

## Romantic Love: Mechanism for Feminist Empowerment or Orientalist Legacy?

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### Abstract

In this article, I analyze the romantic desire of non-Korean – particularly Western – women for the fictional Korean male characters depicted in transnationally popular Korean television dramas. This article is divided into two sections: first, it examines the transnational popularity of the South Korean television drama series, *My Love from Another Star*, and its depiction of a particular type of romantic Korean masculinity called *kkonminam* (flower boy) masculinity. Here, I argue that these fictional stories problematize hypersexual masculinity through their representations of romantic masculinity. The second section of the article extends the analysis by deploying ethnographic interviews and participant-observations of Western fans of Korean television dramas who, believing that the *kkonminam* depicted in the dramas are true reflections of Korean men, travel to Korea to form romantic relations with Korean men in real life. Using feminist theories of love, such as those propounded by bell hooks and Lauren Berlant, and the theory of the erotic by Audre Lorde, I argue that these fans, while romantically desiring Korean *kkonminam*, also co-opt the discourse of romantic love and Korean romantic masculinity to articulate and essentialize cultural differences between the East and West.

**Keywords:** Romantic love, Hallyu, South Korea, masculinity, *Kkonminam*, transnational media

### Introduction

Over the last twenty years, Korean television dramas have gained increasing transnational popularity through a phenomenon called “Hallyu”. This phenomenon, also known as the Korean Wave, refers to the transnational popularity of Korean popular culture. Hallyu is characterized by the consumption of Korean culture that occurs beyond the geographic and cultural boundaries of Korea (Choi 2015, 31-52). Research carried out by the Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE) reports that Hallyu is growing annually at an exponential rate (20). Each year, the number of Hallyu fans spending money on Hallyu-related products grows by more than 5% (KOFICE 21). This number is made up of transnational Hallyu fans, who not only consume drama-related merchandise, but also travel to Korea as Hallyu tourists to immerse themselves in Korean culture. Based on the ethnographic research I carried out, some Hallyu tourists, being drawn to the romantic masculinity depicted in these dramas, visit Korea with the specific aim of forming romantic relationships with Korean men in real life.

Contemporary and modern Korean television dramas traverse multiple subgenres, which include medical drama, legal drama, and police drama. While these may not all fall within the category of melodramas or romantic comedies, they nonetheless contain some romantic and melodramatic components within their plotlines. For example, Korean medical dramas often depict romantic liaisons between doctors, while crime dramas depict intimate encounters between fellow police officers. Particularly noteworthy are the ways in which these contemporary serial dramas portray male characters in romantic relationships. Korean male characters perform their erotic identities primarily through sexual restraint; they do not engage in any sexual or hypersexual behavior. Their romantic desire for their female counterparts is demonstrated through longing looks and acts of care. Some of the Hallyu tourists who travel to Korea assume (or hope) that these depictions of romantic masculinities are true reflections of Korean men's masculine practices. These transnational fans believe Korean men to be different from men of their own cultures, significantly different enough to motivate travel halfway across the world to seek romantic partnerships with Korean men. Part of my research attempts to uncover reasons for this trend. When asked for their impressions of Korean men, the Hallyu tourists I interviewed described them as "romantic," but simultaneously "weak," a conjunction that is of critical interest. The objective of this article is to uncover what Hallyu tourists mean when they describe Korean men as "weak." Following on from this, I evaluate the extent to which their notion of Korean men's "weakness" is associated with the latter's romantic and sexually unimposing behaviors. I parse through the nuances of romantic love, sex, and intimacy, not only as they are portrayed in Korean television dramas, but also how they influence the real-life relationships between the Hallyu tourists and Korean men. I contend that in the transnational context of Hallyu tourism, the characterization of Korean men's "weakness" as romantic idealization sometimes results in reproduction of Orientalist discourse that essentialize assumed differences between Asian and Western masculinity.

To begin, I analyze the Korean television drama series, *My Love from Another Star* (*Byeoreseo on Geudaee*), and its depictions of the *kkonminam* (flower boy) character, who is marked by male androgyny as well as romantic expressiveness and sexual restraint. Through thematic as well as visual analyses that focus on how romantic love and heterosexual intimacy are both visually and narratively depicted, I suggest that romantic love, as it is depicted in Korean television dramas, problematizes gendered assumptions that associate romantic love with femininity and sexual desire with masculinity. Although romantic love and sexual desire are not mutually exclusive per se, as scholarly research indicates, individuals not only distinguish between the two but also mark romantic – or more emotion-centered – relationships as feminine and casual sexual relationships as more masculine (Currier 2013, 717-20). In Danielle Currier's research, heterosexual men and women respectively adhered to such binary assumptions in order to sustain what R.W. Connell defines as "emphasized femininity"

and “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2013, 183). Here, emphasized femininity refers to the problematic social norm that insists that women must cater to the (sexual) desires of men. Meanwhile, according to Connell, men pursue and uphold hegemonic masculinity that subordinates and marginalizes those who embody feminine traits such as sexual submissiveness. In Korean television dramas, however, men are unabashedly romantic and effeminate.

Following this, I analyze data gathered through my field research in Korea where I interviewed and observed Hallyu tourists as they attempted to form romantic relationships with Korean men in real life, based on their romantic fantasies derived from Korean television dramas. I conducted 123 interviews and also conducted participant-observations on some of my interviewees. A majority of my Hallyu tourist informants were white women in their late-teens to early-twenties who came from countries ranging from the United States, Canada, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, Spain, and Germany to list a few. Although they were not explicitly asked to reveal their socioeconomic status, based on the fact that they could afford to travel to Korea for leisure, one might conclude that most of my informants come from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> I argue that Korean television dramas’ depictions of romantic love serve dual functions: within the fictional realm of Korean television dramas, these depictions problematize hypersexual masculinity, but in real life, such fictional depictions of romantic love are partially co-opted to reiterate the West’s essentialist notion that “Asian men appear to occupy the most unsexy, undesirable position of all, seen as soft, effeminate, and poorly endowed” (Nguyen 2014, 2). On the one hand, the transnational popularity of Hallyu and *kkonminam* masculinity may indicate a radical movement in which heterosexual Western women are traveling to Korea to escape, and thereby condemn, what they deem to be hypersexual and toxic models of masculinity that exist in their own cultures. On the other hand, I suggest that a more critical analysis of the phenomenon indicates that the essentialist binary between the East and the West is being repackaged through Western women’s discourse of their romantic desires for Korean *kkonminam*.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Dualism of Romantic Love**

My research focuses specifically on romantic love, which has often been interpreted in conjunction with binary conceptions of gender. Anthony Giddens distinguishes romantic love from other types of love such as “confluent love,” “passionate love,” and “pure love” (1992, 37-43). According to Giddens, romantic love is different from these other types of love for several reasons: it is culturally specific, and very much gendered as opposed to other forms of love (43). He notes that “ideals of romantic love have long affected the aspirations of women more than those of men, although of course men have not been uninfluenced by them” (2). Giddens is not alone in observing the gendering of romantic love. Writing about heterosexual relationships, bell hooks contends that “to embrace

patriarchy, they [men] must actively surrender the longing to love” (39). Hooks argues that patriarchal powers are cast as antithetical to longings for love: for men to climb the ladder of patriarchal hierarchy, they must forgo or ignore their desires to be loved and to love. In essence, men have to rearticulate and reframe romantic love as merely a temporary tool employed to achieve the ultimate goal of hypersexuality and heteronormativity (Allen 2007, 137-50).

From a feminist perspective such as that held by hooks, Hallyu tourists might be understood to be refusing to settle for the male partners and the romantic relationships available to them in their home countries. Instead of settling for what they understand to be patriarchally defined conceptions of love, female Hallyu fans opt to travel to Korea to form romantic relationships with Korean men, who, in this context, represent a “weaker” and non-hypersexual masculinity. Audre Lorde’s notion of women’s erotic power is useful in this instance for analyzing these tourists’ romantic desires for Korean men. In her essay “The Uses of the Erotic”, Audre Lorde critiques heteropatriarchal power structures that sexualize all types of eroticism (1993, 88). According to Lorde, it is exactly the conflation of sex and eroticism that operates to suppress women’s erotic desires that do not conform to heteropatriarchal standards (88). I interpret erotics as overlapping with romance and sex but as not defined just by romance or sex. Erotics is, to cite Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein, a “politics of difference, shaped by the imagination, and fueled by fantasies. Extending beyond sex acts or desire for sex acts, they are often flashpoints for multiplex social tensions” (Mankekar and Schein 2013, 9). Contrary to heteropatriarchal assumptions that equate eroticism with sex, Lorde redefines eroticism as an empowering energy that fuels women to seek genuine change and happiness in their lives (1993, 90). Rather than settle for the mundane, shoddy, and conventional options available to women, erotic energy fuels women – or anyone who is willing to embrace such energy – to continue searching for ideal modes of intimacy (90). I build on Lorde’s notion of female erotic power through my analysis of the Hallyu fans and tourists’ desires for Korean men. However, I also suggest that the Hallyu fans and tourists’ erotic pursuits of Korean men are more complexly organized, than simply self-empowering in the way that Lorde describes erotic power as being nourishment for self-realization. This is because the concept of love – more specifically romantic love – that lies at the heart of these Hallyu tourists’ exercise of their erotic powers is itself an ambivalent concept.

Love is elusive and by no means a concept that can be easily defined. According to Lauren Berlant, love is ambivalent because it motivates individuals in divergent ways: love can provide motivations for survival, but it can also be used as sources of greed as well as sources of social isolation (683). Berlant states, “[t]he anxiety to define – a key feature of being in proximity to all magnetic ideals – especially cleaves to love, and so the conversion of a love into a properly political concept must induce attention to what to do with the freight the term

ports with it” (2011, 683). Berlant thus warns us against taking love at face value and draws attention to how love is susceptible to manipulation. For instance, according to Sara Ahmed, hate groups (such as the White nationalists) often market themselves as groups organized around “love” rather than “hate” (2014, 122). In such hateful renditions of “love,” people are divided into two categories: those who are worthy of love, and those who are unworthy of love. Based on such a definition and use of the term “love,” such groups attempt to transform their hateful agenda into something benign. This example demonstrates that love, rather than referring simply to individual and personal emotions, is also a collective and sociopolitical ideal (Ahmed 2014, 123). As an ideal, it can be exploited to serve certain ideological agendas. With this in mind, I analyze the ways in which romantic love and *kkonminam* masculinity is co-opted by some non-Korean women as a benign discourse through which to perpetuate Orientalism. It is not my intent to thus conclude that these women are racist, or to assume that they are intentionally or maliciously conforming to Orientalist ideologies. Rather, I merely suggest that even something as seemingly innocent as romantic love can contribute towards Orientalism and to racial essentialism.

Romantic love and the transnational travels inspired by love are complexly entwined with histories of colonialism, racism, and Orientalism. Historically, romantic love has been used to legitimize colonization and wars, having a long history of being associated with the politics of modernity: “It has long been taken for granted that romantic love is the fruit of cultural refinements and not an experience readily available or accessible to non-Westerners in general. [...] The hidden inference of this assumption may be that romantic love is the prize or reward of true culture” (Jankowiak 1997, 1). As Dawn Rae Davis observes, within such imperialist projects, love serves as a benevolent façade that hides an insidious agenda of imperialism and colonialism. The ethical goal of spreading the ideology of love – more specifically of romantic love – serves as a justification for the West’s systemic domination of non-Western cultures (2002, 147). For instance, in Western media discourses, some Middle Eastern and Asian women’s purported lack of romantic choice has often been understood as a sign of these countries’ failure to modernize (Penn 2011). From Western understandings of romantic love as associated with individualism, agency, and modernity, non-Western modes of performing and expressing romantic love are incomprehensible and thus perceived to be non-existent. As a case in point, although Koreans experienced and practiced romantic love long before their encounters with the West, romantic love was “re-introduced” to Koreans by Westerners between the years of 1910 and 1920 during the influx of Christianity and Christian missionaries to Korea (Kwon 2005, 186).

Western conceptualizations of romantic love – as interlinked with individual agency and modernity – are however not the only ways that we can possibly think about romance (Lindholm 2006, 10). I do not mean to imply that there is an inherent difference between Western and non-Western conceptions of love. Instead, I

emphasize that, contrary to Eurocentric and colonialist beliefs, European cultures neither invented romantic love nor proselytized the rest of the world to believing in romantic love. The Eurocentric conception of romantic love, constituted in acts of individualism and thus aligned with modernity, is just one of many epistemological conceptions of romantic love. Diverse cultural, and ideological, conceptions as well as practices of romantic love interact with one another to create new and hybrid forms and practices of romantic love. Transnational media plays a central role in such an intermixture of ideologies. I suggest that fictional Korean television dramas not only reflect but also influence the romantic desires and practices of Hallyu fans. Many media and literary scholars have analyzed the ways in which fictional representations influence reality and vice versa. In particular, scholars note how fictional television serials facilitate viewers in reimagining their identities and reality at large (Merayo 2013, 211-25). In consuming these fictions, viewers become “transferred into a liminal state” in between “the real and the fictional, the performative and the imaginary” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 94). By extension, transnational fans of Korean television dramas travel to Korea to find lovers in order to transform their liminal erotic fantasies into realities.

In the following section, I examine the transnationally popular Korean television drama serial *My Love from the Star*, focusing specifically on *kkonminam* masculinity as it is depicted in the series. I offer possible reasons as to why such a romantic masculine model might appeal to some Western Hallyu fans, motivating them to invest an extensive amount of money and time to travel afar to meet and date Korean men in real life.

### ***Kkonminam*: Androgynous, Romantic, and Erotically Desirable**

The Korean television drama serial *My Love from the Star* is a popular romantic comedy that aired from 18 December 2013 to 27 February 2014. The plot revolves around the love story between an extra-terrestrial alien residing in Korea and a Korean superstar. During the most difficult moments of their lives, the two characters meet each other and fall in love. The series depicts love as being strong enough to withstand any and all trials and tribulations the couple goes through. The series gained a popular following both in Korea and globally. One of the pleasures of watching it comes from a particular type of masculinity depicted in the drama: *kkonminam* (also known as flower boys) masculinity. *Kkonminam* are described as androgynous, and refer to “males who have pretty facial features and slim and attractive body shapes” (Oh 2015, 63). More explicitly,

*Kkonminam* men in popular dramas and romantic comedies are portrayed as attentive, sensitive and ready to express their feelings if needs be. They are well-groomed and fashionably dressed, accessorised with the latest man-bag, and excessively concerned with their looks. They are also



invariably young and not averse to using any cosmetic or surgical intervention to stay looking that way, nor averse to showing off their well-toned muscular bodies when an opportunity arises. (Elfving-Hwang 2011, 2)

Men who embody *kkonminam* masculinity are described through their androgynous fashion and beauty choices as well as their “atypical” (at least compared to other men who embody “normative” masculinity) attention to beauty: “Although in recent decades highly stylized, even androgynous-looking male models have also become prevalent in the West, in Korea, the change has been a much more radical one” (Maliangkay 2013, 45). As Roald Maliangkay indicates, whereas androgynous male models in the West have mainly appeared in high fashion magazines and fashion shows, the Korean notion of *kkonminam* masculinity extends beyond its use in the fashion sphere.

The male protagonist of *My Love from the Star* is portrayed as a *kkonminam*. The actor who plays the role of the alien named Do Min-jun (Do) is a young male celebrity named Kim Soo-Hyun who is known for his androgynous beauty. For instance, a photograph of Kim cross-dressing as a woman went viral on the internet among Korean popular culture fan communities. In the photograph, he dons a long-haired wig and stares wistfully into the camera, with enlarged eyes and a look of innocence. In Korea, male celebrities occasionally cross-dress as women as a form of fan-service, not as a way to perform their queer sexual or gender identities. In other words, cross-dressing among Korean celebrities is a prevalent marketing ploy that is used to emphasize the androgynous beauty of male celebrities. Furthermore, cross-dressing is a plot device often used in Korean television dramas (Lee 2015). As such, although Kim Soo-Hyun, the actor who plays Do in *My Love from the Star*, has a muscular physique, he markets himself not as a macho masculine icon, who distances himself from feminine traits, but as a star who possesses both masculine and feminine appeal.

Although androgynous aesthetics are essential for men to be categorized as *kkonminam*, equally important is their sexual innocence. Often, men who embody androgynous masculinity are described and understood in ways that erase their sexuality and sexual desires. For example, in his analysis of androgynous masculinities, Kam Louie says that such men do not possess “traditionally” masculine traits of sexual aggression and sexual dominance (2012, 935). Instead of sexual aggression and sexual dominance, such men are interpreted to perform and desire what is conventionally perceived to be the more effeminate form of love: romantic love. In the drama, Do is depicted as sexually innocent and restrained, somewhat necessitated by his characterization as an alien lifeform. As an alien lifeform, Do possesses a different immune system from humans, which makes intimacy difficult. Because coming into contact with human bodies results in serious illness, Do avoids any initiation of

sexual contact with the heroine, Chun Song-yi (Chun). As the series progresses, Do learns to cope with his physical aversion to human contact, and becomes more intimate with Chun. However, throughout the entirety of the twenty-episode series, he only kisses her a handful of times. In fact, the series does not depict scenes that go beyond light kissing.

Do's romantic desires for Chun are expressed through acts of care for her. In one of the episodes, Chun is asleep in her apartment but she awakes to an excruciating abdominal pain. Alone in the apartment, she cries for help, but realizing that no one is there to help her, attempts to go to the hospital by herself and nearly faints. Do, gifted with astute hearing due to his extra-terrestrial abilities, hears Chun's cry for help albeit being physically distant from her, rushes to her side, and takes her to a hospital for an emergency appendectomy. Do stays by her side at the hospital until she awakes from the surgery. He brings her comic books when she says she is bored. He takes her on walks around the hospital to help her recover from the surgery. During the walk, Do and Chun are captured in a medium shot with occasional close-ups of their arms to show Chun clinging on tightly to Do. As is the case in this scene, and throughout most of the drama, Chun is the one who initiates kissing and other forms of sexual intimacy while Do expresses his emotions through non-sexual yet intimate acts of care. Although he does not assert himself on her sexually, he does eventually become romantically involved with Chun. The drama seems to imply that neither male hypersexuality nor female sexual submissiveness is essential to the development of romantic relationships.

It is important to note that despite its prevalence in Korean popular culture, *kkonminam* masculinity is not the normative masculinity in Korea. It is in fact an alternative form of masculinity created around the time of the 1997 Korean economic crisis, when the ideals of the Korean macho, emotionless, and charismatic man were increasingly difficult to uphold as men were being laid off from work and losing their status as breadwinners (Maliangkay 2013, 45). In contrast to such patriarchal ideals of masculinity, flower boys with their androgynous beauty and qualities of domesticity and good listening skills became popular "alternative" masculine ideals that heterosexual Korean women sought in their romantic partners (Maliangkay 2013, 45). What does the popularity of such alternative, romantic, and androgynous masculinities imply in terms of heterosexual women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures and hypersexual masculine ideals? Why are these fictional depictions of alternative masculinities significant?

According to Celine Parreñas Shimizu, fictional depictions of alternative masculinities can offer models of ethical masculinity for men to emulate in real life. In other words, fictional alternative masculinities are the first steps to reformulating masculine norms so that they are less heteropatriarchal and more egalitarian. Specifically, in analyzing Hollywood's racist depictions of Asian American men as stereotypically asexual,



effeminate, and queer, Parreñas Shimizu contends that rather than critiquing such depictions as racist, such images or portrayals can be mined for feminist resistance to toxic masculinity (Parreñas Shimizu 6). She states, “I ultimately advocate an ethical manhood that recognizes its power not only to hurt others, *but to remap what is valued in our society*” (9). In other words, rather than critiquing images of asexual and sexually queered Asian American masculinities in Hollywood films for not living up to the standards of the masculine norm, Parreñas Shimizu suggests that such images should be used to question the faults within masculine norms that categorize non-normative masculinities as somehow deficient. Similarly, I suggest that *kkonminam* masculinity in Korean television dramas also provides models for an alternative masculinity that critiques normative masculine practices of hypersexuality and heteronormativity. Hence, the transnational popularity of Korean television dramas and their depiction of *kkonminam* masculinity indicates a potential point through which feminists – or heterosexual women at large – might resist patriarchal and hypersexual forms of masculinity that function as the masculine standard in various cultural contexts. Rather than settling for what is easily accessible in real life, Western Hallyu fans and viewers of Korean television dramas turn to the fictional world of Korean dramas to find ideal forms of romantic masculinity. However, just because Korean television dramas depict alternative masculinity to toxic models of masculinity does not mean that their subversive potentials are interpreted the same way by all of the viewers. In the real life relationships between Hallyu tourists and Korean men, racial and cultural differences play significant roles in how *kkonminam* masculinity is interpreted and desired. In what follows, I analyze some Western Hallyu fans’ discourses regarding the “romantic” *kkonminam* in Korean television dramas, with the aim of assessing (1) how these fictional images translate and incorporate themselves into the romantic choices that Hallyu fans/tourists make in their real life, and (2) how transnational Hallyu fans interpret the alternative masculinities projected in Korean television dramas.

### **Essentializing Korean Masculinities through Images of *Kkonminam***

A significant number of feminist scholars on fictional romance stories argue that realities and fantasies are dichotomous. For instance, in her analysis of female viewers of television soap operas, Ien Ang observes that the “pleasure of fantasy lies in its offering the subject an opportunity to take up positions which she could not do in real life: through fantasy she can move beyond the structural constraints of everyday life and explore other situations, other identities, other lives” (2007, 241). To extrapolate, Ang is saying that fantasy is a subsidiary of reality: it is a way in which individuals can envision an alternative reality devoid of any constraints. However, as Nicole Constable notes, such “fantasies and experiences cannot easily be transplanted into real life” (2007, 265). Existing scholarship thus suggests that fantasies are influenced by reality but not the other way around, in an

apparently unidirectional channel of influence. To cite as an example, in her analysis of the popularity of vampire-human romance fictions, Ananya Mukherjea argues that the male protagonists in these stories are, “in short, fantasy men – both very hard and very soft and fantastically flawless in a way that even very few fictional human men could possibly be” (2011, 12). Fictional men are flawless in contrast to the often-flawed men (or people in general for that matter) in real life. These examples suggest that for a majority of scholarship analyzing romance fiction, fantasy and reality are kept separate.

Arguing against these views, I suggest that there is a multi-directionality of influence between reality and fantasy. I suggest that fictional television serials do not simply reflect or mirror reality, or the desires of viewers: they also impact and transform the lived realities of their viewers. After all, as many media studies scholars have noted, fictional television dramas influence the ways in which their viewers conceptualize reality (Pérez 2005, 407-14). For instance, my Hallyu fan/tourist informants’ romantic fantasies about Korean *kkonminam* inspired them to travel to Korea in real life with hopes of finding fantastical *kkonminam* among real life Korean men. Fantasies are often perceived to be “wild, undisciplined imaginings; these imaginings are by nature childish or immature; fantasies entail erroneous, unsupportable beliefs; generically, fantasies are other-worldly stories populated by stereotyped characters; and fantasists are people who are unable to function normally, too disconnected” (Barker 2014, 155). However, my Hallyu tourists were not “too disconnected” from reality, as Barker’s understanding of fantasy and fantasists suggests. Rather, my informants’ fantasies were grounded in their reality-based complaints about the difficulty of finding romantic relationships with men who are emotionally assertive yet sexually unassertive in their own cultures. My Hallyu tourists embraced the fictional images of Korean *kkonminam* as realities rather than mere fantasies, motivating them to travel to Korea to form intimate relations with Korean men in real life. In these ways, my Hallyu tourist informants used fictional images of Korean men to critique their real experiences with hypersexual men back in their own countries. One might contend that they were perhaps naïve in expecting Korean men to be drastically different from heteronormative and hypersexual men back in their home countries, but they were by no means “disconnected” from reality. They were in fact attempting to change their reality through their fantasy-driven quest for ideal (i.e. romantic yet sexually unassuming) masculine lovers. Rather than settling for men who were geographically proximal to them, they traveled to Korea to find their romantic ideals, purely based on the images they encountered in these fictional television dramas.

It became clear, as my research progressed, that my Hallyu tourist informants mixed fantasy with reality, particularly with regards to depictions of *kkonminam* masculinity. They did this based on their desires to find a new paradigm of romantic love that is not grounded in heteropatriarchal conceptions of erotics that equates all

forms of erotics with sex. They were seeking romantic relationships and romantic partners who value femininity and emotions. They explained their motivation for visiting Korea by deferring to descriptions of Korean masculinity that resembled Korean television dramas' depictions of *kkonminam* masculinity: men who are loving, caring, romantic, but not sexually assertive. In that regard, their definition of romantic love de-emphasized sexuality and sexual intimacy. My informants expressed admiration and astonishment at how Korean men who courted them genuinely seemed to be interested in an emotional connection as opposed to sex. When asked how they could decipher Korean men's intentions, a significant number of my informants responded that their assessments were based on how differently Korean men behaved when they were courting as opposed to how men back home courted women. For instance, many of my informants use Tinder, an online dating application, to find Korean dates. The application operates through a simple method whereby users can "like" or "dislike" a profile of another Tinder user depending on the photos and short descriptions they upload to their Tinder profile. If two people mutually "like" each other's profiles, they are matched and are then free to continue their relationship. According to my informants, Western men, when they are matched on Tinder, would directly ask my informants whether they wanted to have sex. As one of my informants from Sweden said, "Once we match, they [men back home] just go, 'Do you want to fuck?'" My informants implied that such sexually assertive and upfront attitudes from men were unbecoming and unappealing. On the other hand, they observed that most of their Korean Tinder matches did not even broach the subject of sex while they chatted online or when they met in real life. One of my informants from Spain, while swiping profiles on Tinder, said,

Even Korean men's Tinder profiles are so different. Back home, guys upload their nude photos, send unsolicited dick pics, and just ask for sex. But if you look at Korean men's profile, they look like such nice and romantic guys: they upload their family photos, they are so well-dressed in their profile pictures, and they are so respectful when they talk to us. I like that Korean men are naturally gentleman.<sup>3</sup>

In this anecdote, Korean men's sexual reserve is contrasted with non-Korean men's sexual aggression. The noticeable differences in how Korean men portray themselves on Tinder as opposed to how Western men portray themselves may be due to differences in cultural norms regarding overt sexuality: in Korea, overt sexuality or even open discussions about sexuality is considered taboo (Kim 2014, 291-325). Hence, Korean men's seemingly sexually restrained attitudes on Tinder, in all probability, are based on Korean cultural norms. However, rather than acknowledging potential cultural differences regarding open discussions about sex, my informants accredited

differences between Western and Korean men to what they perceived to be the natural hypersexuality of Western men and the equally natural sexual restraint of Korean men. They assumed that Korean men's sexually restrained behaviors were natural because that was what they believed to be true based on fictional depictions of *kkonminam*. My Hallyu tourist informants saw Korean men as embodying alternative masculine ideals to those they were exposed to back in their home countries. However, in the process of defining Korean men as alternatively masculine, my informants were juxtaposing Korean men with Western men in ways that rearticulated Orientalist dichotomies between the East and the West. For example, one of my informants, a Hallyu tourist from Sweden in her early twenties, shared a story of how she was constantly sexually harassed and accosted by men back home. My informant said that she had to learn how to punch and kick in order to repel hypersexual men who bombarded her with unsolicited sexual attention. In contrast, she described how Korean men (or Asian men at large) as weaker and less aggressive than Western men.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, her description of Korean men's sexual non-aggression or weakness can be interpreted as Korean men being more gentlemanly and respectful towards women in contrast to Western men, who were cast as hypersexual and rude. She was not alone in comparing Korean men to Western men. On numerous occasions, my informants described getting sexually harassed by Western men back home and in Korea. In their harrowing accounts, they used Korean men's purportedly sexually unassuming qualities to condemn Western men's hypersexuality. In other words, my informants used the trope of Korean *kkonminam* and their sexual passivity in order to express their dissatisfaction with Western men's supposed hypersexuality. My informants' idealization of Korean men was conditional: Korean men were idealized so long as they provided a counterpoint to Western masculinity.

My Swedish informant's choice of the adjective "weak" (as opposed to another word with a more positive connotation) to describe Korean men in contrast to Western men is telling of the ambivalence underlying her idealization of the Korean *kkonminam*. Although her description of Korean men's purported weakness can be seen as a compliment towards their respect for women, the sentiment also recalls Western or Orientalist essentializing of Asian masculinity. For instance, during the San Francisco Gold Rush, male Chinese immigrants in the United States lived in bachelor societies due to a lack of Chinese women in the US. Even though such bachelor societies were formed as a result of US institutional efforts to prevent Chinese men from forming families and permanently settling in the US, these men were depicted as naturally sexually deviant (Sueyoshi 2018, 96). Stemming from such a racist history, Asian men were often depicted in Hollywood films as inadequate, as men from whom Western white men needed to save Asian women (Marchetti 1994, 109). Appropriating Freud's work on fetishism, David Eng analyzes the play *M. Butterfly* and the power dynamic between the play's Asian male character, Song Liling, and a white man, Gallimard, stating, "rather than seeing at the site of the female body a

penis that is not there to see, Gallimard refuses to see at the site of the Asian male body a penis that is there to see” (Eng 2001, 2). Eng explains Freud’s theory of fetishism as originating in a man’s trauma at confronting woman’s anatomical difference (i.e. castration) from him, and his subsequent attempts to create a surrogate penis to project onto the woman’s body (Eng 2). However, when the object of the white male gaze is an Asian man, the Asian man experiences “racial castration.” Eng indicates that Western white men, when confronted with Asian men, de facto associate Asian men with bottomhood and the anus: “In such marvelous narratives of penile privilege, the Westerner monopolizes the part of the ‘top’; the Asian is invariably assigned the role of the ‘bottom’” (1). As such, Eng “insists that sexual and racial difference cannot be understood in isolation” (2).

As these examples indicate, there is a long trajectory of Asian masculinity being demeaned as weak, and effeminate in contrast to Western – particularly white – masculinity. On the one hand, my informants were re-branding apparently weak Korean masculinity as a positive characteristic. However, they were also stereotyping all Korean men as weak. Regardless of how positive the connotations associated with stereotypes are, there is no such thing as a positive stereotype since stereotypes are based on essentialist and crude categorizations of a racial or ethnic group that ignores the diversity of the group being stereotyped. In such ways, although my informants were referring to Korean *kkonminam* masculinity as a romantic ideal, such idealization appears to be based on an essentialist understanding of Korean masculinity. As mentioned earlier on, Korean *kkonminam* masculinity is a relatively recent form of alternative masculinity formed in Korea during the 1990s, one that emerged in response to the threat posed to traditional forms of masculinity in the wake of Korea’s economic collapse. Furthermore, many other types of Korean masculinities exist alongside *kkonminam* masculinity. However, the tropes that my informants attached to Korean men were solely based on the *kkonminam* masculinity’s characteristic effeminacy, sexual pureness or restraint, and romantic mores. In that regard, all other types of Korean masculinity were effectively disregarded.

On the one hand, my informants’ romantic desires and transnational travel from the West to Korea (the East) disrupts the modernist and West-centric perception that romantic love was (and is) a gift bestowed by the modernized cultures of the West onto the rest of the world. Furthermore, my informants’ desires for Korean men also challenge the racist assumptions that Asian men are erotically undesirable in the global dating scene. On the other hand, Korean men’s newfound popularity among Western Hallyu fans/tourists comes at the price of being deemed sexually restrained and weak compared to hypersexual Western men, even if this apparent weakness carries a positive value. Such descriptions and binary categorizations of Korean men and Western men are forms of neo-Orientalism, where previously negative connotations attached to the racist stereotypes of Asian male sexuality, are now turned into positively-connotated stereotypes. Nonetheless, the positive connotations do not

serve to eradicate racialized stereotypes regarding the perception of Asian masculinity in the West. Rather, the positive connotations attached to the stereotypes embolden some women to remark that Korean men are weak, without the fear of appearing racially biased.

### **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to analyze the politics of romantic love in the context of Korean television dramas and their growing popularity among female viewers around the world. I examined the Korean television drama series *My Love from Another Star* and its depiction of *kkonminam* masculinity, a popular trope in romantic Korean television dramas, which offers an image of male androgyny, romance, and sexual innocence. Some Western women who consume such images fantasize about exercising their erotic power (Lorde) to seek romantic relationships that are disconnected from patriarchal conceptions of intimacy which conflate erotics with sex. The *kkonminam* characters in Korean television dramas not only problematize heteronormative masculinity by espousing androgyny, they also embrace sexual innocence. Through my analyses of *My Love from Another Star*, I claim that the *kkonminam* characters offer an image of masculinity that centers on romantic love and sexual restraint, and distances itself from toxic models of masculinity that are predicated on hypersexuality and patriarchal hierarchy.

The transnational popularity of an alternative *kkonminam* masculinity appears to indicate its potential to undercut the hegemony of hypersexual masculinities. However, I also highlighted the ways in which my Hallyu fan/tourist informants talked about Korean *kkonminam* in ways that echoed Orientalist and gendered distinctions between the East and the West. Even though they claimed they desired Korean men and had traveled to Korea to experience alternative masculine expressions of romantic love, some of them pitted Korean masculinity against Western masculinity to create a binary in which the former is associated with being weak, effeminate, and romantic while the latter is deemed hypersexual. Such binaries paint overly simplistic portraits about Korean masculinity as well as Western masculinity. There are multiple forms of masculinities in both Korea and the West that cannot be pared down to the essentialist notion of romance versus sex and East versus West. Hence, although a vision of alternative masculinity predicated on romantic love drives transnational intimacies between Korean men and Western Hallyu fans/tourists, such erotic (and perhaps even feminist) desire for romantic love can also easily be co-opted into neo-Orientalist narratives that reiterate dichotomies between romance and sex, men and women, as well as between the East and the West.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I recruited my informants by staying at hostels and guesthouses around Seoul that are popular among young tourists in Korea. I approached the guests and introduced my research topic. When the guests identified themselves as Hallyu tourists, I recruited them as informants. The interviews were semi-structured and occurred in a mixture of English and Korean. After interviewing everyone in a group, I conducted more in-depth follow-up interviews with some of my informants who provided particularly critical reflections during group interviews. I also conducted participant-observations where I went to clubs and bars with the Hallyu tourists and observed their interactions with Korean men. Furthermore, I observed the Hallyu tourists when they were using dating applications (such as Tinder) to find Korean dates. In these situations, I particularly focused on how the Hallyu tourists described Korean men as erotic subjects and what standards they used to decide whether the Korean men on the dating applications were “ideal” intimate partners.

<sup>2</sup> Although I do not agree with the binary distinction between the “East” and the “West,” I use the term “Western” and “Western men” in this article because my informants used those distinctions in their interviews.

<sup>3</sup> This quote is from my field research in Korea during 2017-2018. Here, “unsolicited dick pic” refers to photos of their genitals that men send to women without any solicitation from women.

<sup>4</sup> This ethnographic account came from my field research in Korea during 2017-2018.

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