying forth any top-down message that works towards a state agenda. I elaborate on this in part two where I discuss *Infinite Challenge* in the context of nationalism.

Gender Failure and Men Who Cry on *Infinite Challenge*

Failure is a key marker of Korean masculinity in the early modern context, during and after Japanese colonization (1910-1945); this includes the failure of being able to defend one's country, failure to prevent the nation from being divided due to foreign tensions, e.g., the US versus USSR, and failure to gain back complete national autonomy after its colonial independence due to the Korean War (1950-1953). Such failures are well-documented in Korean cinema.³³⁴ In Kathleen McHugh's examination of Korean melodramas of the 1950s and 1960s, the male characters in these films display gross incompetence as husbands, fathers and breadwinners: "The lack of strong

³³³ Park Ji-min. Email interview, May 9, 2019.

³³⁴ For more on this topic, see Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

male characters operates as a structuring absence in these films—the tragic, empty center that...wreaks havoc in the lives of women, children, and the social order....”³³⁵ The same association with maleness is also visible in contemporary serialized Korean dramas; father figures are notably absent due to death, divorce, remarriage, work, or negligence, and this leads to massive damage on the wives and children that these men leave behind. Because of its past, Korea’s modern masculine identity is imbued by shame: “The shame and self-loathing...originates from their recognition that they have failed to act their proper positionality as cultural leaders and elite (male) subjects in a deeply patriarchal autonomy.”³³⁶ When considering these failures, a show that satirizes Korean masculinity and incites laughter via perpetual failure offers cathartic relief: “[I]n relief/release theories [of humor], humor can be seen to be socially liberating”³³⁷

Yaja t’aim (yaja time) refers to reverse roleplay in a group setting typically among those in authority positions and those in subservient positions at work or school, where a hierarchical order exists to organize the relationships between the senior (sōnbae) in relation to the junior (hubae). Yaja time was originally conceived for training purposes to build empathy among caregivers at hospitals where a doctor, nurse and patient reverse roleplay in order to understand one another’s positions more intimately and to improve bedside manners.³³⁸ In contemporary social settings, yaja time is played as a drinking game by college students as well as office workers. Given Korea’s Confucian hierarchical culture where honorifics are observed in language and actions, yaja time is

³³⁵ Kathleen McHugh, “State, Nation, Woman, and the Transnational Familiar,” *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema*, edited by Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 22.

³³⁶ Kelly Y. Jeong, *Crisis of Gender and the Nation in Korean Literature and Cinema: Modernity Arrives Again*, (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 33.

³³⁷ Jeremy Butler, *The Sitcom*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 7.

³³⁸ Jung Ji-chang, “South North Dialogue Reverse Role Play,” (Nambuk’oedamgwa yōk’al pakkugi), *Hankyoreh*, Oct. 26, 1991.

a game that transgresses all social restrictions for a set time (whether it is two minutes, an hour or the whole evening); order is reversed and those in lower ranking positions have the opportunity to speak freely and informally to those in a higher positions, including insults and demands. Going back to Couldry's concepts of ritual and liminality, yaja time is a gamified ritual that creates a liminal time/space where order is completely disregarded for a specific period then restored again as though nothing has changed.³³⁹ The purpose of yaja time is not only for group entertainment but also for bonding; during yaja time, built up tensions and resentments that lower ranking individuals may have towards their seniors and supervisors can be released through absurd character breaks that generate laughter. Variety shows like *Infinite Challenge* are constantly in yaja time mode for viewers at home; the entertainers on this show behave and speak in ways they normally would not outside of the ritual and liminality of variety television and comedy. Jeremy Butler claims that "Comedians are allowed to say things that disturb hegemony, that indulge in carnivalesque excesses...."³⁴⁰ In this way, a variety show like *Infinite Challenge* offers viewers tension release through comedy via observation (viewing) and participation (laughing). Tension release is just as possible through crying—a "discharge phenomenon"—that resets one's chemical and cognitive functions as it is through laughing.³⁴¹ Crying builds a social bond by evoking compassion.³⁴² Crying is a release of pent up feelings or energy just as laughing is.³⁴³ Laughing and crying share many similarities and are interconnected neurologically and biologically;

³³⁹ Nick Couldry, "Ritual and Liminality," *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 31.

³⁴⁰ Jeremy Butler, *The Sitcom*, 6.

³⁴¹ Nico H. Frijda, Foreword, *Adult Crying: A Biopsychosocial Approach*, xiii-xviii, eds. Ad J.J.M. Vingerhoets and Randolph R. Cornelius, (New York: Routledge, 2001), xv.

³⁴² *Ibid* xv.

³⁴³ Jeffery A. Kottler and Marilyn J. Montgomery, "Theories of Crying," *Adult Crying: A Biopsychosocial Approach*, 1-18, (New York: Routledge, 2001) 8.

neurological disorders such as Pathological Laughter and Crying (PLC) is a medical diagnosis wherein the two emotional responses are interlinked. Laughing to the point of tears is also a common bodily response. Given the hypercompetitive capitalist pace of Korea, tension release is highly cathartic whether it be in the form of laughter or tears. *Infinite Challenge* provides viewers release through both.

As mentioned, the missions on *Infinite Challenge* are designed to guarantee the members' failure to incite mirth: "Although *Infinite Challenge* freely borrows and transforms various genres, its prototype is the struggles of below-average Koreans, whose physical and intellectual abilities seem to be below those of the average Korean, to carry out reckless or unfeasible tasks, often under unusual circumstances."³⁴⁴ Yoon et al's analysis of the show's baseline is helpful but it does not address gender despite the all-male cast; the man who fails at the assigned mission is funny because it is unmanly to fail; the underlying concept of the show is to emasculate these male comedians and laugh at their incompetence. With that said, the cast members also demonstrate a recovery of masculinity through an expression of tenacity evident through their tears and militaristic pain. Instead of a narrative that works towards a climax and a resolution, the character (a wimp, tarnished celebrity, aging athlete, etc.) gets established over a narrative outcome. Thus, the character as the main text and what he achieves or fails to achieve by undergoing whatever trials that the production expects him to is what drives the show forward and wins the viewers' buy-in. Whatever the show's actual narrative may be is irrelevant. What the character undergoes and how he handles or responds to the circumstances he is put in gives viewers something to invest in. Thus, the establishment of this character through his

³⁴⁴ Yoon, Tae-il, Sae-Eun Kim, Sooah Kim, and Byung-Woo Sohn. "When Old Meets New: An Analysis of Korean Traditional Narrative in the Contemporary Reality TV Show *Infinite Challenge*," 430.

undertakings becomes the text, and more often than not, this establishment occurs through the gender failure. Issues of morality and redemption get worked out outside of the melodramatic mode to the extent that there are no hallmarks of narrative development and resolution. What is achieved is not narrative resolution but the establishment of a character type that aligns with the nation-state.

Militaristic Pain and Manliness on *Infinite Challenge*

Infinite Challenge is a show conceived by a cis-men. PD Kwon Seok headed the program in 2005 as a segment on a Saturday variety show lineup. As it gained increasing popularity, it became its own independent program in 2006, spearheaded by another cis-male PD—Kim Tae-ho. The cast members are also cis-male, and each them also has a producer’s role on the show since the members often suggest ideas for the program and ad-lib their dialogue. Given the masculine make-up of the program, the show exhibits some masculine qualities tied to militaristic practices.

As I repeat throughout the chapters, the Korean television industry has both masculine and militant attributes. The state’s most important institution, according to Ikenberry and Hall, is “of violence and coercion.”³⁴⁵ In the case with Korea, the state’s military institution’s tendencies of violence and coercion spillover onto other institutions including the broadcast institution. The military and broadcast institutions share a close history that shaped the infrastructure of Korean public broadcasting. Korea’s history of constructing hard (aggressive, militant, dominant) masculinity is linked to post-Korean War history. Seung-sook Moon’s concept of “militarized modernity” was an essential part of the ROK’s nation-building process which gendered the

³⁴⁵ John A. Hall and G. John Ikenberry, *The State*, 2.

mobilization of men and women—the *kungmin* or “the people of the state”—since Japanese colonial occupation (1910-1945) through the period of military authoritarian rule which lasted from 1961 through 1988.³⁴⁶ The Military Service Law introduced conscription in 1949, and enforced it starting in 1957, however the burden of service fell mostly on men of lower class. The ROK conscription legislation was revised and since 1962, it universally requires all men from ages 18 and up to serve in the military between 21 to 36 months depending on the branch.³⁴⁷ Those who do not follow this mandate are viewed as deserters to the state and are punishable by law. Militarized modernity, according to Moon, constructs all men as “dutiful nationals willing to perform military service”—a view that naturalizes Korean men as homogenous and willing to take on their “national duty.”³⁴⁸ Men’s bodies are subject to hard discipline and training. This modern concept of “hard” masculinity—or military masculinity—which was a direct result of postcolonialism and civil war during the Cold War era differed drastically from the previous state ideology from the Choson Dynasty (1392-1910): “[M]en of the pen enjoyed political dominance over men of the sword. It was the gentleman scholar (*sŏnbi*), not a martial warrior, who represented ‘hegemonic masculinity’ under the Confucian order.”³⁴⁹

Centuries of this masculine identity were stripped away during Japan’s colonial occupation when the imperial government put Korean men through severe disciplinary training to turn ordinary civilians into Japanese foot soldiers fighting for the imperial cause in WWII. Due to this

³⁴⁶ Moon, 21.

³⁴⁷ Seungsook Moon, “The Trajectory of Men’s Citizenship,” *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, location 867, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), Kindle Edition.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 45-6.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 47.

legacy, after liberation in 1945, the South Korean military continued to train its soldiers with similar methods of “severe and repeated punishment and abuse that the Japanese Imperial Army had practiced,” especially since the ROK’s elite members were comprised of former colonial sympathizers and officers including Park Chung-hee.³⁵⁰ State-constructs of masculinity in Korea emphasizes physical and mental hardness; there is no pity for the weak, and emotional expression such as tears are not tolerated. Then what do we make of the highly emotional men and their frequent cross-dressing on a show like *Infinite Challenge*?



Figure 45. Infinite Challenge. MBC.

The purpose of crossdressing on *Infinite Challenge* is to display men in an “unmanly” way; this, again, reinforces the concept of men failing to perform according to their assigned gender, and it is comedic to fall outside of that assignment. *Infinite Challenge*, however, transgresses these conceptual bounds—emasculatation (gender failure) and comedy (genre failure)—when the members become greatly invested in their given mission and take the task seriously. At some point, these men forget to feel awkward about being dressed in overly tight costumes, wearing garish make-up, and being placed in ridiculous situations; their investment on the mission at task becomes everything to them; they are fully dressed to provoke camp recognition and appreciation but as

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 48.

their investment in the task increases, the humor fades away; the audience is no longer laughing (the laugh track, in fact, disappears). Yoon et al observe that on *Infinite Challenge*, “it is not important whether the challenge is successfully accomplished; rather, the challenge itself is significant, because cast members can manifest their innate vigor and thereby affirm their self-value in the process of undertaking the challenging mission they are given.”³⁵¹ Such missions are often sports related and heavily taxing mentally, physically and emotionally, and the members’ focus shifts from comedic timing to actually winning the competition, and in these instances, the members usually shed tears.

The way that missions are conceived on *Infinite Challenge*, however, echo militaristic abuse. Moon discusses the physical and psychological abuses of the ROK military culture which were designed by Japan’s “fascistic” Imperial Army: “For instance, habitual practices of abuse ranged from verbal humiliation and severe beating to depriving subordinate soldiers of meals and sleep.”³⁵² There are many examples of physical violence and torture in Korean variety shows featuring all-male cast members; *2 Days 1 Night*, for instance, deprives the cast members of any food if they lose a game; the losers must then watch the winners and staff members eat; later in the evening, they play another game, and the winners sleep indoors while the losers sleep in a tent outdoors. *Infinite Challenge* also has its share of abuse and torture; in its early years (2005-2006), the members would play a word-game and the loser would get a dried calabash smashed over his head.

³⁵¹ Yoon, Tae-il, Sae-Eun Kim, Sooah Kim, and Byung-Woo Sohn. “When Old Meets New: An Analysis of Korean Traditional Narrative in the Contemporary Reality TV Show *Infinite Challenge*,” 433.

³⁵² Sungsook Moon, 50.



Figure 46. Infinite Challenge. MBC.



Figure 47. Infinite Challenge. MBC.



Figure 48. Infinite Challenge. MBC.

Korean variety show punishments frequently employ petty violence such as a *ttakpam* (딱밤) which is an extreme form of flicking one's finger onto another person's forehead.



Figure 49. Infinite Challenge. MBC.

Here, we return to the concept of failure. Not only are these men on television failing to be upright, but they also practice violence over ridiculous reasons such as losing a game, or simply testing out one another's strength and endurance. RW Connell writes: "Violence is part of a system of domination, but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection," because it shows the order's weakness by resorting to brute strength.³⁵³ Echoes of failure resound in contemporary Korea, especially on a state level. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Korean state is failing to successfully lure women back into their reproductive expectations; with the country's low birth rate and growing population of the elderly, it is also failing to sufficiently meet the needs of the country's senior citizens, and many resort to suicide. The youth are also killing

³⁵³ RW Connell, *Masculinities*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 2005), 84.

themselves. Young K-pop stars, actors and comedians are taking their own lives.³⁵⁴ The men who were called out for sexual assault are committing suicide. Korean fathers are shamed for failing to be good parents and partners as demonstrated by programs like *The Return of Superman* and *Dad! Where Are We Going?* The mandatory military conscription imposed upon all Korean men is part of the reason why misogyny is so rampant in Korea because “men feel heightened sense of anxiety over the loss of male privileges” during the time they are away from their regular lives and engaged in military service.³⁵⁵ The nation is failing to exacerbate gender tension and discrimination because of this requirement; the men’s longing “to be symbolically remunerated for their military service involved the positioning of women as primary caregivers who fulfill traditional women’s roles.”³⁵⁶ Meanwhile, *Infinite Challenge* showcases men who fail at being men (perhaps even human). The men fight and argue like children, dress in clothes that are often too tight, and have bodies and faces that are socially regarded as aesthetically unpleasant. In fact, they frequently worsen their appearance by placing a nylon stocking over their face and displaying crass behavior. The members of *Infinite Challenge* commit to any mission no matter how base, and do it all solely to incite laughter. The show’s perpetual games and quizzes compete for no prize, but corporal punishment is inflicted onto the losers. *Infinite Challenge* symbolizes a larger social critique of Korea’s patriarchal and capitalist-driven society

³⁵⁴ Kim Dae-o, “I have reported on 30 Korean celebrity suicides. The blame game never changes,” *The Guardian*, Jan. 3, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jan/04/i-have-reported-on-30-korean-celebrity-suicides-the-blame-game-never-changes>, accessed Nov. 10, 2020.

³⁵⁵ Woori Han, Claire Shinhea Lee and Ji Hoon Park, “Gendering the Authenticity of the Military Experience: Male Audience Responses to the Korean Reality Show Real Men,” *Media, Culture & Society*, 2017, 39 (1): 62-76, 73.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 73-74.

obsessed with honor, victory and reward. The members of *Infinite Challenge* are not just comedic losers but represent absurd societal expectations of men through satire.



Figure 50. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.

Deconstructing the Illusio: Appropriately Crying Like a Man

Crying is stereotypically considered in many cultures to be unmanly or weak but always with exceptions. In K-dramas, male crying is extremely common, and considered desirable by especially by international straight cis-female tourists who attribute tears to male sensitivity and emotionality.³⁵⁷ Psychologists Heather J. MacArthur and Stephanie A. Shields write that “crying for the ‘right’ reasons—such as serious situations of loss over which one does not have control—is deemed appropriately masculine.”³⁵⁸ Sports, according to the authors, is one of these contexts in which male crying is accepted. Herein lies the question of whether these transgressions can be viewed as gender failure (emasculation), redefinition of masculinity, or not a transgression at all

³⁵⁷ Min Joo Lee, “Desiring Asian Masculinities Through *Hallyu* Tourism,” *The Rise of K-Dramas: Essays on Korean Television and Its Global Consumption*, eds. JaeYoon Park and Ann-Gee Lee, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers), Location 910. Kindle Edition.

³⁵⁸ Heather J. MacArthur and Stephanie A. Shields, “There’s No Crying in Baseball, or Is There? Male Athletes, Tears, and Masculinity in North America,” *Emotion Review*, 7:1 (2015) 39-46, 41-42.

but a conformity to what was always recognized as masculine when tears are found in the context of sports and nationalism.

The missions on *Infinite Challenge* are assigned by the show producer but they are also self-inflicted seeing as the comedians sometimes suggest their own ideas on the spot, or make bets with one another during games. For instance, in the Chunhyang special (air date May 9, 2009), the comedians dress in traditional female *hanbok* to emanate Chunhyang—the heroine in the *pansori* folk tale *Chunhyangga*. The comedians line up to jump from a swing; the mission is to jump over three meters of kiddie pools successfully. When Jae-suk is on the swing, Myeong-su says, “If you jump over this, I’ll buy a hundred hamburgers.” Jae-suk accepts the challenge and successfully jumps the three meters to Myeong-su’s dismay. Myeong-su raises the stakes to a hundred hamburgers plus a new air conditioner as a gift to a random viewer, betting that Jae-suk can’t jump over three kiddie pools (five meters); when Jae-suk succeeds, Myeong-su insists on jumping the pools himself. Jae-suk accepts the bet and says if Myeong-su wins, then he will buy the hamburgers and the air conditioner instead; Myeong-su jumps and falls into the kiddie pool, losing the bet but getting big laughs. These bets where the comedians cross into personal boundaries (personal finance) for the sake of entertainment is what gives *Infinite Challenge* its unique color; but these are also part of the male social games that Bourdieu mentions: “This primordial investment in the social games (*illusio*), which makes a man a real man—the sense of honour, virility, ‘manliness,’ ... is the undisputed principle of all that a man ‘owes to himself,’ in other words what he must do in order to live up, in his own eyes, to a certain idea of manhood.”³⁵⁹ The *illusio*—or the constructed belief that the man *must* play this game to prove his masculinity to himself—is the

³⁵⁹ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 48.

absurdity that *Infinite Challenge* both exposes and encompasses; it is also what each male comedian embodies, much like the implausible logic that just because a person is born a man he must serve in the military and risk his life to fight a war.

Yoon et al describe the cast members of *Infinite Challenge* as “below-average... comedians whose abilities seem inferior to those of average men.”³⁶⁰ But these below-average men on *Infinite Challenge* are wholeheartedly committed to the ridiculous missions assigned by their PD; as mentioned earlier, much like clowns, they are optimistic and earnest in their pursuit towards success despite predetermined failure. *Infinite Challenge* is a massive parody of masculinity and the male obsession with “social games” in which men are constantly trying to prove their masculinity through ritualistic performances.³⁶¹ At the end of all these missions, there is no honor; as Hyeong-don asks: “Where exactly are we supposed to find the meaning behind these weekly challenges?” The only reward is laughter, and that laughter is earned through the journey that the members take their audiences through; that journey is the impossible mission—the challenge—that these men pursue. Similarly, in clowning, the goal of the clown is to win the audience’s adoration and affection, and “the point of the performance is the journey of the struggle.”³⁶² In this way, *Infinite Challenge* transgresses the myth of hard (military) masculinity as designed by the state; the show lampoons militaristic rituals, hierarchy, and symbolic order.

Gender ideologies differed across classes in neo-Confucian Korea prior to modernization and colonial occupation (1890s-1900s); fighting, for instance, was accepted as masculine among the “common” class whereas strict physical discipline and control was recognized as an aristocrat

³⁶⁰ Tae-il Yoon, Sae-Eun Kim, Sooah Kim, and Byung-Woo Sohn. “When Old Meets New: An Analysis of Korean Traditional Narrative in the Contemporary Reality TV Show *Infinite Challenge*,” 430.

³⁶¹ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 48.

³⁶² Natisha Anderson, interview, phone, June 17, 2020.

or nobleman's gender behavior.³⁶³ Sun Jung explains that a nobleman's masculinity—or sŏnbi masculinity—is more about exhibiting mental discipline as a learned individual; “sŏnbi masculinity contributes to men's disengagement from the daily domestic labor which is indispensable for the maintenance of society but devalued and mostly performed by women.”³⁶⁴ Thus, low class masculinity (physical exertion through combat) and female labor (physical exertion in domestic labor) are viewed similarly; abstaining physically through discipline and control (non-exertion) and mental attainment are regarded as high class masculinity because they are associated with “traditional virtues [such] as politeness, integrity, faithfulness, loyalty, and cultural-scholarly attainment” which are useful in fields related to authority and control, e.g. government.³⁶⁵ Thus, the physical excess and exertion that are exhibited on *Infinite Challenge* bend class and gender expectations seeing as the members are constantly displaying physical activity onscreen, and often for ridiculous reasons. The men on *Infinite Challenge* engage in frivolous activity and banter, cross-gender play, maniac laughter and crying—none of which would be regarded as ideally masculine (or even ideally feminine)—just base, ignorant and low-class. In Ruggero Leoncavallo's tragic opera *Pagliacci*, the clown tenor's sorrowful aria “Vesti la giubba” has the following lyrics: “Well, are you a man? No, you are just a clown,” and the clown weeps. Being a clown is incongruous to being a man. But if a clown's job is to make a person laugh, what use is a weeping clown?

Crying over Tonkatsu, Sports and Nationalism

³⁶³ Vladimir Tikhonov, “Masculinizing the Nation: Gender Ideologies in Traditional Korea and in the 1890s-1900s Korean Enlightenment Discourse,” 2007, 66(4): 1029-1065.

³⁶⁴ Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 27.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

One of the earliest instances of crying on *Infinite Challenge* is in the “Kim Suro” episode (air date Nov. 4, 2006) when the cast members are under the assumption that they are pranking their guest—actor Kim Suro—when, in fact, Suro is the one pranking the members with the help of the show producers; the cast members pretend to get into an argument with one another and Suro pretends to be unhappy as a guest on the show due to their unprofessional behavior. When the tension between Suro and the cast members is at its peak, and the members become nervous, Suro breaks character and surprises the members with news that he and the producers were pranking them all along. At this point Noh Hong-chul begins to cry, telling Suro that he was afraid he’d crossed a line. Hong-chul cries frequently on the show.

A year later, in the “As You Please” special (air date Sept. 8, 2007), Hong-chul falls under hypnosis and describes a memory from his childhood; he begins to bawl sorrowfully, telling the hypnotist that his mother tricked him by inviting him out to eat tonkatsu but took him to the doctor’s office instead to get a shot. The other cast members’ initial reaction to Hong-chul’s tears is shock and laughter, but it soon turns into quiet sympathy. For the rest of Hong-chul’s tenure on *Infinite Challenge* (from 2005 to 2014) the other members refer to the “tonkatsu incident” now and again to tease Hong-chul for crying over such a childish reason. In the “Me vs. Me” special (air date Mar. 2, 2013), Hong-chul is at the doctor’s office about to get his blood drawn, expressing terror at the sight of a needle; Haha teasingly comforts Hong-chul by saying, “Come on. I’ll buy you tonkatsu,” calling back to the “toktatsu incident” from six years ago. In these contexts, Hong-chul’s tears are mocked. However, as the show evolves to integrate more physically challenging missions with greater stakes, crying among all the members becomes more frequent.

A couple of months after Hong-chul’s tonkatsu incident, the members are challenged to compete in a dance competition (air date Nov. 24, 2007, “Dance Sports”). After several weeks of

intense training with their respective professional dance partners, the cast members take the stage one by one to perform their routine before a panel of judges and a large audience. While waiting in the green room, the men start to emotionally fall apart; each member weeps as he describes his feelings of inadequacy, guilt and shame over not performing as well as he should have (air date Dec. 8, 2007, “Dance Sports”). At this point in the show’s development, the missions assigned to the members are less inane (e.g. out-running a bullet train, beating a cow in a tug-of-war, or out-performing a tub drain); the stakes are greater, and involves other people, as well as extra time out of their own schedule which is dedicated to dance practice. Capturing tears on television fall under the category of the “‘money shot’ of the talk-show text” per Laura Grindstaff, who borrows it from porn terms:

Like the orgasmic cum shot of pornographic films, the money shot of talk shows makes visible the precise moment of letting go, of losing control, of surrendering to the body and its ‘animal’ emotions. It is the loss of the ‘civilized’ self that occurs when the body transcends social and cultural control, revealing human behavior in its ‘raw’ rather than ‘cooked’ form.³⁶⁶

On Sept. 6, 2007 (air date Nov. 24, 2007, “Shall We Dance?”), the members begin training with professional dance coach Park Ji-eun and six professional dance partners for 80 days building up to the national dance competition. At first, the members show a great deal of confidence in their dancing abilities, and show off their moves to the tune of random songs. Given the show’s style of humor (schadenfreude), the members nag whoever’s up until they get humiliated off stage. After the showcase, the members are introduced to the different styles of dance such as jive, samba, tango, Rumba and quick step from a professional dance team. After seeing their abilities, the members express their anxiety as to whether or not they’ll be able to perform at that level. Given

³⁶⁶ Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), Location 299-302/4544. Kindle edition.

the high stakes, and the collaboration with professional dancers, the cast members take their assigned mission very seriously. After 80 days of training intensely, on the day of the competition, the cast members all have an emotional breakdown (air date Dec. 8, 2007). The comedians who have years of experience performing live shows before enormous crowds and in front of millions on television suddenly find themselves feeling immensely nervous on the day of the competition. Their main concern is missing a step, a beat or forgetting their moves. In the green room, the men both comfort and tease one another for being so nervous; as they go up on stage one by one, the rest of the members sit in the green room to monitor their colleague's performance. Due to everyone's the high stress level, the members offer more words of encouragement rather than their usual insults. As the remaining members monitor one another's performance, they take on a sportscaster's role of analyzing the routine in terms of quality but also with a great deal of sympathy.



Figure 51. Infinite Challenge. MBC.



Figure 52. Infinite Challenge. MBC.

When Jun-ha returns to the green room after his performance, a melodramatic violin and piano tune plays over the scene as he walks with disappointment for bumping into another couple during his dance. The rest of the members—Jae-suk, Myeong-su, Hong-chul and Haha—greet him warmly, but Jun-ha continues to express shame and begins to weep. At this point, the other men in the green room begin to cry in sympathy. After each member returns to the green room following his performance, he and the rest of the group begin to cry while telling one another, “Great job,” “You did well,” “I feel so sorry for my partner,” “I should’ve done better,” “I made a mistake,” “Everyone worked so hard.” The men express their emotions mixed with post-performance relief—the “come down” after an adrenaline rush. Their feelings of inadequacy are compounded with pride and gratitude for one another’s hard work.

Yoon et al’s explanation for the multiple scenes of crying on *Infinite Challenge* is that the show is based on the aesthetic of Korean *sinmyŏng* narrative where tears and laughter are constantly rotated; “The rotation of tears and laughter is closely related to the rotations of sorrow and pleasure, the tragic and comic, and tension and release, all of which are derived from the

release of pent-up emotions.”³⁶⁷ While Yoon et al insist that these are traditionally Korean narrative elements, the universal format of comedy is and has always been a cycle of tension building followed by release.³⁶⁸ Yoon et al also argue that finding ironic humor in sorrowful situations is part of *sinmyōng* aesthetics but the equation of tragedy-plus-time-equals comedy applies universally.

I push past the essentialist argument that *Infinite Challenge* includes sorrowful moments because it is simply a Korean show; this much we already know seeing as it is produced in Korea by Koreans starring Koreans. What these authors do not answer is why there are so many scenes of male comedians crying on a comedy show. I disagree with Yoon et al that the men on *Infinite Challenge* cry so much simply because the show follows a *sinmyōng* narrative logic; in fact, as mentioned prior, there is no narrative or any real logic to *Infinite Challenge*. It is perverse to see a comedian cry because it does not meet the audience’s expectations; the comedians on *Infinite Challenge* are not even crying ironically like a sad clown might to get audiences to laugh; the audience *expects* to the laugh but the comedian does not live up to that expectation. When a comedian cries, it is disorienting—almost chaotic—because the comedian is meant to make people laugh. The comedian’s job is to entertain, not express their own sorrow. Seeing a comedian cry is perverse just as it is perverse to see grown men cry so much on TV. But when is it appropriate for a man to cry? When is it ok for a comedian to shed tears? What does a show do in order to make it so that male comedians can bawl their eyes out on national television? How does a *yenŭng* program allow this to take place and for the purposes of benefitting the state?

³⁶⁷ Yoon Tae-il, Sae-Eun Kim, Sooah Kim, and Byung-Woo Sohn. “When Old Meets New: An Analysis of Korean Traditional Narrative in the Contemporary Reality TV Show *Infinite Challenge*,” 435.

³⁶⁸ Ruth Nevo, “Toward a Theory of Comedy,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 21:3, (1963), 327-332.

There are many Western comedic characters known for crying, e.g., Stan Laurel of the Laurel and Hardy duo, Pierrot, and Pee-wee Herman; the sight of these comedic characters' tears, however, are meant to incite laughter: "Our response to these clowns may be partially empathetic, but it can also be cruel, akin to the perverse pleasures of watching people cry...."³⁶⁹ But what if the sad clown isn't meant to make you laugh but to draw out sympathy? The most famous sad clown in America was Weary Willie played by Emmett Kelly. Weary Willie was accepted by the public because his act complemented the era—the Great Depression, and was aimed at mirroring society's weariness. Weary Willie brought out sympathy from audiences rather than laughter. Weary Willie was well-liked in the mid-1940s, especially when he traveled with the Ringling Bros. because his act did not aim to amuse; it was meant to be relatable to the public.³⁷⁰ While relatability was trumped over amusement, Weary Willie still managed to entertain; this much is evident given his enormous popularity which led to his casting in the Cecil B. DeMille film *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952). Transgressing expectations of a comedic performer is possible in specific circumstances; if crying occurs in an appropriate context, it is acceptable; the same applies to crying men on television. This acceptance is visible via the *mise-en-scene* that legitimates it through sympathetic music and special effects such as slow-motion, extreme close-ups, and subtitles. Appropriate contexts for male comedians shedding tears on *Infinite Challenge* include physically taxing challenges such as sports or highly nationalistic moments. With that said, crying isn't always treated the same way on *Infinite Challenge*. For crying to restore one's subjectivity, it must be genuine; crying must occur in the context of competitive international sports and have

³⁶⁹ Tom Lutz, *Crying*, (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1999), 253.

³⁷⁰ Laura Woollett, *Big Top Burning: The True Story of an Arsonist, a Missing Girl, and the Greatest Show on Earth* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), 4.

a nationalistic purpose. The comedians on *Infinite Challenge* also self-analyze their instances of crying in relation to television as show business.

Honorable Tears vs. Crocodile Tears

The members of *Infinite Challenge* have their own politics and justification regarding acceptable forms of emotional expression, and the most debated is whether or not their tears are authentic. Realness, again, is valued on the show, and if members feel that another member's display of emotion is not authentically motivated ("waterworks" or "crocodile tears"), they question the necessity of tears, then teasingly question, shame or chastise the person who displayed them. This is due to the show's emphasis on what is real, bringing into question the authenticity of any emotional expression when it is caught on camera; this debate also questions the appropriateness of tears when a man exhibits them. If a man sheds tears, according to this group, they must be necessary, and not just to call attention to himself for sensational purposes. Crocodile tears "are a breach not just of etiquette but of ethics."³⁷¹ Thus, there is a sacredness to tear-shedding and they monitor one another to prevent the abuse of emotional expression for career advancement.

From January 24, 2009 through February 7, 2009, episodes of *Infinite Challenge* were dedicated to the cast members learning how to bobsled with professional Korean Olympic athletes. When Jun-ha, Myeong-su and Jae-suk complete their bobsled course in record time, Hyeong-don breaks out into tears of pride for his team members and cries with shame for not being able to participate due to his illness. Jun Jin—a member of the K-pop boyband Shinhwa and a guest cast member who filled in for Haha while he served his mandatory military service—also cries. All of the men embrace and congratulate one another while crying. A year later, in the "Haha Comeback

³⁷¹ Lutz, 21.

Special” (March 27, 2010), Haha (in jest) confronts Myeong-su and asks, “Why on earth did you cry [during the bobsled special]?” Myeong-su hesitates for a second before blurting out, “To help my popularity,” prompting laughter. Although their moments of crying were genuine, because they cried on camera, the motivation for such emotional expressions become questionable, and the members interrogate this. Through these reflexive instances, *Infinite Challenge* questions the authenticity and realness of emotionally charged moments. The implication here is that tears are manipulative and excessive sentimentality are questionable: “Most media texts, in fact, are organized around moments of dramatic revelation and emotional intensity—organized, that is, around some version of the money shot.”³⁷² The members of *Infinite Challenge* demonstrate their keen awareness of media’s tendency to treat scenes of crying as the money shot, and probe its hackneyed uses by exhibiting their distrust of one another’s tears. Thus, the debate becomes a matter of questioning the act of crying itself. Moments of tear shedding among men are not to be taken lightly; tears, when shed by a man and comedian, must be reserved only for when they are absolutely called for. Thus, a distinction is made on *Infinite Challenge* between honorable *crying* versus a dishonorable *display of tears*; is the crying contextually appropriate or is it an inauthentic performance to enhance viewership, ratings or one’s own popularity?

On the same episode, Haha confronts Gil as to why he cried on the boxing special (air date: January 30, 2010). The boxing special featured a match between two female featherweight boxers—Tenku Tsubasa and Choi Hyun-mi. After the fight, Gil is seen on camera weeping, and Haha’s comment pointedly questions the authenticity and motive of Gil’s tears. Indeed, why do these men cry so often during these challenges? In almost every single sports-related special, all

³⁷² Grindstaff, 302-306/4544, Kindle edition.

of the members of *Infinite Challenge* end up crying. This was the case in the bobsled special, boxing special, and most certainly on the wrestling special (July 3, 2010 - Sept. 11, 2010).

The members of *Infinite Challenge* spent an entire year preparing for their big match on the wrestling special; they trained with professional wrestling coaches and learned real pro-wrestling moves. Many of them suffered major injuries as a result. On the day of the match (air date Sept. 11, 2010), Jun-ha who had been struggling with a back injury for a long time is found nearly immobile. After rushing to the hospital to get an anesthesia injection, he defies doctor's orders to rest and takes the stage to wrestle despite his major back pain. Hyeong-don, who suffers from extreme anxiety, is seen backstage vomiting before his final match. MacArthur and Shields write, "Masculinity within sport is constructed as a place where tenderness, softness, or weakness must be suppressed at all costs, and this often includes denial of physical pain and continuing to play despite injury."³⁷³ The mise-en-scene of this episode, however, suggests more than just a reaffirmation of masculinity through Jun-ha and Hyeong-don's commitment to the sport despite their physical ailments. Their tears give competition an emotional value, which is tied to masculinity, national identity and losing (failure). While the members are on standby, Psy is on stage singing "Entertainer" for the crowd; the music disappears and subtitles to Psy's song lyrics appear over slow-motion shots of Hyeong-don vomiting and squatting on the floor with his head bowed:

I'll be your entertainer and always entertain you. Acting, singing, even comedy—I'll do it all for you. I'll be your entertainer and make you laugh for the rest of your life, making each time just like the first time. I am your entertainer, I am your entertainer, I am your entertainer, I am yours, I'm your dancer-singer.³⁷⁴

³⁷³ Heather J. MacArthur and Stephanie A. Shields, "There's No Crying in Baseball, or Is There? Male Athletes, Tears, and Masculinity in North America," *Emotion Review*, 7:1 (2015) 39-46, 43.

³⁷⁴ Psy, "Entertainer." Ssajib, 2006, Track #3. Yamazone Music/YBM Seoul.

The mise-scene highly dramatizes the images of the comedians suffering backstage prior to the show; as the editing cuts between shots of Psy performing on stage and shots of Hyeong-don squatting in pain and exhaustion, shots of Gil and Hong-chul crying in sympathy are spliced in. The dramatic mise-en-scene legitimates their tears through an exhibition of their tenacity as men but also to their duty as entertainers working for a public TV network. The scene is a display of masculine rigor and athleticism meshed with “the show must go on” logic of show business, and a disregard for physical preservation in the name of something greater than themselves—the audience of a public TV network. These actions signal sacrifice similar to how men sacrifice their bodies to honor the nation-state.

On the one hand, no one in the audience waiting for the wrestlers to take the stage know how much agony they are in to bring the show to them; on the other hand, all of the backstage drama is televised on public broadcast so their suffering is an open secret. The live performance in real-time and the delayed televised program are one package experience. Psy’s song lyrics against the dramatic shots of Hyeong-don agonizing while other members of the group stand around him crying or patting his back frame suffering and injury as glamorous noble sacrifices made for the sake of entertaining the crowd and viewers at home, just like militaristic pain is a sacrifice men make for their country. What makes the content viewer-worthy is the risk that entertainers are willing to take for the show. In this context, entertainment is a service. As a public broadcast program, *Infinite Challenge* withholds the logic their programming is a public service. There is a martyrdom rationale behind these images of comedians suffering that qualifies the show’s value, but also the performers’ masculine subjectivity. Wrestling, according to Henry Jenkins, is a form of “conventional melodrama” for men where everything “must be displayed,

publicly, unambiguously, and mercilessly.”³⁷⁵ Thus, wrestling becomes an appropriate outlet and fitting challenge for a show like *Infinite Challenge* that strives to always bare all.

A great deal of *Infinite Challenge* is about showcasing the male cast members in non-masculine ways; the members are constantly cutting one another down with insults or exposure such as pulling down one another’s pants on camera as well as oversharing or “outing” one another’s personal information or privacy. Because they are made to appear non-masculine most of the time, the instances when they do emote and show great determination or commitment to the mission at task, the humor fades away; the show evolves into a drama, and the members are remasculinized. Kyung-hyun Kim claims that Korean men underwent a gender crisis due to colonization, war, separation, military dictatorships, the IMF crisis and modern social changes, and that Korean cinema emphasizes images of masculine rigor through extremities such as rape, murder and violence often targeting women and children for the remasculinization of male Korean subjectivity.³⁷⁶ In the sports missions, *Infinite Challenge* becomes an unscripted dramedy—a comedy-drama hybrid. In the realm of sports—a masculine genre—there is no room for frivolousness; seriousness and dedication are necessary, and the cast members show their commitment through many months of practice, physical exertion, injury, and an urgent determination to win. In this sense, the tears on *Infinite Challenge* no longer transgress gender expectations; rather, they are aligned to what is typically interpreted as masculine. Sports are about performing and proving one’s masculinity and not to be taken lightly. In fact, in the wrestling special, their coach emphasizes the “seriousness” of the sport repeatedly. The crying in the

³⁷⁵ Henry Jenkins, “Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama,” *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond, 524-539, 525.

³⁷⁶ Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

wrestling special is legitimized on the show as appropriate and honorable because sports are no laughing matter, especially when the pride of the nation is at stake in an international competition involving men.

Conclusion: Tears Transform an Incompetent Loser into a National Hero

One of the longest sports missions on *Infinite Challenge* is the rowing challenge; episodes aired from April 16, 2011 through Aug. 6, 2011. The actual filming of the rowing special began on Feb. 11, 2011, and the members trained for six months towards the day of the international rowing competition in Seoul on July 30, 2011. A few members sustained injuries from overworking their bodies during the training just as they had during the wrestling special. Jun-ha's injury prevented him from competing. Just forty minutes before the rowing competition (air date: Aug. 6, 2011), as the members are about to place the boat into the water, Myoung-su steps onto loose oars on the dock and injures his ankle. Despite the injury, Myoung-su insists on rowing, echoing the performative display of masculinity in sports (persistence despite injury) and an entertainer's commitment to the show, but also a national and athletic commitment to the team that is about to compete in an international race.

The level of rigor among cast members found on the rowing special is different from all the other specials, and the show's mise-en-scene reflects this difference, making it stand out from the other sports-related episodes; for instance, in the finale episode of the rowing special (air date: Aug. 6, 2011), the show provides detailed information on each international team found in the competing lanes. The camera shows the first lane with Oxford University's rowing team "Catz," which a couple of the *Infinite Challenge* members visited in early July (air date July 16, 2011) while touring the Henley Royal Regatta. The subtitles note that Oxford's rowing team has been

around since 1829. Then the shot cuts to the second lane where Keio University's rowing team is on standby; the subtitles read: "Rowing club established in 1889 (122 year history). Consists of 4th year veteran status athletes," with the words "veteran athletes" in bold face. Then it cuts to the Seoul University rowing team in the third lane: "Rowing club established in 1962. Consists of dental school students in 1st, 2nd and 3rd year." Here, the bold face is placed over "students." The fourth lane shows Waseda University rowers and their details: "Rowing club established in 1902 (109 year history). 1st year through 4th year athletes." The fifth lane is Hankuk University of Foreign Studies: "Rowing club established in 1962. Approximately 50 enrolled students are currently participating." The sixth lane is Yonsei University: "Rowing club established in 1961 (50 year history). Won the Eight Competition among four universities." The seventh lane is University of Melbourne: "Rowing club established in 1859 (152 year history). Has the longest rowing history in Australia." The editing and subtitles contextualize the historical disparity in the competition, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of each team, and the mise-en-scene manage expectations based on these disparities within the frame of an international competition. What's clear from the information provided in these shots is that Korea has the least amount of experience in rowing. The white and Japanese teams have rowing pedigree that date back over a century. In comparison, Korea is quite new to the sport, with Yonsei just barely making it to 50 years—a third of what Melbourne has.



Figure 53. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.



Figure 54. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.

The white and Japanese teams out compete all the Korean teams, and the *Infinite Challenge* rowers come in last place. When Hyeong-don—the coxswain—shouts, “Easy oar,” indicating the end of the race, all of the members immediately collapse in exhaustion while bawling hysterically or vomiting. Hyeong-don’s tearful outcry is shown multiple times in repeat with slow-motion effects and music to intensely dramatize the moment. MacArthur and Shields claim that “crying in front of one’s teammates after a major loss may be acceptable because teammates, having gone through the same trials and tribulations as the player who is crying, may be the only people who understand the intensity and meaning of the emotion being experienced.”³⁷⁷ MacArthur and Shields argue that ultimately, tears do not equate unmanliness; in fact, tears in the context of sports is necessarily masculine: “the expression of emotion is an accepted and even essential component of performing masculinity, despite popular beliefs to the contrary.”³⁷⁸ On a program that is typically full of schadenfreude humor, wordplay, and trivial quizzes that lead to physically abusive punishments and a consistent laugh track, the finale episode of the rowing special includes numerous slow motion scenes that romanticize the members’ athleticism, passion, and dedication through their tears. In such instances, much like the wrestling special, the entertainer’s identity is blurred into the athlete’s. The comedian becomes an athlete, and the sport is *yenŭng*. In the realm of competition—especially an international competition where national stakes are involved—a crying comedian is completely appropriate, just as a man’s tears are completely called for in the context of sports and nationalism. Furthermore, these men are still maintaining their brand as losers—failures. Even though they compete and their outcome is loss, per the clown ritual that this

³⁷⁷ Heather J. MacArthur and Stephanie A. Shields, “There’s No Crying in Baseball, or Is There? Male Athletes, Tears, and Masculinity in North America,” *Emotion Review*, 7:1 (2015) 39-46, 44.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

show is based on, the outcome is irrelevant; the steps they took building up to this moment and completing the race is the footage that becomes the show. Thus, another queer effect of this kind of display is the (mis)placed emphasis on the emotional responses of these men rather than their status as failures and losers. Thus, their tearfulness, crying, and expressions of grief, regret, sorrow, agony, gratitude, etc., become a symbol of their sacrifice to the nation-state; they lost but tried their best, and their emotional expression is evidence of that attempt, therefore the labeling of who came first, second or last or who won or lost become irrelevant; according to this logic, these men—just like the incompetent dads in chapter one—deserve nothing but our praise and recognition as national heroes.

Although the members did not train for as long as they did on the wrestling special, the rowing special was especially taxing on the members' physical, mental and emotional state; furthermore, unlike the wrestling or dance competition specials, the rowing special aired for a span of four months, which is episodically longer than any of the other challenges the cast members endured. This demonstrates the show's commitment to this particular challenge but also functions as a remasculinization of these men who are typically presented as anything but masculine. The underlying logic here is that when it comes to international sports competition, there is no room for fun and games; the mission is not fodder for entertainment because the stakes in these instances include national pride. The laugh track is entirely missing in these episodes. Instead, cries of sympathy such as an "Aw" sound are more prevalent. Furthermore, the show exhibits versatility and strength in its ability to manipulate the viewers' emotions in two ways that both involve loss of control and release of tension: laughter and crying. This is telling of the show's capability for moving audiences' emotions on a grander scale when the stakes are raised. Sports are presented on the show as international competitions involving national pride. Eileen Kennedy writes, "This

interplay between class and gender—and, importantly, nation—may be at the heart of the construction of the sports hero.”³⁷⁹ Indeed, this is certainly the case with Korea; as Rachael Joo claims, the sense of collective oneness generated through sports culture along with globalization policies developed a “strong sense of Korean national identity,” particularly through men’s soccer during the 2002 FIFA World Cup and women athletes in the LPGA.³⁸⁰ The tears that the men on *Infinite Challenge* shed in these sports competitions are heroic tears.³⁸¹

The buffoon persona that these male comedians take on makes fun of the “inadequate man” or the “useless male,” but the buffoon’s performance “is catharsis and relief against the fear that we are like that—we are clumsy, we are terribly dependent on our wives and mothers, we are child-like, petty, peevish, but also grandiose, [and] inflated.”³⁸² Not only do the buffoons on *Infinite Challenge* offer such catharsis but their stature reaches the heights of heroism when they cry for the nation out of devotion to the public: “Tears have symbolism, for the one crying and for those who observe the tears....”³⁸³ Through tears, the comedians on *Infinite Challenge* build Korea’s national identity and pride. The affective dimension of failure creates the emotional investment that links masculinity to nationality.

Infinite Challenge is an influential vehicle in building nationalism through a retelling of national history and memory. The next section of this chapter explores how *Infinite Challenge* constructs victimhood nationalism for its viewers while overlooking or erasing Korea’s subimperial status and its current victimization of other nations and their people.

³⁷⁹ Eileen Kennedy, “Bad Boys and Gentlemen: Gendered Narrative in Televised Sport,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 35/1 (2000) 59-73, 59.

³⁸⁰ Rachael M. Joo, *Transnational Sport: Gender, Media, and Global Korea*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 6, 142, 251.

³⁸¹ Lutz, 64.

³⁸² Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis*, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1994) 149.

³⁸³ Michael Tremble, *Why Humans Like to Cry*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2012), 33

Part II: Victimhood Nationalism and Its Transgressions on *Infinite Challenge*

In 2015, *Infinite Challenge* released a special called “Mudo Delivery,” which focuses on diasporic Koreans living apart from their families for various reasons, e.g., adoption, finances, etc. All of the episodes contain unrestrained messages that summon Korean nationalism riding primarily on a victimhood narrative in relation to Japanese colonization and Korea’s subjugation to American neocolonialism. As established, while these shows may not have a narrative per se, the historical retelling (rewriting and reminding) of a painful colonial past gets appropriated by the show for affective purposes. While the program underlines Korea’s past as a victim to foreign powers, it elides the nation’s present status as a subimperial nation-state per Jin-kyung Lee’s phrasing in *Service Economies*, where non-Korean bodies—typically Southeast and South Asian bodies—are exploited for hard labor and reproduction in the ROK while they remain precarious citizens under the eyes of the law and its non-precarious citizens.³⁸⁴

Summoning, Constructing and Channeling Ethnic Nationalism Through Television

Examining television programs of a particular nation offers historical insights of its “society, nation, governing political ideology, and foreign policy.”³⁸⁵ Stewart Anderson and Melissa Charkars argue that televisual nation-building occurs through three forms of modernization—“consumerism and consumer culture, educating and integrating citizens, and glorifying the nation’s technological achievements.”³⁸⁶ *Infinite Challenge* is well-positioned to

³⁸⁴ See section “South Korea as Subimperial Immigrant Nation” in Chapter 4: “Migrant and Immigrant Labor,” Jin-kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010), 214-223.

³⁸⁵ Stewart Anderson and Melissa Charkaras, *Modernization, Nation-Building and Television History*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 8.

satisfy all of these criteria. As an ad-supported public broadcaster, MBC has the pressure to broadcast not just entertaining/commercially viable content but also the kind that appeals to “public interest,” which is often in efforts to reinforce a hegemonic nationalist narrative that overlooks Korea’s exclusionary forms of discrimination against female, queer, and ethnically non-Korean identities. Nationalism is a key component to contemporary Korea’s ideations of what constitutes the ROK and its ideal citizen. Programs that air on a semi-public broadcaster such as MBC have all the more reason to appeal to the public interest while maintaining its objectives of delineating its own standards of ROK citizenship and nationhood.

Korea’s nationalism is diverse. Generally speaking, said nationalism materializes from a sense of oneness among all ethnic Koreans in terms of race and language, and confined to a single nation, culture and history stemming from its founder Tan’gun.³⁸⁷ According to Gi-wook Shin, ethnic nationalism, or nationalism based on Korean homogeneity, is not only a modern construct but a historical one resulting from anticolonialism and efforts towards national unification.³⁸⁸ Choi Jang-jip reiterates this, claiming that Korean nationalism developed out of resistance against Japanese imperialism, emphasizing a united oneness which ironically led to the nation’s civil war.³⁸⁹ Globalization also has a role in Korean nationalism; Hyejung Ju contends that observing a nation’s market and nationalism in relation to a specific media format is an effective way of understanding the function of globalization since “rising national consciousness, cultivating national identity, and stressing national culture and history” are

³⁸⁷ Hyung Il Paik and Timothy Tangherlini, Introduction, *Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity*, edited by Hyung Il Paik and Timothy Tangherlini, (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1998), 3-4.

³⁸⁸ Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, And Legacy*, (Stanford University Press, 2006), location 127. Kindle Edition.

³⁸⁹ Choi Jang-jip, *Democracy after Democratization: The Korean Experience*, (Korea, Humanitas, 2005), translated by Lee Kyung-hee, 57, 91.

incited by globalization.³⁹⁰ Shin observes that the Korean government is highly aware of the nation's status in the global market, therefore globalization in Korea is shaped by ethnic nationalism. Shin argues that Korea's approach to globalization is through appropriation of capitalist benefits while maintaining Korea's "indigenous values and practices" to pursue nationalist interests.³⁹¹ Ju simplifies this practice as "hallyu nationalism."

Hallyu nationalism manifests in the form of overseas sale and promotion of Korean cultural products such as TV shows and music that are closely tied to Korea's national identity.³⁹² Shin notes: "Food, drink, and other everyday commodities that incorporate traditional 'Korean' elements have become popular products in the Korean market."³⁹³ Although this form of nationalism is contingent upon a Korean product's so-called "Koreanness," what is ethnically Korean about a particular object that gets ascribed with a "K" and deemed K-drama or K-pop is increasingly debatable in the present landscape of global synergies. Suk-Young Kim's monograph on K-pop expands on what the "K" in "K-pop" can stand for, beyond just "Korean"; the "k" may stand for "kaleidoscopic" and "keyboard": "The 'K' in 'K-pop' stems from various desires to harness the global popularity of Korean pop music. Prominent among them is the Korean government's plan to lay claim to K-pop as a part and parcel of a national branding

³⁹⁰ Hyejung Ju, "The Nature of Nationalism in the 'Korean Wave': A Framing Analysis of News Coverage about Korean Pop Culture," Conference Papers—National Communication Association, 1. 2007, 5. Retrieved from Communication & Mass Media Complete database, accessed April 19, 2017.

³⁹¹ Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, And Legacy*, location 2688. Kindle Edition.

³⁹² Ju, "The Nature of Nationalism in the 'Korean Wave': A Framing Analysis of News Coverage about Korean Pop Culture," 2-3: via transnational press coverages of the term *hallyu* or Korean Wave in the US, China, Korea and Japan, Ju argues that hallyu nationalism is a "commercial driven phenomenon" that brands Korea and "spreads national identity."

³⁹³ Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, And Legacy*, locations 2754-2755. Kindle Edition.

campaign...which has also given rise to similar terms such as K-drama, K-tourism, and K-education.”³⁹⁴

Gyu Tag Lee claims that K-pop is a product of local culture that has found success in the global market.³⁹⁵ John Lie’s take on K-pop as a cultural product of the “pervasive US cultural influence in the post-Liberation period” conflicts with Lee’s perception; Lie argues that “there is almost nothing ‘Korean’ about K-pop” outside of it being branded as Korean in the global market, and how it is “trivially Korean in the sense that the singers and producers are almost exclusively ethnic Koreans,” which is less and less the case with K-pop groups that now feature diaspora Koreans as well as ethnically Chinese, Japanese and Taiwanese singers.³⁹⁶ Kyung Hyun Kim empathizes with Lie’s position by mentioning cultural thinkers’ collective concern of “Korean popular culture’s authenticity.”³⁹⁷ According to Lie and Kim’s logic, it is impossible to identify ethnic nationalism in Korean cultural products. Television, however, is different.

A real-variety *yenŭng* program like *Infinite Challenge* is a category of infotainment—a program that blends “social learning and entertainment.”³⁹⁸ Part of how MBC rationalizes its broadcast service as a “public good” is by including an educational bent to its programs like it does on *Infinite Challenge*. Some *Infinite Challenge* episodes are nationalist texts that invite

³⁹⁴ Suk-Young Kim, *K-pop Live: Fans, idols, and multimedia performance*, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2018).

³⁹⁵ Gyu Tag Lee, “De-Nationalization and Re-Nationalization of Culture: The Globalization of K-Pop,” (diss., George Mason University, 2012).

³⁹⁶ John Lie, “What is the K in K-pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity,” *Korea Observer*, Vol. 43, No. 3, Autumn 2012, 347, 359-360.

³⁹⁷ Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, edited by Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) 294-517/11544.

³⁹⁸ You, *Entertaining Politics: Exploring Historical Transformation of Production, Distribution and Consumption of Political Entertainment in Korea*, 154.

Korean identities who are familiar with the nation's history and can connect with the content through their ethnic identity. You writes: "[T]he production of the real variety show was not designed to stimulate sales of the newly-launched Korean entertainment shows to neighboring countries, because such television entertainment shows had difficulty attracting international audiences' attention when compared with television soap operas and serial dramas."³⁹⁹ A show like *Infinite Challenge* speaks directly to the *kungmin*—the people of Korea. A strategically effective way to hail Korean nationalism is through a victimhood nationalism.⁴⁰⁰ Victimhood nationalism, in accordance to Jie-Hyun Lim's conception, is an inherited national memory stemming from trauma. In the Korean context, the nation's victimhood nationalism emerges from a memory of its historical past as the "collective innocent" against Japan's "collective guilt" of colonization (1910-1945) and war crimes.⁴⁰¹ Issues of redress and unredressability of Korea's history of victimhood persists on small screens through *yenŭng*.⁴⁰² Shin notes how nation is used interchangeably to signify language, race and ethnicity via the term *minjok* in Korea.⁴⁰³ After the division, the ROK specified this identity to the *kungmin*—a term that describes citizen or local civilian and is tied to a patrilineal Korean heritage and native blood per the Jus-Sanguinis Nationality Law.⁴⁰⁴ Narratives of the nation's suffering and victimhood

³⁹⁹ Ibid, 156.

⁴⁰⁰ Jie-Hyun Lim, "Victimhood Nationalism and History Reconciliation in East Asia," *History Compass*, 8:1, 2010, 1-10.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, 1.

⁴⁰² For more on redress and unredressability, see Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁴⁰³ Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, And Legacy*, location 104. Kindle Edition.

⁴⁰⁴ Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, And Legacy*, location 1985, Kindle Edition; Chong Myung Im, "The Definitions of Individuality and ROK Kungmin in the Political Philosophy of the Incipient Republic of Korea," *International Journal of Korean History*, 16 (1) 2011: 115-139.

nationalism are pointed inwardly towards the nation and presented to the *kungmin* for self-reflection—a form of education and integration of its citizens through public television.

***Yenŭng* as a National Genre**

Yenŭng is simplified as “entertainment” or “variety” by US streaming platforms specializing in Korean television content, e.g. Viki, DramaFever and OnDemandKorea. The global popularity of shows like *Running Man* has led to Netflix’s interest in producing its own *yenŭng* program entitled *Busted!* (Netflix, 2018) which was renewed for a third season and categorized under “TV Variety & Talk Shows” (as of Aug. 29, 2019). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, *Infinite Challenge* credits itself for coining the term and concept of “real-variety.” Scholar Kim e also credits *Infinite Challenge* for conceptualizing the real-variety show format and traces its origins back to early Korean theater from the pre-modern era; Kim analyzes several categories that pertain to the real-variety format including gamification, unscripted performance, an interest in the public’s day-to-day activity, and an interactive rapport between the producer and audience.⁴⁰⁵ This is a prime example of Jason Mittell’s TV genre theory which claims that genre exists through cultural dictates such as “creation, circulation, and reception of texts within cultural context,” which can be conceived as a discursive practice a la Michel Foucault through definition, interpretation and evaluation.⁴⁰⁶ Based on Kim and Mittell’s concepts of genre, a real-variety *yenŭng* program such as *Infinite Challenge* is geared towards the Korean audience and its

⁴⁰⁵ Kim Jin-Seob, “The Real Variety Show since ‘Infinite Challenges’: A Study of its Expandability and Comparison with Traditional Theatrical Performances, *Han'guk k'ont'ench'ŭ hakhoe nonmunji*, 14:8, 2014, 96.

⁴⁰⁶ Jason Mittell, “A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory,” *Cinema Journal*, 40:3, 2001, 8.

interests. Kim even claims that the real-variety genre is culturally specific to Korea.⁴⁰⁷ Laying claim to a genre as culturally specific to one nation is difficult, especially given the fact that the reality television format and verité style of filming were adopted from the US and Europe, and the hyper-kinetic variety aesthetic was copied from Japan. *Infinite Challenge*, however, hails Korean audiences through nationalistic means of storytelling.⁴⁰⁸ To give a brief summary, a pattern at the now-defunct niche content streaming company DramaFever is a useful case study to analyze how the program constructs nationhood for Korean viewers.

The Kungmin's TV Show

DramaFever was a popular streaming company owned by Warner Bros. specializing in Korean television content for North American territories, and had a high traction among mostly non-Korean viewers. According to the Head of Video Operations at DramaFever, Jackie Sia, the most popular game/variety show on the streaming platform was SBS's *Running Man*, which has a global following due to its light, formula-driven format that relies mostly on physical humor as well as guest appearances of well-known hallyu celebrities who are recognized outside of Korea. The second most popular variety show on the platform was *2 Days 1 Night* which is a gamified variety show valued for its heavy emphasis on Korean tourism, which non-Korean viewers can easily access. The least popular show on DramaFever, according to Sia, was *Infinite Challenge*. This is because *Infinite Challenge* dedicates a fair number of episodes to nationalist content such

⁴⁰⁷ Kim Jin-Seob, "The Real Variety Show since 'Infinite Challenges': A Study of its Expandability and Comparison with Traditional Theatrical Performances, *Han'guk k'ont'ench'ũ hakhoe nonmunji*, 14:8, 2014.

⁴⁰⁸ Louis Althusser. "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)." *The anthropology of the state: A reader*, 9, no. 1 (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2006): 86-98.

as pairing the cast with Korean rappers to create a new hip-hop track that narrates Korean history or visiting LA in search of Korean American history through figures such as Philip Ahn and Dosan Ahn Chang-ho. Such episodes are nationalist texts that invite Korean identities who are somewhat familiar with the historical context and can connect with the content through their ethnic identity.

Infinite Challenge foregrounds its reality aspect the most, taking pride in how far it takes its realism with a reflexive consciousness of the viewing audience, often commenting or interacting with fans who recognize the show and its cast members. Kim Jin-seob understands the importance that reality has for the show's audiences: "The cast did not appear on the show as glamorous celebrities or stars but as individuals themselves relating their own personal stories. Through this, they drew out audience emotion and sympathy, creating an affective and therapeutic response."⁴⁰⁹ *Infinite Challenge* has the capacity to achieve an affective response from its viewers.

Sia and DramaFever's Director of Licensing Tim Lee both state that this type of narrowcast programming is what makes *Infinite Challenge* so unpopular among North American viewers on DramaFever despite its high ratings in Korea because the majority of DramaFever's subscribers are ethnically non-Korean. Although it may be unpopular among non-Koreans, *Infinite Challenge* regularly hails native and diaspora Korean viewers thus demonstrating the show's capacity to function as a televisual nation-building apparatus. As Albert Moran states, "Although the globalization thesis is extremely fashionable, the nation-state is more persistent and its role continues to be more pivotally important, both internationally and domestically, than

⁴⁰⁹ Kim Jin-Seob, 97.

the globalists would have one believe.”⁴¹⁰ Moran’s statement aligns with Shin’s argument that globalization in Korea’s context serves the state’s ethnic nationalism: “Chains of memory, myth, and symbol connect nations to their ethnic heritage, and national identity satisfies the people’s need for cultural fulfillment, rootedness, security, and fraternity in the face of tumult. . . . [Thus] national identity increases in importance as the processes of globalization continue.”⁴¹¹ Lee further explained that *yenŭng* programs like *Infinite Challenge* contain fast-paced, idiosyncratic humor which requires native-language skills and a familiarity with local culture to appreciate. *Infinite Challenge*’s reflexive humor crosses into fan reception, tabloid, news, celebrity’s social media accounts, history, and cultural nostalgia that do not easily translate into another language or culture. Part of this has to do with the nature of comedic sensibilities among contemporary Korean comedians; You mentions the transition of comedic style in the 1990s when comics used wordplay and catchphrases in their delivery and leaned less on physical humor.⁴¹² In order to understand wordplay, it is necessary to understand the language as well as the cultural context to grasp the nuances of a joke.

Sia made similar observations as Lee: “*Saturday Night Live* is funny to us because we watch the news and stay up to date on political issues, but it might not be as funny to someone outside of that.”⁴¹³ Lee expressed a frustration with *yenŭng* producers whose production aims “don’t seem to keep the global viewer in mind”—only local (read Korean) viewers—making

⁴¹⁰ Albert Moran, “Television formats in the world/the world of television formats,” *Television Across Asia: Television Industries, programme formats and globalization*, eds. Albert Moran and Michael Keane, (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 2.

⁴¹¹ Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, And Legacy*, locations 2729-2731. Kindle Edition.

⁴¹² You, 157.

⁴¹³ Jackie Sia, Video Operations, interview by author, DramaFever, New York, Feb. 16, 2017.

yeŋg a difficult sell in US.⁴¹⁴ In our conversation, I asked Lee if he felt that yeŋg programs are aimed towards the kungmin. Lee promptly concurred: “These kinds of shows are definitely for the kungmin and they don’t translate as easily for outside consumption.”⁴¹⁵ The show’s high popularity matters a great deal when considering its use as a vehicle for constructing if not drawing out nationalism among viewers. As Shin states, “Nationalism commands popular appeal since nation building incorporates native elements—preexisting sentiments, cultural heritages, and ethnic formations—into its formation process.”⁴¹⁶ As of October 2018, DramaFever has shut down its streaming site for undisclosed reasons. Speculations in the trades state that the company could not sustain itself against competition from larger streaming giants such as Netflix and Amazon.⁴¹⁷ The reason for the abruptness of its shuttering is still unknown. DramaFever is an example of specialized niche boutique companies’ precarity even when it has the backing of a major parent company such as Warner Bros.

Nationalism, Melodrama and Reality TV

Korean comedy prior to the 1970s was subversive and revolutionary, particularly *mandam* comedy records from the 1920s and 1930s which contained elements of critique and resistance against Japan’s colonial authority (1910-1945); comedy records were some of the highest selling during this era but due to its politicized content, such records were eventually

⁴¹⁴ Tim Lee, interview by author, DramaFever, New York, Feb. 16, 2017.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Gi-wook Shin, location 163. Kindle Edition.

⁴¹⁷ Todd Spangler, “Korean-Drama Streaming Service is Shutting Down,” *Variety*, Oct. 16, 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/dramafever-k-drama-shutting-down-warner-bros-1202982001/>, accessed Sept. 2, 2019.

banned from sale by the Japanese authority.⁴¹⁸ In the 1960s, as television sets became more prevalent in Korean homes and comedy began getting airtime, the Korean military regime heavily scrutinized the content for any disparaging details that critiqued the government. This began on June 16, 1971 when the ministry of culture and public relations emphasized “self-restraint” and “self-regulation” in how “vulgar entertainment” was produced and consumed.⁴¹⁹ The beginning of televised comedy started out with heavy restrictions particularly over any political humor. This explains the variety and sketch aspects of Korean television comedy shows that include many props, sound effects, costumes, and other added gimmicks to distract from potentially politicized forms of humor. Unlike America’s *Saturday Night Live* that openly and blatantly parodies government officials including the president, the extent of dissent on Korean variety shows include satire of authority figures such as teachers and bosses. When it comes to national issues, however, *yenŭng* programs never venture into comedy. In fact, they turn it into a melodrama. Thus, comedy is local whereas melodrama is national. As my earlier analyses of *Happy Together* and *Infinite Challenge* show, when it comes to national issues, they are no longer the subject of comedy even on a comedy show; this explains why crying so much on television as men or as comedians is permitted; these male comics are not crying as a man or a comic but as a representative of the spirit of his country thus shifting the registers.

Ien Ang believes melodrama is considered a low form of cultural expression due to the way “it plays on the emotions of the public in a false way: emotional straining after effect is seen as its sole aim.”⁴²⁰ Unsurprisingly, reality TV and *yenŭng* generally have similar cultural

⁴¹⁸ Kyung Han You, *Entertaining Politics: Exploring Historical Transformation of Production, Distribution and Consumption of Political Entertainment in Korea*, 60.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴²⁰ Ien Ang, “Dallas and the Melodramatic Imagination,” *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 480.

associations of “lowness” due to the assumption that these genres do not offer the public any constructive means to an end such as cultural uplift or education aside from entertainment. In the case with *Infinite Challenge*’s “Mudo Delivery” special, while the cast members’ presence continue to reaffirm the program’s entertainment (yenŭng) genre, the educational aspect also finds its way into the work. *Infinite Challenge* was especially popular within the younger demographic of viewers such as teens and college students.⁴²¹ Charles Affron’s identification of the melodramatic genre boils down to the affective display which “dramatize[s] affect itself,” and when sentiment is centralized as the narrative: “[Melodramas] usually image the flow of tears, and they succeed in making audiences’ tears flow in sympathy.”⁴²² *Infinite Challenge* engenders national sympathy as the program constructs a local viewer, or localizes the diasporic Korean viewer, with a nationalist agenda with a retelling of modern Korean history through a victimhood narrative.

Although *Infinite Challenge* undergoes genre bending with its melodramatic episodes, it retains its reality TV mode as a format. Reality TV does more than just discursively educate viewers; reality TV is a “resource for inventing, managing, caring for, and protecting ourselves as citizens” which “actively intervenes in the lives of *needy* individuals.”⁴²³ The neediness that individuals express on these shows creates a vulnerable avenue for something as emotionally charged as victimhood nationalism to gain momentum in a narrative. Shin points out that the “emotional power of ethnonational identity” has been overlooked among nationalism scholars

⁴²¹ “‘Infinity Challenge’ ranked as the #1 show enjoyed by Korean viewers,” May 1, 2013, *All KPop*, accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.allkpop.com/article/2013/05/infinity-challenge-ranked-as-the-1-show-enjoyed-by-korean-viewers-in-april>

⁴²² Charles Affron, “Identifications,” *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 111.

⁴²³ Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV*, 4, (emphasis mine).

but that its influence cannot be denied while citing Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' and its consequences.⁴²⁴ Anderson recognizes the emotional power that nationalism has over individuals that belong to a community: "[N]ations inspire love, and often profound self-sacrificing love."⁴²⁵ The "Mudo Delivery" special's episodes of *Infinite Challenge* contain intense emotionality that hails victimhood nationalist logics that coincide with hallyu nationalism, as well as transgressions of both.

Furthermore, the show's employment of melodrama also plays a role in its construction of this victimhood nationalist narrative; this is what Elisabeth R. Anker refers to this as "melodramatic political discourse" which constructs the nation-state as righteous by displaying its suffering which is coded as integrity and propriety, and whoever caused the nation-state its suffering is, in turn, evil: "By evoking intense visceral responses to wrenching injustices imposed upon the nation-state, melodramatic discourse solicits affective states of astonishment, sorrow, and pathos through the scenes it shows of persecuted citizens."⁴²⁶ *Infinite Challenge* harnesses precisely this melodramatic political discourse to not only emphasize its massive political suffering but also distract from its own enactments of unjust power against its precarious citizens.

Constructing the Ethnic Korean, Nation and Memory via the Korean Diaspora and Food

⁴²⁴ Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, And Legacy*, location 2408. Kindle Edition.

⁴²⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1983), 141.

⁴²⁶ Elisabeth R. Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

In honor of the 70th year of Korea's independence day—August 8, 2015—*Infinite Challenge* produced a special segment entitled “Mudo Delivery.” The first episode of the segment kicks off with a riveting narration over archival black and white photographs of Koreans from the colonial era, the Korean War, and other parts of modern Korean history utilizing Korean food as the hook:

What gave our people the strength to unite our nation as one is rice. Even through times of colonization, war and poverty, we endured each day through the strength we gained from rice. Koreans went far away to foreign lands sweating blood, working difficult jobs as coal miners and nurses. Rice continued to provide warm nourishment even on foreign lands. The best gift that can be offered to a loved one: a warm meal.⁴²⁷

There's a great deal to unpack from this forty-one second-opening. The narration links Korean food to larger historical events of the nation's humbler times, suggesting a victimhood nationalist frame. Whereas in *hallyu* studies, Korean food is frequently understood as a cultural product used for Korea's globalization purposes, a Korean meal—or *pap*—is claimed here as an indigenous source used to aid Korea's independence from Japanese colonization, emerge from Korean War ruins, and remind the Korean diasporic populations of their ethnic identity.⁴²⁸ Korean food signifies oneness and sovereignty for ethnic Korean viewers but it is also a popular commodity among non-Korean viewers. *Hallyu* nationalism melds into ethnic nationalism in this narration through the emphasis on Korean ethnicity and continuation or preservation of that ethnicity even through periods of foreign invasion and dislocation.

⁴²⁷ “Food Delivery,” ep. 441, Aug. 15, 2016, *Infinite Challenge*,

<http://www.ondemandkorea.com/infinite-challenge-e441.html>, translation by author.

⁴²⁸ For more on this topic, see Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, “The Global *Hansik* Campaign and the Commodification of Korean Cuisine,” *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, edited by Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) 8067-8603/11544.

The program producers invited written requests from viewers who wished to deliver home-cooked Korean meals to diasporic family members living abroad. The producers then selected the most appealing requests and had a cast member deliver the food to separated family members in person throughout the globe. In episode 442, Park Myeong-su delivers panch'an such as kimch'i to a father and son living in Chile made by the wife/mother who lives in Korea.⁴²⁹ Park also delivers care packages to a Korean research team residing in Antarctica, sent by their wives and mothers back in Korea. In episode 441, Jung Jun-ha delivers an elderly woman's handmade kimch'i mandu to her son—a Taekwondo instructor living in Gabon, Africa with his wife and children.⁴³⁰ In episode 445, Jeong Hyeong-don visits Germany where a number of Korean nurses and coal miners reside long after having been dispatched as *gastarbeiter* in the 1960s and 70s to support families back home. Jeong delivers a home cooked meal to a sister living apart from her five other siblings in Korea. In episode 441 and 442, Yoo Jae-suk delivers an original mother's home-cooked meal including *miyökkuk* to her youngest daughter who was adopted by a white family in the US and currently expecting her second child.⁴³¹ It is difficult to watch these episodes without growing emotional, seeing as the cast members and family members wail very loudly onscreen as sentimental music plays over the scenes. Intermittently, the reality format disappears and sand art animation takes over with a historical voiceover narration by Yoo Jae-suk to contextualize some of these stories.

⁴²⁹ “Panch'an” - side dishes, which include kimch'i.

⁴³⁰ “Kimch'i mandu” - dumplings with kimch'i stuffing.

⁴³¹ “Miyökkuk” - seaweed soup.



Figure 55. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.

Again, sentimental music overpowers the scenes as cameras close in on faces whenever anyone cries. Added effects such as slow motion are also heavily utilized. All of these effects are highly prevalent in many reality TV programs, but they have origins in melodrama more so than comedy. Such effects on this program are tools used to generate an affective association with ethnic identity and national history.

In episode 441, Jae-suk calls a woman—Kwon Kyoung-hee from Daegu—who submitted a request to deliver her mother’s food to her younger sister, Kwon Sun-yung (Faith Warner), who lives in the US as an adoptee and serves in the US Army with her husband in North Carolina. During Yoo’s exchange with Kyoung-hee, the program’s subtitles appear below the screen over sentimental music: “A younger sister who is currently pregnant and residing in a foreign land. The [older sister] wrote in to deliver their mother’s food from [her sister’s] homeland.” (36:48).⁴³² Right from the get-go, the program positions the US as “foreign” while

⁴³² *Infinite Challenge*, Episode 441, Aug. 15, 2015.

framing Korea as the “home base” where Sun-yung’s familial and cultural roots are from. Kyoung-hee explains that Sun-yung found her original family through Holt Children’s Services, Inc.—an institute formerly known as Holt Adoption Agency founded by two Americans—Harry and Bertha Holt—in the 1950s as a Christian charity organization. Harry Holt’s legacy is riddled with controversy and criticism from adoptees as well as child welfare and social service workers alike for being “another quintessentially American figure—the missionary as cultural imperialist,” and for the Holt agency’s prioritization of a fast and efficient orphanage system that streamlined adoption while neglecting any developments for local welfare needs such as helping families stay together.⁴³³ Yoo visits the Holt center to meet with a Korean agent who worked as a liaison that helped Sun-yung reunite with her birth family in 2005. The agent explains that Sun-yung visited the center while serving in Korea as a US soldier. Yoo asks the agent what he frames as “a sensitive” question: “What was the reason for Sun-yung’s adoption?”⁴³⁴ The agent responds with initial hesitation and changes the subject—going into Sun-yung’s birth date, and the date that she was adopted as a four-month-old infant. Beyond this, the agent does not go into further detail. The question of Sun-yung’s adoption story remains a cliff hanger.

Just as Yoo is about to exit the center, he notices a Caucasian family of four visiting the center to adopt their new son Ji-ho who is 27 months old. The adoptive mother explains that she prayed for this opportunity, highlighting that Holt is a Christian agency. Not insignificantly, the white family is heteronormative and Christian; they claim to have prayed for this union thus reinforcing the US Cold War narrative that adopting a child from a non-white nation is an altruistic and therefore a patriotic Christian act. The adoptive mother tells Yoo that she is a fan of

⁴³³ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*, (Durham: Duke University, 2010), 44, 73-74

⁴³⁴ *Infinite Challenge*, Episode 441, Aug. 15, 2015.

his and says, “*Family Outing* is the first Korean show I ever watched. And when I heard the language, oh, I loved it. It’s so beautiful. I think the Korean language is beautiful. And because of that, we started looking at Korea to adopt from.” The program’s subtitles, however, do not adhere to what the adoptive mother says on camera.

The translation up until her compliments of the Korean language is accurate, but as soon as she mentions that *Family Outing* is the program that led to the family’s decision to adopt a Korean child, the Korean translation reads as, “We found an interest in Korea, and that eventually led to the relationship with Ji-ho [the adoptive Korean son].” There are a several takeaways from this brief exchange. For one, the scene exemplifies hallyu nationalism by revealing Korean *yenŭng* program’s global influence via a white American family’s awareness of *Family Outing* (SBS, 2008-2010) and the “kungmin emcee” Yoo Jae-suk. The white mother’s remark ranks *Infinite Challenge* alongside SBS’s commercial and highly accessible *yenŭng* shows such as *Family Outing* and *Running Man* both of which are hosted by Yoo Jae-suk; *Infinite Challenge* is framed in the same category of globally popular shows that white American families enjoy over dinner, reinforcing a hallyu nationalist narrative of Korea’s global triumph through media. The Caucasian family’s commentary now gives *yenŭng* hallyu credibility. As the episode continues, Sun-yung’s adopted status and American citizenship are also framed as hallyu nationalism albeit through circumstances that enable a victimhood narrative.



Figure 56. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.



Figure 57. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.

Sun-yung reunites with her original parents in episode 443. In a highly emotional scene full of loud bawling, Sun-yung’s parents and older sister arrive at Sun-yung’s home in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Sun-yung comes out to greet her wailing mother on the lawn as her father, sister, husband, and son look on. Jae-suk also stands in the background weeping. In the kitchen, Sun-yung’s mother shows her daughter how to make miyōkkuk (seaweed soup) over stovetop—an image that encompasses a powerful mother-daughter bond, where a mother passes on her knowledge of the miyōkkuk recipe to her child who was separated from her at birth;

there's also the indigenous significance of miyökkuk itself which Koreans culturally regard as a soup that mothers consume during their post-partum phase, and cook for their children on their birthdays to commemorate birth, blood and family ties; the significance of bloodline and the food that represents are culturally embedded in Korea to signify identity, ethnonationalism, and a rooted connection to the nation.⁴³⁵ The episode also shows Sun-yung's Caucasian husband and Caucasian adoptive father enjoying their Korean meal without rest. Yoo takes notice of the two white men who cannot stop eating and comments on it, reinforcing hallyu's power via food; hallyu nationalism is present in this scene through the white Americans' adoration of Korean food—a Korean commodity—which wins over global taste buds. Hallyu nationalism is also visible through Sun-yung's status as a Korean American living in the US. Historically, adoptee children became repackaged as “cultural assets” that reflected the globalization drive during the Kim Dae Jung administration via the Overseas Koreans Act (OKA), which expanded Korean citizenship to diaspora Koreans including adoptees.⁴³⁶ Sun-yung is an adoptee, raised in America and serving the US Army but her identity is constructed as Korean in this episode, thus contributing to the ethnic nationalist narrative.

After dinner, the family sits down with Yoo in the living room where Sun-yung's original mother tells her side of the story as to what led to her youngest daughter's adoption:

Back then, I gave birth at a birth clinic and not at a hospital. I went under anesthesia. While I was under, I heard the baby's cry as if it were a dream. But after that, the baby disappeared. When I asked where the baby went, I was told that she was dead. So I figured as such and time passed. But in my memory, I definitely heard the baby's cry, so I returned to the clinic. But they said that after five years, they dispose

⁴³⁵ Eleana J. Kim, xiii, 29, 61, 72, 90, 226; Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, And Legacy*, location 77, 114, 201, 229, 274, 287, 303, 342, 563, 627. Kindle Edition.

⁴³⁶ Eleana J. Kim, 179.

of the birth records. And so we forgot about it.⁴³⁷

The original mother's remark here contains a transgressive critique of the Holt agency; historically, due to its vertically integrated system, the Holt agency's negligence led to inaccurate birth records and cases where adoptees should not even have become adoptees. Sun-yung states that Holt is the adoption agency where she was dispatched from as an infant. Whereas in the earlier episode, the Korean agent that Yoo visits at Holt takes responsibility only for the reunion of Sun-yung and her birth family via Holt, the agent does not comment on why Sun-yung ended up at an adoption agency in the first place. It is through Sun-yung's mother's personal testimony that we learn the truth—Sun-yung was swindled out of her mother's arms while she was under anesthesia and sold into the corrupt Korean adoption system at Holt.

This is a victimhood nationalist narrative that illustrates an American organization as corrupt and Sun-yung's Korean family as its victim. While the Holt agency carries blame for its corrupt system, no critique is made on how the Korean government enabled such a system to thrive in the country. By placing a foreign agency at the center of the story, the Korean nation and Sun-yung's national identity, become part of the victimhood narrative framework. At the end of the adoptee episode, the program features other Korean adoptees who speak into the camera in direct address in English, claiming that they are seeking their families in Korea. In this way, "Mudo Delivery" reappropriates the sentimental and altruistic performance that white American arbiters take part in by treating the adoption issue as a melodrama—a sentimental program that digs into viewers' hearts through excessive tearfulness, music, and emotions while using a politically charged moment in history like the Korean independence from Japanese colonization as a launching point. Missing from this adoption episode are faces of mixed-race adoptees and

⁴³⁷ *Infinite Challenge*, Episode 443, Aug. 29, 2015, 34:09-37:42.

single mothers. This absence reinforces the hegemony of ethnic nationalism, nuclear family, and heteronormativity as the only acceptable stories worthy of sympathy and showcase through a national public broadcaster.

Furthermore, the very act of dedicating an episode to Korean adoption illustrates the conflict between harnessing both hallyu nationalism and victimhood nationalism at once; whereas hallyu nationalism celebrates Korea's cultural and economic triumph, the display of pain through adoption via a victimhood nationalist framework as well as the very act of portraying a two-year-old child in the process of being adopted by a white Christian family demonstrates conflict. Korea's earliest cases of adoption that date back to the Korean War were due to economic reasons. But today, as the ROK boasts the status of a developing if not already developed nation, the very display of a young child being handed over to a white American family's arms is highly ironic if not perturbing. The adoptee episode in the "Mudo Delivery" special demonstrates how hallyu nationalism and victimhood nationalism can work symbiotically but also conflict.

On May 13, 2017, the University of California Irvine led a symposium entitled, "Ends of Adoption: A Symposium on Transnational Korean Adoption," with keynote speaker Pastor Dohyun Kim of the organization Koroot. Presenters included a long list of scholars and activists who questioned and problematized the persistence of adoption in Korea, and the Korean government's neglect of young, single mothers who are not offered any social and economic support for their circumstances. Panelists also took issue with the persisting economic rationale made for Korean adoptees being sent abroad today while calling for an end to Korean adoption and demanding that funds currently used to aid foreign adoption be used to support families to stay together instead.

Mudo Delivery's Utoro Village Story

In episode 444, Haha pays an emotional visit to displaced Korean elders living in Utoro Village near Kyoto, Japan. Prior to making his trip, Haha gets more information on Utoro and its Korean residents there from an organization called the Korean International Network which aids diaspora Koreans. Haha admits that he knew nothing about the hundreds of Koreans living in Utoro who had suffered threats of eviction due to anti-Korean discrimination. The Utoro Koreans had initially been brought there by force and conscripted as laborers during the colonial period to build war planes during WWII for the Japanese imperial army. The conversation between Haha and the organizers cuts away to a sand art animation to illustrate the colonial history's context combined with dramatic piano music and Haha's voiceover narration. The animation and narration state that over 70,000 Koreans were forced into labor to aid Japan's war effort, and many families were separated or displaced during this time. 1,300 of those laborers were sent to Utoro to build planes. Through melodramatic images and music, the animation contains unrestrained victimhood narrative historicizing the plight of Koreans forced into migrant labor for the Japanese imperial government, such as poor working conditions, starvation, illness and death. Although some had returned to Korea after the liberation, many stayed behind because they did not have the means to make it back home. After decades of living in Utoro and establishing a life there, the elderly Koreans of Utoro were told to leave the premises by the Japanese government. Haha makes arrangements to visit a 91-year-old woman named Kang Kyung-nam—the only living first generation Korean of Utoro. Haha goes to Kyōngju first where he finds two chefs who prepare foods that are local to Kyōngsang Province, which is where is Kyung-nam from. Haha brings the food to Kyung-nam who hasn't seen her hometown Sach'ŏn in South Kyōngsang Province since she was eight years old.

Once again, Korean indigeneity plays a role in hallyu nationalism via food, and it becomes a marker of Korean heritage. Haha eventually brings the food to Kyung-nam who dines with fellow Korean Utoro villagers around the table as the non-diegetic tune of a children's folk song "Kohyangŭi pom" ("Spring of My Homeland") plays over the scene. When Jae-suk joins Haha in Utoro to show photos of Sach'ŏn to Kyung-nam, she sheds tears of joy and nostalgia, claiming not to recognize the landscape any longer because they are so drastically different from her memory of home. As they part ways with Kyung-nam, both Jae-suk and Haha spend a long time with her shedding tears with their heads bowed. Jae-suk makes a tearful apology, telling Kyung-nam he is sorry for visiting her so late. What Jae-suk and Haha claim here is a collective national guilt over their ignorance as to the existence of Kyung-nam and the displaced Koreans who worked, lived and died in Utoro. This collective guilt is built upon Korea's collective suffering under Japanese atrocities, which demonstrates a oneness as a nation albeit built on a victimhood narrative.

Conclusion: Korea's Victimhood and Victimization

In 2015, *Infinite Challenge* aired the "Mudo Delivery" special that dumbed down their usual comedic qualities of the show to construct victimhood and hallyu nationalist narratives that relied on high emotionality through melodrama and reality TV elements but also folk and indigenous markers such as food and blood. Lisa Yoneyama writes, "[O]ne historical loss cannot be addressed and redressed without implicating other histories of violence and dispossession."⁴³⁸ The absence in these tear-jerking stories is the parallel of migrant workers from South and

⁴³⁸ Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1739/8603. Kindle edition.

Southeast Asian countries living in Korea today. In fact, *Infinite Challenge*'s description on DramaFever's site states that the cast members "scramble their way" through missions to prove that "*Infin[it]e Challenge* is 3-D: dirty, dangerous, and difficult."⁴³⁹



Figure 58. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.



Figure 59. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.



Figure 60. *Infinite Challenge*. MBC.

⁴³⁹ "Infinite Challenge," *DramaFever*,
https://www.dramafever.com/drama/4337/Infinity_Challenge/.



Figure 61. Infinite Challenge. MBC.

“3-D jobs” is an abbreviation that describes occupations that are “difficult, dirty, and dangerous,” and typically assigned to migrant workers in Korea, primarily factory work.⁴⁴⁰ *Infinite Challenge*, however, does feature any migrant workers to discuss of their plight. Instead, the members of the show engage in inane activities that have self-inflicted abuse including physical and mental pain and anguish, then reconfigure those afflictions into an honorable one dedicated to the nation-state. Rather than focus on the plight of ethnically non-Korean civilians of Korea who actually *do* occupy 3-D jobs working in Korean-owned factories, American military bases, domestic spaces, etc., *Infinite Challenge* dwells on the nation’s colonial past to strengthen ethnic nationalism by perpetuating narratives of victimhood and injustice or highlighting its hallyu nationalism through triumphalism. Jin-kyung Lee states, “South Koreans, whose ethnonational identity has been shaped by the continual shoring up of a sense of victimhood in relation to Japanese colonialism and US neocoloniality, now must grapple with

⁴⁴⁰ Jin-kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea*, 198.

their new position in the present global order that has created an anti-subimperial population, an anti-Korean political entity.”⁴⁴¹ In the global order, Korea’s position as a middle power has potential to aid other national interests, however, this should not be limited to economic aid alone. Building a social infrastructure to facilitate greater cultural understanding and offer justice to the disenfranchised who are exploited in contemporary Korea must be prioritized. There are limits to this when ethnic nationalism is placed at the forefront of Korean consciousness via victimhood or triumphalist narratives. Xenophobic remarks found in America’s political discourse today that blames economic slumps to immigrants and undocumented workers are commonly found in Korea as well.⁴⁴²

Even in comedy, Korean entertainment exhibits national traumas in efforts to combat cultural amnesia of the nation’s past struggles. Korean public television dwells on its colonial victimhood but lacks self-reflection of its own history of victimizing local and international women as well as Southeast and South Asian workers. While the number of Korean women who were sexually enslaved and raped by Japanese soldiers during WWII is estimated at hundreds of thousands, it is also documented that Korean men raped and murdered many local women during the Korean War—an incestuous battle that caused family members to turn against one another out of suspicion against their loyalty to the state and its ideologies due to US McCarthyism versus communism.⁴⁴³ In addition, when 300,000 South Korean soldiers were recruited by the US as “mercenary troops” to fight in the Vietnam War, many of them had relations with Vietnamese women and abandoned their children.⁴⁴⁴ The shame that American soldiers harbored

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, 198, 204.

⁴⁴² Ock Hyun-ju, “Korean perceptions of migrant workers worsen: survey,” *Korean Herald*, Jan. 3, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180103000696>, accessed Jan. 7, 2020.

⁴⁴³ See Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*, (New York: Random House, 2010).

⁴⁴⁴ Jin-kyung Lee, 76.

by fathering illegitimate offspring before abandoning them when leaving Vietnam applies to Korean soldiers as well. The Korean soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War for the US also committed war atrocities in Vietnam, including the murder of thousands of unarmed Vietnamese civilians between 1964-1973.⁴⁴⁵ Hyun Sook Kim asks, “How can Vietnam, as a site of critical inquiry and a place of history, be actively incorporated into Korea’s national memory?”⁴⁴⁶ Television is a potential answer to this incorporation yet mainstream programs leave out Korea’s war crimes and the nation maintains a disavowal of said crimes: “Koreans’ demand for redress of the historical injustices committed during Japan’s colonization of Korea must be accompanied by South Koreans’ need to seek Vietnamese forgiveness.”⁴⁴⁷ The ROK is repeating history by sending “the second largest number of ground troops after the United States” to aid the US’s war in Iraq against the outcry of the Korean public.⁴⁴⁸

In the present day, Filipina and Eastern European female sex workers pursue Korean men and American GIs in US military base camptowns in Korea for upward mobility; since the 1990s an increase in Filipino, Chinese and Vietnamese men and women have been living and working precariously in unjust conditions in Korea as migrant workers or migrant brides while recognition of their Korean citizenship remain unstable.⁴⁴⁹ As Hae Yeon Choon states: “The border of citizenship has never been static; rather, it is a productive site for the pursuit of equal

⁴⁴⁵ Hyun Sook Kim, “Korea’s ‘Vietnam Question’: War Atrocities, National Identity, and Reconciliation in Asia,” *Positions*, 2001, 9:3, 621-635.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 621-635, 622.

⁴⁴⁷ Jin-kyung Lee, 76.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 37.

⁴⁴⁹ For a detailed ethnographic study on this topic, see Hae Yeon Choon’s *Decentering Citizenship: Gender, Labor, and Migrant Rights in South Korea*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

rights in the face of exclusion.”⁴⁵⁰ Gi-wook Shin acknowledges that Korea’s ethnic nationalism does not invite other national identities beyond ethnicity: “Koreans need to promote a civic national identity that would allow more diversity and flexibility among the populace, including foreign workers, rather than simply appealing to and enforcing conformity to an ethno-nationalism that tends to encourage false uniformity.”⁴⁵¹ To do this, Koreans must learn how to move beyond ethnicity or “blood” as a signifier of national identity. Furthermore, as Shin argues, institutionalization of identity politics may aid Koreans in achieving this goal.⁴⁵² Establishing these grounds may be a long and arduous road, however, just as *yenŭng* can be a vehicle in building ethnocentric nationalism, it has potential for knowledge formation of identity politics, local injustice, and social activism to amplify the voice of marginalized groups. What cannot be overlooked is that *yenŭng* programs are a powerful apparatus that can mobilize the public and reconstruct national memory, passing on knowledge of a tragic past from one generation onto the next but also contribute to ignoring, erasing or not recognizing the painful history and past imbued with Korea’s national shame. *Infinite Challenge* constructs a memory of victimhood through historical archives and narration while showcasing families separated among the Korean diaspora through colonization, war, adoption, or financial needs. But *Infinite Challenge* is also an example of *yenŭng*’s ability to self-reflect and self-interrogate through its reflexivity and probing truths to get to the real; the potential to do this with regards to the nation’s complex and ever-changing ethnonationality is also there.

⁴⁵⁰ Hae Yeon Choon, *Decentering Citizenship: Gender, Labor, and Migrant Rights in South Korea*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 7.

⁴⁵¹ Gi-wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, And Legacy*, locations 2342-2344. Kindle Edition.

⁴⁵² *Ibid*, locations 2975. Kindle Edition.

On November 23, 2018, I attended the Korean Women's Association for Communication Studies seminar entitled, "2018 Society's Minority Legacy in Media and Broadcast Television" in Seoul. The panelists included a group of communication studies and gender studies scholars from Korean universities and one television industry worker—KBS PD Ahn Jin. The scholars presented their findings from recent Korean television programs and films where minority identities appeared such as Chinese-Koreans (chosŏnjok), and how often they appeared as either dangerous, psychologically or emotionally unsound, destitute, or weak. Scholars especially problematized the representation of migrant brides in Korean film and television. PD Ahn Jin offered a counterpoint to the scholars' findings and mentioned that there are documentary-based reality shows that aim to humanize ethnically non-Korean citizens living as housewives or workers, but added, in jest, that the ratings on these shows are "dangerously low"—to the point where she might lose her job. Ahn also mentioned the contrast of these ratings to *yenŭng* programs that feature non-Koreans which have high ratings because the majority of foreigners who appear on those shows are white men. Ahn's points describe the local culture's taste and viewing preferences; while there are documentary programs that actively humanize migrants living in Korea, viewers are uninterested; sensationalized TV dramas and films that problematically feature migrants negatively, however, have higher viewer ratings. But nowhere in this conversation was budgeting and how networks rationalize allocation of production funds to which programs mentioned.

The academics in Korea are consciously debating as to what constitutes fair and accurate portrayals of minority groups in Korea when it comes to ethnically non-Korean citizens of the ROK. What's missing from such discussions, however, are perspectives of non-Korean scholars, viewers and workers. In this regard, there is more work to be done to include a diversity of critiques in efforts to improve Korea's media representation of minorities, constructions of national identity,

and willingness to accept the nation's multiculturalism. The seminar on minorities in Korean media, however, lacked any mention of LGBTQIA+ issues. The next chapter focuses on queerness in Korean variety programs and cable television.

Chapter 3: Cable Variety TV, Queerness and the Return of Fallen Stars

In this chapter I examine variety shows and the impact of cable television in Korea. It is separated into two sections; the first section produces a discursive queer political discourse by examining the cable industry, the Broadcasting Act, and state laws regarding transgender identities and homosexual relations within the Korean military. A closer look at the KCC—a state organization that is responsible for TV censorship and specific exchanges within the television industry—reveals the government’s limited concerns over fair and equal treatment of queer citizens. Meanwhile, the variety genre itself is highly subversive and frequently employs queerable subjects onscreen. Queerness is hypervisible through variety show gimmicks, mise-en-scene and homosocial casting which temporarily allow all identities to transgress their social prescriptions through cross-gender performance and queer intimacy between straight men. This section investigates the KCC’s accusations of homophobia and sexism against the JTBC program *Ask Us Anything*, which conflict with the state’s own inconsistency in protecting the rights and representation of marginal identities. The conjoining of homophobia and misogyny legitimizes hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, while the queerness of the variety genre creates moments of queer potential on television.

Section two of this chapter focuses on the same program but specifically on how the cable network permits “fallen” male stars of the Korean television industry to make a return to the small screen after having “done their time” away from entertainment to “self reflect” on their actions. Beloved male entertainers with a marred past make their return to television on Korean cable channels. This section explores masculinity in the context of failure, comedy and redemption and how cable enables television personalities associated with scandal to make their return by harnessing their dicey past as part of their contemporary star persona.

Part I: The Queer Politics of Korean Variety TV: State, Industry, Genre & Gender⁴⁵³

On September 3, 2016, the popular South Korean (hereafter “Korean”) variety program *Ask Us Anything* on cable network JoongAng Tongyang Broadcasting Corporation (JTBC) aired an episode featuring singer Ahn Sol-bin of the Korean pop (K-pop) girl group LABOUM. Early in the episode, one of the program’s regular cast members Kim Hee-chul (of boyband Super Junior) invites Ahn to come sit beside him saying, “Sol-bin. Even if you date me, you won’t be involved in any scandals so don’t worry. Really.” To this, Ahn immediately responds, “Why? Are you gay?” Kim and the cast members all react to Ahn’s comment with laughter while the canned audio laugh track plays alongside. Three months later, the Korea Communications Commission (KCC) issued a disciplinary action against *Ask Us Anything*’s program runners citing this remark to be problematic as it might be offensive to the “sexual minority” (*sŏngsosuja*) otherwise known as the LGBTQIA+ group in Korea. Alongside this, the KCC also condemned the program’s frequent objectification of women’s bodies, citing the episode in which cast member Min Kyung-hoon made a bra out of paper cups and gifted it to actress Jun So-min. The KCC is a state administration that is responsible for producing and regulating all broad and narrowcast policies including censorship and comparable to the FCC in the US. KCC representative Ha Nam Shin states, “[*Ask Us Anything*] is a variety program which is comedic in nature but it also enjoys a level of popularity that rivals non-cable programs. This means that the show also must maintain a level of class that reflects its popularity and we decided to issue a warning on this ground.”⁴⁵⁴ In the same report is a record that thirty-seven viewers wrote in

⁴⁵³ A version of this part of the chapter is published in *JumpCut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 60 spring 2021.

⁴⁵⁴ Pinaz Kazi, “Knowing Brothers receive severe disciplinary action for sexually objectifying women,” *International Business Times*, Dec. 27, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.sg/knowing-brothers-receive-severe-disciplinary-actions-sexually-objectifying-women-5891>.

complaints against the show to the KCC, although the details of these complaints were not published.

This section investigates the KCC's disciplinary action against *Ask Us Anything* based on claims of homophobia and sexism, which construct a state concern for the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community and women. The infrastructure of the state and industry, however, prevent fair and equal treatment of queer and female identities on and off screen. While the two particular incidents that the KCC cite lack sufficient textual evidence of homophobia or sexism, *Ask Us Anything* does air homophobic and misogynistic content that state censors overlook, demonstrating that the KCC's political concerns for the rights of marginal identities in the ROK are inconsistent at the very least. I take a discursive approach towards producing a queer political discourse of the Korean television industry.⁴⁵⁵ Similar to the method that political scientist Samuel Chambers applies, I bring attention to the "queer politics" of Korean variety television by reading the text through a queer lens. Additionally, I analyze state laws, the industry, and episodes of *Ask Us Anything* for evidence of state and industry intolerance of queer identities.⁴⁵⁶ I incorporate industry discourse through an interview of a former Korean television industry employee who produced comedic variety show content for commercial television and radio at SBS. The interview highlights how the oppression of both queer and female subjects reinforces a hegemonic-masculinist logic in the TV industry.⁴⁵⁷ While this section of the chapter includes just

⁴⁵⁵ Stuart Hall, "Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse," *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, eds. Margaret Wetherell, et al., (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 72-81.

⁴⁵⁶ Samuel A. Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television*, (New York & London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 3-10.

⁴⁵⁷ By "hegemonic masculinity," I am referring to the dominant hetero masculinity in Korea which propagates misogyny; see Woori Han et al, "Gendering the Authenticity of the Military Experience: Male Audience Responses to the Korean Reality Show *Real Men*," *Media, Culture & Society*, 2017, 39:1, 62-67; the authors base their concept of hegemonic masculinity from Gramsci's (1973) work on hegemony.

one former industry worker's views, the final chapter includes many for a more rounded out perception of this issue; this interviewee's insights are used specifically to demonstrate the industry's position when it comes to gender identity and sexual orientation. With that said, Korean queer scholarship has a complicated debate around issues of identity and coalition politics.

Korean LGBTQIA+ activists and Korean feminists have a contentious relationship. Korean trans-studies scholar Ruin's essay on transnormativity describes the conflict that trans feminists and cis-female feminists faced in the early 2000s because of transphobia. Lesbian-rights activists also critique Korean feminists for "blatantly exclud[ing] lesbian issues."⁴⁵⁸ Cis-female feminists criticize trans feminists for dismantling their feminist work by catering to the male gaze (trans singer and actress Harisu being one example). Ruin additionally notes how cis-female feminist scholars treat queer issues as "merely private and trivial personal interests, rather than being significant to the very formulation of gender."⁴⁵⁹ This rationale considers queer issues as non-issues and justifies the treatment of queer bodies as invisible—a rationale that Korean politicians also adopt. Todd Henry's essay "Queer/Korean Studies as Critique" illustrates the systemized discrimination against and suppression of not only queer identities in the ROK but also the scholars who seek to publish on the topic which "relegate[s] scholarship on LGBTQI Koreans to a position of negativity and neglect."⁴⁶⁰ In fact, during the research for this chapter, I

⁴⁵⁸ Soo Jin Park-Kim (Park Tong), Soo Youn Lee-Kim (Siro) and Eun Jung Kwon-Lee (Yuri), "The Lesbian Rights Movement and Feminism in South Korea," *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, (2007), 10:3-4, 161-190, 182.

⁴⁵⁹ Ruin, "Discussing Transnormativities through Transfeminism," *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2016, 3:1-2, 202-211, 206.

⁴⁶⁰ Todd Henry, "Queer/Korean Studies as Critique: A Provocation," *Korea Journal*, 58 (2) 2018, 5-26, 10.

had trouble finding Korean academic publications on critical queer television studies. What little I did find were few and far in between.

Ruin problematizes how queer studies in Korea gets consigned to women's studies departments (since the 1990s) because cis-female scholars limit the scope of the discourse to hetero-feminist priorities and visions: "[The] transnormative narrative is designed for consumption by nontrans people in order to facilitate their understanding of trans people, to set their expectations of them, and to structure interactions with them."⁴⁶¹ Soo Jin Park-Kim (Park Tong) et al cite the history of lesbian rights being excluded if not entirely left behind by women's studies scholars and activists due to homophobia and patriarchy that stand between lesbian feminists and hetero feminists. Cis-gender hetero feminists offered an insensitive study of lesbians by referring to their sexuality as "abnormal," which created further rifts between queer feminists and cis-gender straight feminists: "The story of myself, a Korean lesbian who is definitely a 'woman' and homosexual, wasn't left out by someone's mistake. It just was not there in the first place."⁴⁶² Queer Korean scholars put out a call for feminists, regardless of their sexual orientation, to unite around one goal: "Solidarity between lesbian activists and feminists is essential to challenging hetero-sexual centric patriarchy."⁴⁶³ Woori Han also believes that Korean LGBTQIA+ activists can thrive through coalition politics: "[B]uilding solidarity with labor activists and feminists who have actively participated in pride parades since 2015 and who are also perceived as interrupting national development by capitalist and patriarchal norms,

⁴⁶¹ Ruin, 203.

⁴⁶² Ibid, 181.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

LGBTQIA+ activists may reconfigure citizenship and queerness in ways that can critique both queer liberalism and developmentalism.”⁴⁶⁴

Gender discrimination is different from discrimination against sexual orientations; these identities and their histories are distinct yet intertwined. There are overlaps in how both groups are discriminated against in contemporary Korean society. The discriminatory practices against women and queer identities expose how hegemonic masculinity affects both groups in the television industry.

Anti-Queer Politics in Korean Broadcasting

The Cable Television Broadcasting Act in Korea was approved on December 17, 1991, however, the cable industry’s growth was slow due to the government’s overregulation of the industry. Cable networks that emerged in 1995 did not last. In 1998, the cable television industry was deregulated, following the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis (also known as the Asian Financial Crisis) of 1997. The Cable Television Broadcasting Act was amended in 1998 which allowed vertical and horizontal integration of these channels. The ROK television broadcasting used to be centralized primarily to the state broadcaster—Korea Broadcasting System (KBS)—for military dictator Park Chung-hee to maintain control of the media. In the early 1990s, laws were amended to allow commercial and cable broadcasters to compete, and a separate act—the Cable Television Broadcasting Act—was introduced in 1991. Since 2000, however, the entire cable industry is now subject to broadcast regulations of the Broadcasting Act set by the Korea Broadcasting Commission now known as the KCC.

⁴⁶⁴ Woori Han, “Proud of Myself as LGBTQ: The Seoul Pride Parade, Homonationalism, and Queer Developmental Citizenship,” *Korea Journal* 58 (2) 2018: 27-57, 52-53.

Queer Korean identities are not outlawed or entirely invisible in broadcast television. Within domestic politics, however, there is stark lack of effort from the state to enforce policies that liberate queer identities from discrimination. Following the impeachment and arrest of former President Park Geun-hye in late 2016, President Moon Jae-in was elected into office. During Moon's presidential campaign, he publicly announced that he opposed gay marriage and homosexuality in the military. Moon claimed that one's sexual orientation was a "private matter"—a statement that forces queer identities into the closet and prevents them from living freely and openly in society.

Homosexuality is not illegal in Korea but laws like the Juvenile Protection Act (also known as the Youth Protection Act) that went into effect in 1997 masquerades as a form of government protection of the youth while repressing queer identities. In 2001, the law was amended to prohibit the distribution of any homosexual material alongside content related to incest, bestiality and sado-masochism.⁴⁶⁵ Distribution, according to the act, includes the sale of audio-visual media content and broadcasting. This law not only equates homosexuality with harm to youths, but also legitimizes the exclusion of queer subjects on television. In April 2003, after years of gay rights activism by Korean LGBTQIA+ groups, "homosexuality" was removed from the list of "obscenity and perversion."⁴⁶⁶ Despite this, in 2015, it was reported that Samsung, along with Google, banned a popular app for social networking within the queer community called Hornet.

⁴⁶⁵ Erick Laurent, "Sexuality and Human Rights," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 48:3-4, 163-225, 206.

⁴⁶⁶ OutRight Action International, "South Korea: Homosexuality Removed from Classification of 'Harmful and Obscene' in Youth Protection Law," Apr. 22, 2003, <https://www.outrightinternational.org/content/south-korea-homosexuality-removed-classification-harmful-and-obscene-youth-protection-law>, (accessed Mar. 6, 2018).

Samsung, which owns the newspaper *JoongAng*, is also affiliated with the JTBC network where *Ask Us Anything* airs. (The KCC's Broadcast Act allowed *chaebol*⁴⁶⁷ groups to own up to 33% of cable operations to produce, program and air their own entertainment.⁴⁶⁸) A representative of the company explained in a memo to Hornet dated January 1, 2013 that the app was not approved for Samsung Galaxy phones and tablets: “[D]ue to the local moral values or laws, content containing LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi sexual, Transgender) is not allowed in the following countries....”⁴⁶⁹ The list includes 34 countries including the ROK and the US, as well as nations with socially progressive gender and sexuality politics such as Sweden, Iceland, Denmark and Norway. The report also states that images found in the app are “not appropriate for young users” such as teens and children.⁴⁷⁰ This remark stems from Samsung's assumption that an LGBTQIA+ identity is necessarily sexual and immoral. It also contains the discriminatory myth that conflates homosexuality with pedophilia. Samsung's report which includes this conflation is consistent with the language used by the KCC in the Broadcasting Act. While queerness is not illegal in Korea, discrimination against said identities is systemically present in both state and commercial institutions in Korean society.

The KCC's Broadcasting Act applies to all broadcast and narrowcast programs that air. Throughout the document, there is a consistent discouragement of “lewdness” or anything that

⁴⁶⁷ *Chaebol* refers to Korean conglomerates.

⁴⁶⁸ For more on Korean cable history, see Daeyoung Kim, “The Development of South Korean Cable Television and Issues of Localism, Competition, and Diversity,” (2011), *Research Papers*. Paper 78, Southern Illinois University of Cabondale OpenSIUC, http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp/78; Armit Schejter and Sahangshik Lee, “The Evolution of Cable Regulatory Policies and Their Impact: A Comparison of South Korea and Israel,” *Journal of Media Economics*, 20:1, 2007, 1-28.

⁴⁶⁹ Samsung Apps, “Application Screening Result Report.”

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

would disrupt “a sound family life and on [the] guidance of children and juveniles.”⁴⁷¹ The Broadcasting Act also condemns discrimination according to “sex, age, occupation, religion, belief, class, region, race, etc.”: “A broadcast shall strive to faithfully reflect the interests of the groups or classes that are relatively small in number or at a disadvantage in realization of the pursuit of their interests.”⁴⁷² Whereas identity-based discrimination is condemned, there is no explicit language that protects sexual orientation. By not reserving any explicit language for LGBTQIA+ rights, stressing the family, emphasizing the protection of youth, and overall “public morals and social ethics,” the Broadcasting Act demonstrates its bias for the heteronormative family structure. The state’s protectiveness of the “sound family life,” the children, as well as public morals is motivated by sexist and homophobic underpinnings, as demonstrated by the Juvenile Protection in the late 1990s.⁴⁷³

Despite the state’s emphasis on family life, there are many single people living in Korea. The number of heterosexual marriages are low while divorce rates are high. Child birth is also at a low, which produces a great deal of government anxiety given the high number of senior citizens and a concern over welfare.⁴⁷⁴ Because there are so many singles living in Korea, same-sex cohabitation among heterosexuals is quite common, and homosexual cohabitation can easily pass for straight cohabitation.⁴⁷⁵ As mentioned earlier, being gay, lesbian or bi-sexual is not

⁴⁷¹ Korea Broadcasting Act, The Korea Communications Commission, chapter 1, article 5, paragraph 5, 6.

⁴⁷² Ibid, chapter 1, article 6, paragraph 2, 6; chapter 1, article 6, paragraph 5, 6.

⁴⁷³ Ibid, chapter 1, article 5, paragraph 5, 6.

⁴⁷⁴ Suk-Hee Kim et al, “Long-Term Care Needs of the Elderly in Korea and Elderly Long-Term Care Insurance,” *Social Work in Public Health*, 25 (2) 2010: 176-184.

⁴⁷⁵ Hwajeong Yoo, “Living Cohabitation in the Republic of Korea: The Reported Experiences of Lesbians, Gays and Heterosexuals,” Ph.D. diss., 2015, The University of York (United Kingdom), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1779252662?accountid=14512> (accessed March 7, 2018).

illegal in Korea. Additionally, transgender folks are not barred by law to change their gender status in government records, public files, and national registration identification card (chumin tŭngnokjŭng) albeit with a great number of challenges.⁴⁷⁶

The policing of queer people occurs in certain spaces. According to the Constitutional Court of Korea, Article 92 of the Military Criminal Law considers homosexual behavior (2008Hun-Ga21) in the military punishable by law. Article 92 stipulates that anal sex or sexual acts between service men may be punishable for up to two years in prison. Because of this law, in 2017, over 30 men were arrested and charged with 2008Hun-Ga21.⁴⁷⁷ Laws such as these demonstrate the legal consequences of being male and gay in Korea, where conscription to the military is mandatory for every able-bodied cis-man in the country. Although the military does not turn away gay conscripts, the law does not tolerate gay intimacy during service.⁴⁷⁸ In addition, in January 2020, transgender sergeant Byun Hui-su was discharged by the Korean military citing “physical or mental disabilities” as a provision to discharge military personnel, equating Byun’s gender-reassignment surgery as a disability, and barring her from serving despite her desire and commitment to her military duty and national security. Such examples demonstrate the suffering that queer individuals endure in Korea due to the nation’s homophobia and transphobia.

⁴⁷⁶ For more on this topic, see Ruin, trans. Max Balhorn, “Mobile Numbers and Gender Transitions: The Resident Registration System, the Nation-State, and Trans/Gender Identities,” ed. Todd A. Henry, *Queer Korea*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 357-375.

⁴⁷⁷ Paula Hancocks and Lauren Suk, “Dozens arrested as South Korea military conducts ‘gay witch-hunt,’ *CNN*, June 11, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/11/asia/south-korea-lgbt-military/index.html>.

⁴⁷⁸ Hyun-Jung Song, “The Application of the American Experience on the Decriminalization of Homosexuality to South Korea,” *Kyungpook National University Law Journal*, 53:2, 2016, 31-54.

The ROK's military discrimination against queer citizens is an example of Eve Sedgwick's concept of "homosexual panic"—a type of homophobia that occurs in a homosocial environment wherein both the self and others are suspected of being gay and therefore feared.⁴⁷⁹ Homophobia is amplified in homosocial conditions because the potential for homosexual desire is heightened. I add that not only does the Korean state induce homosexual panic through law but legitimizes said panic with the state's concerns over the country's low birth rate as mentioned in chapter one. All men in the ROK are required to serve in the military for up to two years—a gendered state obligation required in order to be recognized as men—a quality that is replayed in the form of ritual with ridiculous games on *yeŋŋ* programs like *Infinite Challenge* as mentioned in chapter two.⁴⁸⁰ Upon completing this task, the next step is for men to fulfill their state duties as breadwinners by participating in the economy and as fathers through marriage and procreation with a woman. Thus, homosexual panic, when coupled with the nation's panic over the population crisis, makes homosexuality appear like a betrayal to the state, and women's bodies are seen as useful solely for procreation.⁴⁸¹ The nation's heavy emphasis on heteronormative familialism, or what John (Songpae) Cho calls "Confucian biopolitics," "inhibits the expression of homosexuality, except in highly discreet ways...."⁴⁸²

⁴⁷⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic," *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 157-174.

⁴⁸⁰ Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 45.

⁴⁸¹ Woori Han et al, "Gendering the Authenticity of the Military Experience: Male Audience Responses to the Korean Reality Show *Real Men*," *Media, Culture & Society*, 2017, 39:1, 62-67; the authors mention how the misogynistic response from male audiences of *Real Men* blame women who pursue their own careers and interests for not birthing enough military personnel (sons) who can fulfill their duties to the state.

⁴⁸² John (Song Pae) Cho, "The Three Faces of South Korea's Male Homosexuality: Pogal, Iban, and Neoliberal Gay," (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 263-294, 265-266.

In her monograph on single women and the housing market in Korea, Jeessook Song details how lesbians remain closeted for fear of facing job discrimination and abandonment by their families. All unmarried women—lesbian or straight—who choose to live apart from their families are infantilized by their community: “[Unmarried women] are treated as children or disabled people and their sexual security is threatened.”⁴⁸³ The treatment of single women as disabled echoes the treatment of sergeant Byun as disabled and therefore unfit to serve as a trans woman. Misogyny and transphobia in such contexts become a form of ableist discrimination. Song describes one woman’s experience at a social gathering where she was told by married men that “‘children should go home’ because they ‘shouldn’t interfere with...adult business.’”⁴⁸⁴ Song observes a parallel between the single woman’s issue with the queer issue because both identities fall outside of Korea’s social order of heteronormativity which is, in part, conditioned by patriarchal rationalizations that all women should be married to men, and label those who are not as “immature.” The misogynistic idea of the single woman’s immaturity is tied to the assumption that all single women are virgin, and not sexually awakened through the aid of a man, specifically a husband. The possibility that the woman might have engaged in pre-marital sex with someone regardless of gender or sexual orientation prior to meeting her husband simply isn’t an option. Just as female bodies are treated as purely an apparatus of procreation within the confines of marriage to a man, homosexuality is not viewed as an option in this hegemonic masculinist conception of “normal” lives and relationships. This assumption ignores accounts documented in memoirs and short stories of lesbian relationships among school girls in colonial Korea, which were long trivialized and dismissed by scholars due to their ephemeral and

⁴⁸³ Jeessook Song, *Living On Your Own: Single Women, Rental Housing, and Post-Revolutionary Affect in Contemporary South Korea*, 33.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

transient quality during the girls' "transitional phase" of adolescence: "And unlike heterosexual relationships that often entail the danger of either becoming ensnared in a feudal family structure or ending up as a married man's mistress, same-sex love functions as a platform in which the girls can jointly construct their identities and fulfill their desires as 'modern women.'"⁴⁸⁵ It also erases the documented homoerotic stories between women catered predominantly to male readers for entertainment purposes in newspaper weeklies that combined "investigative journalism and the playful invention of fictional storytelling" that produced "cautionary tales" in 1950s-1970s ROK's Cold War era to allow male readers to "imagine themselves as more thoroughly embodying idealized notions of (re)productivity and patriotism, thus allowing them to assume a position of domination in relation to their 'deviant' female compatriots."⁴⁸⁶ The conjoining of homophobia and misogyny legitimizes hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, while the queerness of the variety genre creates moments of queer potential on television. There is, however, a difference between representation of queer figures and queerness as a dynamic that is at play within the text; there are queer identifying figures like Hong Seok-cheon who represents queerness yet queerness is also present as a dynamic of the program itself as a text albeit outside of any formulation of narrative.

The Queerness of the Korean Variety Show Called *Yenŭng* and Its Significance

⁴⁸⁵ Shin-ae Ha, trans. Kyunghye Eo, "The Wartime System and the Symptomacy of Female Same-Sex Love," Todd A. Henry, ed. *Queer Korea*, 146-174, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 149-150.

⁴⁸⁶ Todd A. Henry, "Queer Lives as Cautionary Tales: Female Homoeroticism and the Heteropatriarchal Imagination of Authoritarian South Korea," ed. *Queer Korea*, 205-259, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 210-212.

As mentioned in the earlier chapters, *yenŭng* encompasses classic variety show elements such as singing, dancing, sketch, banter, improv, quizzes and games. Comedy is the foundation of all *yenŭng* programs and with it comes great possibility for destabilizing constructed identities. Jack Babuscio lists humor as “the strategy of camp: a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity.”⁴⁸⁷ The political application of queer theory matters greatly in contexts where the rigidity of language and ideology repress identities that go beyond hegemonic recognition as it is in the case with contemporary Korea. Dong-jin Seo writes, “Although homosexuality exists in modern-day Korean society, it seems to be an entity whose meaning has been endlessly deferred.”⁴⁸⁸ Seo laments the unhappiness which frequently defines homosexuality in Korean society because its “social existence” goes unrecognized. This raises the question of where Korea’s “non-normative” identities can turn to for affirmation and “queer happiness.” Thus, in my application of the term “queer,” I include all qualities and identities that disrupt heteronormative and hegemonic assumptions, and this extends to not just individuals but also genre categories including *yenŭng* which is genre-queer.

Yenŭng as a genre of television consistently displays queer and destabilized images of gender “norms.” Rather than simply search for queer-identifying figures on these programs, I argue that queerness is very present on Korean variety TV shows; “the mainstream itself might be thus realized, re-viewed, or remade as ‘queer.’”⁴⁸⁹ *Yenŭng* also exhibits its queerness through

⁴⁸⁷ Jack Babuscio, “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, 19-38, ed. David Bergman, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 27.

⁴⁸⁸ Seo, Dong-Jin, 2001, “Mapping the Vicissitudes of Homosexual Identities in South Korea,” trans.

Mark Mueller, *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity and Community*, edited by Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson, (New York: Harrington Park Press), 65-80, 66.

⁴⁸⁹ Lynn Joyrich, “Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams,” *Cinema Journal*, 53 (2) 2014: 133-139, 138.

camp aesthetics of excess and artifice; Korean variety programs have an excess of effects both sound and visual, e.g., CGI, slow motion, repetitive replays of significant moments, subtitles in bold texts, canned laugh track, music, and contain multitudes of intertextual meaning.

Star Intertext and the Straight Guys' Queer Possibility on Variety TV

Erick Laurent claims that queer culture in Korea has conflicting roots tangled in Buddhist and Confucian ideologies that coexist in the social and cultural fabric of society. Per Laurent's research, records of queerness in Korea date back to 350 AD, with cross-dressing shamans; in the 13th century, homosexual activity among the *hwarang*—men who served the royal court's military—occurred regularly; homosexuality was also a part of the *namsadang* (a mobile theater troupe) at this time. Queerness was present in spiritual, military and performance spaces of pre-modern Korean society. But as Confucianism began to take hold in Korean society, the pressure to conform to a hetero-family unit began to rise: “Confucianism, its emphasis on social order and family, viewed male same-sex relations as a threat, and tended to ignore female same-sex relations.”⁴⁹⁰ Meanwhile, Buddhist thought, which was and is just as influential in Korea, promotes acceptance of homosexual engagement. Because of this, Laurent contends that while the burden to get married and produce offspring is there (Confucianism), homosocial bonding is greatly tolerated (through Buddhism) in Korean society: “[S]ame –sex friends living together before marriage, the fact of holding hands and rubbing each other in the street, of brushing a male friend's buttock or genitals when parting. Nothing sexual will be interpreted.”⁴⁹¹ The kind of homosocial “tolerance” that Laurent describes here, however, has more to do with open

⁴⁹⁰ Laurent, 205.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid, 206.

homosexuality being so far from the realm of possibilities in society that such homoerotic behavior will not be interpreted as anything but straight intimacy. Ron Becker observes that post-closet American TV narratives construct “queer straight guys” who are open to the possibility of male-to-male intimacy as well as emotional and physical bonding; the queer straight guy concept functions as a sign of liberal progression of the producers and viewers of that era.⁴⁹² In Korea, however, the nation’s open tolerance of homosocial bonding is a result of never considering gay or lesbian relationships as a possibility. Open gayness is not an option. With that said, *Ask Us Anything* includes instances of homosocial bonding which cross into the realm of post-closet television with queer straight guy intimacy.

Kim Hee-chul is a popular entertainer and emcee on numerous talk and variety television shows but his stardom originates from the internationally beloved K-pop boyband Super Junior, which debuted in 2005. Since his debut, Kim co-hosted over three dozen unscripted television programs on public, commercial and cable channels. Kim’s popularity among fans stems from his sharp wit and comedic timing but also his close friendship with numerous girl group members and his androgynous appearance. For instance, Kim was mistaken for a woman by security guards when he tried to enter the men’s room. Although many rumors speculate on his sexuality, Kim claims to be straight.⁴⁹³ Kim also claims in interviews that he does not adamantly deny gay rumors for fear of offending his gay fans.⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹² Ron Becker, “Guy Love: A Queer Straight Masculinity for a Post-Closet Era?” *Queer TV, Theories, Histories, Politics*, Ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 121-140, 125.

⁴⁹³ Simi John, “Is Super Junior’s Heechul gay? Singer declares his true sexual orientation,” *International Business Times*, Sept. 6, 2017, <https://www.ibtimes.sg/super-juniors-heechul-gay-singer-declares-his-true-sexual-orientation-15915>, accessed Dec. 30, 2019.

⁴⁹⁴ Ra Hyo-jin, “Kimhūich'ōri tebwi ch'obut'ō iōjin 'keisōloūl haemyōnghaji anūn kōn sōngsosuja p'aendūl ttaemuniōtta,” *Huffington Post*, April 14, 2020,

On episode 37, Kim and the other members of the show play two rounds of a game called “the egg test,” which determines a man’s stamina by seeing who can hold an egg between their knees the longest. Kim wins both rounds of the test. Upon winning, Kim turns to the camera in direct address and says, “Dear future wife, aren’t you so grateful to me?” Kim performs his heteronormative masculinity here but he is mostly known on the show for his frequent cross-dressing and dancing alongside girl groups whenever they appear as guests; Kim is, by all means, “that bitch” on the show: “Within the world of queer performance, being ‘that bitch’ is about having an exacting, unquestionable creative juice and asserting yourself through performance and style.”⁴⁹⁵ Kim’s male co-hosts tease him for this while also expressing their amazement at how well he knows the girl groups’ dance moves. When Kim goes up to dance, the editors add graphic imagery to give Kim long flowing hair, turning the moment into a CGI drag performance like they did in episode 21 (air date Apr. 23, 2016) with a guest appearance by Red Velvet.



Figure 62. *Ask Us Anything*. JTBC.

https://www.huffingtonpost.kr/entry/story_kr_5e953d9bc5b606109f5f0e11, accessed July 20, 2020.

⁴⁹⁵ Madison Moore, “‘I’m that bitch’: on queerness and the catwalk,” *Safundi: Journal of South African and American Studies*, 18 (2), 2017: 147-155, 147.



Figure 63. *Ask Us Anything*. JTBC.

Kim happens to know all of their dance moves because he is a fan of Red Velvet’s music, but when the producers in the editing room place a CGI wig over Kim’s head, there is a hint of trans/homophobic ridicule in equating his love for a girl group as a gender-specific act. With that said, Kim’s “that bitch” attitude towards speculations on his sexuality as well as not seeking approval of whether his knowledge of girl group dance moves is a threat to his gender or sexual identity make him a confident queer figure on *Ask Us Anything*.



Figure 64. *Ask Us Anything*. JTBC.

Onscreen cross-dressing is a camp feature—a superficial style.⁴⁹⁶ Such images of gender nonconformity are also, as Quinlan Miller argues, “a part of trans history.”⁴⁹⁷ Kim’s persona on *Ask Us Anything* is “trans gender queer”—a term that “positions *gender* as a multiplicitous switch point between *trans* and *queer*, accounts for prototrans subject positions and for nonbinary orientation missed and misidentified because of conventions surrounding categories....”⁴⁹⁸ By naming Kim trans gender queer, the myth that queer identities do not exist on Korean television and therefore society is broken; queerness gets centered, and the variety show genre’s camp gets recognized: “[Television’s] cultural power came from trans gender queer camp....”⁴⁹⁹ Kim’s confidence and enthusiasm whenever he dresses like a woman or dances alongside girl groups is also a display of Becker’s notion of straight guy queerness. Kim may be straight but he is still the ultimate queer figure on *Ask Us Anything* by remaining untethered to gender norms which is a quality that is commonly found in many K-pop boybands. Male K-pop soloists and boybands have a flexible gender identity when it comes to expressions of masculinity, ranging from hard-bodied muscular images like Rain to softer, more effeminate images such as BTS and 2AM.⁵⁰⁰ The soft masculine images of these K-pop boybands demonstrates gender flexibility reserved for male K-pop stars whereas that option is extremely limited for girl groups who must always accommodate the hetero-male gaze. Girl groups are pressured to maintain slim bodies, certain facial features through surgery and makeup, wear short skirts and heels even when performing complex dance routines, and behave childishly (*aegyo*) to

⁴⁹⁶ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 67.

⁴⁹⁷ Quinlan Miller, *Camp TV*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019) 2.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid*.

⁵⁰⁰ For more on popular Korean masculinity and their diverse variations, see Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011).

preserve the fantasy of the infantilized girl child.⁵⁰¹ This gender rigidity placed onto girl groups to be hyper sexual and feminine is a sexist construction of desirable femininity designed to fit the standards of hetero-masculinity. Such gender disparity explains the variety show's homosocial environment. Women are not invited to be regular cast members on popular programs like *Ask Us Anything*. In general, women are never cast in historically popular variety shows such as *Infinite Challenge* and *2 Days 1 Night*. The shows' consistent failure to cast women as regulars is an act of female exclusion. These variety shows featuring only men permit queer moments between cast members with male-to-female cross-dressing because remaining homosocial with the potential of crossing into queer boundaries is preferred over inviting women as show regulars. Furthermore, the drag performance by these straight men is an example of "hetero-masculine drag" that gets staged strictly for "fun and comedy."⁵⁰²

Kim Hee-chul's star "intertext" of having a queer quality while maintaining a straight orientation makes him a prime candidate for giving the show a color of liberal progression by exploring gender fluidity as well as queer intimacy.⁵⁰³ This is particularly evident in the music video that Kim made with his fellow *Ask Us Anything* co-host Min Kyung-hoon entitled, "Sweet Dream." "Sweet Dream" is a musical collaboration between Kim and Min. The music video was made with the rest of the *Ask Us Anything* members and production staff. The music video's storyline is a vague love triangle between Kim, Min and Momo from the K-pop girl group

⁵⁰¹ An exception is Amber Liu of the K-pop girl group f(x) known for her androgynous tomboy look; for more on "aegyo," see Aljosa Puzar and Yewon Hong, "Korean Cuties: Understanding Performed Winsomeness (Aegyo) in South Korea," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 19, no. 4 (2018): 333-349.

⁵⁰² Joanna McIntyre, "Respect and Responsibility? Heter-Masculine Drag and Australian Football Culture," *Outskirts*, 33, 2015: 1-17, 1.

⁵⁰³ Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 51.

Twice. In the end, when Kim finally meets Momo in-person, he expresses his excitement at the possibility of being with her. To this, Min reacts with joy but later, when no one is looking, he removes his hand from his desk to reveal the scrawl “Kim Hee-chul <3 Min Kyung-hoon,” suggesting same-sex love.



Figure 65. Ask Us Anything. JTBC.

Kim and Min are known for their “bromance” or straight guy queerness on the program just as much as Kim is known for his feminine tendencies.⁵⁰⁴ Including these characters on a show as popular as *Ask Us Anything* signals the show’s progressive choices. However, it is important to note that these queer intimacies all function in the realm of comedy seeing as *Ask Us Anything* is a comedic variety program.

⁵⁰⁴ “Bromance” is a portmanteau of “brotherhood” and “romance.”



Figure 66. Ask Us Anything, JTBC.

As Chambers claims, “Thought rigorously, ‘queer television’ would describe television that suggests a relational understanding of (sexual) identity and/or television that resists or subverts normative heterosexuality.”⁵⁰⁵ Variety shows, which are known for their excessiveness and liminality through comedy, skits, costumes and games, are the perfect temporary realm for all identities to transgress their social and cultural boundaries for a moment before the show ends and everyone returns to their regular social positions. Experimenting with gender cross-over and homosocial play that edge towards homosexual intimacy are all acceptable in the secure bounds of variety comedy. With that said, *Ask Us Anything* displays homosexual panic when an openly gay man appears as a guest.

Open Gayness on *Ask Us Anything*

Actor Hong Seok-cheon is an *Ask Us Anything* guest on January 13, 2018. The minute Hong arrives, jokes stemming from homosexual panic get thrown around, which Hong himself plays into. When Kim Hee-chul asks Hong if he would care if Twice appeared, Hong expresses irritation at the thought of being surrounded by nine girls.

⁵⁰⁵ Chambers, 21.

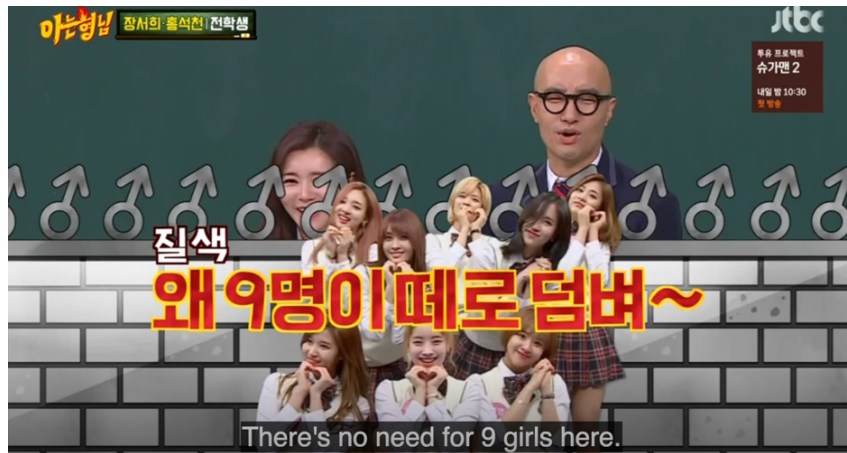


Figure 67. Ask Us Anything. JTBC.

But when Kim mentions the boy band Wanna One that includes eleven young men, Hong breaks out into a celebratory song and dance making his preference for men very clear.

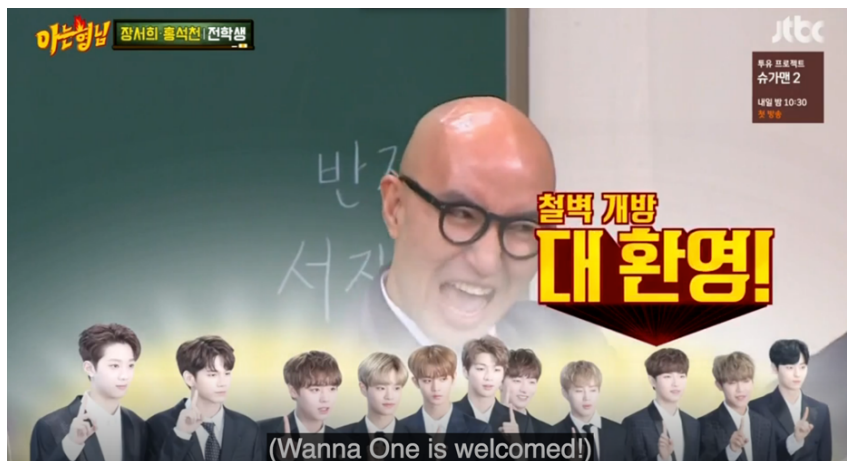


Figure 68. Ask Us Anything. JTBC.

Becker discusses how the constant presence of humor around television discussions of homosexuality demonstrates a persistent cultural anxiety around LGBTQIA+ themes in the mainstream: “That most queer straight guys are found safely wrapped in comedic irony reveals a culture nervously processing its changing politics of gender and sexuality rather than one fully confident in a vision of some queer future.”⁵⁰⁶ In the same way, discussions around gayness are

⁵⁰⁶ Becker, 135.

generally limited to spheres like the variety show, where the tolerance for queerness is very high through the safety net of comedy. Homosexuality is a threat to a set like *Ask Us Anything* where all the members are confined to a homosocial space; Hong's openly gay identity activates the homosexual panic in the room. Hong's deviance from heterosexuality is a threat to the members' masculinity. While Hong appears as an LGBTQIA+ member who has found success on television, due to the "dominant currents within televisual flow...[he is]...no longer quite queer...."⁵⁰⁷

Hong is the first openly gay Korean celebrity to come out in 2000. Upon coming out, Hong lost all his broadcast and advertisement deals. At the time, Hong was a regular on the children's program *PoPoPo* (MBC, 1981-2013). On *Ask Us Anything*, Hong casually mentions this period in passing, and how he could not make any television appearances for three years. From there, Hong transitions into a story about how his passion for cooking enabled him to become a great chef and successful restaurateur (he owns seven restaurants in Seoul's gay district Itaewon). The congratulatory and triumphalist tone of this anecdote, however, skirts the fact that Hong had to seek an alternative means of survival after losing his job in entertainment as a consequence of coming out. Hong is now back on as a regular in multiple programs, however, the social acceptance of Hong's gay identity relied on his success as a restaurateur. This demonstrates the conditional acceptance of gayness for economic purposes.⁵⁰⁸ Hong is tolerated by Korean society as a gay man because his wealth and status afford him that luxury. Living an openly gay life in Korea is not an option for everyone, especially if they lack the

⁵⁰⁷ Lynn Joyrich, "Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams," *Cinema Journal*, 53 (2) 2014: 133-139, 134.

⁵⁰⁸ Ron Becker, "Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties: Network Television, Quality Audiences, and Gay Politics," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 42, 1998: 36-47.

economic means to live apart from their families or be fired for ever coming out or be outed. Hong's bold move to come out in 2000 has empowered numerous others. However, Hong's persistent treatment in mainstream television as the gay man whose sexuality must be treated as a joke is a testament to Korea's social and cultural lag when it comes to acceptance and humanization of LGBTQIA+ citizens.

Heteronormative ideals on *Ask Us Anything* are prominent. Whenever a female guest who meets the standards that qualify her as desirable to the male gaze by being conventionally beautiful, young, slim, and demure, the cast members greet them with loud, unrestrained joy conjuring the classic cartoon image of Tex Avery's Big Bad Wolf who howls, whistles, and bangs his head with a mallet at the sight of an attractive woman. But when female comedians (Lee Guk-joo, Jo Hye-ryun, Park Narae, Shin Bong-sun, Park Mi-sun, Kim Shin-young, etc.) who do not meet patriarchal physical standards appear as guests, the cast members treat them as undesirable or threatening. The female comics are not feminine in the conventional sense (slim, young, pretty, demure) and they might as well be men. Thus, the female comedians' presence threatens hegemonic masculinity; the threat is visible in the male casts' open reaction of disdain, disappointment or disapproval of these women. In this context, female comedians are interchangeable with gay men in that both groups threaten the heteronormative order and are received similarly, signaling the queerness of female comedians. Another way to understand such female presence on the show would be to claim that "the female" does not exist—only "the non-male": "[T]he only way a woman can be accepted as a person (except as a demeaned, and still ultimately threatening, sexual object) is for her to become 'non-male'; that is to say without gender."⁵⁰⁹ *Ask Us Anything* preserves hegemonic masculine ideals through both misogyny and

⁵⁰⁹ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 63-64.

homophobia, however, in the male cast members' disqualifying or rejection of the female comedians on the show as acceptable, these women take on a queer trans gender dimension. John Fiske's concept of "excess as hyperbole" on television defines this inherent contradiction that television has in its ability to support dominant ideology (sexist and homophobic masculinity) while also being critical of it—however unwittingly or indirectly—through the transgressions such as straight guy queerness or queer trans gender elements as in the case with *Ask Us Anything*.⁵¹⁰

The KCC and Male Cronyism

KBS and MBC are considered "public broadcasters" in Korea. However, KBS is closer to a state broadcaster and relies on direct government subsidies as well as public funds (fees collected from every home that owns a television set) to produce its content ranging from news to TV documentaries to entertainment programs like dramas and variety shows. MBC is less beholden to the state because it is run by ads; however, given its foundational history as a public broadcaster, it must maintain its image and role as a public service. Commercial broadcaster SBS is subject to less scrutiny from the KCC because it is ultimately a commercial broadcaster and involves no government subsidies or public funds. With cable channels like JTBC, which narrowcasts to a niche audience, there is more leniency in terms of censorship. However, the Broadcasting Act applies to all Korean networks. If any network breaks KCC rules and standards, they are subject to warnings, fines and penalties at the workplace, such as a demotion.

⁵¹⁰ John Fiske, *Television Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1987 2011), 90-91.

On Feb. 7, 2018, I conducted an in-person interview with Ana Park—a former variety show producer-director (PD) who worked for SBS back in 2011.⁵¹¹ Park explained that despite the KCC’s standards for broadcasting and censorship, what ultimately matters is how close the chief producer (CP) is to the members of the board at the KCC. When a PD gets hit with a warning, there are a number of possibilities that could result. If the CP in charge of that team is close to members of the KCC, then the KCC will overlook any issues that could otherwise be problematic, e.g. cursing, slang, innuendos, etc. If the CP has no relationship with the KCC, or, even worse, a bad one, then the committee would be more scrupulous in their monitoring of the show and come down harder with punishments. Park extrapolated that the latter is likely in the case with *Ask Us Anything* involving Ahn Sol-bin’s question to Kim Hee-chul: “Asking someone jokingly if they are gay on a comedy show is hard to qualify as an offense. How can [the KCC] know if the majority of the viewers were offended by this? It’s hard to measure what turns an audience off. What ultimately matters is what the relationship is like between the CP and members of KCC board.”⁵¹² Park’s response is a direct reflection of how masculinist cronyism politics—a non-contractual “gentleman’s agreement”—dictates the political and social networks of the broadcasting industry and state institution.⁵¹³ The hetero-masculinist nature of these networks make female and queer identities impossible to enter—a reflection of the industry’s hegemonic structure. Park believes that the KCC is an archaic concept: “Back when I was working in TV, we all looked at the KCC like they were just a bunch of old men with too much

⁵¹¹ For the protection of the interviewee and per her request, “Ana Park” is a pseudonym.

⁵¹² Ana Park, in-person interview by author, Feb. 7, 2018.

⁵¹³ For more on cronyism politics in Korea, see Joanna Elfving-Hwang, “Aestheticizing Authenticity: Corporate Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Television Drama...” *Asia Pacific Perspectives*, 15:1, 2017, 55-72; Judith Irwin, “Doing Business in South Korea: An Overview of Ethical Aspects,” *Occasional Paper 2*, (London: Institute of Business Ethics, 2010).

time on their hands. They had nothing better to do so they came after us. Also, a lot of the men working at the KCC were former PDs whose programs didn't do so well, so now they were working for the state. If they were good at their jobs, then they'd still be working in the industry, right?»⁵¹⁴

PDs who retire from the industry often write books on how to survive the industry, or get a PhD and become professors. Others get hired by the state and work at the KCC. According to Park's testimony, however, it's also possible that the PDs who work at the KCC are disgruntled former industry workers. This makes the relationship between the industry and the state institution all the more dependent on how satisfied the KCC members are with the PDs they formerly knew as colleagues. There is an added social pressure among PDs due to this incestuous relationship between the KCC and networks, seeing as the KCC's decision to take disciplinary actions against a program can be quite arbitrary. People of lesser power are more vulnerable in situations where decisions are made arbitrarily. In an environment where interpersonal relationships dictate decision makings, it becomes harder for workers to have any certainty about their place in the industry's strata. Cronyism makes it all the more difficult for women to have any influence seeing as female industry workers are not invited to social settings that have professional impact. Park was careful to explain that finding favor with the broadcaster and the higher ups also depended on just how much the program was favored by viewers and listeners.

AP: "If a PD's program has incredibly high ratings but also a bunch of warnings, it becomes trickier for the CP. Ultimately, though, money wins. If you look at a show like *Cultwo*, it's partially successful because of the show's edginess and frankness. They've been hit with

⁵¹⁴ Ana Park, in-person interview by author, Feb. 7, 2018.

multiple warnings.⁵¹⁵ The DJs would even drink on the show, or show up to work after having a few. This is an absolutely unacceptable way to conduct broadcasts, and they've been warned by the KCC multiple times, but their ratings have remained steadily high. Audiences love them. So, in a case like theirs, the program and its staff are protected by other influences. A broadcaster can't afford to shut down a show with such high popularity." Park's explanation here is an example of immunity to power from market success, demonstrating the KCC's inconsistency while reaffirming the broad/narrowcasting system's neoliberal values.

Conclusion

Queer politics in Korean variety television is discursively visible on a state, industrial and generic level. The variety show's inherent openness as a genre allows greater queer possibilities among a homosocial cast. Images of straight guy queer intimacy and male-to-female crossdressing abound on *Ask Us Anything*. However, the show also demonstrates a preference towards queerness by directly refusing to engage with female entertainers on the set. This exclusion of female comedians as regular cast members of the show results from feelings of threat to their hetero masculinity. The same threat occurs when gay men appear on the show, who bring a similar disruption to the hetero order. In addition, the masculinist-hegemonic politics of the state and the television industry suppress queer and female subjects while permitting homophobia and misogyny to abound. State laws like the Broadcasting Act, the Juvenile Protection Act and 2008Hun-Ga21 not only fail to recognize queer identities but also

⁵¹⁵ *Cultwo* is a popular variety radio program on SBS that's been on air since 2006 hosted by variety talk show hosts Jung Chan-woo and Kim Tae-gyun.

regard homosexuality and transgender identification as a social malaise, and force LGBTQIA+ identities into the closet.

While the #MeTooKorea movement has been gaining steam since early 2018, outing predatory men of all ranks such as actors, PDs, and politicians, queer activism has yet to make its way into the mainstream discourse in Korea. Similar to how Hong Seok-cheon's return to television has been "earned back" through his entrepreneurial success with the restaurant business, Korea's #MeToo movement first gained its cultural value in the US by trending among Hollywood's most recognizable white actresses. The #MeTooKorea movement has "earned" the media's and public's attention through the Hollywood #MeToo movement's cultural value despite the fact that sexual harassment issues in the Korean entertainment industry have been circulating for years, and often disappeared without any indictments, public outcry and resignations. Queer individuals who suffer from injustice, invisibility and silencing are easily recognizable to women in Korea who suffer the same. There are deep parallels between the treatment of LGBTQIA+ groups and women in Korea, and how their social movements take place within a neoliberal system of justice and their legitimacy is contingent upon the recognition by existing forms of power, which only do so according to these figures' and events' value be it fiscal or cultural.

PART II: Evolved Television Personalities of *Yenŭng* Programs on South Korean Cable

The rise of Korean cable networks and the increasing popularity of their programs have been circulating in the press for several years now.⁵¹⁶ Following the success of Korean dramas (K-dramas) *Reply 1997* (2012) and *Reply 1994* (2013) which aired on tvN, JTBC enjoyed its success with the hit show *Secret Affair* (2014, JTBC) starring top-tier actors Yoo Ah-in and Kim Hee-ae. Cable *yenŭng* programs such as *Grandpas Over Flowers* (2013-2015, tvN) also saw success, which became a remake in the US as *Better Late Than Never* (2016-2018) on NBC.⁵¹⁷ In a Soompi roundtable discussion, the participants credit the success of these programs for being “daring,” taking “risks,” and making a “conscious effort to appeal to a broad spectrum of demographics,” as well as its advantage of being held to a lower standard of censorship than the major network broadcasters: “Cable TV is simply bolder.”⁵¹⁸ Korean cable television networks such as tvN and JTBC certainly are taking bigger risks than the nation’s three broadcasters—KBS, MBC and SBS.⁵¹⁹ This allows cable channels to stand out and be more competitive against broadcasters. The cable TV industry has been strategizing in recent years by revamping its model for television production by hiring younger writers with more innovative ideas and by creating a

⁵¹⁶ The Romanization for herein will follow the McCune Reischauer system save for the spelling of celebrity names and organizations, which will follow the format in how they appear in the press.

⁵¹⁷ *Yenŭng* is essentially a genre of Korean television that is unscripted, comedic and blends reality, variety and talk show elements and is hosted by comedians or celebrities known for comedic personas such as former athletes, actors, musicians, and K-pop idols.

⁵¹⁸ “The Rise of Cable in K-dramaland: A Couch Kimchi Roundtable,” *Soompi*, Dec. 24, 2014, <https://www.soompi.com/2014/12/24/hold-for-christmas-the-rise-of-cable-in-k-dramaland-a-couch-kimchi-roundtable/>.

⁵¹⁹ For more on Korean cable history, see Daeyoung Kim, “The Development of South Korean Cable Television and Issues of Localism, Competition, and Diversity,” (2011), Southern Illinois University of Carbondale OpenSIUC, http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp/78; Armit Schejter and Sahangshik Lee, “The Evolution of Cable Regulatory Policies and Their Impact: A Comparison of South Korea and Israel,” *Journal of Media Economics*, 20:1, 2007, 1-28

writers' room to make the developmental process more collaborative—a stark contrast from the conventional standard where a writer works in solitude prior to the production team receiving the script.⁵²⁰ Cable networks have also been poaching a number of writers, producers and stars for their own programs from the mainstream broadcasting networks by enticing them with greater freedom. Former staff writer of *Infinite Challenge* Park Ji-min explains, “The boundary between public broadcasting and cable has nearly vanished in recent years. When successful PDs transfer over to cable, writers and staff members also move to cable networks where the work environment is better.”⁵²¹

Not only do cable K-dramas have more instances of profanity, violence and sexual frankness, but cable *yenŭng* programs also take risks by hiring television personalities who were forced to resign from the television industry due to illicit activity. Cable networks have become a harbor for television personalities that make a return to the public after disappearing for some time due to a scandal that led them to disgrace—many of whom are men. This is especially the case with figures such as Lee Soo-geun, Lee Sang-min and, most especially, Kang Ho-dong on *Ask Us Anything*. As Richard Dyer argues, “one needs to think in terms of the relationships...between stars and specific instabilities, ambiguities, and contradictions in culture...”⁵²² rather than link one star to an entire society. Korean cable networks allow *yenŭng* programs to take risks in their unscripted programs by hiring disgraced public figures, while also enabling a sense of intimacy between performer and spectator through qualities of “overshare”

⁵²⁰ Jin Sun Park, Sae Bom Kim, Hun-Yul Lee, “Analysis of Changes in Television Drama Script Writing System: Focusing on Korean Cable Televisions Collective Creation Cases,” *Broadcasting & Communication*, 16 (3) 2015: 5-52.

⁵²¹ Park Ji-min. Email interview, May 17, 2019.

⁵²² Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 35.

on television.

Rebranding as a Bad Boy

All of the episodes on *Ask Us Anything* on JTBC begin with a cold open in their standard classroom setting with all of the cast members dressed in high school uniforms.⁵²³ The men roleplay according to the concept that they are all high school students of the same age but adlib their lines based on their actual lives and identity. In an episode that aired on Feb. 11, 2017 with celebrity guests Lee Teuk and Shin Dong of K-pop boyband Super Junior, Kang Ho-dong jokes that Shin Dong should take a year off to reflect on his actions because Shin Dong failed to know the title of another program that Kang co-hosts with Lee Kyung-kyu—*Let's Eat Dinner Together* (2016—, JTBC). In response to this, Kim Hee-chul fires back, “The amount of time you sentenced him for his self-reflection is the same as yours.”⁵²⁴ The members of *Ask Us Anything* openly riff on their troubled past with jokes that air their shameful publicity without spelling out the offense, which work under the guise that their past is public knowledge and now a part of their redesigned television persona.

The scandals associated with these figures are well-known in Korea. Lee Soo-geun, a comedian who rose to prominence for his roles in hit programs *Gag Concert* and the first season of *2 Days 1 Night* was involved in a 2013 gambling scandal alongside other celebrities. Because of this, Lee was dropped from all of his television gigs and disappeared from the public eye for two years before making his return in 2015.⁵²⁵ Lee Sang-min—former rapper of the hip-hop

⁵²³ This is with the exception of the first 16 episodes when the program first started and was in search of finding a format.

⁵²⁴ *Ask Us Anything*, JTBC, episode air date Feb. 11, 2017.

⁵²⁵ *The Korea Times*, “Lee Soo-geun’s Return Show,” June 15, 2015, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/culture/2015/06/201_180868.html.

group Roo'ra and producer of groups such as Chakra and Country Kko Kko—enjoyed his heyday in the 1990s but lost everything in the mid-2000s following a lawsuit and costly divorce after just a year into his marriage, failed business ventures, and an arrest for running an underground gambling enterprise. Lee became famously known for being 6 million US dollars in debt.⁵²⁶ Lee vanished from the public eye until 2012 when he made his public return as a television emcee on *The God of Music* (2012-2016) which aired on the music cable channel Mnet, owned by CJ E&M.

In Kang Ho-dong's case, his early television persona was very much built around nationalist interests tied to Korea's public and commercial broadcasters such as KBS—a state public broadcaster, MBC—a “public” broadcaster with commercial infrastructure, and SBS a commercial broadcaster. Kang is a former *ssirŭm* wrestler who made a name for himself as a local athlete in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁵²⁷ Ever since Kang retired from wrestling and joined the television industry as an entertainer in 1993, he began to appear on comedic television programs. Kang became the perfect figure to carry on the title of “nation's emcee” given how he'd already won the nation's heart with his athleticism of an indigenous national sport. Kang hosted a number of hit family-friendly weekend variety shows over the years. By the early-2000s, he had made a name for himself as “the nation's emcee” alongside another star television personality/comedian/emcee Yoo Jae-seok. Kang's image was built on wholesomeness and family-friendliness; the shows he led contained a “moral education” for viewers in lieu of

⁵²⁶ Jieun Choi, “‘Icon of Debt’: S Korea's Most Sought-After Celebrity,” *Korea Expose*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.koreaexpose.com/icon-debt-koreas-sought-celebrity/>.

⁵²⁷ *ssirŭm* is a form of folk wrestling; it is a national sport in Korea that dates back to ancient history.

patriarchy, or in-step with national patriarchy when considering the shows' airing on public broadcast networks.⁵²⁸

In September 2011, however, Kang faced prosecution over tax evasion. At the time, Kang was hosting several very popular *yenŭng* programs across the nation's three broadcasters: *Star King* (2007-2011, SBS), *Golden Fishery: Knee-Drop Guru* (2006-2011, MBC), the first season of *2 Days, 1 Night*, and *Strong Heart* (2009-2011, SBS). Kang subsequently went into a temporary "retirement" from the industry, and did not appear on any television shows for a full year. In 2012, Kang signed a contract with SM Entertainment and made a comeback on broadcast television but his shows failed to generate sufficient ratings and ended after a short run. In his book on broadcasting, PD Nam Kyu-hong writes, "Kang Ho-dong, who was once known as the nation's emcee, made a comeback without much success. ... I have not seen many television personalities who leave the industry make a successful return to recover the popularity they had in their heyday."⁵²⁹ Nam's book, however, published in 2014, could not have predicted Kang's successful return to television via the cable industry with a revamped persona that integrates a self-awareness of his tainted public image.

In 2017, PD Na Young-seok, who made a name for himself in 2007 with the first season of *2 Days 1 Night*, brought together some of the same cast members from the show for a reality travel/variety show for cable channel tvN as mobile content for exclusive online viewing. The program was a collaboration with Naver, Korea's largest search engine and media company, and entitled *New Journey to the West* (2015-2017) featuring some of the same members from *2 Days*

⁵²⁸ Gary Whannel, *Media Sport Stars: Masculinities and Moralities* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 214.

⁵²⁹ Nam Kyu-hong, translation from Korean by author, *TV pangsonggihoek, saenggaktaero toenda*, (Seoul: Yeamoon Archive Co., 2014), 32-33.

I Night—Lee Seung-gi, Eun Ji-won, Lee Soo-geun and Kang Ho-dong. In the pilot episode of *Journey to the West*, Kang expresses anxiety over the laxness of internet programming, where his younger male cast members freely crack lewd jokes and make innuendos that are not acceptable on broadcast television networks such as KBS, MBC and SBS—the networks whose policies he is more used to. The younger cast members tease Kang for being so set in his “old school” ways. As communications scholar Hye Ryoung Ok observes, mobile content or “internet TV” has “comparatively more freedom to portray restricted topics such as sex and violence, which, however, are still contained to a moderate degree suitable for its rerun on cable TV.”⁵³⁰ I would add to this list the frequent images of alcohol consumption on cable variety shows whereas on broadcast variety, alcoholic drinks are generally blurred through self-censorship. There are many scenes in *Journey to the West* when cast members sit with the production staff drinking soju over a meal. Generally, on an unscripted program for broadcast, images of cast members drinking alcohol or conducting the show under the influence is not permitted by the KCC.⁵³¹ But on internet and cable TV, the producers and cast members have more freedom to push boundaries through words and actions, creating a novel atmosphere and edge as well as an atypical viewing experience for audiences.

Following their appearance on *Journey to the West* on tvN’s VOD TV, Kang and Lee Soo-geun reunited as cast members on *Ask Us Anything* in late 2015 on another cable network JTBC alongside Lee Sangmin, Kim Hee-chul, Min Kyung-hoon, Kim Young-chul and Seo Jang-hoon.⁵³² Kang Ho-dong, Lee Soo-geun and Lee Sangmin, who have all taken time off from

⁵³⁰ Hye Ryoung Ok, *Screens on the Move: Media Convergence and Mobile Culture in Korea*, PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2008, 210.

⁵³¹ This also applies to live radio broadcasting.

⁵³² The first few episodes of *Ask Us Anything* also featured Hwang Chi-yeul and Kim Se-hwang but they were dropped and Lee Sang-min soon took their place.

television gigs due to illegal activity, wear their controversies on their sleeves. Jokes about scandalous pasts are not limited to the cast members themselves. In one episode, celebrity guest Tak Jae-hoon—former member of Country Kko Kko with Shin Jung-hwan (also a former member of Roo'ra)—who was indicted for illegal gambling, introduces himself to the class as a transfer student who went away to “self-reflect for three years” after “an accident” as the theme song from the 2003 K-drama *All In* (SBS) plays in the background.⁵³³ The intertext of the *All In* original sound track written by Kim Hyŏng-sŏk is a reference to the plot of *All In* which centers on an underground Korean hwat'u gambler who became a professional high roller poker player in Las Vegas and is loosely based on the life of Jimmy Cha (Ch'a Minsu). Narratives of the celebrities' troubled past are not simply tabloid fodder, but essential elements for character building on cable TV.

The cable network is uniquely positioned to allow such frank disclosures of television stars' dubious pasts, where the members can openly and even roughly attack one another with jokes about their dicey past. This is not to say that yenŭng programs on broadcast networks do not have such moments; for instance in 2017, Lee Sang-min made an appearance on season one of MBC's *My Little Television* (2015-2017) to demonstrate ways to lead a frugal life—a clear gambit pointing to his life in debt. But on public broadcast yenŭng programs, the core members of the show are not typically led by scandal-ridden figures. In fact, on *Infinite Challenge* (2005-2018, MBC), after members Noh Hong-chul and Gil were arrested for drunk driving, they were removed from the show in 2014. Not only were they not invited back on the show, but it was not permitted to even mention their names on the program for at least a couple of years. This is

⁵³³ *Ask Us Anything*, JTBC, episode air date July 30, 2016.

because it is forbidden to feature lawbreakers on television.⁵³⁴ Anytime *Infinite Challenge* makes self-referential moments by replaying clips from their own archives, Noh's and Gil's faces are blurred out; when their faces were included in *Infinite Challenge*'s yearly calendar printed for fans to purchase, the show faced complaints from viewers; Sookeung Jung writes: "This dispute clearly shows that as viewers' expectations for the program grew, so did the members' and staffs' burden of social responsibility and morality."⁵³⁵

Much like the pattern seen in the cases of Lee Soo-geun, Lee Sang-min and Kang Ho-dong, both Noh and Gil eventually made their television comebacks on cable networks; Noh appeared on tvN's *My Room's Dignity* (2015) and Gil appeared on season 5 of *Show Me the Money* in 2016 on Mnet. The openness of the emcees' past mistakes is an effective means of achieving affective intimacy between the audience and TV personality. Not only does cable TV facilitate this achievement but the *yenŭng* genre of shows like *Ask Us Anything* and *Journey to the West* attribute to this process as well. *Yenŭng* as a TV genre collapses the boundary between the star and spectator.

Yenŭng's Boundary Issues

As mentioned in earlier chapters, *yenŭng* programs rely on excessive visuals whether they be text (subtitles), animation (CGI), material (water, props, costume, make-up), emotion (hysterical laughter or crying) or special effects (sound, laugh track, music). The laugh track plays a significant role in generating a sense of closeness, realness and liveness for *yenŭng* viewers:

⁵³⁴ Han Sang-hŏn, interview, email, November 14, 2016.

⁵³⁵ Sookeung Jung, "Dynamics of a Periphery TV Industry: Birth and Evolution of Korean Reality Show Formats," PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2019, 162.

[T]his sense of immediacy created by live audience laughter also functions to inject into any given program a veneer of reality that exceeds that of shared presence. Namely, it creates the aura of a palpable social bond between not only performer and viewers, but also between viewers and one another. As one laughs together with the studio audience, one laughs together with an unseen mass public.⁵³⁶

This is because of laughter's ability to destroy, as Bhaktin observes, "any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance":

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it.⁵³⁷

The excessiveness of *yenŭng* is also notable in the tell-all confessional tendencies of the performers; there are no boundaries between the television personality and viewing audience at home; the selling point among *yenŭng* performers is that they are an open book for viewers to peer into. Their personalities are central to the show's progression. A television personality, according to James Bennett, "consists of those performers who play themselves, making little distinction between on-screen and private persona."⁵³⁸ Marshall also notes that television celebrities are embodiments of "familiarity and mass acceptability."⁵³⁹ *Yenŭng* blurs the boundary between what is private and public, as in the case with Lee Soo-geun, Lee Sang-min and Kang Ho-dong. Their personal scandals are a part of the narrative on unscripted comedy programs.

⁵³⁶ David Christopher Humphrey, *Warai: Laughter, Comedy and the Television Cultures of 1970s, 80s and 90s Japan*, diss., 2014, University of California Berkeley, 5-6.

⁵³⁷ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bhaktin, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 23.

⁵³⁸ James Bennett, *Television Personalities: Stardom and the Small Screen*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 18, 555.

⁵³⁹ Marshall, 120.

In the 1980s, American broadcast television (including serialized TV and the evening news) underwent aesthetic transformations to produce “televisuality” or “visual and graphic ‘bells and whistles’” to attract viewers (and advertisers) as they competed against the rise of cable networks.⁵⁴⁰ While *yenŭng* has the spectacle that all variety shows have in order to keep the viewer mesmerized, cable *yenŭng* plays with risqué information by featuring people who were once forbidden to be shown on television. These popular stars are now making a comeback to TV via cable. As mentioned in earlier chapters, *yenŭng* thrives on its ability to produce intimacy between the performers and the audience. On cable shows like *Ask Us Anything*, just as its title suggests, there are no limits to what can be asked of the members. Their excessive oversharing gives these shows edge and compels viewers to tune in. Excessive information overshare including private information is exposed on *yenŭng*. The Korean public is well-aware of the scandals that the three specific members of *Ask Us Anything* were once embroiled in; whenever the troublemakers themselves mention it, the logic is that the viewer is receiving some form of explanation for their scandalous past—a kind of “insider” speak where the curtain gets pulled back and viewers are invited to witness these touchy discussions behind the scenes. Furthermore, the comedic genre of *Ask Us Anything* that entices laughter also reveals the object’s “innards, not normally accessible for viewing.”⁵⁴¹

Yenŭng is comedy entertainment but it is also built, to an extent, on a tabloid logic where public figures expose their privacy on television. US tabloid press outlets such as the *The Sun*, *US Weekly*, *TMZ*, *Star Magazine* have been around in the US since the 1980s and arguably even further back to the 1890s with muckraking journalism. The tabloid concept, however, is

⁵⁴⁰ John Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis and Authority in American Television*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 6.

⁵⁴¹ Bhaktin, 23.

relatively new to modern-day South Korea. According to journalist Lee Myung-goo whose own group of reporters began taking paparazzi snapshots of celebrities and reporting tabloid news, this strain of journalism is a result of heavy government repression and censorship of the press especially with regards to politics.⁵⁴² While *yenŭng* is different from Lee’s form of tabloid journalism, *yenŭng* does rely on building a narrative around the star’s actual life. Going back to shows like *Happy Together* mentioned in chapter one, the “tell-all” concept of the show privileges viewers into a star’s private life, which attributes to the show and star’s popularity. Kyung Hyun Kim writes, “[P]rivate lives of celebrities tend to shape the landscape of popular culture itself rather than the actual production and consumption of their creative outputs....”⁵⁴³ Kim’s statement is most appropriate in the context of *yenŭng* programs; when it comes to the marketing and consumption of these TV, movie or K-pop stars, it is less about their current production and more about stories that go beyond their celebrity image that audiences want to consume. In fact, because many entertainers—especially K-pop stars—know that their singing career is unsustainable in the long run, they often branch out into other areas of entertainment such as radio, film and TV. If a singer does not feel like they have the looks or talent to become an actor but has a quirky or funny personality, then they transition into the *yenŭng* industry; Lee Kwang-hee is one major example of a K-pop star who became a *yenŭng* talent. Many *yenŭng* programs are self-regulated tabloid for these subjects; rather than have gossip columns and bloggers speculate on celebrities’ personal lives, a *yenŭng* program gives the subject an opportunity to confirm or quell rumors around their image. Tabloid blurs the line between news

⁵⁴² *Radiolab*, “K-paparazzi,” Feb. 24, 2016, <http://www.radiolab.org/story/kpaparazzi/>, accessed Dec. 19, 2019.

⁵⁴³ Kyung Hyun Kim, “Part One: Click and Scroll,” *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, edited by Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe, (Duke University Press: Durham, 2014), ebook, 603/11544

and entertainment.⁵⁴⁴ Yenŭng becomes a channel for fallen stars to strategically take ownership over their past mistakes and control the narrative.

In the case with Seo Jang-hoon and Lee Sangmin, their divorce history is frequently used against them on *Ask Us Anything*. Members on the show make endless jokes related to their divorced status, putting divorce under a light of shame. The constant berating of divorcé/es is a form of public arraignment. This activity is also inscribed by normalizing heteronormative standards of coupling. Being single is frowned upon. Being divorced is somehow worse. Hetero-coupling is the ultimate win, and any alternative to that is but an alternative to having a complete and successful family—a failure. By being open about their scandalous pasts, these yenŭng stars invite viewers to see how they live by openly teasing one another amongst themselves. P. David Marshall wraps this idea up as “new public intimacy”: “The demarcations of propriety have broken down to the point that fame and celebrity are naturally linked with private revelation for public consumption and that hidden intimacies have become some sort of desire for an inner truth and meaning that is oddly tied to prurient and voyeuristic pleasures.”⁵⁴⁵ Thus yenŭng contains elements of tabloid by shrinking the gap between the subject and viewer.

Television itself is a medium that corrodes the boundary between public and private spheres. Marshall calls this “the familiarization function of the medium.”⁵⁴⁶ Misha Kavka observes that television “fulfills its function as a technology of intimacy; by bringing things spatially, temporally and emotionally close, television offers to re-move the viewing subject—not in the sense of informative distantiation, but precisely through its opposite, a collapse of

⁵⁴⁴ Kevin Glynn, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American TV*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 21.

⁵⁴⁵ P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xiii.

⁵⁴⁶ Marshall, 131.

distance and time through the production of affective intimacy.⁵⁴⁷ Television's impact in achieving affective intimacy was recognized since these small screens began to enter homes in the 1950s. As Spigel notes, during the advent of television, the object itself was "caught in a contradictory movement between public and private worlds, and it often became a rhetorical figure for that contradiction."⁵⁴⁸ For instance, although spatially, postwar suburbs in the 1950s excluded people of color, gays, lesbians, singles, and the homeless through zoning laws, television brought all kinds of images into the home through its function as the "window on the world."⁵⁴⁹ Just as the TV as a medium and object has the function of breaking boundaries, the variety genre collapses the distance between star and spectator.

Spigel lists the kinds of early variety shows that visually played with ways of merging "the family's private interior world" with "a view of public exteriors" such as *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (1950-1958, CBS) and *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957, CBS).⁵⁵⁰ These shows were conceived by television producers who "took the promise of hyperreality quite seriously, devising schemes by which to merge public and private worlds into a new electrical neighborhood."⁵⁵¹ The relationships of cast members on these variety shows also blurred boundaries between public and private worlds. George Burns and Gracie Allen, for instance, were comedy partners who began as a two-person vaudeville act in the 1920s then transitioned their show to radio and later TV. Burns and Allen played a married couple and were, in fact, married to each other in real life. The sitcom *I Love Lucy*, which has influences of variety/vaudeville stylings, feature Lucy Ricardo (Lucille Ball) and Ricky Ricardo (Desi Arnaz)

⁵⁴⁷ Kavka, 7.

⁵⁴⁸ Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, 109.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

who play a married couple; Ball and Arnaz also based the show from scenarios in their actual married life together. In this way, the world of the real and screen are less distinguished on variety shows. Variety shows have a long history of melding the private and public into one.

While *Ask Us Anything* has a general rubric of sketch and performance with a school concept production design, costumes, and improvisation, the cast members and guests retain their actual names and identities. Writers are present on set and hold up cue cards with specific lines or questions, but, for the most part, the performers rely on their own life's stories to generate content. In this respect, *Ask Us Anything* shares aspects of talk show television as well as reality television formats; Kavka explains that reality television especially pushes the affective boundary through its format as well as the television personality featured in such programs: "The tension between the performance of the public self and a more integral notion of selfhood, between the mediated personality and the 'truth' of the everyday person, is nowhere better distilled than in reality television programmes."⁵⁵² A reality TV show's television personality and a variety show host share similar characteristics. They both rely on the public self—the mediated personality.

I asked KBS announcer Han Sang-hŏn, "How would you explain the increasing popularity of *yenŭng*?" Han replied, "I believe it is the intimacy. Audiences can relax and laugh along with it, and experience a closeness by watching members whose appearances and environments are quite similar to themselves and the realities of their day-to-day."⁵⁵³ The production design on *Ask Us Anything* produces a sense of familiarity and intimacy through its utilization of nostalgic imagery. The classroom setting, high school uniforms and informal

⁵⁵² Kavka, 78.

⁵⁵³ Han Sang-hŏn, interview, email, Nov. 14, 2016, translated from Korean by author.

address of everyone on the show speak to viewers at home that these cast members are just like them while reaching into Korea's collective memory of youth. *Ask Us Anything's* production design invites viewers to become as close to the screen world as possible. The intimacy that *yenŭng* produces between the viewer and screen world is affective, which, as mentioned earlier, occurs through the perversion of private and public boundaries by the television personality who allows his publicly known past—however shameful—become a part of his televisual persona.

Lee Soo-geun who was once famous for his comedic performances is now a man known for illegal gambling, and Lee Sang-min who was an untouchable star in the 1990s is now fallen and riled in debt with a trail of failed businesses. Kang Ho-dong, the former Korean wrestler who was nicknamed “wild tiger” for his comedic emceeing skills, is now re-nicknamed as a “toothless tiger” in the media; he’s taken this image on as part of his evolved *yenŭng* persona on cable programs today.⁵⁵⁴ These figures, who were once stars for their talents as a comic, musician, athlete and emcee, are now one step more relatable to ordinary civilians as they’ve exposed their human side, demonstrating that they are capable of mistakes, too. This “contradiction,” as Dyer puts it, is part of the star phenomenon: “Are they just like you or me, or do consumption and success transform them into (or reflect) something different?”⁵⁵⁵ These fallen male celebrities have adopted their past errors into their present personas on cable shows, moving away from state broadcast network’s approved model citizens who set a good example for the nation’s viewers. Cable *yenŭng* programs are “raking high viewer ratings for shows that appeal to people for their familiar and relatable concepts.”⁵⁵⁶ Cable *yenŭng* programs also rely

⁵⁵⁴ Woo Dong-kyun, “Nayŏngsŏk, int’ŏnesesŏ kanghodongŭl kuhada,” *OhMyStar*, Sept. 5, 2015, http://star.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/OhmyStar/at_pg_m.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002141559#cb

⁵⁵⁵ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 49.

⁵⁵⁶ Salal Nasif, “South Korean Cable TV Networks Pose Threat to Major Broadcasters with Consistent Success in Drama Ratings,” *Korea Portal*, Jan. 28, 2016,

on the entertainers' edge and scandal to draw in viewers. The specific trend on cable yenuŋ programs is featuring stars who have a criminal past but are now re-embraced by the public for their familiarity and relatability.

The Television Personality, Televisual Aura and Morality

The television personality's centrality to unscripted television program is well established. John Langer observes in his influential analysis of the television personality, "Those television genres which can be crudely classified as non-fiction, actuality forms—news, current affairs, talk shows, variety, game and quiz shows to name just few of the dominant and historically well-established of these forms—are all significantly structured in and around various manifestations of the television personality."⁵⁵⁷ Bennett's definition of a television personality refers to "*presenters* of television programming, whose *fame* has developed a high degree of intertextuality and longevity that is strongly connected to their *work* in, and on, television."⁵⁵⁸ Lindsay Giggey's work on reality television stardom of the Kardashians and Jenners also speaks on the television personality: "[V]iewers can watch these relationships develop over time, and, most importantly, the fact that they are real things happening to real people adds a level of indexicality and erases the line between television personality and the role that she plays on television."⁵⁵⁹ In Korea, the television personality who appears on yenuŋ is

<http://en.koreaportal.com/articles/13584/20160128/south-korean-cable-tv-networks-pose-threat-to-major-broadcasters-with-consistent-success-in-drama-ratings.htm>.

⁵⁵⁷ John Langer, "Television's Personality System," *Media, Culture and Society*, 1981, 4, 351-365, 352.

⁵⁵⁸ James Bennett, *Television Personalities: Stardom and the Small Screen*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 19, 567.

⁵⁵⁹ Lindsay Giggey, *Producing Reality Stardom: Constructing, Programming, and Branding Celebrity on Reality Television*, PhD diss., UCLA, 2017, 141.

called a *yenŭng-in* (藝能人) or “entertainer.” They are known for having a comedic persona which makes them suitable for *yenŭng* programs as an emcee/host—the master of ceremonies. In the case of *yenŭng-ins* such as Lee Soo-geun, Lee Sang-min and Kang Ho-dong, their criminal past that once had them both removed from public television has now found production value on cable. The frank and unapologetic flaunting of their scandals is woven into the show’s narrative. This is quite a different image from the typical routine wherein a Korean celebrity caught in a scandal holds an “apology” press conference before the public with their heads bowed followed by pulling out of all television programs to spend some time to “reflect” on their actions. Many K-pop stars observe this ritual as well. In the US, examples of this kind of “break” or “taking time off” are observable in the cases of Louis CK and Aziz Ansari who disappeared from the public eye after being accused of sexual assault during the #MeToo movement. In the case with Kang Ho-dong, the emcee shed tears at his apology press, telling the public that he was sorry for “disappointing” them and for being a “let down.”⁵⁶⁰ What is the significance of a public apology? Why does the public deserve an apology for mistakes made by a celebrity?

Lowney writes that television talk shows don’t just entertain but provide “an electric tent” where people can confess their “sins” and become absolved by being “reinstated into the moral community” much like how Americans of the revivalist era held emotion-filled revivals in a public space such as a church in order to convert people into Christianity.⁵⁶¹ White, in her analysis of daytime television talk shows and the proliferation of confessionals that crop up in

⁵⁶⁰ *AllKPop*, “Kang Ho Dong to Temporarily Leave the Industry to Reflect on His Actions,” Sept. 9, 2011, <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2011/09/kang-ho-dong-to-temporarily-leave-the-industry-to-reflect-on-his-actions>; *AllKpop*, “Noh Hong Cul Apologizes for Drunk Driving + Withdraws from ‘Infinity Challenge’ and ‘I Live Alone,’” Nov. 7, 2014, <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2014/11/noh-hong-chul-apologizes-for-drunk-driving-withdraws-from-infinity-challenge-and-i-live-alone>.

⁵⁶¹ Lowney, 13, 17.

such texts, explains that “viewers may assume the position of the therapist-authority to whom the confession is addressed,” and their reaction may range from moral superiority to sympathy to scorn.⁵⁶² In the context of American daytime talk shows, ordinary civilians would appear on the show to openly share some aspect of their lives that the public (or in this case the live studio audience) would find morally reprehensible and express this through gasps and boos. Lowney calls talk show hosts “pop cultural moralists.”⁵⁶³ But in the case with *Ask Us Anything*, the hosts have fallen from their moral reliability, and the canned laugh track frames the stars’ offenses as benign.

Drunk driving, tax evasion, and illegal gambling are outlawed in Korea because according to state logic, there are direct consequences to these actions onto the rest of society. Driving under the influence or evading taxes have obvious social costs. Gambling is included in this category of having a social liability; it is barred in Korea because “the social impact of gambling is...well-documented, in terms of addiction and broken families, as well as criminal activities like loan-sharking.”⁵⁶⁴ In this way, gambling in Korea is considered a crime against the public so a public apology is made necessary. The other reason for a public apology is because these men are beloved public figures on national public television. They delighted viewers, convinced them that they were fun, family-friendly, morally sound and relatable while retaining star status on television. Thus, they emanated televisual star aura.

In my discussions of Walter Benjamin’s aura, I’ve encountered several scholars who make claims that about half of the people who read his work are misreading or misinterpreting it.

⁵⁶² White, 75-76.

⁵⁶³ Lowney, 18.

⁵⁶⁴ Agence France-Presse, “Why Most S Korean Casinos are Open to Everyone Except Koreans,” *ABS CBN*, Jan. 28, 2013, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/business/01/28/13/why-south-koreas-casinos-are-open-everyone-except-koreans>

Here, I see room for a queer possibility to end this debate on how Benjamin's aura is read. Akira Lippit claims that catachresis "includes one of the worst abuses of language, mixing metaphors," which produces a queer possibility by making systems once presumed categorically separate, pure, and closed no longer; catachresis mixes metaphors and reveals that "incompatibility makes meaning possible," and he argues that this is the basis of cinema through montage via editing thereby revealing the great irony of its abundant use in nationalistic films that emphasize purity such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Triumph of the Will* (1935).⁵⁶⁵ Lippit's emancipated theory of catachresis is visible in other modes of questioning the status quo.

In the 2018 documentary *RBG* by Betsy West and Julie Cohen, late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is heralded for her liberal reading of the law and seeing its potential for how it can apply to identities that were not taken into account when the Constitution was written such as women, people of color and queer folx in sharp contrast to Justice Antonin Scalia who upholds a traditionalist view of reading the law more literally and according to its meaning based on the written words of white hetero cis-men from over 200 years ago. While applying Benjamin's concept of the aura to television and mediated stardom may be fundamentally flawed given that television is a mere simulation of liveness, and any inkling of aura according to Benjamin's definition diminishing via a mechanical reproduction is therefore completely gone as soon as the object/subject appears in any form of mass mediated product be it film, television, postcards, etc., I still understand *how* the shift in categories is taking place and being applied within the segmented hierarchy of media constructed by the field of Cinema and Media Studies—a hierarchy that is noticeable in the very title of the discipline which separates

⁵⁶⁵ Akira Mizuta Lippit, "Like Cats and Dogs—Cinema and Catastrophe," *Parasophia Chronicle*, 2015, vol. 1 (1): 19-25,

“Cinema” from “Media Studies”—a redundancy that makes the field perplexing when I name it in personal conversations within my social circles to which people ask me, “Well, isn’t cinema *media*?” and my explanation being that this belabored title “Cinema and Media Studies” exists today only because “serious” film scholars have their own misgivings about being categorically the same as *media* scholars—those who look at frivolous and hilarious media objects such as memes and shows with men wearing tights who swing into kiddie pools. “Cinema and Media Studies” is a catachresis in its apprehension of the very thing that cinema scholars do *not* wish to be—catachrestic, and mix up systems; they hope to retain academic purity through separation without seeing the great irony of this, given how cinema is catachrestic. Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* was written less than a decade after television was invented in 1927 and before its technology became widely known and available around the globe; one can only speculate how Benjamin would respond to how his concept of aura and the reproducibility of art gets applied among television scholars today, but I see a value in the (mis)reading, mixing of metaphors, and appreciating catachresis across categories of media via Benjamin’s theory as it produces a potential for furthering our understanding of television and stardom to produce new meaning, and I expand the application and use of aura around concepts of television, intimacy and affect between the star and spectator.

Benjamin’s concept of aura pertains to a work of art but Denise Mann borrows it to describe film stars whose star aura undergoes a “decay” when they appear on television.⁵⁶⁶

According to Benjamin, an artwork’s aura derives from its authenticity which strikes awe,

⁵⁶⁶ Denise Mann, “The Spectacularization of Everyday Life: Recycling Hollywood Stars and Fans in Early Television Variety Shows,” *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, edited by Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 41-69.

reverence, and achieves a distancing effect though its liveness by existing in a single place at a single time as a singular work of art; the artwork's mechanical reproduction through technology, such as cinema, diminishes this authentic aura; cinema reduces the weight and relevance of liveness by making objects/subjects available to the masses anywhere at any point in time.⁵⁶⁷ Thus, the film star's aura is, in fact, already in a state of decay even when she appears in a film, but Mann's application of Benjamin's aura follows another logic by giving film auratic status as a highbrow medium and television a base status as lowbrow and more proliferate; Mann, therefore, replaces artwork with the star. Philip Auslander claims that aura is a "function of distance" rather than one of uniqueness; the star is untouchable; yet, when a mass cultural viewing mode such as television emerges, that function disappears.⁵⁶⁸ Marshall reiterates this by noting the "construction of distance" that gives a film celebrity their aura whereas a television celebrity's aura does not exist due to their familiarity.⁵⁶⁹ Marshall's reading of Benjamin's aura is similar to Mann's; Mann's argument rests on the logic that the small screen and its proliferation of images surpasses the number of silver screens which diminishes if not expunges that already decayed star aura; the star's once unreachable status has fallen and they've become personable because television removes distance. In fact, television does everything it can to remove distance, and it strives for intimacy.

All of the things that make a television celebrity—their domestic availability, their close ties to capitalist consumption, the commercial interruptions that break a celebrity's performance

⁵⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19-55.

⁵⁶⁸ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in Mediatized Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 38.

⁵⁶⁹ Marshall, 119, 121.

continuity, and their direct address to viewers at home—reduce their (filmic) aura: “This acknowledgement of presence serves to reduce the aura constructed by the narrative of film” which protects the diegesis.⁵⁷⁰ In the case with Korean TV personalities, this already decayed aura is even more diminished by the camp nature of the *yenŭng*’s genre-queer character. Then how do we explain a *yenŭng-in*’s aura?

The logic that televisual stardom has no aura neglects the power that television holds over its viewers. Aura is in effect when television convinces viewers that what they see on their small screens is, in fact, the authentic real. America’s socioeconomic realities of the late 1940s and 1950s forced Hollywood film stars to come to terms with making television appearances due to the Paramount Decree of 1948. Televisions became more ubiquitous in the 1950s, and networks were in need of content. Film stars, no longer bound to the studio system, were free agents, and as television opportunities rose, a number of them shifted towards the small screen although others were reluctant to “commercialize” themselves through television. But the ones who did move to TV were challenged by the drastically different nature of TV versus cinema; Giggey writes,

The live nature of early television programming helped define it as a medium and created a sense of authenticity amongst its personalities. Liveness demanded actors to be able to deliver lines in single takes, especially since programming could not be edited. Although television moved away from its reliance on live programming in favor of filmed programming, this authenticity tied to the feeling of liveness reemerges as a central tenet in the construction and presentation of reality television.⁵⁷¹

Does aura not derive from the affective feeling that a spectator experiences by seeing a star on television be their “real” and “authentic” self? Perhaps feelings of kinship that a television personality brings to a spectator through *yenŭng* does not equal awe, but awe and distance is still

⁵⁷⁰ Marshall, 121, 126.

⁵⁷¹ Giggey, 21.

there knowing that no matter how small the screens are, a production exists in between the star and spectator, thus giving the show's subjects their celebrity status. I expand this (mis)application of aura to television personalities who appear on reality and variety programs.

Just as a film star's aura is a contradiction but named, televisual aura is also identifiable through its association of liveness. Per Spigel, early American television featured comedic performances by vaudeville actors whose efforts were always in pursuit of "an aura of theatricality, encouraging viewers to feel as if they were on the scene of presentation, watching a live show."⁵⁷² Thus, early television strived for awe striking aura by simulating liveness as closely as possible. Early sitcoms generated "an aura of liveness" by braiding scripted narrative with variety show elements, and "an aura of intimacy" through serialization by depicting the same family for years to come, "giving audiences the impression that they were lifelong companions."⁵⁷³ Aura is also identifiable in affect through a sitcom's "believability" or "their ability to create warmth and sentimentality."⁵⁷⁴ Sit-coms generate an aura of intimacy, sentimentality, closeness and companionship. Television, despite its reproducibility of images, which, by Benjamin's and Mann's standards decays aura, in fact generates affective aura for viewers at home. Televisual aura in the case with *yenŭng* programs is definable in terms of its affective intimacy; the production constructs a sense of closeness for the viewer through direct address, exposing backstage conversations, and pointing out the cameras and crew members who should be invisible but exposed to remind viewers that this is a TV show, and viewers can get "in" on the "inside"—see what's behind Oz's curtain. Early American radio disc jockeys relied on a similar strategy to keep audiences engaged under guise of familiarity: "They addressed you,

⁵⁷² Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 154.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid*, 155 and 157.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 157.

hoped you liked the show, told you what happened in the week intervening, and begged for some kind of return indication of friendship.”⁵⁷⁵ Aura can be a sense of closeness or a spectator’s belief that they know the person who is broadcasting. But when the person onscreen does something to disrupt that faith—like get arrested—that aura is disturbed. The spectator cannot recognize who this person is anymore, bringing about a feeling similar to Brecht’s *verfremdung* effect (V-effect)—or alienation/estrangement effect.⁵⁷⁶ Through this distancing effect, the spectator realizes that the television personality had an auratic hold over them. The TV star’s affective aura is noticeable only when it is taken away.

When these television stars fall from grace due to a scandal, their auratic televisual presence suddenly comes to fore through the audience’s recognition of its absence; the persona that the *yenŭng*-in had fooled audiences into believing that they were like a friend/family as well as authentic and morally upright is no longer. Audiences mourn the loss of the star’s affective aura. In a *yenŭng* production, stars do everything they can to make the viewing experience feel as close to the audience’s actual lives as possible, but in a moment of crisis, their celebrity status reappears as they are *required* to hold an apology press and *officially* declare their withdrawal from the industry for a period to “self-reflect.” Star images, according to Dyer, “function crucially in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to ‘manage’ or resolve.”⁵⁷⁷ The fact that they owe the public an official apology rides on the logic that they are public figures who have a responsibility to said public by maintaining moral

⁵⁷⁵ Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010), 54.

⁵⁷⁶ Bertolt Brecht, “On Chinese Theater, *Verfremdung* and Gestus,” trans. Jack Davis et al, *Brecht on Theatre*, third ed., eds. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 149-200.

⁵⁷⁷ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 38.

standards. When entertainers make a formal public apology after erring in their ways, they are apologizing for committing an act that not only fails to entertain but also fails to live up to their role as a model citizen. This is, again, because Korean variety shows are built on the concept of being both entertaining while also serving the public interest; for instance, Korean variety shows in the late 1990s and early 2000s “have often mobilized the Korean people to overcome national disasters and promote social and political agendas.”⁵⁷⁸ In a state of crisis, these variety show personalities are measured by a standard of their celebrity and they are no longer “just like us.” Their wrongdoings have stunned viewers out of the illusion that they *knew* who that person was. When television stars break laws, they destroy the public’s preferred image of them as benign entertainers who appear on TV inside their homes. The intimacy collapses, and their mistakes are deemed unacceptable because public figures should not make such mistakes, and the boundary between star and viewer is reinstated.

When these figures disappear from TV to take some time to “self-reflect,” the ritual and a symbolic prison sentence whereby those who commit crimes go away to “do time” is in effect. When the figures return, the idea is that they have been absolved of their sins because they have publically admitted their wrongs through an apology, taken time away to “self-reflect” and served the necessary amount of time before returning to the public. But this ritualistic act of apology, taking time away, and returning later is constructed by the television industry itself; the ritual is a performative act that is irrelevant to the actual public’s interest. This is visible in how disgraced stars’ comeback takes place on cable networks and not on broadcasting networks such as KBS, MBC or SBS.

⁵⁷⁸ Soo Keung Jung, *Dynamics of a Periphery TV Industry: Birth and Evolution of Korean Reality Show Formats*, PhD diss., 2019, Georgia State University, 123

Cable networks bank on the tabloid surrounding disgraced stars for their controversial history, which give viewers a reason to see what these celebrities are up to since they “went away.” As Kevin Glynn observes, tabloid television “dwells on social and moral disorder.”⁵⁷⁹ Just as cable TV K-dramas utilize sensational and edgy storylines by increasing instances of violence, sex, and profanity in their production to draw in viewers, cable *yenŭng* programs utilize the tabloid now associated with these figures as a visual attraction. Disgraced from public broadcast, men like Lee Soo-geun, Lee Sang-min and Kang Ho-dong have found a home on the edgier side of the TV industry. All three men host cable TV *yenŭng* programs on tvN, JTBC, Channel A, E Channel, MBN, and Olive TV, but ever since the success of *Ask Us Anything*, they have been making their way back onto broadcast channels in recent years. Thus, cable has a catalytic function. Cable itself is an extension of the apology ritual. Being recast in broadcast programs is a further indication that their past mistakes have been absolved and that they are worthy of being invited back into the public’s embrace. Their televisual aura is recovered, and their blemished past is now a part of said aura, and a reason for viewers to share affective intimacy with the stars once more. When stars air their dirty laundry, they are opening up to their viewers to rebuild a sense of trust and closeness. The fallen stars are returning to their positions as public figures but with the mark of having paid their dues.

In a more practical sense, cable channels like JTBC take the risk of hiring emcees who were dismissed from public broadcast networks because they don’t have much to lose. MBC and KBS employees went on strike in September 2017 demanding that the president of each network—Kim Jang-kyeom and Ko Dae-young—resign. The strike left the broadcasting industry

⁵⁷⁹ Kevin Glynn, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 7.

in a disarray.⁵⁸⁰ Popular *yenŭng* programs such as *I Live Alone*, *Infinite Challenge*, and *Happy Together* were forced to play reruns for months. While the programs on KBS and MBC were on hiatus, cable channels enjoyed a boost in their ratings. In 2017, JTBC even outperformed KBS—an unprecedented achievement given how the first is a narrowcast channel and the latter is free to the public. Broadcasters today are losing viewership and advertisement revenue as cable outcompetes them.⁵⁸¹ The landscape of the Korean television industry today is undergoing drastic changes, and at this point, cable has a cultural advantage by winning favor with viewers.

Cable TV’s Preference for “Fallen Men”: Anti-Heroes and Failures

The term “fallen” has a couple of connotations when associated with entertainment and stardom. For one, it is a metaphor for someone who was once at the height of their fame—metaphorically a “star”—but scandal has brought them back down to earth. The other use of the term “fallen” was exclusively applied to certain women. The term “fallen woman” originates from Victorian era England, and the concept later permeated into the US and other parts of Europe through literature and theater; it was used to describe women who gave up their chastity (outside of marriage) and engaged in promiscuity, material indulgence and exploration of the city life away from their rural origins. In early Hollywood films, the fallen woman became a film genre; Lea Jacobs connects how the literary precedent of the fallen woman genre, where an “erring woman” gets “irredeemably punished” in the stories, continued into cinematic traditions and such women would often face death or great suffering for their actions in the form of a moral

⁵⁸⁰ Romy Doo, “MBC, KBS Strikes Leave Little Choice for Public,” *Korea Herald*, Nov. 7, 2017, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171107000825>.

⁵⁸¹ Jin-hai Park, “Viewers Turning Away from Major Broadcasters to Cable Networks,” *The Korea Times*, Sept. 13, 2017, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2018/05/688_236440.html.

punishment. In the case with cinema, these punishments were often shoehorned by state censor organizations like the Studio Relations Committee that oversaw production to cut or reedit scenes to uphold American-Christian values.⁵⁸² The same punishment in films are also frequently assigned to queer identities.⁵⁸³ But how does the term fallen apply to men in the context of cable television?

Fallen men on cable TV are more often described as “failures” in their expectations of patriarchal/hegemonic masculinity.⁵⁸⁴ Whereas “fallen” was frequently applied to women who did not uphold society’s religious morals, “failure” is often applied to describe men who do not fulfill their masculine duties to society within domestic and economic contexts as a family man and working man. These failures are also visible on Korean cable variety television. On *Ask Us Anything*, Lee Sang-min and Seo Jang-hoon are persistently teased for their failed marriages; Kang Ho-dong is constantly berated for his tax evasion scandal and disappointing the nation as the “nation’s emcee”; Lee Soo-geun is relentlessly teased for breaking the law by gambling and failing viewers at home who adored him for his comedic genius on publicly broadcast family variety shows. Thus, when it comes to cable *yenŭng* TV failure, let-down and disappointment sum up the adjectives for describing its presentation of masculinity.

The way that these former Korean outlaws make cable networks their home is similar to how the cable industry in the US found success through shows featuring male protagonists as anti-heroes. As Amanda Lotz describes, the male anti-hero “does not have to be a good man; and

⁵⁸² Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1997), 5, 41.

⁵⁸³ Dustin Bradley Goltz, *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation: Tragedy, Normativity and Futurity*, (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁵⁸⁴ Amanda Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television Masculinities in the 21st Century*, (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 69; Michael Mario Albrecht, *Masculinity in Contemporary Quality Television*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 102.

cable channels can offer compelling original series and their storytelling is advantaged by smaller audiences.”⁵⁸⁵ Male outlaws as protagonists in serialized cable TV shows “exist in narratives that may not go so far as to seek audience empathy, but construct circumstances so that audiences understand how the characters reach this point of action.”⁵⁸⁶ The male *yenŭng-in*s who appear on *Ask Us Anything* do not go so far as to rationalize how they reached their point of disgrace, but they do openly talk about the offenses they’ve made very regularly on the program; they repeat them to the point of their past sins losing all meaning.

What does it mean to have a male *yenŭng-in* openly share his crimes in a haughty fashion on television? What happens when a *yenŭng-in*’s past offenses no longer have meaning? What does it mean to pardon those who committed crimes in the past and to embrace them for their mistakes on a network owned by a *chaebol* that is consistently embroiled in political scandals but never required to take responsibility for its crimes?⁵⁸⁷ JTBC is associated with the conglomerate Samsung as well as CJ Entertainment and Merchandising (CJ E&M) through family ties.⁵⁸⁸ Samsung Group, which is a family-run business operation, has been criticized for years due to its corrupt business tactics. In late 2007, Samsung Group chairman Lee Kun-hee was revealed to have deep ties to bribery and tax evasion. Lee was arrested in 2008, however, President Lee Myung-bak—former CEO of Hyundai Group and president elect of Korea’s conservative party (*Senuri* or Liberty Korea Party)—pardoned the chairman of his criminal record due his position

⁵⁸⁵ Amanda Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television Masculinities in the 21st Century*, (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 63.

⁵⁸⁶ Amanda Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television Masculinities in the 21st Century*, (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 85.

⁵⁸⁷ *Chaebŏl* refers to Korean conglomerates; Choe Sang-Hun and Raymond Zhong, “Samsung Heir Freed, to Dismay of South Korea’s Anti-Corruption Campaigners,” *New York Times*, Feb. 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/05/business/samsung-lee-jae-yong-appeal.html>.

⁵⁸⁸ Chunhyo Kim, *Samsung, Media Empire and Family: A Power Web*, (New York: Routledge, 2015).

as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) member, which would increase Korea's chances for hosting the 2018 Winter Olympics. This ultimately did secure Korea the opportunity to host the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. Samsung has a history of pulling its ads from newspapers that were critical of the company's corruption. Left-leaning papers such as *Hankyoreh* and *Hyunghyang* lost their advertisement sponsorship with Samsung after reporting on chairman Lee's corruption scandal in 2007. Samsung Group's Lee family is no stranger to public scandals involving bribery and politics. Reports since 2016, following former President Park Geun-hye's impeachment, revealed that Lee Kun-hee's son and the group's vice chairman Jay Y. Lee, have not only committed embezzlement but also bribed former President Park during her presidency while financing Choi Soon-sil—the controversial figure who the Korean media has deemed the orchestrator behind Park's corruption. JTBC's parent company is layered in decades of conservative ideology and corruption, and the state's interest is also to protect and pardon the Lee family, which is valuable to the nation's political and economic stability. Meanwhile, as the earlier section of this chapter reveals, minority rights are not the priority of the network or the state, especially if they fall outside of the neoliberal logic. As the GDP in South Korea continues to rise, cable channels and programs are reaching more local homes and homes around the globe. A diversity of content in reaction to the production limits that the three Korean broadcasters have set for themselves is resulting in innovative content but also diminishing the gravity of crimes committed by male entertainers. In the era of the #MeToo movement, what does this mean for the future of Korean media?

Yenŭng's unique ability to normalize what was once taboo through humor and creating a sense of realness and affective intimacy, in part, stretches the limits of society's moral compass. Cable TV's preference for male anti-heroes and outlaws who generate attractive storylines

through moral ambiguities also contribute to this expansion. This style of morality on television can also be understood as “a postmodern self-reflexive style of reasoning that denaturalize[s] morality and the subject’s relation to it.”⁵⁸⁹ Tonny Krijnen and Irene Costera Meijer’s statement here borrows from Linda Hutcheon’s concept of postmodernism: postmodernism attempts to “de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ (they might even include capitalism patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us.”⁵⁹⁰ Morality is itself a cultural construct, and it can be denaturalized on a *yeonŕng* program that, through its generic format, enables plenty of reflexivity.

Go Ah-ra and L (Kim Myung-soo/member of the K-pop boyband Infinite) who play judges on the K-drama *Miss Hammurabi* (2018, JTBC) are the celebrity guests on *Ask Us Anything* (air date June 9, 2018) when Lee Soo-geun gets up and says, “Let’s not live a life breaking laws. What reason do we have to come face to face with a judge?” In response to this, fellow cast member Seo Jang-hoon shoots back, “Speak for yourself.” In reaction to this, Lee Soo-geun mugs for the camera with a guilty look and says, “Oh right,” cuing laughter from the rest of the group as well as the laugh track. Such a moment denaturalizes immorality by lampooning Lee’s past offenses to the state in an acceptable frame of humor and reflexivity.

The #MeToo movement spread to Korea when prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun made allegations of sexual harassment against a senior level prosecutor at her workplace in a televised interview on JTBC.⁵⁹¹ This led to a seismic shift in how the Korean entertainment industry handled

⁵⁸⁹ Tonny Krijnen and Irene Costera Meijer, “The Moral Imagination in Primetime Television,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2005, 8:3, 353-374, 360

⁵⁹⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2.

⁵⁹¹ Jo He-rim, “Female Prosecutor Opens Up About Sexual Harassment,” *The Korea Herald*, Jan. 30, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180130000855>

allegations of sexual harassment. In April 2018, male comedian Kim Saeng-min resigned from all of his television programs following two former television industry staff members' allegations of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment allegations are not taken lightly at the moment, but questions of whether such figures should or should not be allowed to return to the television industry requires further debate. In the current cultural climate in both Hollywood and hallyu industries, where powerful men in entertainment are facing charges of sexual harassment by women, the question of return and the public's acceptance of men with a marred past require further analysis, especially when men with such pasts *do* make a return and reoccupy the same positions of power as they once did regardless of the public's preparedness or approval.

Last but not least, further critical considerations must be given to how Netflix handles the acquisition of local media content like *Ask Us Anything* which is available for streaming in US territories under the title *Men on a Mission*. Whereas nearly three hundred episodes have been shot and aired since 2015, only a selected few are made available on Netflix. Furthermore, the original content with all its sound effects, laugh track, music cues, and entire scenes are not included in the globalized Netflix version of this program. These are examples of mutilations wherein the text changes through its transnational availability (dislocating); the mutilation (cutting, replacing, erasing) of the text is taking place because Netflix as a corporation will not pay for the music clearance that America broadcasting and streaming requires. But these notions of dislocating and mutilation conjure up concepts explored in chapter one with K-pop stars and the compromises they make in order to become widely appealing mainstream stars. The liberties that Netflix takes to make these programs fit into their standard while compromising the integrity of the show should be questioned alongside expanding Williams's concept of *flow* in relation to streaming content that gets dislocated from its original time and space. While these yenŭng

programs do not necessarily have a narrative, the subjects who appear on these shows as characters of themselves in the form of stock characters come with their own lived experiences (including scandals) as a package that contributes to the program as well as the brand of the network it airs on. If certain episodes are removed, then the sum of these experiences get dismembered, lost, and forgotten, thus breaking the continuity/flow that should be there for the texts to work together as a whole. This disjointedness makes callbacks to earlier jokes impossible to read or understand albeit the repetition of the same few jokes tied to the stock characters must also be recognized. Netflix's disregard for the preservation of original music cues, sound effects, footage, etc. come with the corporation's assumption that these shows are no longer *live*—they are not being broadcast live; they are from the past, and therefore *dead*; if the episode is dead then the logic allows mutilation (cutting sequences), replacing/erasing (removing sound effects and originally edited-in music cues), and dislocating/mixing up the program elements to fit Netflix's standards. But this requires further questioning, similar to how objects get dislocated from the land they are originally conceived in and put on display in museums for tourists to see without questioning whether or not it makes sense in order to understand and appreciate those objects according to their purpose. What histories, nuances, cultural specificities, lives, memories, references and jokes get altered, dismembered, removed, lost, and forgotten? To an extent, this is also a way to question Netflix's archival practice and whether or not it respects cultural boundaries tied to the programs it acquires, and in that regard, this becomes a matter of political economy, coloniality/decoloniality, and transnational flow within the bounds of reformatting.

Chapter 4: Militarism and Toxic Masculinity in the TV Industry in the Age of Netflix and Stand-up Comedy

Part one of this final chapter is a critique of the militant, masculinist and hierarchical nature of the Korean TV industry and its present changes starting with stand-up comedians. I generate a “thick description” of Korean stand-up culture and the #MeTooKorea movement based on fieldwork in Seoul. The male comedians I interviewed note that the sketch variety shows they were on are now canceled because viewers’ taste in comedy is changing. Korean comedians left the TV industry because they were tired of its heavy censorship and restriction over content, as well as abuse. The female comedians I interviewed left the TV industry because of sexual harassment and discrimination. Live stand-up comedy offers these former TV workers an escape from male toxicity in the workplace, and cathartic healing through performance.

Part two explores the English-language comedy scene in Korea and its genealogy linked to American militarism and the English language teachers (ELTs) who are white, hetero and cis-male. Through interviews with Korean female comedians, I demonstrate how Korean women are practicing affective resistance against hegemonic masculinity through stand-up comedy. My methodology includes interviews of bilingual Korean comics, queer comics, and white hetero cis-male English teachers who work in Asia and pursue open mic comedy. I integrate anthropological studies conducted on the English education system in East Asian countries, modern Korean history, as well as masculinity and whiteness theory to illustrate the climate of the English-language stand-up comedy scene in Korea and how it relates to a broader history of racialized and gendered politics between Koreans and Americans.

Part I: Alternative (to TV) Comedy in Korea

The market for televised comedy in Korea is currently undergoing a shift due to cultural, technological, and political changes. Since the 1960s, Korean television aired family-friendly variety entertainment. Early comedy shows on MBC and TBC (now known as KBS-2) aired variety shows with sketches, musical numbers, dance, and sitcoms. In 1969, the show *Laughter Brings Good Luck* (웃으면 복이와요) on MBC “paved the way” for variety programs emphasizing sketch comedy on television with its immense popularity.⁵⁹² To this day, sketch variety shows air on public broadcasting and cable channels. As mentioned in chapter 2, networks have been hiring comedians through an open-recruiting system since the 1980s; KBS, MBC and SBS recruit in-house comedians for their sketch variety shows by holding a nation-wide open-call audition.⁵⁹³ But the ratings for sketch variety shows have been declining in recent years, leaving many comics who entered the television industry for *k'ongt'ŭ* (*conte* in French or *konto* in Japanese) or sketch comedy with nowhere to turn. There is, however, a small but significant number of Korean comedians today who are now pursuing stand-up comedy. These comics are actively working to build a following through social media, and eventually get crowds into live showcases at comedy clubs and theaters where they perform stand-up. The big hope for many of these comics is to cut a deal with the streaming giant Netflix, which produces and streams dozens of original stand-up comedy productions from as early as 2006 with *Zach Galifianakis: Live at the Purple Onion*. Netflix’s global reach maximizes stand-up comics’ exposure; furthermore, given the numerous stand-up specials Netflix is known for producing, it has recently become the most

⁵⁹² Kyu Kim, Won-yong Kim and Jong-geun Kang, *Broadcasting in Korea*, Seoul: Nanam Publishing House, 1994, 124.

⁵⁹³ You, *Entertaining Politics: Exploring Historical Transformation of Production, Distribution and Consumption of Political Entertainment in Korea*, 154.

coveted spot for stand-up comedians around the globe. The purpose of this chapter is to first identify what “toxic” masculinity is seeing as academic theory on this definition is harder to come by in comparison to the wide usage of this phrase in popular American culture. In the course of unpacking this term, I will be utilizing my ethnographic observations and research as vehicles in an attempt to identify this elusive expression that is—despite its academic elusiveness—quite definitively present in the contemporary mainstream zeitgeist that is more vigilant around gender issues.

Another goal for this chapter is to survey the landscape of Korea’s emerging stand-up comedy scene. Part of the reason why Korean comedians are turning to stand-up comedy is because of the fewer professional opportunities they have outside of sketch comedy on TV. According to Korean American stand-up comic Danny Cho who moved to Seoul in 2018, “Stand-up comedy is becoming a thing in Korea because the ratings for the sketch shows like *Gag Concert* and *Comedy Big League* have plummeted. Also, they canceled *SNL Korea* and a few other sketch variety shows. So it seems that a lot of comedians here have nowhere to go.”⁵⁹⁴ Indeed, over the years, ratings for Korea’s longest running variety sketch program *Gag Concert* on KBS has been dropping.⁵⁹⁵ *Gag Concert* is filmed before a live audience and features multiple sketches involving a team of comedians who write and perform their own sketch. While, in the past, *Gag Concert* boasted ratings as high as 30% and up, their numbers have fallen to as low as 4% in recent years, averaging at 7-8% as of late; critics say that the format of popular comedy in Korea has been stagnating over the last two decades, and it has not been able to compete against online comedy programs that do

⁵⁹⁴ Email Interview. Danny Cho. July 19, 2018.

⁵⁹⁵ Yonhap News, “kaek'on' kŭpkiya 4%tae ch'urakt'pulp'yŏnhan kaegŭ chi,” Aug. 13, 2018, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20180813038800005>, accessed Apr. 17, 2019.

not have topic restrictions because of censorship.⁵⁹⁶ The rise in online formats of entertainment and the import of Netflix's stand-up comedy specials are changing the landscape of comedy in Korea in terms of both industry and reception. But while the landscape of Korean comedy may be changing, some of the habits from the television industry are carrying over into the spaces of live stand-up comedy. But while the landscape of Korean comedy may be changing, some of the habits engendered during television comedy days are perpetuating in the spaces of live stand-up comedy. Up and coming Korean comedians who now identify as stand-up comics do so by differentiating themselves from network television comedians who perform sketch comedy. This distinction, however, is not as clear-cut as they put it; part of this is because their industry training is visible in how they produce live stand-up shows, and this includes toxically masculinist behaviors.

The TV comics' industry training is visible in how they produce live stand-up shows, and this includes some logics and behaviors that slightly mirror their work experience as television sketch comedians despite their desires to distinguish themselves from the industry's toxicity. While they are less affiliated with the TV industry, they continue to maintain some of the qualities of television's hierarchical rigidity that they are used to from their training which echo their militaristic experiences.

But first, it is necessary to define what makes "toxic" masculinity so toxic. While this expression "toxic masculinity" is a commonly used phrase in contemporary discourses, an academic definition is practically non-existent. American masculinity studies scholar Michael Kimmel says the following: "First of all [men] were telling me that the real man is the performative part. The real man is the part that has to perform for others, to validate their

⁵⁹⁶ Jung-sun Park, 'kaek'on', 'k'obik'e ch'iigo int'ōnese milligo, JTBC, July 18, 2017, http://news.jtbc.joins.com/article/article.aspx?news_id=NB11496182, accessed Apr. 17, 2019.

masculinities. The real man is homosocial. The good man is abstract. It's not necessarily interactive."⁵⁹⁷ "Toxic masculinity" manifests when a man's gender performance in his homosocial environment is not aligned with his own values of what a good man is. This is also to say that when a man's beliefs and definition of what a "good man" constitutes is not exercised because of limitations he faces in his homosocial environment, it may require male performances that cause harm and injury towards others. Toxic masculinity is more than just "unhealthy" masculinity according to mainstream feminism wherein a man's behavior or words victimize women and children. So how do men define a "good man"? What does a "real man" constitute for men? What does it mean to be a "bad man" for men? These are categorizations that can be explored in gender studies among men for pedagogical purposes to integrate real values with lived experience.

The Transcultural Roots of Korean Stand-Up Comedy

The art and tradition of spoken humor is not new to Korea. Korea has a long history of live performances ranging from oral traditions (*p'ansori*) and dance that date back centuries; early performances such as *talch'um* (masked dance) and *jultagi* (tight rope walking) have aspects of orated blue humor through sexual innuendos and double entendre interwoven with recitation, song, dance and music.⁵⁹⁸ Korea's most modern version of orated humor is *mandam* (만담/漫談)—a satirical form of storytelling that is performed by one person or a banter between two or more

⁵⁹⁷ Michael Kimmel and Lisa Wade, "Ask a Feminist: Michael Kimmel and Lisa Wade Discuss Toxic Masculinity," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44, no. 1 (2018): 233-254, 238.

⁵⁹⁸ Dong-il Cho, trans. Kyong-hee Lee. *Korean Mask Dance*, Seoul: Ewha Women's University Press, 2005; CedarBough Tam Saeji, *Transmission and Performance: Memory, Heritage, and Authenticity in Korean Mask Dance Dramas*, Phd Diss., UCLA, 2012.

comedians. Mandam emerged during the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945) in the 1920s, as a short act during intermission between musical theater numbers; mandam comedians produced “verbal fun by quickly repeating words such that these performers’ work was similar to the US stand-up comedy of the 1950s and 1960s.”⁵⁹⁹ Mandam performances contain “satiric and educational content about a societal phenomenon.”⁶⁰⁰ Shin Bool-chool is perhaps the earliest and most well-known mandam performer in Korean history; You describes Shin’s contribution of mandam as “a Korean form that could contribute to Koreans’ national consciousness and thus to the nation’s liberation from Japan.”⁶⁰¹ Mandam was political humor that “played a critical role in forming public opinion at the time” and criticized the colonial regime.⁶⁰² Mandam records were, therefore, highly censored or prohibited by the Japanese Governor-General between 1933 and 1934 “for breach of public order” “and “promoting immoral behavior.”⁶⁰³

There are many similarities between mandam and early stand-up comedy in that they both contain a rebellious spirit that demands freedom of thought and speech above all else: “[T]he deepest desire of stand-ups is to be, with respect to their lives, unencumbered.”⁶⁰⁴ In the 1960s, Lenny Bruce was arrested on charges of obscenity; mandam duos like Son Il-pyeong and Kim Won-ho, whose comedy stylings were inspired by the American duo Laurel and Hardy, performed acts that satirically criticized the Japanese colonial authority; due to their material, the police often monitored Son and Kim’s live performance in theaters. The performance style of mandam is also

⁵⁹⁹ You, *Entertaining Politics: Exploring Historical Transformation of Production, Distribution and Consumption of Political Entertainment in Korea*, 66.

⁶⁰⁰ You, “Exploring Mandam [Comic Talk] as a Unique Form of Political Entertainment in Korea During the Japanese Colonial Period,” 135.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid.

⁶⁰² Ibid, 136.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, (Durham: Duke University, 2000) 6.

similar to how stand-up comedy is performed; it involves one person on stage with a mic before a live audience; the performer tells funny bits with setups and punchlines, a funny story, scenario or thought, and the audience reacts with laughter. Some mandam performers sang songs with funny lyrics much like how numerous American stand-up comedians integrate music into their acts, e.g. Phyllis Diller, Zach Galifianakis, Sarah Silverman, and Demetri Martin. Stand-up comedians go “on the road” to perform gigs in towns across the nation or around the world at clubs, bars, theaters, universities, etc., just as mandam performers toured around the country to perform before live crowds. Mandam comedians sold records of their acts much like how stand-up comics record comedy albums of their hour-long special. This is how the initial proliferation of mandam in colonial Korea took place—through transcultural devices like the gramophone, records and radio which were carried into occupied Korea from Japan. In fact, it can be said that mandam existed *because* of the transnational encounters Korea had through foreign occupation, seeing as early mandam performers who emerged in the 1920s mainly criticized Japan’s colonial occupation as well as America’s military presence after Korea’s liberation from Japan in 1945. In the same way, the rising popularity of stand-up comedy as an art form in the ROK today is a transcultural manifestation.

Initially, the YouTube platform and local fan labor made English-language stand-up comedy more accessible to Koreans through subtitled video clips. Then Netflix entered the Korean market in 2016. Given the dozens of stand-up comedy specials that are available on Netflix with subtitles, Koreans became more exposed to stand-up comedy. I’ve noticed in conversations with comics in the US how the goals have shifted; stand-up comedians today don’t necessarily say that they want a spot on a late night show such as *The Tonight Show* or *Late Night*—which is not to say that such spots are not coveted; it is more common to hear comics nowadays say that their

dream is to have their own “Netflix special.” This is indicative of the influence that Netflix has in the business of stand-up comedy; it is expanding the art form transnationally, and stand-up comedy exists as a programming genre on Netflix to the point where prestige comedy specials have become tied to the streaming platform. This also increases the international tours that comedians can make now that they have an audience base around the globe. Netflix not only streams comedy specials but also produces original stand-up specials featuring headlining acts such as Dave Chappelle, Jim Gaffigan, Wanda Sykes, Amy Schumer, Bill Burr, Tom Segura, Anthony Jeselnik, Ellen DeGeneres, and a host of others. Netflix specials are known for changing the careers of comics like Ali Wong, whose 2016 stand-up special *Baby Cobra* turned her into a household name overnight.

As established, however, the basic elements of stand-up comedy are already familiar to Korean audiences given the history of mandam and talk concerts, and the massive similarities between stand-up and mandam. You argues that the popularity of mandam was mainly attributed to the economic viability of this source; record and gramophone companies were able to sell them to listeners. Theaters collaborated with record companies to produce new mandam records, and newspapers benefited by selling ad space dedicated to said records; radio stations also benefited from this ecosystem dedicated to mandam entertainment.⁶⁰⁵ In the 1950s, some mandam performers tried to continue their work in radio but not to great success as the performers began to rely more on word play for comedic purposes rather than satire and social critique. As a result, the political potency of mandam began to diminish. Furthermore, program producers began to seek comedy programs that served more to entertain rather than offer social critique, resulting in “the depoliticization of comedy as well as the transformation of the comedy genre.”⁶⁰⁶ The advent of

⁶⁰⁵ Kyung-han You, “Chapter Two: The Origins of Korean Political Entertainment During the Japanese Colonial Period,” 35-69.

⁶⁰⁶ Kyung-han You, diss., 71.

television in the ROK began in 1961 just as Park Chung-hee came into power. Media was heavily controlled by Park during his reign, and television was utilized to promote self-serving political messages with a suppression of any resistance, including political satire. Comedy began to change in the 1960s onward due to political, economic and technological changes such as the military dictatorship's heavy censorship and the advent of television. The new form of comedy that emerged is what Kyung-han You refers to as "stand-up comedy": "...the introduction of television influenced the generic transformation of television comedy into stand-up comedy on the basis of unintelligent characters, and the 1970s and 1980s were thus marked by the popularity of stand-up television comedy."⁶⁰⁷ What You calls "stand-up comedy" is actually referred to as "standing comedy" (스탠딩 코미디) in Korean. Kim Hyung-gon is one example of a standing comedian whose jokes are delivered typically as fictional scenarios with set ups and punchlines. Again, this type of comedy is a descendant of mandam comedy and a close relative of stand-up comedy. It is, perhaps, more accurate to claim that the concept of stand-up comedy went out of mode and was forgotten seeing as it wasn't as prominent on television, but as Netflix entered the Korean market in 2016, the concept was reintroduced to Korean audiences as a brand new "American" concept into mode through the genre's close association with a major global streamer that has a large catalogue of original content featuring Hollywood stars.

Netflix is uniquely positioned to host an art form such as stand-up comedy; at the moment, Korean audiences have limited access to entertainment media that is not heavily censored; the exception (as mentioned in chapter 3) is internet broadcast content that is not subject to KCC's high scrutiny over profanity, sex and violence. Rules for Korean narrowcast channels such as cable

⁶⁰⁷ Kyung-han You, *diss.*, 110.

are not like US subscription cable channels such as HBO, FX and Showtime where FCC's censorship rules do not apply. The KCC's rules apply to cable channels in Korea such as tvN and JTBC. Thus, although shows on Korean cable channels play with more suggestive remarks, situations, and scenes, they still censor or prohibit profanity, tattoos, smoking, knives (when used as a weapon), and nudity. (Of course, Korean cinema is where these suppressions are released and many films include excessive violence, smoking, nudity, drug use, and profanity.) If sex and profanity is prohibited on television, then where do Korean stand-up comedians go when they want to spill all with no holds barred?

Now that Netflix is producing its own serialized Korean dramas exclusively for its platform, e.g., *Kingdom* (2019-2020) and *Extracurricular* (2020), a genre such as stand-up comedy now has the perfect home. This is why Korean comedians who've recently delved into stand-up comedy such as Yoo Byung-jae and Park Narae are making their stand-up specials available on Netflix. In fact, Netflix's first ever comedy festival—Netflix is a Joke Fest—booked Park Narae to perform at The Wiltern Theater in Los Angeles, although the festival was canceled due to COVID-19. Park Narae's stand-up special *Glamour Warning* was released on Netflix in April 2019. Lee Soo-geun's stand-up special is also in the works at Netflix. Stand-up comedy as an art form becomes a reason for Netflix to produce original Korean stand-up comedy specials with well-known comics for exclusive streaming on their platform; it incentivizes interested viewers to subscribe to Netflix and access content they could never see anywhere else.

Introducing Korean Stand-up Comedy

In 2018, writer/comedian Yoo Byung-jae released his first hour-long stand-up comedy special *Too Much Information* on Netflix. Yoo opens it by instructing the audience on how to react to his stage presence while also managing their expectations:

I'm sure most of you aren't familiar with stand-up comedy. I'm not familiar with it, either. I've only done it a few times. Simply put, this is the only thing you'll see for the rest of the evening. More specifically, stand-up comedy is a show where a comedian takes the stage with a microphone and performs on his own for whatever duration of time. I'm telling you this now because some of you might have this thought. Some of you might be thinking, 'Yoo Byung-jae is a member of YG Entertainment. Maybe he will have a special guest from YG Entertainment for the show....' I'm the only one from YG Entertainment who you can see up close for 45,000 won.

The reason why Yoo takes the time early on to explain stand-up comedy to his audience is because of the underlying assumption that stand-up comedy is foreign to Koreans. In fact, many Korean stand-up comedians claim that local audiences are unfamiliar with the art form, and comics preface their live shows in the beginning with basic instructions on what to expect and how to react. Sometimes, the host opens the show by asking audiences if they've been to a stand-up comedy show before and counts heads. Despite Korea's history of mandam, Koreans still claim stand-up comedy to be a novel form. Given the history of Korean mandam, however, it would be inaccurate to say that stand-up comedy is new to the ROK as many journalists and comedians report.⁶⁰⁸

Besides mandam, there are other forms of comedic storytelling formats known in Korea such as "talk concert" (t'ok'ük'onsöt'ü), and comedians like Oh Jung-chul have been known for holding them.⁶⁰⁹ In fact, some stand-up comedians in Seoul promote their showcases as a "talk

⁶⁰⁸ Kim Tae-woo, "Pangnarae-ga Netp'ülliksü Süt'aendüöp K'omidi Süp'esyöl 'Pangnaraeüi Nongyöm Chuüibo'E Ch'uryönhanda," *Huffington Post*, April 8, 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.kr/entry/netflix_kr_5caaa086e4b0dca033034b09, accessed May 12, 2020.

⁶⁰⁹ Lee Geun-mi. "T'ok'ük'onsöt'ü-ro Ttün Kaegūmaen," Chosun News Press, 2012, <http://monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?ctcd=E&nNewsNumb=201211100051>, accessed May 1, 2020.

concert” in their publicity material in efforts to attract more attendees through a term that is slightly more familiar within the Korean nomenclature. While mandam and stand-up comedy have a goal, which is to always get laughs, talk concerts are not always expected to be comedic in nature. Some talk concerts may be more sincere throughout. In both mandam and stand-up comedy, the expectation from the audience is always a set-up followed by a punchline which repeats throughout the duration of the set or the show, but this is not necessarily the case with talk concerts. With that said, some stand-up comedians stray from the rapid pattern of setup, punchline and laughs by adding an element of sincerity; Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby’s Netflix special stands out as one of these: “Is it fair to call this stand-up? Opinions vary.”⁶¹⁰

There are numerous stand-ups in the US who also utilize storytelling in their acts. Examples include Tom Segura, Rachel Feinstein, Jim Jefferies, and Tig Notaro, but unlike talk concerts, their acts continuously generate laughs. They have punchlines every few seconds or a minute. A Korean talk concert, and the majority of Korean stand-up comedy acts performed today, do not have the same repetitive rhythm of setup, punchline, and laughs, over and over again till the end. There is a pacing to stand-up comedy where one can hear consistent laughs break out throughout a comic’s set. Danny Cho says, “In my opinion, a talk concert would be like an amusing TED talk. There is

⁶¹⁰ Judy Berman, “‘Nanette’ is the Most Discussed Comedy Special in Ages. Here’s What to Read About It,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/13/arts/television/nanette-hannah-gadsby-netflix-roundup.html>, accessed May 1, 2020; Melena Ryzik, “The Comedy-Destroying, Soul-Affirming Art of Hannah Gadsby,” July 24, 2018, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/24/arts/hannah-gadsby-comedy-nanette.html>, accessed Dec. 17, 2019; Interestingly enough, Neal Brennan’s Netflix 2017 stand-up special *Three Mics* also involved moments of grave seriousness yet it did not draw as much ire, debate and controversy as Gadsby’s special as to whether or not it is stand-up comedy raising eyebrows given Brennan’s identity as a white hetero cis-male and Gadsby being a white queer cis-woman.

a point and a lot of times it's like a humorous lecture. In stand-up, being funny is the most important thing. You are not there to teach anything.”⁶¹¹

The sentiment that the point of stand-up comedy is to hear laughs and not give a lecture is shared by comics like Ali Wong. In her book *Dear Girls*, Wong writes: “Learning how to get as many laughs as possible per minute is a skill born out of necessity. And thinking that a crowd of strangers wants to hear your sad story or enlightened political ideas at a comedy show without consistent laughs throughout is a bad habit born out of entitlement. Save the speech for a TED talk or brunch.”⁶¹² Aside from Cho and Wong’s philosophy as to what stand-up comedy is or should be is besides the point; the deciding difference between a stand-up comedy set and a speech is getting the laughs. Korean stand-up comedians today have their own takes on what stand-up comedy is to themselves, to Koreans, and everyone else.

As of November 11, 2019, the public broadcaster KBS aired a program called *Stand Up* (2020—) featuring Park Narae as the emcee with a line-up of comedians who have earned their comedian qualifications through the “exam” process at one of the big three broadcasting networks in Korea—KBS, MBC and SBS. The show airs late at night after 11PM KST with a number 19 watermark on the top corner to signal viewers that the show is not suitable for children. The comics tell stories with a funny ending. The setup is long and the punchline comes much later, but the basic idea of stand-up comedy is there. Unlike stand-up comedy specials seen on American TV and Netflix, however, there is a great deal of editing that goes into *Stand Up* that turns the show into another variety show. This is inevitable in some ways given that the PDs and editors of any comedy program are mostly used to producing and editing variety shows with laugh tracks, CGI,

⁶¹¹ Interview. Danny Cho. Email. July 19, 2018.

⁶¹² Ali Wong, *Dear Girls: Intimate Tales, Untold Secrets & Advice for Living Your Best Life*, Random House: New York, 2019, 142.

sound effects, music cues, and close-ups of reaction shots. The genre of stand-up comedy on Korean television is merging with its existing world of sketch and variety comedy, and currently exists as a hybrid of all three. The difference is that the comics can exercise more freedom of word choice and subject matter (sex, politics, drugs) on Netflix because it is uncensored whereas on public broadcast station, they must “clean up” their acts significantly. This is the same in the US where comedians who wish to debut on a late night program with their tight five must avoid cursing or delivering overtly suggestive material because they are under greater scrutiny by performing on national television.

Korean stand-up comedians who regularly perform live today do not have a strong tie to the TV industry. They are working from hand to mouth as live performance comics, and work day jobs. When I ask them what their strategy is to land success with their comedy, they either do not have an answer or say that they want a stand-up special produced and available to stream on Netflix. Part of the reason why Korean comics dream of a Netflix special is because comedians like Yoo Byung-jae and Park Narae have already accomplished this. However, what these Korean stand-ups do not have that Yoo does is a million Instagram followers.

Andrew Husband for *Forbes* magazine writes: “The best working comedians today understand the need for this dichotomized personality, and the greatest know how to transform it into a viable business model.”⁶¹³ The comic’s personality even in the scheme of Netflix needs to make fiscal sense; venues, networks and media companies today base their investments on the number of social media followers that comics have. The landscape of stand-up comedy has changed since the rise of social media and digital streaming. American comics like Kyle Dunnigan

⁶¹³ Andrew Husband, “‘Ali Wong: Hard Knock Wife’ Presents A New Gold Standard For Comedy,” *Forbes*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewhusband/2018/05/14/ali-wong-hard-knock-wife-review/#43d201ab21a9>, accessed May 5, 2019.

recognize the benefit to having hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram which help him not only book spots at clubs and theaters but also fill the seats.⁶¹⁴ Social media has made it easier for media corporations and bookers to invest in their performers based on the number of followers they have. Danny Cho mentioned in our interview that nowadays, it's not necessarily about talent, but more about how many followers one has on Twitter or Instagram.⁶¹⁵ This is why Korean comedians produce their own video content and upload them onto YouTube; they want to produce content that may eventually go viral, and attract more followers. The comics also hold a short “fan” session with attendees and let them take photos with the comedians to upload and tag on their social media to expand their presence. For working comics today, their social media accounts act as a business portfolio, and a great deal of time and effort go into this labor albeit free conjuring yet again neoliberal rationale; the benefactors of this labor are the platform hosts e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, etc.

The Korean comedians who perform live shows have a work ethic and method of preparation that they put into their stand-up that closely mirrors their work experience as television sketch comedians. While they are less affiliated with the TV industry, they continue to maintain some of the qualities of television's preparedness that they are used to from their training, including some militaristic aspects of that work.

Reproducing the TV Industry's Military-Identity Complex in Live Korean Stand-up Comedy

⁶¹⁴ PowerfulJRE. “Joe Rogan Experience #1134 - Kyle Dunnigan,” *YouTube* video, 2:29:05. June 22, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANeILT_kkDM (accessed May 27, 2019).

⁶¹⁵ In person conversation, Seoul, Nov. 16, 2018.

On January 11, 2019, I went to see stand-up comedian Jim Jefferies perform at the Live 24 Hall in Seoul with five bilingual Seoul-based stand-up comedians. Afterwards, the comedians and I went to a restaurant nearby. Over dinner, a local comic mentioned that the multiple meetings, rehearsals and performances she participated in over the holidays wore her thin. Another comic responded, “That’s so Korean. It’s so military.” This particular comic essentialized the militant manner of holding meetings and rehearsing intensely for a stand-up comedy show as distinctly Korean. While I disagree with the remark that being militaristic is necessarily Korean, military masculinity is an ideological underpinning of Korea’s social fabric. Although toxic masculinity is embedded in the television industry, male Korean comics that I interviewed express a desire to break away from conventions they witnessed while working as a TV comedian.

The Korean television industry’s foundation mirrors the militarized economy that Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan envisioned in the 1960s through the 1980s by integrating military service into the labor force. This involved making military service a prerequisite during recruitment, allowing military service to be recognized as prior work experience, and offering benefits or advantages to those who’ve completed their military duties at job interviews and exams.⁶¹⁶ Such policies excluded the possibility of women finding employment at major corporations with high paying wages and significant benefits. While some of these policies have been abolished due to the women’s rights activism in the late 1990s, corporate environments were still dominated by military culture: “Corporate culture in major business firms was characterized by rigid hierarchy based on rank, the command mode of one-way communication, and a collective ethos used to justify individual sacrifice. These aspects of corporate culture underlay interactions

⁶¹⁶ Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), Kindle 744-755/4595.

among workers and managers in offices and on shop floors.”⁶¹⁷ The Korean television industry is also hierarchical, with respects paid to those with seniority or a higher rank by junior or lower ranking staff. This militant cultural dynamic is not just present on sets in Korea, but in Hollywood as well. John Caldwell refers to the production industry’s strict culture adhering to this top-down process as a “military-identity complex.”⁶¹⁸ This military identity complex is most visible on the Korean television production set, including a variety program’s.

In 2015, KBS aired a 12-episode reflexive, mockumentary-style workplace dramedy entitled *Producer*, which is set on the sixth floor of KBS’s headquarters in Yeouido following a group of *yenŭng* producers. The show is a good road map to understanding how a KBS *yenŭng* production imagines or theorizes its own work place.⁶¹⁹ On episode 4, a seasoned floor director (FD) (Lee Joo-seung) advises a rookie producer-director (PD) Baek Seung-chan (Kim Soo-hyun) on what to expect on the set of the popular real-variety show *2 Days & 1 Night*:

When you step onto the set of *2 Days & 1 Night*, do so with the mentality of entering a battlefield. So dress and pack appropriately. ... You won’t have time to eat, so you won’t have time to brush your teeth. ... You won’t be able to brush your teeth so washing your hair is out of the question. When you’re in a car, you’re going to sleep no matter what because you won’t be able to sleep otherwise.⁶²⁰

The high stress of *yenŭng* programs such as *2 Days & 1 Night* has a lot to do with its reality format which requires the crew to be “on” at all times.⁶²¹ In 2008, KBS aired a narrative mini-series entitled *Worlds Within* starring Song Hye-kyo and Hyun Bin, which dramatizes the set of a

⁶¹⁷ Ibid), Kindle 802/4595.

⁶¹⁸ Caldwell, *Production Cultures*, 131.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid, 147.

⁶²⁰ *Producer*, episode 4, KBS, 2015, VOD, DramaFever, <https://www.dramafever.com/drama/4670/4/Producer/>, accessed Nov. 12, 2016, translation by author.

⁶²¹ Caldwell, *Production Cultures*, 165: Caldwell describes the tall order of shooting conditions on a reality set in.

serialized Korea drama production and the taxing work conditions onset. In the opening of the first episode, a production crew races against the sun to complete the final shot then rushes the tape over to the network for editing right before airing it on time while Vivaldi's "Winter" grippingly plays over the sequence.⁶²² There are images of crew members suffering injuries on a rushed set, PDs sweating, and chief producers (CPs) cursing, slapping and kicking their subordinates for the delays. Part of the reason why drama production sets are so high pressure has a lot to do with the standard of "last-minute live filming" which prioritizes viewer reactions and ratings, as well as lowering production costs.⁶²³ These working conditions are exacerbated by the militant on-set environment.

Shows like *Producer* and *Worlds Within* are the TV industry's love letter from the producers to the consumers, illustrating the lengths that the staff will go in order to deliver content to the viewing public. In this way, they rationalize and justify the harsh work conditions and the violent behavior of heads of staff. In YouJeong Oh's interview, a crewmember on a drama set claimed, "Not sleeping is required practice in this field. We are so used to it. Nevertheless, drama [sic] should be broadcast. It is a promise with the public."⁶²⁴ The crewmember's belief that the show must be broadcast no matter what the cost contains both a militarized logic and the idea of broadcast as a public service. A production on KBS, which must constantly articulate itself as a

⁶²² *Worlds Within*, episode 1, 2008, Viki: <https://www.viki.com/videos/67294v-worlds-within-episode-1?locale=en>.

⁶²³ Youjeong Oh, "The Interactive Nature of Korean TV Dramas," *Hallyu 2.0: The Korea Wave in the Age of Social Media*, edited by Sangjoon Lee and Abé Mark Nornes, (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 2015), 135: "Broadcasting firms and drama producers share the interests in viewer ratings; higher ratings not only generate more sales of commercials, but also raise the unit price of commercials.... This critical commercial logic has created a system of what is called *jjokdaebon* (a slice of script) or 'hasty script' in the Korean drama industry. Under this system, extremely short sections of scripts arrive on set, barely meeting the live-shoot schedule."

⁶²⁴ Oh, "The Interactive Nature of Korean TV Dramas," 137.

public network that produces public-interest programs, must maintain the same rationale. Oh argues that this “public nature of TV dramas” is what causes on-set stress.⁶²⁵ The issue of “public interest”—a national cause—is utilized as justification for militaristic physical, mental and emotional violence imposed onto industry workers. In recent news, there were reports of deaths on the sets of Netflix “original” Korean dramas such as *Kingdom* (2018-2021) and *Arthal Chronicles* (2019).

You-me Park argues that violence in Korea is routine and normal because militarized masculinity as well as neoliberal masculinity legitimate its cultural existence.⁶²⁶ As mentioned in chapter 1, violence is not only normalized, but legitimized as an acceptable part of life in capitalist/neoliberal Korea. Many show business workers in Korea today seek alternative means of fulfillment by working outside of the television industry precisely because they are tired of its heavy demands.

Comedian Jung Jae-hyung is the CEO of a comedy theater production company called Comedy Alive and a former comedian featured on the sketch-variety program *Gag Concert*. Jung took the entrance exam to become a comedian at KBS in 2014. The total number of applicants numbered at 1700. By the third round of the exam, the applicants were down to somewhere between 300 to 400. Out of that number, 14 were selected including Jung. Unlike auditions at NBC’s *Saturday Night Live*, which is reserved for select comics who are called in to audition, KBS puts out an open call for anyone to apply. The comedians refer to this process as an “exam,” not an audition. The application involves turning in paperwork that includes one’s basic profile information as well as a portfolio, and the exam consists of the comedian performing their

⁶²⁵ Oh, “The Interactive Nature of Korean TV Dramas,” 137.

⁶²⁶ You-me Park, “The Crucible of Sexual Violence: Militarized Masculinities and the Abjection of Life in Post-Crisis, Neoliberal South Korea,” *Feminist Studies*, 42 (2016): 17-40.

practiced “bit” or “gag” before a panel of PD acting as judges. The applicants have between 2-3 minutes to impress the judges, before they receive a callback to perform in the second and third rounds. This exam process lasts several days.

Jung said that after the exam was over and he was “hired” at KBS, he started out with running coffee errands for fellow comedians who were his “sōnbae” (seniors) but without pay. By 2015, he began to write and perform his own bits, but it took another full year before he had his own spot on *Gag Concert* in a sketch called, “Wu-ju Like.”⁶²⁷ The main PD and head writer of the show made final decisions regarding sketch pitches that the comedians made.

Jung Jae-hyung: On Monday, we would pitch ideas and rewrite based on feedback we received. On Tuesday, we would pitch again and wait for their approval. By Wednesday, approved sketches would enter dry rehearsals then dress rehearsals before the taping before a live audience. On Thursday and Friday, they we would have to write a whole new act for the following week’s show.⁶²⁸

By 2017, however, Jung claimed to have hit a wall. He wasn’t getting enough air time and he was tired of the structure of his workplace. Jung also stated that he was tired of the rampant hazing culture and bullying he was both subjected to and witnessing: “If someone more senior was offended by me or a person on my team messed up a bit on stage, we would all be called up to the roof and told to remain in a plank position on our heads with our arms behind our backs for long periods of time—to the point of bleeding from our skulls. The women would have to remain still in push-up position.”⁶²⁹ This top-down enforcement (senior to junior comedians) has military coding in its hierarchical nature alone, but the form of punishment is also commonly used in the Korean military. When Jung was telling me about these examples of hazing, he was careful to say that such acts are from “the past,” and “they probably don’t do this anymore,” but given Jung’s

⁶²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZL5pMB1xPw>

⁶²⁸ Jung Jae-hyung. Interview. Dec. 9, 2018.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

short tenure at KBS and the recency of 2014-2017, it is most probable that such practices—or forms of hazing—continue to endure in these settings. The strenuousness and high pressure of TV in addition to unpaid labor—a concept that becomes justifiable according to neoliberal logic—makes it impossible to imagine a different scenario.

In 2017, Jung said he received a call from a friend and fellow comedian Lee Sung-hu who suggested that they try stand-up comedy together since they “had nothing to lose.” Jung began researching stand-up acts on YouTube, starting with Chris Rock’s “bullet control” bit. They each wrote a 30-minute act and performed an hour show together at a small bar in Hongdae. “It was more like a 15-minute set-up with two punchlines,” Jung joked. He admitted that they were both so new to stand-up that they weren’t exactly sure if what they did was even stand-up comedy, but they decided that this was the path they were going to take.

Jung and his team at Comedy Alive consist of a handful of other stand-up comedians and most of them have television experience as “gag men” (kaegūmen) performing sketch comedy. The team regularly produces content for their YouTube channel including short video clips of them having funny discussions, their stand-up material, or pranks.⁶³⁰ They meet every week—Monday through Thursday—to create content, have a general meeting about the direction they are headed, and put on a show every Thursday through Saturday nights at the comedy club Comedy Haven in Gangnam and another stage in Hongdae. Jung stated his belief that their online presence and live performances can be sufficient alternatives to the Korean broadcast industry, which he is wary of due to the bad experiences he endured as a performer at *Gag Concert*. With that said, Jung was still realistic about the economic potential that stand-up comedy currently has in Korea: “When

⁶³⁰Comedy Haven [YouTube Channel]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCX0QbFGX5LscgfZQCZ5qIAg>, accessed Nov. 6, 2020.

[K-pop] idols tour the country, they make about two to three thousand dollars per gig for fifteen minutes of performance, so if we can achieve the same then it's perfectly viable. But Koreans don't know stand-up comedy conceptually just yet. We tried to put on shows outside of [Comedy Haven] but the audiences did not laugh at all. They sat, smiled, and clapped in the beginning and in the end. The concept of stand-up comedy is still too novel to Koreans.”

The reason why comedians go straight to networks is because that was the only means of visibility and the promise of financial stability; but most importantly, however, the network was where they could earn the qualification as a comedian. *Stand Up* on KBS features, however, features some comics who have not gone through the network process to become a comedian; one of these is Korean American comic Danny Cho. Cho, however, has credibility as a stand-up comedian which he practiced for nearly two decades in the US before moving to Seoul; he has American TV network credits on *Mad TV* (1995-2009, 2016) on Fox and CW, *Dr. Ken* (2015-2017) on ABC, and Comedy Central that give him the qualification of a recognized stand-up. The rest who appear on the show, however, are not debuting as a comedian for the first time on television; they have all gone through the selection process at a network to earn their badge as a “qualified comedian.” Although they are not practiced in the art form of stand-up comedy, they do have many years of experience as sketch comics with impressions, slapstick bits, and other jokes, and the lot of them primarily perform acts that lean heavily on storytelling. These comics also have a following on their social media accounts due to their years of television work. If a comedian does well on a TV show, they catch the attention of advertisers who approach them for endorsement deals. These offers are called a “CF” and stands for “commercial film,” which refers to the act of filming a commercial. CFs pay handsomely, but they are reserved for popular performers who make an impression on viewers and critics with their work on TV.

In late 2018, Jung said that a network approached him and his team with an offer to film them for television, but he said that he politely declined because he was well-aware of how the process would end up: “They would impose their own ideas and try to control the performers’ material to match their standards.” Jung is very protective of the artist’s creative freedom and recognizes that as part of the benefit of a live performance apart from TV. The value of creative freedom appeared to be the priority, but economic realities did appear to weigh heavily over Jung and his team. “Once we are sufficiently prepared, we’d like to eventually do a showcase on television, but that’s more of a long-term goal, and we would only do it in the right conditions.”

Just before the holidays in December 2018, I sat down with comedian Lee Sung-hu who started his stand-up career with Jung.⁶³¹ Lee is also a former “gag man” who got started in television sketch comedy on the variety show *People Looking for a Laugh* (2003-2017) on Korea’s commercial broadcaster Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS). Lee began performing comedy in 2011 with a sketch comedy theater company (“kūktan”) that functioned much like an academy with an instructor. It included an ensemble of comedians who gathered to write, rehearse and perform among themselves as a means to eventually audition at a network. Lee took the exam to get into network television in 2011 but failed. He continued to take the exam every year after that but got rejected until he passed at SBS in 2016: “About a thousand people auditioned that year and eleven were selected including me.”

Much like Jung, Lee expressed his distaste for the politics, hierarchy and competitiveness he witnessed in the television industry while working on the show: “There were seniors and PDs that we constantly needed to suck up to. People had to bow down to them, address them with

⁶³¹ Interview, Lee Sung-hu. Dec. 20, 2018. Seoul; at the request of the subject, Sung-hu’s name has been changed to a pseudonym.

respect, and do everything just as they were told just like we had to in the military.” Although Lee had finally made it past the “gates” of television, Lee said that getting paid was difficult: “Performers only got paid if their ‘corner’ aired that week, which depends on luck and playing one’s cards correctly. There’s a lot of sucking up that we had to do to the seniors and PDs, including bringing them gifts. I didn’t want to beg for a spot.”⁶³² When Lee started the show, he was one of the juniors. He got paid 400,000 won (approx. \$335) per episode if a corner he was involved in got air time, which was not a guarantee. Even if he did get air time every single week, that amounted to about \$1,340 a month. “It’s difficult to live off of that much income [in Seoul] as a celebrity, which requires us to maintain an image by buying a lot of clothes and accessories.” What Lee means by “maintaining a celebrity lifestyle” is that as a TV entertainer, he needs to exhibit celebrity status through high-end fashion, hair and makeup. Part of being a celebrity is playing the part through image. But on Lee’s meager income, this was an unrealistic pursuit. After only a year into his new TV career, *People Looking for a Laugh* got canceled in 2017. Lee said, “I was glad in some ways, because I wanted to get out of the industry system. But I also dealt with a period of depression. I stayed at home for a long time without seeing anyone. After a year of working week after week as an entertainer, not being able to work or make anyone laugh made me feel worthless. I felt like I’d lost my identity.” Lee said he got a credit card and spent some time traveling. He reconnected with his estranged mother in Paris, and decided he wanted to be an artist but as a comedian.

Around this time was when comedian Yoo Byung-jae—former writer of *Saturday Night Live Korea*—wrote, produced and performed his own stand-up special *Black Comedy*, and uploaded clips of it onto YouTube and eventually sold it to Netflix. This inspired Lee and Jung to

⁶³² A “corner” is a term used to describe a sketch or a segment on a variety show.

give stand-up comedy a shot. Lee echoed what Jung said about their 1-hour performance in Hongdae: “It was like two 15-minute set-ups with one punchline for each. We started without knowing a thing.” But due to the positive response from the audience and friends, Lee and Jung decided to continue their stand-up work by creating their own team and theater production company.⁶³³ “Comedy Alive has three goals. The first is to support the artist’s material. The second is to avoid the TV industry system. There’s no hierarchy in our team. No one is above another. We treat one another like brothers. And finally, we offer management support to the team members.”

Luckily for Lee and Jung, they discovered a community of people who had the same passion for stand-up comedy in Seoul and other parts of Korea, and requests for open mic spots started to come in. The team began to host open mics in February 2018 at Comedy Haven. The common point that both Lee and Jung share in their vision for stand-up comedy in Korea is a protection and preservation of artistic integrity and creative freedom. What I found ironic in this ideological declaration was the fact that Comedy Alive hosts a weekly open mic every Saturday evening that requires rehearsals two hours beforehand as well as a preliminary meeting on Wednesday with the open mic host. The preliminary meeting is required for anyone trying out the open mic for the first time. The host goes over general do’s and don’ts of the open mic such as avoiding cursing at the audience, not screaming into the mic, not stopping in the middle of the act and abandoning the stage, making sure to keep time, etc.

I asked Lee if the team was not controlling the comedians’ material by holding these preliminary meetings and rehearsals. Lee said he agreed with this sentiment: “So we stopped holding open mic rehearsals for a bit, but then things got out of control. Some of the comedians

⁶³³ “Hongdae” is an abbreviated term describing the college neighborhood of Seoul where Hongik University is based, and is commonly referred to locals as “Hongdae.”

would come in and all they would do is just scream directly into the mic, or some male comedians would say offensive things on stage that resulted in audience complaints.” Lee’s rationale was that the stand-up comedy scene in Korea is still in the budding stages, and he and his team members feel a responsibility to maintain its image by offering cues, guidance, advice and, at times, censoring material in case the comics might offend someone: “We tell male comics to avoid sex jokes if they can. We tell them to try it out if they are *really* confident in their material. But when one of our team members told a joke about masturbation, the reaction from the crowd was so negative that he decided to abandon the bit.” There is a sense of control and ownership in this rationale over all of stand-up comedy in Korea. Lee said that when male comedians mentioned their genitals in their act, the reaction from the audience, especially women, was negative. Lee believes it’s because female audience members might feel threatened by male comics’ display of overt sexuality, thereby becoming a matter of safety: “Especially since sexual harassment is such a big issue.” Lee and Jung did not seem to view setting these limitations as control over the comedians’ material but a form of guidance. Furthermore, given Lee and Jung’s hetero cis-male identity in the #MeToo era, they wanted to take extra precautions not to offend women.

Despite their good intentions, Lee and Jung are unwittingly reproducing a militaristic and hierarchical top-down formula of control and screening of stand-up comedy. Part of this is because Lee and Jung are repeating what they learned from the television industry and from their military service rather than completely reimagining how their live performances can proceed. They imitate the procedures they followed from their industry work similarly to how Korean producers first imitated Japanese television programs. There is a disconnect from their intention and their execution. As network comics, they were subject to having an authority figure grant approvals or disapprovals of every bit they ever wrote. They were subject to rehearsals and rewriting sketches

before letting it air. The reason for this kind of control, according to Jung and Lee, has more to do with the fact that they are trying to protect the reputation of “stand-up comedy” which is vulnerable due to its newness. They are also trying to protect their own reputation and brand as Comedy Alive, as well as the image of Comedy Haven. For Jung and Lee, the pressure of leaving a good first impression is high because the Korean stand-up scene is very small, and other venues do not exist where examples of stand-up comedy can leave another kind of impression. Thus, the members of Comedy Alive feel an obligation to set the standard for what stand-up comedy is so that audiences can have a positive evaluation of the performance. Furthermore, Comedy Alive feels responsible for standards and the image of what stand-up comedy is for audience members who are getting acquainted with the art form. This sense of responsibility and control over an entire art form in name of something greater such as their troupe and the comedy club has a shade of militaristic control.

Although the Comedy Alive members expressly did not wish to carry on the same top-down structure of approval, the team also shows a contradiction in the screening process where they instruct members on particular do’s and don’ts. The don’ts, however, involve mostly directing male comics not to practice overly blue humor that might offend women.⁶³⁴ Jung also mentioned that it is hard for Korean men to practice blue humor because they fear women’s negative reactions:

The majority of Korean comedy from the previous generations were more oriented towards men. The sex puns were there but subtle. On stage today, it’s easier for women to crack jokes about herself ‘down there.’ The women laugh and the audience approves. But [Korean] men have trouble crossing that line, and it’s a battle with his own self. He needs to become trash but he can’t allow himself that just yet. If he says ‘dick,’ and a woman gasps or doesn’t laugh, it’s awful. Moments like that is when I realize that Korea is still a Confucian society.⁶³⁵

⁶³⁴ “Blue humor” refers to humor based in ribaldry.

⁶³⁵ Interview. Jung Jae-hyung. Dec. 9, 2018.

Jung believes that women have a pass to talk openly about their genitals and sex life because it is easier for them, and the audience is more accepting of such discussions. Jung faults gender politics and blue humor itself rather than the male comic's ability to land a punchline. Meanwhile, in the English-language stand-up scene, "dick jokes" are extremely common—so much so that it is a category onto itself (as aforementioned).

While the Korean stand-up scene currently shares similar aspects with the local TV industry and military complex in that there is a level of instruction and control, Comedy Alive claims to set a limit to words and actions that may be misogynistic or threatening to women; the team has an awareness of how male sexuality is often used in abusive ways. This is in light of recent events in Korea involving gender issues such as the Seocho-dong public bathroom murder of a woman, the numerous scandals involving male Korean celebrities being called out in the #MeTooKorea movement, politician Ahn Hee-jung's multiple rapes of his secretary Kim Ji-eun, and the #MyLifeIsNotYourPorn movement that rose against digital crimes involving revenge porn as well as hidden cameras installed in public toilets, locker rooms, dressing rooms, and motels to spy on female victims who are unaware of the filming. Male Korean stand-up comedians are making attempts at being informed comics without offending audience members or making them feel unsafe with sexual remarks; with that said, there is still an order to the way stand-up comedy is practiced in Korea, and the gatekeepers are, again, men. They also associate primarily with other men. While the male comedians I interviewed state that they curb blue humor among male comics who are relatively new to performing because they want to protect female audiences, this intention is also mixed with economic and social reasons, as they openly claim that they do not wish audiences to associate Comedy Haven and stand-up comedy with a negative image.

I asked Danny Cho why he thinks Korean audiences aren't as receptive to blue humor. Cho responded, "In my opinion, I know Koreans like dirty humor but they have to uphold an image. In drinking settings, I've heard crazy dirty jokes being thrown left and right but that's just amongst friends. However, if you are in an audience with a bunch of people, laughing at dirty jokes might make you look like you have a dirty mind. Also from my experience the Korean audience is a bit more conservative. Meaning they don't react well to dirty material as much as the western audiences."⁶³⁶ Korean audiences are generally used to enjoying comedy from television, which cleans up content to become family-friendly and broadcast ready. The space on television is quite limited for comedians to practice blue humor, but in an enclosed space among friends, men speak and joke openly about sex. While the pressure to maintain a certain image appears to be the driving factor to preventing male comedians from practicing blue comedy, Korean audiences might not respond well to any joke that simply isn't funny. This is a matter of how *well* one can execute blue humor, which is the test of every comedian; just because a statement, idea or story is funny among friends, does not mean that it will be met with laughter in a room full of strangers.

In major cities in the US, there are many comedy open mic rooms where comedians can try out their material. These are hosted by fellow comics at theaters, bars, backyards or people's homes. Large comedy clubs such as the Ice House, Flappers, Hollywood Improv, Laugh Factory and the Comedy Store in LA host open mic nights at least once a week, which, depending on the club, also function as auditions before the house bookers for comics to potentially become "in-house" comics who can perform at the club. In show business-centric places like LA and New York, the open mics are often occupied by other comedians who are waiting for their stage time. These comics in-waiting then act as the audience for the fellow comic on stage. If the material

⁶³⁶ Interview. Danny Cho. Email. July 19, 2018.

isn't funny, the silence acts as feedback which the performer can either take or leave to try out in another room, adjust the bit until there is laughter, or drop it completely and write a new joke. The Korean comics in Seoul do not have the advantage of visiting dozens of different open mics every single night of the week to work out their material. Part of this is because the stand-up comedy scene and culture are still in development in Korea, and it is led by a team of comics who have top-down television industry training.

Korean comedians who are trained for television self-censor any sexual explicitness so that they can get their content approved by producers and writers as broadcast-ready (family friendly). This is not to say that discussions of sex or sexual innuendos are entirely absent from television. In fact, discussions of male sexuality frequently appear on public and cable channel variety shows, and they are normalized on television as natural and a matter-of-fact. Television personality and comedic emcee Kim Gura and actress Jang Youngran spoke with sexologist Dr. Kang Dong-woo in an episode of *My Little Television* season two (MBC, 2019-2020, air date Apr. 26, 2019) to discuss the importance of sex education for children, but the discussion was exclusively limited to matters related to the penis such as circumcision, male masturbation and ejaculation. In an episode of *Ask Us Anything*, Kyuhyun of the boyband Super Junior is a guest who asks the cast members to guess what activity he engages in three times a week, and all of the (male) members laugh while cracking side jokes hinting at their unspoken guess: masturbation. In an episode of *Infinite Challenge* (air date Aug. 19, 2006, "New Zealand Special"), the members of the show placed an adult video inside Yoo Jae-suk's bag to make it appear as though he'd packed it for the overseas trip in New Zealand. When the group finds the planted video, HaHa says, "He's the nation's greatest emcee. He needs his release, too," which, again, suggests male masturbation and ejaculation. Discussions of female sexuality in Korean television, however, is highly rare.

Whenever female sexuality *is* mentioned on TV, it is often through an association with a specific comedian and she is defined by that persona. Comedians Ahn Young-mi and Park Narae are associated with high promiscuity. Park Narae's sexuality is often framed in the context of her being a sexual aggressor prowling on men who do not reciprocate the same desire. Ahn Young-mi's blue humor on television is often framed as insane or unhinged and not to be taken seriously. *My Little Television*, *Ask Us Anything*, and *Infinite Challenge* treat male masturbation and stamina as general knowledge, but when Ahn Young-mi appears as a guest on *Ask Us Anything* (air date Nov. 17, 2018) and says she wanted to be partners with Seo Jang-hoon because "he's the biggest"—a comment that clearly insinuates the size of his genitalia relative to his height—there is a shocked hush in the room; acting quickly on her feet, another guest comic Song Eun-i speaks up for Young-mi and says it's because Young-mi is tall and therefore prefers tall people in general, which satisfies the flummoxed male cast members. Thus, female and male sexualities are treated differently relative to the stage and television; male sexuality is dealt with openly on television but received poorly among audiences in a live performance, whereas female sexuality is pathologized, erased or ignored on television but liberated on stage in live stand-up performances. With that said, it is also possible that the current female stand-up comics are simply getting more laughs because they write better jokes.

Korean Women and Korean Stand-up Comedy

Comedy Haven shuttered its doors in late September 2019 due to the lack of business. The local comedians I spoke with between late 2018 and early 2019 all expressed concern over the survival of the comedy club due to the high rent given the club's location in Gangnam and the limited number of patrons who attended the club. Between early November and late January,

however, I went to see Korean stand-up comedy at Comedy Haven on a weekly basis; I saw a total of 10 shows including both open mics and showcases. The very first Korean stand-up that I watched was an open mic at Comedy Haven on Nov. 10, 2018. I was pleasantly surprised to see many women perform that night. The subject matter they covered in their material was diverse, ranging from Christian mothers to workplace qualms to online dating. One of the club's regulars is Jung-yoon Choi, who is now a part of the Comedy Alive troupe. Choi is also the author of the book *Stand-up Now New York* which is an introductory overview of the American stand-up comedy for Korean readers. In order to write her book, Choi conducted a year of research while taking stand-up comedy classes in New York. She also conducted further research in Los Angeles where she interviewed some Korean American stand-up comics including Danny Cho and Esther Ku. She and some of the other Korean female comics put together a group called "Bloody Funny," and they host a monthly women's open mic and an all-female comedy showcase which they performed in Seoul and Busan in both Korean and English. One of the young female comics of this group is Choi Yena.

Choi started her comedy training in sketch and took classes at a comedy school taught by former TV industry comedians with the hopes of breaking into the television industry. Choi's talents were enough to make her a finalist in the tvN comedians' exam in 2017 for the show *Comedy Big League* (2011—) but she did not make the cut. Choi currently works multiple part-time jobs and performs stand-up comedy whenever she can and plans to make it her career. When I asked her about her experience at the comedy school, she sarcastically quipped: "That place where you pay money to get sexually harassed?"⁶³⁷ When I asked Choi to elaborate she said, "The teachers are mostly male. They would say extremely vile things to female students and the rest of

⁶³⁷ Yena Choi. In-person interview. Nov. 28, 2018.

the class would react with laughter. That would make it hard for anyone to speak up.” In a classroom setting, the students felt pressured to laugh at the teacher’s jokes no matter how offensive, in order to normalize it and make it acceptable. Neoliberal pressures are visible yet again here to follow authority blinding while discounting one’s own moral or ethical standards which echoes a toxic masculinist tendency as well wherein one’s values do not align with one’s actions as one laughs along with the crowd to please the authority figure.

Yena shared other stories of sexual harassment at the comedy school: “One of my peers bought a soda for herself and an extra one for the teacher because she knew that the teacher is fond of this particular drink. When she handed it to him, he said, ‘What’s with you today? Want me to suck on your tits to thank you?’ The teacher said it loudly enough for the rest of the class to hear and the other students reacted with laughter.” Part of the power in laughter is its affirmative value. When laughter erupts in response to a statement, it affirms the joke teller’s position while also reassuring others that what was said was, indeed, a joke, and therefore harmless, regardless of the reality of its impact. However, this is often how sexual harassment functions, especially when the victimizer makes his crime open to the public; when the public does not react negatively to this, the abuse is legitimated and accepted in a social setting, and not labeled as “abuse.” This is how Harvey Weinstein’s sexual harassment and Scott Rudin’s abusive workplace harassment went overlooked for decades; the Hollywood culture treated Weinstein’s predatory behavior as an open secret but did not incriminate him until investigative journalists from the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker* exposed his actions, leading to the #MeToo movement in the fall of 2017.

In another class, Choi said that a peer (female) told the teacher that he was, “Very funny,” to which he responded, “If you like it so much, why don’t you lie down for me, you fucking bitch?” Yena said that such comments were heard on the regular, and she gave up her dream of pursuing

sketch comedy in the television industry: “If the school I attended was this bad with sexual harassment, I wondered how much worse an actual TV set might be.” Stories of women giving up their dreams in a career that they want because of male abuse is common. Louis CK’s scandal involved female comics who claimed to have given up their comedy careers because of the trauma CK left on them. A similar pattern of discourse is also visible among female many Korean television industry workers.

Sexism in the Korean Television Industry

In October 2017, as Tarana Burke’s #MeToo digital activism began to go viral in Hollywood addressing workplace sexual harassment, Chinese American Los Angeles native Amber Liu—a member of the K-pop girl group f(x)—joined the conversation via Instagram: “[Sexual harassment] happens everywhere, even here. I want to add my voice as well. Not only from what I have experienced but also from what I have seen my friends and loved ones have to go through...and because it’s so common, I hate to say it.. the feelings become so numb and we all felt that we just had to ‘deal with it.’”⁶³⁸ However, it took another three months before #MeToo began to catch on in the ROK.

Korean women have also been using #MeToo to share their stories of harassment and to call out male celebrities who have committed offenses since early 2018. Chairwoman Lee Mi-kyung of the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center stated in January 2018: “The Korean media outlets, the prosecution and businesses are all linked, and female actresses and artists are often

⁶³⁸ Amber Liu, @ajol_llama, Instagram, Oct. 19, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BacDW3EF6K5/?utm_source=ig_embed

pressured to trade sexual favors for career advancement.”⁶³⁹ In a complete transcript of the JTBC interview, prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun notes how infuriated she was when she learned that people who were present at the dinner table and witnessed the groping said nothing to address the sexual harassment they witnessed in the moment, nor did they follow-up to check in with her on how she felt about it.⁶⁴⁰ In Max Weber’s description of a state’s bureaucratic structure, he mentions: “The individual bureaucrat is, above all, forged to the common interest of all the functionaries in the perpetuation of the apparatus and the persistence of its rationally organized domination.”⁶⁴¹ The silence, disregard and willful blindness to harassment are problems that perpetuate these kinds of incidents, thus normalizing them as acceptable social behavior in the workplace. Workspaces which are dominantly hetero cis-male design the “common interest.” Anyone who disrupts or resists such interest gets pushed out. The function of the television industry is to preserve hetero cis-maleness at the expense of identities that differ from such.

I return to my interview with former SBS variety show producer Ana Park, which I cite in chapter 3. Upon graduating Korea University with a degree in media studies, Park immediately landed a job at SBS—Korea’s largest commercial broadcaster—in the *yenŭng* sector, which produces unscripted variety programs for television and radio. Park said that her dream was to work in the entertainment sector, especially radio, so landing this job was an opportunity of a lifetime. Although my interview was initially to get a better understanding of the inner workings of the television industry, our conversation became mostly about the toxic masculinist environment

⁶³⁹ Jo He-rim, “Korean celebrities find it difficult to break silence on sexual exploitation,” *The Korea Herald*, Jan. 29, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180129001049>

⁶⁴⁰ Youjin Lee, “The Prosecutor Who Exploded #MeToo in Korea: The JTBC Interview with Seo Ji-hyun,” <https://www.aprilmag.com/2018/02/06/the-prosecutor-who-exploded-metoo-in-korea-the-jtbc-interview-with-seo-ji-hyun/>.

⁶⁴¹ Max Weber, “Bureaucracy,” *An Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, eds. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, (Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 49-70, 62.

that Park worked in for barely a year before quitting. The following is a description of the television industry's general structure which varies from network to network. The description, however, provides a broad picture of what the Korean entertainment industry looks like which reveals the structure and hierarchy of Korean production culture. As mentioned earlier, the hierarchical nature of the television industry is quite similar to the military industrial complex. In the ROK, the military is "a crucial practice of hegemonic masculinity," and those who understand what life was like during their service are more likely to share a stronger bond with the senior staff who are all male.⁶⁴² This understanding is exclusive to men since only men in the ROK are bound by their conscription duty to the state. As a result, the male hegemonic culture is all the more potent, and women are viewed to be less than men considering their lack of military experience that the men collectively share.⁶⁴³

Park stated, "The head is always a man."⁶⁴⁴ The chief producer (CP) and senior PDs run the show. The CP, according to Park, has his own "line" or team of loyal PDs and writers. The job security of that CP's staff depends on the strength of his network and ties to state institutions like the KCC. Due to this top-down model, respect for hierarchical order is all the more necessary. Park stated: "Misogyny and objectifying women are contagious in that environment. That mentality affects everybody. Some men who are new to the job are just fine at first but they are immediately affected by the misogynistic culture. Soon, they become a part of the problem."⁶⁴⁵ Park describes misogyny like a contagion that spreads; according to her, misogyny is a culture that is created. People join the industry, learn misogyny, then all share the same mentality as their

⁶⁴² Woori Han et al, 64.

⁶⁴³ For more on military culture and gender politics, see Rachael Joo, *Transnational Sport: Gender, Media, and Global Korea*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁶⁴⁴ Ana Park, in-person interview by author, Feb. 7, 2018.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid 2018.

seniors who perform their masculinity in the form of inappropriate words and behavior towards women.⁶⁴⁶ This, again, is in line with Weber's concept of how common interest and functions continue in a system through "the perpetuation of the apparatus," which, in this case, is the apparatus of misogyny.⁶⁴⁷ The hegemon is maintained as other men assimilate to the sexist culture at work. The other men who joined the network without misogynistic preconceptions adapt to the setting's toxically masculinist environment thereby denying their own values to conform to the majority's mentality and behavior in demeaning women. This is another example of how toxic masculinity functions in the workplace.

Park stated that the entertainment sector is an "extremely masculine" environment and that sexual harassment and misogynistic jokes were the absolute norm on both the set and in the office. When I asked for an example, Park shared an incident she encountered at work: "I was sitting in the office next to two senior male PDs. They were talking about a new writer (female) who joined another production team. One PD said, 'Hey, did you see the new writer on that team?' And the other PD responded, 'Yeah. I almost came.' They spoke this way openly in my presence. They knew I heard what they said. We were sitting together in the same room."

Park said that all kinds of things went through her mind in that moment. She said her first option was to not say anything, assuming that maybe they thought she didn't hear, although they spoke very casually and audibly, knowing full-well that she was there, so perhaps they didn't care if she heard them. The second thought that occurred to her was to join them in laughter, in the hopes that this would help her to appear like she is someone who could appreciate such jokes

⁶⁴⁶ Judith Butler, "Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory," *Theatre Journal*, 1988, 40:4, 519-531.

⁶⁴⁷ Weber, 62.

however inappropriate. The third thought was whether to address the inappropriateness of their joke and complain. Ultimately, Park said nothing and continued her work.

Aside from misogyny in the workplace, Park said that she loved her job. She said she loved being able to see audiences react with comments and phone calls to the content she produced. Because of this, Park wanted to find a way to survive in the industry, so she sought consultation among senior PDs at work. A male senior PD told her to hang on for just a few more months because she would get used to these things soon. Another senior PD she spoke with echoed the same remarks, telling her that these incidents would cease to bother her at some point. These kinds of advice from her industry mentors were means of conditioning Park to the point of being numb to misogyny—an effort in getting her to compromising her own values. When Park shared stories of workplace harassment with her father, he discouraged her from quitting her job: “Working at a major broadcaster is such a stable job. They rarely fire PDs. The job is secure and the salary is great. The hours may be long but it’s fun. So even my own father advised me to put up with it.”⁶⁴⁸ The fact that Park’s father encouraged his own daughter to overlook the misogynistic aspects of work demonstrates the extent of patriarchy in the ROK. This is an example of neoliberal values aligning with the function of toxic masculinity. Human rights logic was not an option in the conversations Park had with her colleagues and her family; economic stability was the only priority. But most importantly, the mentors closest to Park who she sought advice from pressured her to conform and accept this culture of sexism. “In Korea, women or even the gender female is considered so low,” Park said. “Being female is the absolute bottom. That’s the thinking, so it’s hard to change that.”⁶⁴⁹ As Sherry Ortner claims, “The secondary status of woman in society is

⁶⁴⁸ Ana Park, in-person interview by author, Feb. 7, 2018.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact.”⁶⁵⁰ RW Connell reinforces this sentiment: “The world gender order mostly privileges men over women.”⁶⁵¹

It’s notable that Park loved her job and was well-qualified for it. In fact, being a broadcast PD was her *dream* job. In spite of this, and against the wishes of her senior colleagues and family, Park left the media industry completely because she did not want to accept sexual harassment as a normal part of her life. By creating an intolerable work environment for women, Park was, in fact, forced out of her job by the masculinist culture of the TV industry. But through Park’s act of leaving a job she loved, she performed a political action via personal sacrifice; she gave up something she loved in the name of resisting a plague of toxic masculinity, misogyny and abuse that saturated her work environment. By leaving the job, she chose not to give in to the hegemonic system which continued to perpetuate the rationale that women were powerless and therefore okay to abuse. Park made her resistance clear: “I did not want to become someone who accepted sexual abuse as the norm.”⁶⁵²

I spoke to a Korean stand-up comedian and female TV network employee—Jessica Kim—who works at the cable channel JTBC.⁶⁵³ She also has experience working at MBC. Jessica’s initial desire to work in broadcasting came from wanting a job that was global—like a diplomat. She studied international relations as a college student. Kim said her desire to work in media initially came from a nationalistic drive; “I wanted to make Korea more appealing, especially to people who didn’t know Korea, and still called it a third world country.”⁶⁵⁴ Kim said that work life in the

⁶⁵⁰ Sherry B. Ortner, *Making Gender: The politics and erotics of culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 21.

⁶⁵¹ RW Connell, *Masculinities*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995, 2005), 260.

⁶⁵² Ana Park, in-person interview by author, Feb. 7, 2018.

⁶⁵³ In-person interview. Jessica Kim. Nov. 27, 2018.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid.

television industry is hard for women because there are always “men’s egos that women need to be mindful of.”⁶⁵⁵ Working with men in TV involved diminishing her own opinions constantly: “Instead of telling anyone what *should* be done, I always *suggest* something, like offering a blanket for the female idol singers who sit for long hours at an outdoor shoot since they are often wearing really short skirts.”⁶⁵⁶ Kim said she makes a lot of effort making her own opinion seem “unobtrusive,” and make sure her wording gives the appearance of ideas originating organically from the men she reports to rather than as her own. “For a woman, working in TV is about making herself appear as though she does not exist. Make her voice as little as possible.”⁶⁵⁷ Again, female presence is considered the most acceptable in this environment when it is made invisible or insignificant. According to my interviewees’ description, the glass ceiling in the TV industry is very thick. Kim said that women are never promoted to a CP position.

Another woman I spoke to—Kristina Bae—who worked as an announcer/anchor for SBS and TV Chosun—said that she’s never seen a woman in her field get past a middle-management position. Bae said, “To get promoted to higher positions, employees would have to appeal to their seniors. In the case with men, they would do that by doing favors like driving their drunk bosses home, or stepping outside and smoking cigarettes with their supervisors to socialize. But women wouldn’t have such opportunities because they are never invited to these settings.”⁶⁵⁸ Another major component to workplace gender discrimination, according to Bae, stems from the fact that men already have a shared camaraderie tied to their experience in the military. Male militarism is present in the workplace but also as a shared experience among men. This kind of collectivist

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁸ In-person interview. Kristina Bae. Nov. 21, 2018.

mentality naturally excludes women: “Women are not viewed as equal to men, so they would never get hired as the president of a television network. They would never be hired as a CP or a head PD.”⁶⁵⁹ Kim lamented the lack of female role models for her to turn to in the workplace: “Women—after getting married and having children—would be moved to a different department to handle censorship or ratings. Their bosses make an excuse for them that they shouldn’t go out in the field anymore because it is physically either too cold or too hot for women.”⁶⁶⁰ The excuse that women are not cut out for the physically taxing aspects of TV production is often used against hiring women.

Sung Min Jung, who worked in TV documentary production at SBS as a PD, said that her male superiors would often complain when a woman got hired because they assumed she would be less competent than men, and this assumption was perpetuated as the default: “They would tell women things like, ‘Well, once you get pregnant and leave this office, I’m going to have to pick up your slack. Plus, you’re a woman, and you’re not as good as a man when it comes to work, so my workload doubles up if the company hires you.’ This is just the baseline assumption.”⁶⁶¹ Jung admitted that working in the television industry was, indeed, physically taxing: “The men are usually the bosses. They’re the ones who are PDs and, it’s true. I found it difficult to keep up with their pace. Staying up late and drinking and then getting to work again early in the morning is hard. But the fact is that they *created* an environment that was difficult for women to thrive in. So I found it odd for them to complain that women ‘can’t keep up.’”⁶⁶²

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁰ In-person interview. Jessica Kim. Nov. 27, 2018.

⁶⁶¹ In-person interview. Sung-min Jung. Dec. 24, 2018.

⁶⁶² Ibid.

Drinking culture is a major aspect of work life in Korea in all industries especially in a *hoesik* setting.⁶⁶³ I asked how often they would go out for *hoesik*. Jung replied, “Very frequently. Because we’d be filming outdoors till late, and after a shoot, the cameramen and PD would want to drink. It was usually men who wanted to drink. And they’d grumble if a woman was present because they felt like women couldn’t keep up with them. But the fact is, I personally don’t like to drink that much. I’m just there because it’s part of the job to be present at these functions.”⁶⁶⁴

Bae also mentioned *hoesik* as a definite setting where employees had a chance to appeal to their bosses, but this would also involve a great deal of drinking, which some women would avoid for reasons of safety and general discomfort. Bae mentioned that most job benefits and workplace comforts would depend on how much one appeals to their direct superior and this shows how power functions unequally. This echoes what Lee Sung-hu mentioned in his interview on how comedians would have to make themselves noticeable to head PDs and writers by lavishing them with gifts and offering favors. Getting hired or fired in the industry for those in precarious positions such as writers, comedians and women is relative to how one maintains a relationship with their direct superior. In the Korean television industry, those in the most powerful positions are always male, and whether one finds favor with that person dictates their future. Distribution of power is unequal and workers in precarious positions—such as freelance workers—are the most vulnerable. Jung quit her job less than a year after starting because she felt as though she could not envision her life with that kind of work schedule. “There were too many nights when we had to work late. We would have to get to work by 8AM but we’d typically leave work at 12AM. I didn’t want that to become my life.”⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶³ *Hoesik* involves going out for dinner and drinks with one’s boss and coworkers.

⁶⁶⁴ In-person interview. Sung-min Jung. Dec. 24, 2018.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

I interviewed a former PD who worked on the set of serialized Korean dramas for tvN—Pyo Jina. She stopped working for the TV industry in 2012: “I couldn’t handle the men I worked with, and I couldn’t envision myself working for people like that day in and day out.”⁶⁶⁶ Most of the women who worked in the TV industry that I interviewed have left their jobs since. Interestingly, the reason why Ana Park, Kristina Bae, and Pyo Jina all quit the TV industry is similar. Although they each worked at different networks and departments, collectively, their experiences as female TV workers were all negative and it was linked to patriarchal oppression in the workplace. I asked for other specifics that made Pyo’s job difficult: “Sometimes we would not sleep for two to three days at a time. And it’s necessary to film this way because in Korean drama filming there is hardly any preproduction. It used to be that audience comments and input would alter scripts, but nowadays it has more to do with the production budget. The budget fluctuates. If a show isn’t doing so well in the early episodes, sponsors start to pull out and the budget decreases. Then we have to readjust logistics to match the budget.” Pyo’s observation here speaks to the problem of unregulated labor in the ROK’s TV industry. Unlike a set in Hollywood where according to union standards, there are limitations for work hours, regulation for when meals are served, and ample time for workers to get their nightly rest before returning to set for a specific call-time. But a Korean production’s set is defined by overworking.

I asked Pyo if there were any ways that production budgets could become stabilized: “Yes. If we market or write in order to sell shows abroad, add in idol members to sell as a Hallyu product, then a show might have a chance.” I asked if this was worth it despite inferior quality: “Yes. Because the quality of the content isn’t what matters. Selling it to China is what matters since that’s where the capital is.” I could tell from our conversation that Pyo still cared about television

⁶⁶⁶ In-person interview. Pyo Jina. Nov. 19, 2018.

production and industry work, and excited for the potential that Korean TV has a cultural product, and the directions it could take. Pyo currently works in a field completely unrelated to media production (public education) and she expressed her discontent with her current job. Pyo's case is another example of a woman who is passionate about her TV work but was pushed out of the industry because of industry sexism and the unregulated hours that overworked her. Pyo mentioned that she still feels overworked at her current job; when we met for our interview, it was 7PM. Pyo had stepped out of her office to meet me for dinner, and right afterwards, Pyo headed straight back to the office to continue working at 9PM. In the summer of 2018, President Moon Jae-in's administration introduced a law to enforce 52 hours as the maximum amount of work per week but overworking is still an issue in Korea as Pyo's case shows.

When it comes to PDs, however, they have lifelong job security working in television. Just as Park's father discouraged her from leaving her PD position at SBS, Bae echoed the fact that the TV industry is a highly secure position for some: "When you pass the exams and get officially hired in the TV industry, you can generally count on having job security for life. Especially PDs. That is, unless an employee commits a heinous act. Other than that, you are generally protected for life. This is part of the issue with the system in Korea because even if male PDs get called out for sexual harassment, most men keep their jobs. They'll be put on probation or penalized with a pay reduction. But they won't be fired." Bae also left the TV industry in early 2018 due to health reasons. "I had trouble breathing and I was suffering from hair loss." Bae said her health failed due to the long work hours. "I worked from 4AM till 6PM. If we had maybe two more employees, we could've reduced our work hours but the budget did not allow these hires. So I couldn't stay." After Bae left TV, she started working in real estate. She said that issues of sexual harassment were still not adequately addressed at her current job; she explained how a female colleague had

been sexually harassed by her boss who threatened to rape her. When the colleague went to human resources with this issue, human resources mentioned that they would have her boss take an online course educating him on sexual harassment in the workplace. Beyond this, no other actions were taken to protect her colleague.

I asked Bae if there were unions at SBS or the other networks that could help resolve issues of overworking, being understaffed, and sexual harassment: “There is a kind of coalition or group that’s like a union at each station but within each department. But they are powerless to have any real influence.” Workplace gender discrimination, long work hours, and lack of mobility is what led Bae to leave the television industry, but her desire is to return at some point. Bae expressed her desire to go to Singapore and try working at BBC as an announcer first, and returning to Seoul once she has earned enough qualifications so that she wouldn’t be subject to workplace bullying: “Those in positions of power bully those without power because they can. That’s just normal. But isn’t it the same in the US?”

Bae’s belief that workplace bullying is normal is a sign of such a culture having become normalized for her; it is also, however, a remark on how this culture has become normalized not to a specific locality but to industries globally. Bullying, overworking, getting hired but not being on payroll, and a pressure to adapt to a misogynistic culture are all normalized in the Korean entertainment industry. Bae’s rhetorical question may be read as a deflection or perhaps a means of reflecting that reality back to me (the interviewer) who approaches her as an outsider (from the US). As the #MeToo movement has shown, neoliberalism that protected toxic masculinist structures have kept many women working in media and other industries locked in abusive power-imbalanced relationships. Aside from that, mental, emotional and physical abuse disguised as ritual or categorized as “hazing” is a flagrant problem found regularly in American college fraternities,

the military, and office settings on Wall Street—all of which are masculinized spaces.⁶⁶⁷ Toxic masculinity manifests in the form of bullying, sexual harassment, refusal of mentorship, preventing promotions, non-disclosure agreements, and forced drinking which are then justified in a neoliberal system as “part of the job.” Bae’s understanding of these workplace discomforts as normal is also “normal” when understood within the neoliberal context of doing whatever it takes to get the job done because said task is compensated and is a part of a coveted industry—television’s.

Conclusion: Stand-Up Comedy and Liberation

On November 28, 2018, Korean comedian Kim Young-hee—a veteran sketch comic with a track record at *Gag Concert* and other variety programs—performed a stand-up set at Comedy Haven. Kim worked out a storytelling mode of stand-up reflecting back on an incident involving her best friend and her ex-boyfriend in college. The crowd was more energetic than usual because of Kim’s celebrity status. After Kim’s set, the show host requested that Kim and another *Gag Concert* veteran/sketch comedian Park Young-jin perform their old duo act that they used to perform on the KBS program. The crowd’s energy was far more ecstatic than it had been that entire night. Kim and Park gave into the crowd’s applause and cries, and performed their two-person sketch where Kim plays the female spokesperson for all women who are “fed up” with men, and

⁶⁶⁷ Gillian B. White, “A Former Wall Street Trader on Why He Left Banking,” *The Atlantic*, Jul. 20, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/07/sam-polk-wall-street/492101/>, accessed May 17, 2019; Julia La Roche and Linette Lopez, “7 Wall Street Hazing Stories to Scare The Bejeesus Out Of Your Newbies,” *Business Insider*, Mar. 27, 2012, <https://www.businessinsider.com/7-wall-street-hazing-stories-to-scare-the-newbies-2012-3>, accessed May 17, 2019.

Park plays the male spokesperson for all men who are “fed up” with women. It was clear to everyone that the laughter, cheers and applause during this performance was by far the highest of the evening. When I spoke with the other stand-up comics after the show, the consensus was that sketch comedy still dominated the local audience’s hearts, and it was clear that Korean stand-up comedy had a long way to go in order to gain the love and attention that Kim and Park’s impromptu sketch performance did that night.

On Thursday, Jan. 3, 2019, I attended a special donation-based stand-up comedy showcase at a venue called Jebidabang in Hongdae, which is famous for featuring popular local indie bands. There were six comedians—four men and two women—and Kim Young-hee headlined the show. The night was particularly eventful for Kim who, since December 2018, had been riled in a media scandal involving her estranged father and his unpaid financial debts. Kim’s set, which lasted approximately 15 minutes, began tearfully. This was the second time that I’d seen Kim perform stand-up, and her demeanor was a lot different this time. Kim freely used profanity more so than the last time I saw her; she expressed rage at the false accusations that haunted her and her mother, and at news reporters who exacerbated the scenario. Kim told stories of how she suffered while living in the public’s eye as people stare at her whenever she walks her dogs, how she discovered who her true friends are during these trying times, how she couldn’t do much except stay at home over the past month, and how hard it was for her to have a job as a comedian during trying times such as these. “If I were an actress, I could at least play a sad role and cry my eyes out. But I can’t even do that because my job is to make people laugh. I’m a comedian.” Kim closed the show by sharing a story of her friend reading comments of encouragement from her followers on Instagram, and how she’d found some comfort in that. Kim further declared that she was glad to have found a format of comedy such as stand-up which she can pursue until the day she dies. After the show,

I asked Kim why she is pursuing stand-up comedy despite her TV success. Kim replied, “Because it doesn’t require anyone else’s approval to get shown. The performer has complete control over their material.” This has been the most common answer I heard from Korean comedians who started their careers in television and transitioned into live stand-up performances. What I also observed during my time in Korea conducting fieldwork is the liberation that comics feel while performing on stage. Furthermore, stand-up comedy on streaming services give Korean comedians the ability to re-politicize comedy again just as mandam had.

In his book on stand-up comedy, comedian Richard Belzer writes, “[Jokes] deal with things that are almost incomprehensible. They’re ways of controlling the uncontrollable.”⁶⁶⁸ I think about the uncontrollable situations that my interviewees find themselves in. The women I spoke with are discriminated against based on their gender; they feel overworked. When I see them go on stage and talk about the things in their lives that they do not have control of, they appear to have regained some of that control back by turning their duress into a punchline. It is a difficult yet simple act—to go up on stage, hold a mic, and tell a roomful of strangers jokes about one’s life—but it is also a radical act for a woman to publicly speak out against sexism in the workplace, home and interpersonal relationships. Their stand-up acts turned their social pressures into jokes which the audience reacted to with laughter, and in that, I sensed liberation.

⁶⁶⁸ Richard Belzer, Larry Charles and Rick Newman, *How to be a Stand-Up Comic*, New York: Villard Books, 1988, 51.

PART II: English Language Stand-up Culture and White Masculinity in Korea

The history of stand-up comedy in Korea is different between the English-language comedy scene and Korean-language comedy scene. Korea's English-language stand-up comedy scene began to develop in Seoul around 2009 with English language teachers (ELT) who began open mics and showcases in cities like Seoul and Busan to perform stand-up. Danny Cho began making trips to Korea in 2011 to perform stand-up in English:

When I first got here back in 2011, there was/and still is a group here in Korea called Stand Up Seoul. It was composed of mostly English teachers who were doing stand-up as a hobby. It was mostly led by two Canadian comedians—Brian Aylward, who is now touring all over Asia and Canada doing stand-up, and Jeff Sinclair, who held down the Stand Up Seoul group for about 10 years. Unfortunately, all of them have left Seoul but there are other members of the group that are still holding down the fort. In addition to the Stand Up Seoul crew, there is a dude in Busan named Chris Tharp who really held down the stand-up scene in Busan for many many years. Chris and the Stand Up Seoul guys worked closely together so when a headliner was in town they would help plan out multiple gigs for them throughout the peninsula. The comedy rooms in Korea were at Western bars. All the shows were in English and for the most part, the audience was expats, military [personnel] and Korean Americans.⁶⁶⁹

The English-language stand-up comedy scene in Korea must be examined in the context of gendered and racial politics between male ELTs and locals in Asia because members of the ELT community in Korea are the founders of the English-language stand-up comedy scene in Seoul. This section explores the existing modes of racial hierarchy and politics from ELT which spillover onto the stand-up scene, as well as the local bilingual female stand-up comedians who resist and react to white masculinity in Korea.

Doobo Shim and Joseph Sung-Yul Park state that “English fever”—or Korea’s obsession with adopting the English language as a skill—is an extension of “the global

⁶⁶⁹ Email interview. Danny Cho. July 19, 2018 and Oct. 10, 2018.

hegemony of English onto Korean society” and it is linked with “persisting conditions of inequality and dominance” tracking how the history of the English language as a global lingua franca dates back to the British Empire’s colonization of the world followed by the United States’ rise as a world power after WWII, which “exercises de-territorialized control through language.”⁶⁷⁰ English in Korea was a necessary component in the nation’s history particularly after its liberation from Japan and the US military replaced those colonial spaces in 1945 mostly in the southern part of the peninsula. Koreans who spoke English could mediate with the American military and occupy government positions; this was the start of locals associating the English language with higher status, education and power. As the ROK began to push for globalization in the 1980s with the Asian Games in 1986 followed by the summer Olympic Games in 1988, Korean citizens were encouraged to adopt a “global mindset” that included the English language skill.⁶⁷¹

There is a significant amount of literature dedicated to an intersectional ethnographic study of gender and race relations among white ELTs in Asia, and they all mention the politics of hierarchy and sexuality between white male teachers and Asian female students in connection to a broader discourse of neocolonialism.⁶⁷² As Sara Ahmed notes, “Colonialism makes the world ‘white,’ which is of course a world ‘ready’ for certain

⁶⁷⁰ Doobo Shim and Joseph Sung-Yul Park, “The ‘English Fever’ in Korea,” *Global Makeover: Media and Culture in Asia*, edited by Danilo Araña Arao, 71-90, (Seoul: Asian Media and Culture Forum, 2010), 74.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid*, 77.

⁶⁷² Roslyn Appleby, *Men and Masculinities in Global English Language Teaching*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Christopher Joseph Jenks, *Race and Ethnicity in English Language Teaching: Korea in Focus*, (Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters, 2017); Phiona Stanley, *A Critical Ethnography of ‘Westerners’ Teaching English in China*, (New York: Routledge, 2013); Pei-Chia Lan (2011) White Privilege, Language Capital and Cultural Ghettoisation: Western High-Skilled Migrants in Taiwan, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37:10, 1669-1693.

kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach.”⁶⁷³ The history of US military presence in Korea and R&R (“rest and relaxation”) services provided by Korean sex laborers at military camps colors today’s understanding of relations between white male English teachers and Korean female students seeking their aid; this inevitably influences the description of the English stand-up comedy culture as a gendered and racialized presence in contemporary Korea given that English language teachers are at the center of the English stand-up comedy scene.

This segment of the chapter is both a confrontation as well as an exploration of white masculinity in Korea: “If whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed, then what does it mean to notice whiteness?”⁶⁷⁴ Korea’s English-language stand-up comedy culture is rooted in white masculinity stemming from the ex-pat community of English teachers and American military personnel in Korea. These are the individuals who come to see and perform English-language stand-up comedy. The white men who participate in and attend stand-up comedy shows in Korea fit into a larger history of American military presence and neocolonialism in Asia. I include interviews with white hetero cis-male English teachers who perform and teach in Seoul, as well as both local and ex-pat identities that are marginal to the aforementioned including Korean comics and queer ex-pat comics/teachers of color. I aim to illustrate the resistance that Korean women practice through English stand-up comedy.

English Teachers as Stand-up Comedians in Korea

⁶⁷³ Sara Ahmed, “A phenomenology of whiteness,” *Feminist Theory*, (2007), 8: 149-168, 154.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 149.

Brian Aylward, who graduated Cape Breton University with a Bachelor of Arts in Community Studies, found himself working “a variety of bad jobs,” such as a janitor, security guard, and oil rig work: “Teaching ESL in South Korea became an option and all you needed was a bachelor's degree. So, I moved to the other side of the world and I became an Actor [sic] in South Korea, pretending to be a [sic] English Teacher [sic] for 6 years.”⁶⁷⁵ Aylward’s experience is not uncommon in Korea. As Francis L. Collins and Sergei Shubin note, the migration of English teachers from the West to Korea is often motivated by circumstantial reasons related to underemployment, debt (student loans or other), or under qualification for the job market back home.⁶⁷⁶ Aylward’s motivations for leaving Canada and going to Korea had a great deal to do with achieving upward mobility by migrating to a nation that greatly values the English language, and seeks to hire Caucasians in their early to mid 20s from North America. Aylward’s white identity from Canada has cultural value in Korea. Aylward describes himself as an “actor” who “pretends” to be an English teacher in Korea from 2003-2009; his own self-description contains a cheeky acknowledgement of his imposter syndrome that claims that he “got away” with being an English instructor when he himself does not feel qualified to have been one. Studies show that the hiring process in Korea enables white men like Aylward to easily get hired in the Korean education system which gives preference to Caucasian cis-males. Aylward is, unwittingly, describing his ethnic (white) privilege as well as his national (Canadian/North American) privilege that landed him a job that is higher in its social status compared to the previous blue collar jobs he worked back in Newfoundland, Canada.

⁶⁷⁵ Interview, Brian Aylward, Apr. 26, 2019, email.

⁶⁷⁶ Francis L. Collins and Sergei Shubin, “Migrant times beyond the life course: The temporalities of foreign English teachers in South Korea,” *Geoforum* 62 (2015): 96-104.

The English language has significant cultural capital in Korea. Many Korean parents send their children to “cram” schools (*hagwŏn*)—a school outside of regular school hours—or to English-speaking countries abroad, which result in developmental problems related to children’s mental and emotional health.⁶⁷⁷ The ROK’s government is complicit in this drive to make its citizens English-language competent for its economic and national growth; since the 1990s, the Korean government emphasized the need for Koreans to be English proficient as part of the nation’s globalization effort, and English language tests were implemented into college entrance exams, resulting in a whole economy of cram schools for additional learning which cost families additional funding. As linguist and cultural communications scholar Christopher Joseph Jenks describes, “[F]or many Koreans, the understanding that English will lead to economic prosperity, or is necessary for financial survival, began with the US military shortly after Japanese colonialism ended. This discourse continues today, with the United States dictating international trade agreements and other global financial matters.”⁶⁷⁸ But Aylward’s whiteness afforded him with privileges in Korea that Korean Americans with the same qualifications do not have; John Song Pae Cho finds in his research on cis-male Korean American English teachers that these young men “can recover a sense of masculine status and [patriarchal] privilege denied to them as emasculated Asian-Americans in the United States” while being “simultaneously downgraded as failed immigrants and inauthentic English-speakers.”⁶⁷⁹ When it comes to white cis-male English teachers like Aylward, the racialized assumption from Korean natives that Caucasians are naturally

⁶⁷⁷ Jin-kyu Park, “‘English fever’ in South Korea: its history and symptoms,” *English Today*, 25 (2009) 50-57.

⁶⁷⁸ Christopher Joseph Jenks, *Race and Ethnicity in English Language Teaching: Korea in Focus*, (Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters, 2017), 81.

⁶⁷⁹ John Song Pae Cho, “Global fatigue: Transnational markets, linguistic capital, and Korean-American male English teachers in South Korea,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 16:2 (2012) 281-237, 220.

better at English than Korean Americans works to their benefit; Cho's research shows that Korean American English teachers make less money for the same amount of work than Caucasian teachers due to the "white men theory"—that white male teachers are naturally more competent in English than non-white teachers.⁶⁸⁰ This is an example of what sociologist Catrin Lundström calls "white capital" à la Pierre Bourdieu—when "embodied privilege travels and is re-installed in different contexts."⁶⁸¹ Of course, if whiteness is revered by Korean society, one must ask how Blackness is perceived. As African American and Gender Studies scholar Karen Flynn's research illustrates, Black male English teachers in Korea experienced a "temporary celebrity status," as they were regularly compared to popular Black athletes, artists and even politicians (President Obama) by their Korean students but Black female English teachers encountered resistance, as Black femininity was "regarded as deficient and thus undesirable."⁶⁸² Anti-Black racism and colorism in Korea is a social issue, and both require a great deal of historical contextualization.⁶⁸³ Flynn aptly captures the reason for learned anti-Blackness being reproduced in Korea: "Racist ideologies are

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid, 227.

⁶⁸¹ Catrin Lundström, *White Migrations: Gender, Whiteness and Privilege in Transnational Migration*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 13; Pierre Bourdieu (1986), ed. John Richardson, "The Forms of Capital" in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, 241-258, (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing, 1986).

⁶⁸² Karen Flynn, "Reconfiguring Black Internationalism: English as Foreign Language Teachers of African Descent in South Korea," *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage*, 6:3 (2017): 262-283, 270.

⁶⁸³ Jae Kyun Kim, "Yellow over black: History of race in Korea and the new study of race and empire," *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 2 (2015): 205-217; Stephen Castles, "Understanding global migration and diversity: A case study of South Korea," In *Critical Reflections on Migration, 'Race' and Multiculturalism*, Ed. Martina Boese, 27-45 (New York: Routledge, 2017); Jae-Kyun Kim, "Yellow over black: the precolonial and colonial history of race in Korea, 1883-1945," PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2017; Hyein Amber Kim, "Understanding Blackness in South Korea: Experiences of one Black Teacher and one Black Student," *Global Journal of Human-Social Science Research*, 17 (2017): 85-93; Claire Heffernan, "Pretty for a black girl: Anti-blackness and K-pop," *Voiceworks* 100 (2015): 18;

mobile; their meanings can be altered or recreated across borders.”⁶⁸⁴ Just as racism is mobile and reproduced in Korea, so is white cis-male privilege.

White Menace

A number of headlining American comics made their way through Seoul between 2018 and 2019. Hannibal Buress made a stop in Seoul between trips during his tour, and performed a pop-up show at a club in Hongdae on June 27, 2018 which sold out. Buress was able to bring in a crowd simply by posting his announcement on Twitter and Instagram. Shortly after Jim Jefferies performed in Seoul, Jim Gaffigan performed there on Apr. 2, 2019. American comics are touring their way through Korea because show business is now aware of Korea’s appreciation of stand-up comedy as a result (in part) of Netflix’s impact.

When I attended Jefferies’s show on January 11, 2019, the majority of the attendees were white men. The crowd was rowdy and disruptive throughout the show—many of them talking directly to the comic (heckling) mid-performance, shouting “facts” about Korea like eating dogs and cats. The dominance of white masculinity in the room was heavy. The persistent interruptions to Jefferies’s act—which is long-form and therefore not conducive to breaks in between—made it difficult for him to finish his new act. In fact, less than half way through the show, Jefferies stop performing his written material and only did crowd work. Jefferies closed the show out on an old recycled bit—“Gunther”—from his 2007 special “Swear to God.” The comics I spoke to after the show mentioned that using a recycled bit as a closer in a live show was a performer’s way of saying “fuck you” to the

⁶⁸⁴ Karen Flynn, “Reconfiguring Black Internationalism: English as Foreign Language Teachers of African Descent in South Korea,” *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage*, 6:3 (2017): 262-283, 269.

disruptive audience; comedians understand that “the closer” is the best part of a show, and it usually brings the biggest laughter and applause to end the show. Added to this is the fact that Jefferies is known for being a misogynistic comic.⁶⁸⁵ In his opening, Jefferies admitted on stage to being called this in the past but that he earned the “right” to say a few sexist things about women since he bought “one a house”—referring to his ex-partner and the mother of his son. The crowd was uproarious in response to this with loud cheers, applause and laughter. During the second half of his show, Jefferies left a bottle of vodka on the edge of the stage and he walked out into the crowd to interact with audiences up close; during this time, a middle-aged white man took the opportunity to walk towards the stage, grab the liquor bottle, drink from it, then give Jefferies a thumbs-up before returning to his seat. Jefferies addressed the inappropriateness of this action and berated his “useless” security personnel. In the eyes of the local Korean women I spoke to after the show, however, this was an extreme display of white male entitlement.

The disruptive behavior that the white male audiences exhibited throughout the show without consideration for the other paying audience members was precisely the kind

⁶⁸⁵ *Time Out*, “Jim Jefferies 4.0: hold the misogyny,” Jan. 7, 2018, <https://www.timeout.com/israel/news/jim-jefferies-4-0-hold-the-misogyny-010718>, accessed Apr. 1, 2019.

Sandi Scaunich, “Stand-up comedian Jim Jefferies’ misogynistic jokes fall flat,” *The Kristina Morning Herald*, Apr. 2, 2015, <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/standup-comedian-jim-jefferies-misogynist-jokes-fall-flat-20150401-1mciqq.html>, accessed Apr. 1, 2019.

Steve Bennett, “Jim Jefferies: Unusual Punishment,” *Chortle*, https://www.chortle.co.uk/review/2018/01/20/38926/jim_jefferies:_unusual_punishment, accessed Apr. 1, 2019.

Elahe Izadi, “Jim Jefferies joins the late-night TV crowd. He’ll try not telling too many Trump jokes,” *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/06/05/jim-jefferies-joins-the-late-night-tv-crowd-hell-try-not-telling-too-many-trump-jokes/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.95bdc03e37eb, accessed Apr. 1, 2019. 4. 13.

of toxic white male privilege that we'd seen get exercised in numerous settings throughout our lives as Korean and Korean American women, each in our own individual way. While we dismissed the behavior to that time-old standard of "typical white male privilege," I also sensed a socio-political resistance in my discussions with these women. For one, the four Korean women who came to this show had not paid to see it; they'd gotten extra tickets that were leftover and given to them as a courtesy of being part of the stand-up comedy community in Seoul from the Stand Up Seoul crew. For another, the women were actively vocalizing their disdain for the kind of demographic that this show attracted, as well as the distasteful behavior they exhibited. One of the women said, "These white people who lived in Korea for years and years are out of touch. They got away with so much over the years that they forgot how to act appropriately. They think it's normal to do that at a show because they're *in Korea*. They would never do that back in America. They only do that here because they think so little of Korea and Koreans. And they are used to getting away with bad behavior out here." Another woman agreed: "It's because they lived here for too long. They didn't have anybody telling them not to say and do those things, and they're used to acting that way." This white amnesia on acceptable conduct and decorum that the women discuss is also catalogued by Phiona Stanley in her ethnographic account of white male English language teachers in Shanghai who objectify local women, and have sex with their students as well as local prostitutes in order to affirm their own masculinity to themselves and other fellow white male English teachers, and do so with a full "an

awareness that these behaviours would likely be considered ethically wrong in their home cultures.”⁶⁸⁶

I was invited as a guest on a comedy podcast called *The Peoples Mic Podcast* hosted by comedian Jimmy Peoples in New York with two other Asian American female comics. In our discussion of white migration to Asian countries, HAPA/Korean American comedian Youngmi Mayer says,

In Korea, white guys that go there...the culture is so different. They don't understand that Korean people don't confront you to your face. So, white guys think that they're always right. After a few years, they go kind of crazy because no one is confronting them. They don't understand that in Korea the culture is ... you say it in a different way...so [white people] think that everyone is in love with them and they're smarter than everyone, and then they get crazy.⁶⁸⁷

Mayer's observation of white masculinity is what Stanley calls a “superhero” phenomenon wherein white men get constructed as exonormative and therefore desirable by local Asian women but also a phenomenon that is “borne out of a power imbalance” between the two groups; this breeds ignorance among white men who “pass” socially despite egregious behaviors since they are not confronted for them.⁶⁸⁸

Ex-pat white masculinity is negatively pathologized by locals; there is a sense of disturbance that Korean women feel when encountering white masculinity in Korea, and it is triggered by behaviors they characterize as menacing. What is also notable is how Korean women describe white men in Korea as being completely ignorant as to whether or not their actions are offensive or disrespectful; in fact, it never crosses their minds to even

⁶⁸⁶ Phiona Stanley, *A Critical Ethnography of 'Westerners' Teaching English in China*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 179.

⁶⁸⁷ Jimmy Peoples, *The Peoples Mic Podcast #297*, YouTube, Mar. 11, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76beUpCGFo0>, accessed Apr. 29, 2019.

⁶⁸⁸ Stanley, 171.

wonder. As Lundström writes, “White privileges are usually normalized, invisible and unproblematic to the subjects that embody them.”⁶⁸⁹ And, as Mayer mentions in the podcast, the local community encountering inappropriate behaviors by white men do not confront them. Sara Ahmed writes: “In other words, the [white] body is habitual insofar as it ‘trails behind’ in the performing of action, insofar as it does not pose ‘a problem’ or an obstacle to the action, or is not ‘stressed’ by ‘what’ the action encounters.”⁶⁹⁰ Korean locals do not challenge problems that white men create because historically, such confrontations have never resulted in justice. Grace Cho’s monograph catalogues multiple traumatic encounters between American soldiers and Korean civilians during the Korean War such as mass killings, rape and physical battery, which were either undocumented or actively erased but live on in the memories of locals; Cho also catalogues events after the Korean War like on June 13, 2002 when a US military tank ran over two middle school girls to death, inciting anti-American protests in Korea.⁶⁹¹ These soldiers were never indicted for their crimes.

Ahmed states: “White bodies are comfortable *as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape.*”⁶⁹² The comfort of white bodies is extended by the law when those same bodies are not charged with murder. White bodies sense comfort in spaces abroad because (neo)colonialism has extended their habitat, and made spaces non-resistant to whiteness be it a classroom, bar, theater or club. While prostitution is illegal for Koreans, it is legal for

⁶⁸⁹ Catrin Lundström, *White Migrations: Gender, Whiteness and Privilege in Transnational Migration*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 163.

⁶⁹⁰ Ahmed, 156.

⁶⁹¹ Grace Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 31, 67, 81, 114-118, 123-124.

⁶⁹² Ahmed 158; emphasis in the original.

American military service men. Another reason why Koreans do not confront toxic white masculinity upon witnessing it is, as Mayer mentions in the podcast, Koreans “say it in a different way,” by which she means suggesting indirectly, rather than saying directly. This suggests a cultural communication gap between the locals and foreigners; it may be that Koreans *are* confronting white men when they exhibit toxic behavior, but the confrontation goes missed by white men because it is not communicated in a way that is familiar to them. This opens up the suggestion that a complaint was expressed to them but they remain ignorant to said complaint. This, again, is an example of white bodies not conforming to locality but continuing to abide by their comfort zone thus extending their white spaces, and it is through ignorance—willful or otherwise. As Jack Halberstam writes, “Male stupidity is in fact a new form of macho....”⁶⁹³

At one point during his show, Jefferies asked the crowd what Koreans eat here, and a white man in the audience shouted, “Dog!” Asian cuisine has a long history of being constructed in Western contexts as suspicious or inedible: “The relative rarity with which dog meat is consumed in China, and elsewhere in Asia, is disproportionately reflected in the frequency with which it is used in anti-Asian racist rhetoric.”⁶⁹⁴ This is so much so that the COVID-19 pandemic was blamed on China and the myth that it came from a Chinese cuisine involving bats. This xenophobic and trumped-up anti-Asian misconception has led to real consequences in America as well as around the globe with a high spike in Asian-targeted hate crimes since early 2020 which carries on through 2021.

⁶⁹³ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), Kindle Location 1105. Kindle Edition.

⁶⁹⁴ Lucas Tromly, (2018), “Tourists in the Kitchen: Asian American Culinary Travelogues,” *MELUS*, 43: 46-64, 54.

While dog meat consumption in Asia is relatively rare and has a complex history, when referenced by a white man in a predominantly white space in response to another white man's loaded question as to what Koreans eat, the answer acquires a racialized dimension stemming from willed ignorance and enacted verbal violence.⁶⁹⁵

Western Orientalist Gaze and Diversity in the English Stand-Up Comedy Scene of Korea

Itaewon is a neighborhood in the Yongsan district of Seoul known for its ethnic and cultural diversity. Part of the reason for the diversity is the Yongsan Garrison—a former Japanese military base that eventually became an American military base which is stationed in the area. Local officials are in discussions about turning the garrison into a national park.⁶⁹⁶ Many ex-pats from America and other parts of the world either reside in or frequent Itaewon for food, drink and atmosphere. Aylward hosted Wednesday open mics at a bar in Itaewon called Tony's, and held a monthly showcase on the first Thursday of every month at Rocky Mountain Tavern in the same neighborhood until 2011. According to Aylward, the events would draw a crowd because ex-pats wanted some form of recreation that helped them feel connected to what was familiar to them back in North America. The open mic that Aylward ran drew 8 to 10 comics each month but Aylward claims that there were a little over a dozen comics total.

⁶⁹⁵ Julien Dugnoille (2018), "To eat or not to eat companion dogs: symbolic value of dog meat and human–dog companionship in contemporary South Korea," *Food, Culture & Society*, 21:2, 214-232.

⁶⁹⁶ Lee Suh-yoon, "Yongsan US Army Garrison opens up to Korean public," *The Korea Times*, Nov. 7, 2018, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/11/281_258295.html, (accessed May 25, 2019).

The first round of interview questions that I sent to Aylward via email were about the general foundations of Korea's English language stand-up culture's development, and his responses were loquacious, proud and optimistic, envisioning meaning for ex-pats who miss recreational activities that feel familiar, and how comedy can work towards bridging cultures.

Brian Aylward: "I pioneered the English-speaking stand-up comedy scene in South Korea, eventually establishing Stand Up Seoul in March 2009. ... I just figured there had to be others like me who wanted to give stand-up comedy a go and there was. It became popular almost instantly. I think English music and comedy was relatable and a connection to back home for many, so it was the right place and the right time kind of situation."

GJ: What kind of audiences would come to the shows?

BA: Mostly expats. Maybe 7-10% Korean. There is a language barrier and a cultural one to point. However, my hope is that comedy helps bridge those gaps so we can all learn and laugh together.⁶⁹⁷

I included follow-up questions to Aylward which were related to difference, and his answers were noticeably shorter compared to the elaborate description of his story and the intentions he had with comedy in Seoul—a hesitation I encountered in other instances when I tried to interview industry workers who remain in industry and are apprehensive about exposing too much of the industry for fear of how a scholar might critique it.

GJ: What were the ethnicities of most of the comics?

BA: Mostly White American expats. Some African Americans. A few Koreans. A guy from Saudi Arabia was a regular. Scottish, British ...

GJ: What was the gender ratio between the male and female comics?

BA: There were only a handful of women.

GJ: What kinds of jokes would you hear the most often at the mics and showcases? Is there any that you recall?

BA: All kinds. Many people talked about their expat experiences living abroad.⁶⁹⁸

The majority of the comics at the comedy events Aylward hosted were white, hetero and cis-male, and the comedy that they performed was on the topic of being an expat in Korea. Aylward's answer to my question on gender disparity is also quite vague: "...a handful of women."

⁶⁹⁷ Brian Aylward, email interview. Apr. 23, 2019.

⁶⁹⁸ Brian Aylward, email interview. Apr. 26, 2019.

While Aylward mentions that the comics who showed up were mostly white American he qualifies his statement by mentioning *some* ethnic diversity with the emphasis on one person from Saudi Arabia, which soon follows with more white comedians from the UK. To get a more rounded perspective about this scene, I interviewed a bilingual female Korean comedian Soomin Choi who has been going to English open mics and showcases in Seoul since 2015 and Korean mics and shows since 2018.⁶⁹⁹ Choi also spent her formative years in the US living and studying with a Caucasian homestay family while attending high school where she became fluent in English. Choi offered her insights on comedy by white English teachers at open mics in Seoul, and the discomforts she felt as a Korean woman listening to white men talk about her culture in their stand-up comedy:

GJ: “When you went to more English stand-up open mics back when they were more regular, did you see a lot of English teachers using their students as material or Korean culture as material?”

SC: “If I recall, more on Korean culture. There are only few stuff [sic] about class/students they could talk about.”

GJ: “Were any of the jokes culturally insensitive that you recall?”

SC: “They were often very insensitive.”

GJ: “How so? Does anything stick out?”

SC: “Well, mostly, lots [sic] of them were lazy. They did make fun of [the] *ajumma* a lot. I think lots of them came across as racist in the [sic] way, ‘Wow, I am American and I am the standard of all things and what is all this exotic stuff?’”⁷⁰⁰

Choi’s observation in terms of making Korean culture appear “exotic” relative to the American “standard” is frequently found in Anglo-American rhetoric. Making Asia appear exotic, foreign, strange and alien is common in America; othering Asia is not only a Hollywood trope for TV and film but also frequently the topic of many jokes in

⁶⁹⁹ Per the interviewee’s request, “Soomin Choi” is a pseudonym.

⁷⁰⁰ An “*ajumma*” refers to a middle-aged woman who is typically married and has children.

comedy.⁷⁰¹ These anti-Asian jokes and constructs are forms of dehumanization. Notable means of othering Asians in Hollywood mainstream comedy includes ridiculing their physical appearances such as their faces and bodies. Ridiculing Asian language accents is also a hackneyed comedic trope in mainstream Hollywood media.⁷⁰² Choi's observations reiterate how the Western Orientalist gaze is omnipresent and operative but its application is invisible because it is treated as "the standard" gaze, just as whiteness is invisible but maintained as the standard by which all other races and ethnicities are compared.⁷⁰³ A film like *Lost in Translation* (2003, Sofia Coppola) is one example wherein the film centralizes the Western Orientalist gaze and Japanese culture is constantly viewed as strange, disorienting, or inadequate in the eyes of the two protagonists played by Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson.⁷⁰⁴ Projection of the Western Orientalist gaze as the standard to analyzing Korean culture is the common denominator in all the jokes by white male expats. Linda Tuhiwai Smith problematizes Western paradigms of research methodologies that apply orientalist views onto indigenous groups thus othering them through "imperial eyes."⁷⁰⁵ In the same way, white normativity—or the standardization of whiteness—fuels

⁷⁰¹ Simon Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour: US, UK and Global Race Joking*, (London: Routledge, 2011); Darrell Y. Hamamoto, *Monitored peril: Asian Americans and the politics of TV representation*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

⁷⁰² Shilapa Davé, "Racial Accents, Hollywood Casting, and Asian American Studies," *Cinema Journal*, 2017, 56 (3): 142-153.

⁷⁰³ Ashleigh Shelby Rosette, Geoffrey J Leonardelli, Katherine W Phillips, "The White standard: racial bias in leader categorization," *The Journal of Applied Psychology* Vol. 93, Iss. 4, (July 2008): 758-777.

⁷⁰⁴ Koichi Iwabuchi (2008) "Lost in TransNation: Tokyo and the urban imaginary in the era of globalization," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 9:4, 543-556.

⁷⁰⁵ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*, (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2013), 56.

the white male ex-pat comics in Korea when developing material.⁷⁰⁶ Choi elaborates on the long delay—or resistance—in terms of adjusting to the local culture despite the years that they’ve spent in Korea:

SC: “I think the general premise is, ‘Wow, Korea. I lived here for 5+ years and things are still weird.

SC: [They] also talk about Koreans being racist.”

GJ: “Racist against white people?”

SC: “Yes.”⁷⁰⁷

The worn-out premise of making Korea appear strange despite the fact that the white teacher/comic has lived there for more than five years is an example of white resistance to assimilation, acclimation and acceptance of the local place and culture they are in; instead, they continue to uphold their white standards and measure everything in that local culture to said standards; there is a refusal to conform or change according to their current environment because whiteness is the norm as well as comfort, and when that is threatened, the white comic resorts to a narrative of white victimhood by claiming Koreans as being anti-white and therefore racist. Charles Mills writes:

So white normativity manifests itself in a white refusal to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today, and all of its consequent advantages in negotiating opportunity structures. If originally whiteness was race, then now it is racelessness, an equal status and a common history in which all have shared, with white privilege being conceptually erased.⁷⁰⁸

White ignorance gets converted into a narrative of white victimhood; the white comics accuse local Koreans for being racist when they notice preferential treatment offered to

⁷⁰⁶ Michael Morris, “Standard White: Dismantling White Normativity,” *California Law Review*, 104: 4, 2016, 949-978.

⁷⁰⁷ Interview, Soomin Choi, Kakao message. Apr. 29, 2019.

⁷⁰⁸ Charles W. Mills, “White Ignorance,” *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 11-38, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 28.

Koreans over whites. Mills attributes white declarations of racism against identities of color to collective amnesia. The white comics' collective amnesia in their accusations against Korean locals of anti-white "racism" is a willful act of forgetting or remaining ignorant to the history of the Korean War, and the atrocities committed by American soldiers against Korean civilians. Bruce Cumings claims that the reason why the Korean War is a "forgotten" war is because memory only haunts those in pain: "Here, in essence, is the reason why Koreans remember and the Americans forget."⁷⁰⁹ The white male comics are also forgetting the global dominance of white hegemony and their associated privilege, which allows them to be freely mobile around the world; they are forgetting the history of white dominance and white crimes such as genocide and colonization against indigenous populations. Mills writes: "[T]he dynamic role of *white group interests* needs to be recognized and acknowledged as a central causal factor in generating and sustaining white ignorance."⁷¹⁰ As Aylward mentions, the people who tend to show up at English stand-up mics and showcases were generally English teachers. Given the audience, the material was geared towards appealing to what was familiar to them. The general attitudes found in mainstream American comedy from decades ago have trickled into the transnational spaces where other Americans gather, and in these spaces, time is slowed down or turned backwards as these comics revert to regressive punchlines.

On the night of Stand Up Seoul's English-language showcase at Comedy Haven on Nov. 16, 2018, I was sitting in the green room with a white British comic who lives and works in Japan as an English teacher and stand-up comedian. The English comic casually expressed disdain for

⁷⁰⁹ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*, (New York: Random House, 2010), 62.

⁷¹⁰ Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 11-38, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 34.

transgender women in Japan: “They make no effort to look attractive. They are bad at being women, and don’t know how to dress like one or apply makeup well.” The boldness of this man’s transphobic remarks and how plainly open he was with them initially shocked me. In the opening of his act, the same comic transparently exoticized Asian women’s bodies, claiming that he loved living in Japan because of all the Japanese women he could date. He openly fetishized and objectified Asian women just as he unapologetically made transphobic remarks earlier. The local female comedians who were present later debriefed among themselves at a bar right after the show on how offended they were by his blatant insensitivity, obliviousness and ignorance as to how his remarks would be received.

The literature on white male ignorance in the context of education is abundant. Nolan L. Cabrera and Chris Corces-Zimmerman utilize Mills’s theory of *epistemologies of ignorance* to describe how willful white ignorance, white privilege and misunderstandings of race cause racism in spaces of higher education.⁷¹¹ Elaine Swan also examines white male ignorance in the world of UK higher education and its function as a form of labor, arguing that ignorance “takes resources, skill techniques, argument, and justification” which is to say that “ignorance is manufactured, sustained, and circulated and is entangled with, and constitutive of, practices of oppression.”⁷¹²

I interviewed a non-binary queer Mexican American comedian and drag king named Jax who has been working as an English teacher in Seoul since 2011.

GJ: “What kinds of jokes did you encounter frequently at English language open mics in Seoul that you found repetitive or distasteful?”

⁷¹¹ Nolan L. Cabrera and Chris Corces-Zimmerman, “An Unexamined Life: White Male Racial Ignorance and the Agony of Education for Students of Color,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* (2017), 50, 3: 300-315.

⁷¹² Elaine Swan, “States of White Ignorance, and Audit Masculinity in English Higher Education,” *Social Politics*, (2010), 17, 4: 477-506, 478.

Jax: “Jokes about Korean culture were the most annoying! I absolutely hated seeing white men joke about kimchi, ajössis, ajummas, or soju.⁷¹³ They were *never ever* funny and all sounded the same, which is why I chose to have them excluded from my show. I also hated seeing men joke about women. I went to a show and the guy tried to joke about trans prostitutes, and no one laughed. That [is] an extreme example.”

In response to this, Jax hosted their own open mic called Lyrically Minded which they describe as “a safe space for all performances and especially LGBT performers that sometimes don’t feel safe at other open mics.”⁷¹⁴ Lyrically Minded was curated by Jax to include poetry, “clean” comedy, music, rap, dance and drag: “And by clean comedy I just had rules for comedians like no racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic jokes (or jokes about Korea).”⁷¹⁵ Jax’s effort to create a performance space for women, people of color (PoC), gender non-conforming individuals and LGBTQIA+ identities is an active response to spaces they’ve encountered that were not inclusive of such identities. Smith writes that “self-determination of the indigenous peoples” is an important part of the decolonization process.⁷¹⁶ This process, according to Smith, involves forming alliances between indigenous and non-indigenous groups in pursuit of healing and transformation, and an effort towards rejection of Western institutions. When the Korean comedians hold space and have an exchange just to vent or debrief about what they witnessed which they found distasteful and ignorant. It is an act of forming alliance around a dismissal, rejection and devaluing of a racist and transphobic comic who disrespects the local culture; this is arguably a method of decolonization through a self-determination. Jax’s event is also an

⁷¹³ An “ajösssi” describes a middle-aged man who is typically a married man and has children; it is the counterpart to the ajumma.

⁷¹⁴ Interview. Jax. Email. May 26, 2019.

⁷¹⁵ Interview. Jax. Email. May 26, 2019.

⁷¹⁶ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*, (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2013), 116.

example of decolonization in the sphere of local English stand-up comedy as they create an environment specifically for marginalized identities including local participants to feel safe from discomforts carried down from hegemonic forces. Jax's efforts move towards "seeking spatial justice" as described by political geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja who argues that "assertive spatial perspective" impacts our understandings of power and justice in relation to geography.⁷¹⁷ When it comes to decoloniality, the following questions must be asked "Who is doing it, where, why, and how?"⁷¹⁸ Lyrically Minded resists colonial whiteness, heteronormativity, and misogyny through an occupation of space, and the host dictates the contractual terms of that space which invites marginal identities to thrive in safety and keeps the white performers in check by establishing ground rules for words and behaviors within that space.

Can the Subaltern Crack Jokes?

The 1990s government's globalization policy (seggyehwa) required many business officials to speak English in order to close deals with overseas companies. Along with globalization policies, educational policies in schools pushed for English to be taught in schools starting in elementary school. Students take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to get accepted to college, and continue their English language classes as undergraduate students. The Korean job market requires many applicants to be competent in English despite the fact that their jobs do not always require them to speak it. Thus, the English language skill is used by employers to exercise classist tactics and show

⁷¹⁷ Edward Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010), 2.

⁷¹⁸ Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 108.

preference for those who had the financial advantage to study English at cram-schools or study abroad. This keeps out employees of a lower-income demographic who cannot afford such privileges. A Korean citizen's competence in the English language is a sign of status in terms of wealth, education and international travel experience.

The bilingual Korean female comedians I encountered during my research come from such privileges; they are all college educated and spent some years studying abroad as undergraduates or private school attendees for middle and/or high school education in English-speaking countries like the US or Australia. Part of the reason why they are fond of stand-up comedy stems from their English language skills, which affords them the ability to laugh at and tell jokes in English.

One of these women is Soomin Choi who overheard two white men who were sitting behind her at Jim Jefferies's showcase. Their conversation was about an English-language comedy show called "Savage Girls" that the men had seen a week earlier featuring an all-female line-up including Choi. The white men's complaint about "Savage Girls" was that "it was not diverse." What does it mean when an agent of hegemonic influence demands diversity in a space and event designed to champion precisely that? What kind of "diversity" is this agent demanding from a group of performers who are majority women, local, and/or of the queer community?

The "Savage Girls" showcase was produced by bilingual Korean comedian Jung-yoon Choi, and the spirit of the show was in response to the male dominance of the local stand-up comedy scene. The event took place in a basement bar/event space in a neighborhood called Haebangchon which has recently become a popular area for its international cuisines (Chinese, Italian, Lebanese, American, etc.) and draws many local ex-pats. The show was hosted by a Latinx-American ex-pat drag queen/comedian Ms. Queenie (Marty Silva), who performs drag shows

regularly in Haebangchon. The neighborhood is steps away from the Yongsan Garrison—a US military base. “Haebang” in Korean means “liberation” or “decolonization.” The neighborhood’s name refers to the late period of Japanese colonization, when Korea was liberated from Japan in 1945 only to be taken over by the American military which reoccupied all of the colonial spaces Japan had relinquished at the end of WWII in 1945. The “liberation” in Haebangchon has now taken on a new kind of meaning by also becoming a safe space for queer identities and allies for drag performances at ex-pat-friendly gay bars and clubs.⁷¹⁹

The complaint from these white male audience members of the “Savage Girls” showcase was that it did not feature men like them—cis-male, hetero and white. To them, a lineup of queer, female, and non-white bodies equaled “lack of diversity,” despite common knowledge that as far as show business goes, it is dominated by white men.⁷²⁰ The remark is yet another example of white male ignorance stemming from a myopic view of what it means to be marginal. Ahmed states that “white bodies do not have to face their whiteness; they are not oriented ‘towards’ it, and this ‘not’ is what allows whiteness to cohere, as that which bodies are oriented around.”⁷²¹ In Korea, however, white bodies do not cohere; they are oriented towards their whiteness at all times by

⁷¹⁹ The gay/trans community in Korea does not have a strong camaraderie with local women; gay bars/clubs in Itaewon, for instance, which is a haven to many queer Koreans, charge extra for Korean cis-women who want to enter gay bars/clubs to watch drag shows while gay men and trans folk pay less; I’ve encountered similar instances when I was required to pay extra as a non-Korean citizen to enter some bars/clubs in Itaewon, which charges foreigners extra entrance fees as opposed to Koreans who have a local identification card.

⁷²⁰ Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, “Response: Standing Up, Breaking Rules Returning the Favor: Ludic Space, Comedians, and the Rhetorical Constitution of Society,” *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change*, eds. Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt, 237-249, (New York: Routledge, 2017); Darnell Hunt, Ana-Christina Ramón and Michael Tran, “Hollywood Diversity Report 2019: Old Story New Beginning,” UCLA College Social Sciences, <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2019-2-21-2019.pdf>.

⁷²¹ Ahmed, 156.

Korean locals but do not see it; some even claim to feel marginalized by this, echoing the argument of “reverse racism”—a concept dismissed as a fallacy.⁷²² To these discussants, anything that does not challenge their comfort of being white cis male and hetero is the norm, but the “Savage Girls” showcase featured female comics who openly spoke on anti-Asian racism, toxic masculinity, female sexuality, menstruation, and general discomforts of navigating a male-dominated society as a woman which in turn left these white men feeling marginalized.

An early mandam act by Shin Bool-chool entitled “Kũnk'o tach'inda” from 1946 contained criticisms of American military presence in Korea that replaced the Japanese colonial authority in 1945. Shin was arrested for slandering an ally force—a violation of the MacArthur’s decree number 2. Shin stopped recording mandam albums altogether thereafter, and fled to North Korea before the Korean War. The history of silencing Korean criticism of American military presence makes it hard for Koreans to ever speak up against American aggressions. This, in part, explains the non-confrontational manner of Koreans in their encounter with Americans, which is not to say that anti-American sentiment among Koreans does not exist; it exists in the form of civic activism on social media (where one can be faceless or nameless) or in private conversations among Koreans after an encounter with white masculinity in a local space like the women had after the Stand Up Seoul

⁷²² Jacqueline K. Nelson, Maria Hynes, Scott Sharpe, Yin Paradies & Kevin Dunn (2018) Witnessing Anti-White ‘Racism’: White Victimhood and ‘Reverse Racism’ in Australia, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39:3, 339-358; Casey Ryan Kelly (2018) The wounded man: *Foxcatcher* and the incoherence of white masculine victimhood, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 15:2, 161-178; Mike King, (2015), “The ‘knockout game’: moral panic and the politics of white victimhood, *Race and Class*, 56 (4), 85–94; Paul Elliott Johnson (2017) The Art of Masculine Victimhood: Donald Trump’s Demagoguery, *Women's Studies in Communication*, 40:3, 229-25.

showcase where a white man unabashedly fetishized Asian women before a Korean crowd and made transphobic remarks to people he'd just met.

Anti-American civic resistance, however, gets suppressed or undone by neoliberal pressures. For instance, Psy is the first artist in the world to gain over a billion views on YouTube with his song "Gangnam Style," and the first Korean artist to perform in Times Square, New York on New Year's Eve in 2012. Despite being a global household name, Psy became embroiled in American media controversy in 2012 when news of his anti-American military concert held in 2002 (in response to the deaths of two teenaged Korean girls run over by an US military tank) surfaced. In addition, American mainstream media unearthed Psy's rap lyrics from his 2004 album which critiqued America's involvement in the Iraq War, and called for the deaths of American soldiers and their family members.⁷²³ Psy's apology for anti-American protest concerts and song lyrics he'd initially written with a sense of rebellion, revolt, and nationalistic pride is a product of the global neoliberal economy that Korea is now part of. Now that his global popularity and financial success were at stake, Psy whistled a different tune: "I understand the sacrifices American servicemen and women have made to protect freedom and democracy in my country and around the world."⁷²⁴ Psy taking back his words, and apologizing to American military troops after his global success and American/Hollywood's interest in his artistry illustrates the power disparity in terms of global hierarchy as well as the impact of capital, and how fame and monetary success restrict one's political freedom and freedom of speech.

⁷²³ Max Fisher, "Gangnam Nationalism: Why Psy's anti-American rap shouldn't surprise you," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 7, 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/12/07/showbiz/psy-apology-irpt/index.html>, accessed June 18, 2019.

⁷²⁴ Jareen Imam, "PSY Apologies for viral anti-American lyrics," *CNN*, Dec. 10, 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/12/07/showbiz/psy-apology-irpt/index.html>, accessed June 18, 2019.

The local female Korean comics from the “Savage Girls” showcase currently do not have the same amount of global media attention as Psy today, but their performance which took up space and occupied an area in Haebangchon—“liberation village”—close to the US military garrison, is an allegoric reclaiming of space and voices that were taken away by suppressive forces, e.g. local patriarchy, foreign patriarchy, foreign military presence, and foreign authority figures (ELT), and an exercise of affective resistance. Soja claims that spatial justice does not need to be defined in finite terms but should evolve or cohere to the contexts they are at play in: “[T]he geography, or ‘spatiality,’ of justice...is an integral and formative component of justice itself, a vital part of how justice and injustice are socially constructed and evolve over time.”⁷²⁵ The Korean female stand-up community’s alliance with ex-pat LGBTQIA+ comedians of color is an example of social justice taking form through activity, activism, assertion, call-back and laughter: “[Spatial justice] seeks to promote more progressive and participatory forms of democratic politics and social activism, and to provide new ideas about how to mobilize and maintain cohesive coalitions and regional confederations of grassroots and justice-oriented social movements.”⁷²⁶

Gayatri Spivak’s question as to whether or not the subaltern can speak is necessary because, as Rosalind Morris writes, “It enables an investigation of what conditions obtrude to mute the speech of the subaltern woman, to render her speech and her speech acts illegible to those who occupy the space produced by patriarchal complicity (whether of imperialism or globalization), namely the state.”⁷²⁷ The bilingual Korean female comedians of Seoul are just a few who can answer the question, “Can the subaltern speak?” with an affirmative, “Yes.” They have a setup

⁷²⁵ Soja, 1.

⁷²⁶ Soja, 6.

⁷²⁷ Rosalind Morris, “Introduction,” *Reflections on the History of an Idea: Can the Subaltern Speak?* Ed. Rosalind Morris. 1-18, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

and punchline to reclaim the spaces once occupied by local and foreign hegemonic forces, and for however much time they have on stage, they are in control of the people who are listening and losing themselves under their influence in laughter.

Conclusion

After 21 years, the live sketch variety show *Gag Concert* concluded its airing on June 26, 2020. A spokesperson at KBS stated that the “changing broadcasting environment and comedy trends, limitations of open comedy programs, among others, are the reasons for going on a temporary break...”⁷²⁸ The end of KBS’s main comedy showcase means the end of the open-recruiting system for finding new comedians in Korea, but there’s no end to *yenŭng* programs. New ones crop up each day, and more and more non-comedians are appearing on these shows including K-pop stars, actors, athletes, former anchors, models, chefs, designers, and others. What will the future of comedy and comedians look like for Korea? How will this impact the kinds of programs produced from here on out?

Although Korean stand-up comedians are charting new territory, those without “qualified” star status such as representation at an agency or official recognition at a television network still struggle to make their big break on television. Of course, the definition of “qualified” stardom is also changing. Plenty of user-generated content creators such as ASMR and *mŏkpang* (*mukbang*) video authors have their own platform on YouTube and social media.⁷²⁹ Some of these creators eventually appear on television shows because of the enormous following they’ve built on their own, and have become recognizable in the zeitgeist. This practice is also commonly found in Hollywood; for instance, videos of Sarah Cooper’s imitation of Trump landed her a Netflix special in 2020; Canadian YouTuber Lilly Singh who became

⁷²⁸ Lim Jang-won, “‘Gag Concert’ to go on hiatus after 21 years,” *The Korea Herald*, May 15, 2020, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200515000587>, accessed June 29, 2020.

⁷²⁹ See Tania Lewis, *Digital Food: From Paddock to Platform*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Paula Clare Harper, “ASMR: bodily pleasure, online performance, digital modality,” *Sound Studies*, 2019, 6(1): 95-98; Glen Donnar, “‘Food porn’ or intimate sociality: committed celebrity and cultural performances of overeating in *meokbang*,” *Celebrity Studies*, 2017, 8(1): 122-127.

famous through her own YouTube channel is now the host of an NBC late night TV show—*A Little Late with Lilly Singh* (2019-). Blogger Camila Coelho and YouTuber James Charles get invited to the Met Gala. Social media influencers who became viral sensations such as Amanda Cerny, Tway Nguyen, Zachary King, Charli D’Amelio and Brittany Tomlinson (Kombucha Girl) are in Superbowl LIV commercials for Sabra Hummus. Social media influencers are now part of the Hollywood ecosystem and mainstream media has already reckoned with this.

The last generation of Korean comedians who made it into the open-recruiting system who now practice stand-up spend a great deal of time generating content for their YouTube channel and social media with the hopes for content to go viral; an example is the Psick University YouTube channel made by former TV sketch comics who now practice stand-up comedy. The kind of content they produce emulate styles and techniques of *yenŭng* programs such as their editing, effects, pranks, sketches, improv, etc.⁷³⁰ *Yenŭng* programs today are also adapting and recognizing the influence of UGC creators and their works; shows like *How Do You Play?* (also known as *Hangout with Yoo*) starring Yoo Jae-suk and created by PD Kim Tae-ho of *Infinite Challenge* feature segments on their show that include edited parts of the livestreams they host with viewers via YouTube. *How Do You Play?* also invited influencer/mukbang YouTuber Tzuyang (쯔양) who has over 2.3 million subscribers (as of 2020) to taste Yoo’s fried chicken. *Yenŭng* is always in the process of evolving and transforming, and now shares a symbiotic relationship with contemporary UGC content and its creators. In fact, *yenŭng* programs like *My Little Television* already successfully blended the world of broadcasting and livestreaming together on MBC. *Yenŭng* is a variety show because it

⁷³⁰ Psick Univ, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGX5sP4ehBkihHwt5bs5wvg>.

can be a variety of things—never one and never static. Some things, however, do remain the same.

During the course of this project since 2016, I watched close to ten thousand hours of Korean variety shows. In that time, what I noticed time and time again is that the female emcees are always replaced or removed from shows a lot more often than male emcees, and often times for no reason at all, while male emcees had to commit a serious offense or crime to get removed from programs (as observed in chapter three). Yenŭng programs with an all-female cast are few and far in between while all-male cast yenŭng programs are treated as the standard.⁷³¹

In January 2014, veteran comedian and variety/talk show emcee Park Mi-sun accepted an award for Top Female Excellence Award for the Variety Division at the 2013 KBS Entertainment Award Ceremony. While accepting her award in tears, Park said, “I’ve been in this business for 26 years. If you look at [yenŭng] these days, it’s all about the men taking it for themselves. I was really upset about that. The women have a lot to offer, too. I’d like the women to get together and make lots of good programs in 2014.”⁷³² In the fall of 2015, Park was let go from the variety talk show *Happy Together*, which she’d been an emcee on for nearly 400 episodes. The other female emcee and comedian Kim Shin-young was also let go from the show, and *Happy Together* revamped its cast to three male emcees—Yoo Jae-suk, Jun Hyun-moo and Park Myung-su. Actress Uhm Hyun-kyung was recruited for *Happy Together* but only

⁷³¹ *Heroine 6* (2004-2006) on KBS is one example; *Infinite Girls*—a spin off of *Infinite Challenge* aired on MBC from 2007-2013; *Sister’s Slam Dunk* lasted one year (2016-2017, KBS).

⁷³² KBS World, “2013 KBS Entertainment Awards | 2013 KBS 연예대상 - Part 2 (2014.01.10),” Jan. 16, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnMprxfQ2pw&app=desktop>, accessed July 22, 2020.

temporarily and she was significantly younger than Park Mi-sun. As of now, *Happy Together*'s consistent emcees are all male, and a rotation of guest hosts are brought in week by week.

I see the trend of removing or replacing female emcees in other popular *yeŕng* programs including *Magnificent Dogs* (2019- , KBS) and *Back Alley* (2018- , SBS). The inconsistency of female emcees on popular and long-running shows is a visible testament to how the industry determines women as replaceable and impertinent. If a show's ratings drop, the women are replaced; female emcees on *yeŕng* are treated like costume or set design changes. Furthermore, there is a continuation of our witnessing of stress aesthetics and melodrama being operative in footages like the award acceptance speech by Park Mi-sun in her tearful display as she makes a statement about how the industry ignores or shuts out women. KBS produced and aired a television documentary called *Documentary: Gag Woman* (2020) where it interviews six female comedians, and on this, there are moments where the women declare their own suffering and victimization further perpetuating and producing content for us to be entertained by—witnessing their lived suffering and pain for our viewing pleasure. To what extent are these narratives perpetuating because of the industry's need to have this kind of content for viewer engagement? Does the industry resist change because of the marketability of stress aesthetics and weepy “real-life” melodramas? Korean comedian Park Ji-sun who was mentored by a lot of the women interviewed in this documentary took her own life on November 2, 2020. The shock to the Korean comedy community at the loss of a comedian is still settling in, including some of my interviewees who had worked with her or gone to school with her in the past. Speculations as to the cause of her death is mostly around health issues she'd been struggling with but questions around the industry's pressures and its resistance to structural and systemic changes to recognize female comedic talent and give them jobs in hosting roles on major programs, and produce a

supportive industry culture wherein these women's roles can be preserved, maintained and developed continue to linger.

Furthermore, in my research, I found that all of the writers on these *yeonŕng* programs are women while the majority of PDs are men; the power disparity between these roles are major; writers lead a precarious freelancers' life while PDs have a lifetime job security at a network with greater options for career mobility to become a CP, CEO, board member, a member of the KCC, etc. More work is required to tease out these disparities that segregate or assign jobs according to gender, and how that shapes job expectations. I'd also like to see research on how these industry standards get broken, reproduced or completely reimagined in non-traditional non-industry platforms like social media where artists generally have more agency although compensation is not guaranteed.

Neoliberal Logics Protecting Toxic Korean Masculinity

Because of neoliberal policies, and the political/economic influence that Korean media industries have, the Korean government is reluctant to punish violators: "In a society modeled after a military or a neoliberal market—where authority and power are simply idealized in a self-authorizing way—the coercive and violent nature of sexual violence is rendered illegible when those violent acts are committed by someone in a position of power and prestige."⁷³³ On Mar. 10, 2019, I met up with a screenwriter friend who writes for both Korean film and television—Jae-in Kim.⁷³⁴ While drinking tea at a café in Greenwich Village, we talked about the #MeTooKorea movement and the social impact this had in our personal and professional lives.

⁷³³ You-me Park, "The Crucible of Sexual Violence: Militarized Masculinities and the Abjection of Life in Post-Crisis, Neoliberal South Korea," *Feminist Studies*, 42 (2016): 17-40, 23.

⁷³⁴ To protect his identity, this person's name was replaced with a pseudonym.

Kim mentioned that an investigative piece was underway which collected stories of sexual harassment within the Korean film industry; he mentioned that a list was compiled by the Korean film magazine *Cine21*, and on that list was “every well-known Korean actor and filmmaker. You name him, and he’s on that list. Of course, the editor put a stop to the investigation and killed the story because if these people’s names are outed, we’re talking about the end of the Korean film industry altogether.”⁷³⁵

The film industry does not work in isolation. Many of the sponsorships and products are found in the television ecosystem. CJ Entertainment is tied to the cable channel tvN where enormously popular programs air; CJ’s drama production sector Studio Dragon produces wildly popular Korean dramas that air across all public, commercial and cable networks as well as global streamers such as Viki and Netflix (*My Holo Love* [2020] and *Sweet Home* [2020]). In Korea’s neoliberal market-driven economy, requesting that corporate heads and its top selling entertainers be removed is not an option. Jinhee Choi’s monograph *The South Korean Film Renaissance* offers a clear picture as to how the nation’s visual entertainment industry is built on the backs of chaebol food corporations, e.g. CJ and Lotte, and these corporations are the ones that own CJENM and Lotte Entertainment.⁷³⁶ This is why so many Korean movies, TV shows and music videos include eating—because their corporate sponsors sell food. The manifestation of mǒkpang (mukbang) videos is no accident; it is a direct result of the Korean entertainment system’s commercial roots in the food industry. The Korean government is at the mercy of Korean conglomerates such as these as well as their stars and directors no matter how predatory.

⁷³⁵ Jae-in Kim, in-person interview, Mar. 10, 2019.

⁷³⁶ Jinhee Choi, *South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

The value of Korea's soft power and its economic contributions to the state through hallyu's media industries is significant.

In chapter one I discuss the anecdotes from members of Highlight (née B2ST) who appeared on *Happy Together* in 2009 to express their hardships as boys when they first began training as K-pop stars. In 2019, a member of Highlight—Junhyung (Yong Jun-hyung)—became entangled in Jung Joon-young's sex scandal and announced his retirement from entertainment.⁷³⁷ As mentioned in chapter one, many young K-pop idol members are accustomed to mental, physical and emotional abuse through their management systems. Abuse, objectification and disrespecting of bodies, and the “suck it up” mentality are normalized for them from a young age as part of their training. Furthermore, as these young idols find success, they learn to abuse their power and victimize other young folk in entertainment such as trainees, particularly young women. For these young people who've acclimated to abuse as the norm, objectifying, disrespecting and sexually exploiting women are also the norm. After Jung Joon-young and Seungri's stories were exposed, what headlines consistently noted as “a shock” to the K-pop industry is, in fact, no shock at all. Inflicting pain onto others was normal to them because they themselves suffered normalized abuse and injustice; sexual exploitation and victimization of others did not seem immoral to them; they appeared to be a “part of the job” and an act of “paying dues” just as they had at the start of their careers. As You-me Park explains, “In a system of militarized patriarchy, for example, the boundary between coercion and power

⁷³⁷ Tamar Herman, “Yong Junhyung Leaves K-pop Group HIGHLIGHT & Admits Knowledge of Sex Crimes Scandal,” *Billboard*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/8502483/yong-junhyung-leaves-k-pop-group-highlight-sex-scandal>, accessed Aug. 11, 2020.

becomes blurred, as both the power to dominate and violate as well as the power to refrain from violating and, instead, to protect, is always imagined in gendered and sexualized terms.”⁷³⁸

Former YG Entertainment CEO Yang Hyun-suk who was embroiled in charges of sex trafficking for his VIP clients had his charges reduced to gambling. Seungri who retired from show business via an Instagram post enlisted in the military. Military enlistment in Korea is a common move made by many celebrities who get caught in scandals. Military enlistment is a ritualistic haven or a substitute-prison sentence for male celebrities similar to how Europe becomes a haven for Hollywood men riled in sex scandals, e.g., Roman Polanski, Woody Allen and Louis CK.

The #MeTooKorea movement has, in recent years, been pointing out specific victimizers within the media industry, and cases that went cold have been restored again, like in the case with the late Jang Ja-yeon. Many male entertainment figures were exposed like the late director Kim Ki-duk who was highly regarded in the European art house film festival circuit for films that frequently included misogynistic scenes and/or premises. Kim was brought on charges of physical assault, rape and coercion by actresses who worked with him, but this led to no indictment, and the filmmaker continued to deny these accusations.⁷³⁹ Kim later admitted to slapping an actress on a film set, but remained starkly unapologetic of the incident; the court dropped Kim’s charges of sexual assault.⁷⁴⁰ In 2018, Kim attended the Berlinale to screen his

⁷³⁸ You-me Park, “The Crucible of Sexual Violence: Militarized Masculinities and the Abjection of Life in Post-Crisis, Neoliberal South Korea,” *Feminist Studies*, 42 (2016): 17-40, 23.

⁷³⁹ Hyo-won Lee, “South Korean Filmmaker Kim Ki-duk Accused of Rape,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Mar. 6, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/south-korean-filmmaker-kim-ki-duk-accused-rape-1092225>, accessed Oct. 31, 2019.

⁷⁴⁰ Patrick Frater, “Berlin: Kim Ki-duk Responds to #MeToo Accusers, Talks Violence in Movies,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Feb. 17, 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/film/asia/berlin-kim-ki-duk-metoo-accusers-violence-in-movies-1202703301/>, accessed Oct. 31, 2019.

latest film *Human, Space, Time and Human*. Kim died in 2020 due to COVID-19 related illness. In what ways do the American and European film markets' persistent fetishistic gaze onto objectified and brutalized Korean female bodies in cinema and continued revelry of male filmmakers with misogynistic storylines and tendencies function as enablers? Such critique and questioning are necessary in media scholarship through theories of transnationality, industry, gender, and politics.

Flagrant misogyny and sexism in Korean society is no secret, just as abusive labor conditions in the K-pop industry is common knowledge; as mentioned in chapter one, Korea scores very low in gender equality in the World Economic Forum, especially for nation with a stable economy. Despite many years of lawsuits and accusations made by women against male entertainment figures, nothing has been as impactful as the #MeToo movement. Change, however, remains slow. The #MeToo movement is not just about sexual assault in the workplace, but of power inequality, and citing or recalling instances where victims were left feeling uncertain or uncomfortable with the interaction they had because their abusers had higher power over them, and were therefore left in a position of being unable to question said authority and his advances due to job precarity. The notion of “believe all women” did not become a trend until the #MeToo movement took place. Part of what makes the movement invaluable to feminists is because it relies on the anecdotes of victims rather than corporate investigations or legal action—both of which have let down many victims because their word has been regarded as insufficient evidence.

The majority of the K-pop stars exposed by investigative journalist Kyung Yoon Kang had their charges dropped, and their stardom is still preserved and idolized in their social media accounts. Problematic idolatry surrounding the fallen male stars of K-pop also preserves and

reverses male toxicity much like how the film festival circuits do for Korean filmmakers. This calls for more criticism in pedagogy, especially given the great popularity of Korean pop culture studies around the globe. Jung Joon-young's Instagram account, for instance, still includes comments such as, "I miss you" and "I love you" from fans who support him despite his crimes against women. The larger impact of the #MeToo movement, regardless of indictments and their resolutions, is the affective purpose it fulfills. The significance that #MeToo has is the potential for awakening self-awareness in men who never once had to think about misogyny and sexual assault in the past because they were accepted as social and industrial norms. Men begin to self-reflect on whether their past actions will be claimed as sexual assault or inappropriate actions. Women also self-reflect and traverse their past to reconsider whether certain moments in their lives that were full of self-blame, guilt and shame, are now moments to be reclaimed through female empowerment and reframing the narrative. There is a cathartic effect that the #MeToo movement has through the sharing of personal stories and feeling connected to a larger political and cultural shift in thinking. While the judicial proceedings that follow the #MeToo movement are not always clear and just, the affective value of the cultural awakening it sets in within a society is significant. While my own work questions the ROK's relationship to hegemony (local and foreign) in the context of gender, sexuality, and nation, I'd like to see more work in Korean studies to include such reflections, and more Cinema and Media Studies researchers to not just pay heed to popular culture and fandom but also the shadows and back channels where scholarly criticism is necessary to bring greater awareness, imagine possible resolutions to contemporary problems, and address the discontents that arise when a nation reaches economic and political triumph. Moving forward, more academic work is necessary in thinking through what social and cultural practices as well as adjustments need to be made to prevent such social malaises. What

we accept as the norm must continuously be questioned. This is the work of media and cultural criticism.

Appendix

Grace Jung: Have you come across any articles or theories as to why a school setting is so common in Asian variety shows? High school setting, high school uniforms, etc.

Yuki Nakayama: I have some theories of my own. I think there is an aesthetic/visual aspect to it and a cultural aspect. The aesthetic reason is that it's a visual iconography that needs no explanation. Audiences immediately know the setting. It has characters [and] archetypes that a large portion of the society is familiar with. And all you need is a desk or people in school uniform like costumes so it's cheaper than other more complex set ups. The cultural reason is that schooling/education continues to be a key category and societal unit in Asia. I think that's why we see it across all media forms and genres. I also think for variety it connects to its audience base. Variety tends to be an all-ages type of programming so it must be a setting that is the most "mass"/widely known. It probably is also connected to its visibility in other medias that allow it to be so widely accepted. I think there is also a very personal reason why many content creators use that setting.

GJ: I'm definitely there with you on the school outfits being a point of connection for everyone. Especially in Japan and Korea where students still wear uniforms to school. I spoke to another academic and she said that school settings trigger a collective nostalgia to a past so that everyone can relate to what they see, which is similar to what you're saying. I like what you're saying re visuals. It immediately grounds the viewers to what they are seeing. In Korea's case with a variety show like *Happy Together*, I feel like the school uniform gimmick was to attract more teenagers as viewers. And to get the celebrities to sort of get into a school mentality when they were all students and had their guard down, and could relate to one another without formalities. Even their speech would be altered, and become informal. And watching that informality among celebrities brings a comfort to the viewer. Everyone seems so much more relatable, and like their older brother or sister rather than some idol.

YN: I agree with your relatability reading. The archetype of the school setting is pretty simple so that everyone seems to understand and know if the talent starts to role play as well. I wonder if the nostalgia is a culturally created one rather than a lived experience one.

GJ: Maybe so. Also, maybe it's to make these comedians and guests appear more youthful, too. Give them a space where they can "play" like kids back then, and that creates a more fun and loose atmosphere which makes it conducive to comedic outcomes. I encountered some high school girls in Korea, and they made me laugh *so* hard. They're so goofy, funny and witty.

And less inhibited. Once people become adults, and they have jobs and other things at stake, the inhibitions take over and that loose and goofy sensibility is dimmed. So maybe it's to bring these television personalities and celebrities back to that place of looseness, lower inhibitions, and really give up everything for comedy—even their reputations or star image as someone serious, stoic or reserved.

YN: It's a very special part of life in Asia, I think. Before college or work life. Before people are corrupted by society.⁷⁴¹

⁷⁴¹ Yuki Nakayuma and Grace Jung. Twitter Messenger. Sept. 10, 2019.

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