

Women We Love

Femininities and the Korean Wave

Edited by SooJin Lee, Kate Korroch, and Liew Kai Khiun

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Contents

List of Figures	vii
List of Tables	viii
Acknowledgments	ix
Note on Romanization	x
Introduction: Femininities and the Korean Wave	1
<i>Kate Korroch, SooJin Lee, and Liew Kai Khiun</i>	

Part I: Characters We Love

1. Is Femininity Hard? Naming Femininities in the Age of Soft Masculinity	15
<i>Kate Korroch</i>	
2. Tomboy in Love: Korean and US Views of Heterosexual Eroticism in the K-Drama <i>First Shop of Coffee Prince</i>	34
<i>Maud Lavin</i>	
3. Miss Kim: God of the Workplace	54
<i>SooJin Lee</i>	

Part II: More than Girl Groups

4. Ella Gross and Child Social Media Stars: Rising to Fame through K-Pop Idol Trainee Systems, Mixed-Raceness, and Tabloid Cycle Controversies	71
<i>Jin Lee and Crystal Abidin</i>	
5. Girl Groups in Uniform: Moranbong Band and the Staging of NK-Pop in and out of North Korea	95
<i>Douglas Gabriel</i>	
6. <i>Ssen-Unni</i> in K-Pop: The Making of “Strong Sisters” in South Korea	116
<i>Jieun Lee and Hyangsoon Yi</i>	

Part III: Fans and Fan-Producers

7. <i>Alpeseu</i> (RPS) and Business Gay Performance in the Korean K-Pop World <i>Stephanie Jiyun Choi</i>	137
8. Females, Frontliners, Fringes: K-Pop's Performers and Protesters from Southeast Asia <i>Liew Kai Khiun, Malinee Khumsupa, and Atchareeya Saisin</i>	156
9. Riding the Korean Wave in Iran: Cyberfeminism and Pop Culture among Young Iranian Women <i>Gi Yeon Koo</i>	176
10. Into the New World: From the Objectification to the Empowerment of Girls' Generation <i>Erik Paolo Capistrano and Kathlyn Ramirez</i>	201
Notes on the Contributors	229
Index	233

Figures

Figure 5.1: Hyon Song-wol (far right) carrying a Chanel handbag	104
Figure 5.2: Chunhun of Sengun-Joshi rehearsing Moranbong Band's choreography for a fan event	108
Figure 9.1: Screen grab of GEM KOREA TV Instagram page	188
Figure 9.2: EXO fan club meeting in Tehran	192
Figure 9.3: The souvenirs from an offline BTS Fanclub (Persian Army) meeting	192
Figure 9.4: Celebratory announcement posted by Iranian fans in the subway in Seoul, South Korea	192
Figure 9.5: Iranian BTS fans' financial support of people with mental health issues	195
Figure 10.1: SNSD at the FOREVER 1 15th Anniversary Press Conference	202
Figure 10.2: SNSD performing "Mr. Mr." at Mnet's <i>M Countdown</i> in 2014	216

Tables

Table 8.1: Fundraising efforts for protest movements based on K-pop groups	169
Table 9.1: List of Korean TV dramas aired on IRIB	184
Table 9.2: List of K-dramas aired on Iran's most popular satellite channel, Farsi1	186
Table 9.3: Difference between K-drama and K-pop in the dominant medium and the age group and gender of the primary audience	191
Table 9.4: Major Korean celebrity fan pages on Instagram	193
Table 9.5: Most-visited fan pages devoted to Korean Wave content on Instagram	193
Table 10.1: Girls' Generation's members' stage names, real names, and positions in the group	205

Introduction

Femininities and the Korean Wave

Kate Korroch, Soojin Lee, and Liew Kai Khiun

Women We Love is a playful and nuanced text that takes the offerings of Korean Wave stars, idols, and fans seriously, and grapples with what they bring to conversations about gender and sexuality. There are 89 million Korean Wave fans in 113 countries; 66 percent of these fans are under thirty years old, and roughly 90 percent are female.¹ Despite that, several of the stars and idols that receive scholarly consideration are male. *Women We Love* looks closely at the relationships that form on-screen and are projected to millions of people all around the world. Further, this collection parses how those projections take on new life as they enter the milieu of the fan. The chapters look at how the fans take up their idols' emanations to create their own versions of nonconformist femininity and sexuality.

Beginning in the 1990s, Hallyu (한류), the “Korean Wave,” began permeating cultural borders regionally in Asia and across the globe. Driven by Korean popular music (K-pop) and dramas (K-drama), the faces and methods of Hallyu have not only shaped the world's perception of South Korea (Korea hereafter) but also influenced popular culture on an international scale. Hallyu's vast influence demonstrates the global interconnectedness of a local Korean cultural output. Impacting various genres and riding the “wave” of the internet, Hallyu is available in multiple media, on various platforms, and across cultural formats.

1. Kwak Yeon-soo, “89,000,000 ‘Hallyu’ Fans Worldwide,” *Korea Times*, January 11, 2019, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2021/04/732_261877.html; Kim Yunmi, “K-Pop Drives Hallyu Craze: Survey,” *Korea Herald*, June 13, 2011, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20110613000731>. Caitlin Kelley, “BTS Lead the Growth of Hallyu to Nearly 90 Million Fans Worldwide In 2018,” *Forbes*, January 11, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/caitlinkelley/2019/01/11/bts-lead-growth-of-hallyu-90-million-fans-2018/>.

By the early 2000s, Hallyu's stars had become household names: the star of beloved K-drama *Winter Sonata* (2002), Bae Yong-joon stole hearts, and PSY's record-breaking music video "Gangnam Style" (2012) could be heard almost anywhere. Recently, BTS was featured in a star-studded Grammy performance (2020), and Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* won Best Picture at the 92nd Academy Awards (2020). Each popular male-centered example and the fandom surrounding them contributes to a formalized male-oriented aesthetic of the Korean Wave. Such maleness becomes in turn synonymous with Ju Oak Kim's framing of the globalization of K-pop as "BTS as method," with its counter-hegemonic cultural formations and networks engendered from the peripheries in decentering Hollywood's dominance in popular culture.² Citing Kuan-hsing Chen's influential book, *Asia As Method* (2010), BTS as method follows and realizes the scholarly emphasis from inter-Asia cultural studies academic networks on positioning "Asia as method" in cultivating more unique regional subjectivities, methods, and references.³

This collection pushes aside the male centeredness of the Korean Wave and focuses on the femininities that are birthed from popular Korean cultural production.⁴ In turn, such femininities should be critically integral to methodologies in understanding the Korean Wave. Hallyu may be closely identified critically with women consumer cultures. But the lived experiences, spaces, and practices of such cultures should transcend the static treatment of women in the binaries of passive consumers manipulated by neoliberal capitalism. Here, through feminist and queer critical regionalities, Audrey Yue has provided a discursive addendum to "Asia as method" within the inter-Asia subjectivity with new practices of solidarity and intimacy.⁵ Access to media networks by the constantly burgeoning middle class has created new mobilities from otherwise highly embedded and immobile structures. Beyond the celebratory accounts of making inroads into the Western market, Hallyu's narratives should also be understood in terms of the more diffused, cosmopolitan, transcultural femininities that this project seeks to position.⁶

2. See Kim Ju Oak, "BTS as Method: A Counter-Hegemonic Culture in the Network Society," *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 6 (September 2021): 1061–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720986029>.
3. Kim, "BTS as Method," 1064.
4. For more on hegemonic masculinity in South Korea, see Moon Seungsook, "The Production and Subversion of Hegemonic Masculinity: Reconfiguring Gender Hierarchy in Contemporary South Korea," in *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*, ed. Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 79–114; Moon Seungsook, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, ed. George Steinmetz and Julia Adams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
5. Audrey Yue, "Critical Regionalities in Inter-Asia and the Queer Diaspora," *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (March 2011): 131–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.537042>.
6. See Sun Jung, "K-Pop beyond Asia: Performing Trans-Nationality, Trans-Sexuality, and Trans-Textuality," in *Asian Popular Culture in Transition*, ed. John Lent and Lorna Fitzsimmons (London:

In this project, “women” is an inclusive term extending to all those who self-define as women. Harnessing the genderqueer potentialities, we use the plural of *femininity* to communicate dynamic intersectionality; femininities allow us to deconstruct representations that have been used as a foil to masculinity and have become spaces for gender experimentation. In line with Amelia Jones and Erin Silver’s framing of queer feminist art history, rather than a singular definition, *Women We Love* presents a constellation of possibilities of what plural femininities can be.⁷ Makiko Iseri posits femininities as flexible in her analysis of popular Japanese star Kyary Pamyu Pamyu.⁸ Iseri argues that Kyary’s costumes and performances exaggerate femininity into a grotesque domain that pushes that which is sanctioned to be feminine out of the realm of heteronormative desire. Namely, these constellations and flexibilities intersect via their relationship to hegemonic gender construction in Korea, in Asia, and around the world. The chapters in this volume present fresh understandings of femininity and seek new frameworks for existing femininities circulating among Korean Wave stars and their fans.

The Absence of Analysis of Femininities and the Korean Wave

Women We Love sits at the scholarly intersection of texts about the Korean Wave, gender studies, media studies, and fandom studies. Although femininities in the Korean Wave have not been addressed thoroughly in current scholarship, we draw inspiration from texts that have approached gender and sexuality within popular media and fan studies. Kim Gooyong’s astute analysis in *From Factory Girls to K-Pop Idol Girls: Cultural Politics of Developmentalism, Patriarchy, and Neoliberalism in South Korea’s Popular Music Industry* (2019) addresses Korean cultural and socioeconomic contexts of the Korean Wave alongside a discussion of binary female gender within the music industry.⁹ *Women We Love* broadens this scope of analysis to the global market of the Korean Wave, extends the potential of femininity beyond binary gender, and addresses the multimedia scope of the phenomenon. Broadening the reach of analysis to music, dramas, and their global reception, Sun Jung’s book *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (2011) examines distinctive

Routledge, 2013), 108–31; Vincenzo Cicchelli and Sylvie Octobre, *The Sociology of Hallyu Pop Culture: Surfing the Korean Wave* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 309–18.

7. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver, eds., *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, Rethinking Art’s Histories (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2015).
8. Makiko Iseri, “Flexible Femininities? Queering *Kawaii* in Japanese Girls’ Culture,” in *Twenty-First Century Feminism: Forming and Performing Femininity*, ed. Claire Nally and Angela Smith (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
9. Kim Gooyong, *From Factory Girls to K-Pop Idol Girls: Cultural Politics of Developmentalism, Patriarchy, and Neoliberalism in South Korea’s Popular Music Industry* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).

Women We Love sits at a unique juncture that occupies the literatures addressed above—it is the multimedia of South Korean popular culture, it is a conversation about gender locally and globally, it is queer, and it is feminist. This collection allows for the ideas explored above to be repositioned to think deeply about the roles of femininity in the Korean Wave and how they function in South Korea, Asia, and globally.

The Chapters

Women We Love brings together a cohort of international thinkers to grapple with representations, impacts, and outcomes of femininities within the Korean Wave. The chapters analyze femininities active in and around the Korean entertainment industry since 2000. The cohort of contributors includes professors, independent scholars, and advanced graduate students from around the world. We are K-pop and K-drama fans, we are queer, we are international, we are academics of Asian histories, sociology, gender and sexuality, art history, and visual culture. The chapters are playful, intersectional, and accessible.

Women We Love is organized into three sections, each devoted to a theme that arose as the contributions took shape. The focus of analysis of the Korean Wave looks closely at moments on the screen or onstage and expands to a macroanalysis via global impacts outside of South Korea. Similarly, femininity is treated as a radical method as well as a passive identifier, crucially showing the multifarious possibilities of the term.

Part I: Characters We Love, looks closely at the female-identifying lead characters we see on-screen. Kate Korroch questions the binary complement of “soft masculinity” through an analysis of the “hard” female leads in relation to their female counterparts in the television dramas *First Shop of Coffee Prince* (2007) and *Secret Garden* (2010). The chapter allows for a recentering of how perceptions of femininity are constructed, shifting away from female-male relationships. Maud Lavin’s chapter follows the evolution of the lead in *First Shop of Coffee Prince* as she navigates a romantic relationship that sits at the intersection of heterosexuality and queerness. Lavin unpacks the tomboy trope through analysis of the drama, fans, and autoethnography. Together, Korroch and Lavin’s chapters show the significance of the K-drama *First Shop of Coffee Prince*; even over fifteen years after its debut, it remains unique due to its bold treatment of gender and sexuality. SooJin Lee examines the significance of the popular drama *God of the Workplace* (2013) in terms of representation of women in the postindustrial workforce. Through textual and aesthetic analyses of the drama, which she links with statistics and theories of labor and feminism, Lee deconstructs the main character Miss Kim as a persona of ambiguities and ironies that expose the

interrelated problems of gender and class in the Korean workforce structure and culture after the financial crisis of 2008.

Part II: *More than Girl Groups*, offers a plethora of deep dives into K-pop female-only groups. Girl groups are known for their exquisite performances and celebrity prowess, but their impact extends far beyond the stage or screen. Jin Lee and Crystal Abidin's chapter brings together YG Entertainment's group BLACKPINK and social media celebrity Ella Gross, a Korean-American child star who gained fame through her affiliation with BLACKPINK's members. Lee and Abidin's deep analysis of digital participant observation and the content of Gross' Instagram feed investigates the routes and implications of such cross-promotional celebrity. Douglas Gabriel continues the consideration of girl groups through his historical and aesthetic analysis of North Korean girl group Moranbong Band. Gabriel argues that despite being widely ridiculed as an antiquated other to global capitalist entertainment industries, Moranbong Band speaks to a totalitarian element that surreptitiously permeates mass spectacles of all ideological stripes, not only those of the so-called Hermit Kingdom. Jieun Lee and Hyangsoon Yi's chapter stems from a concern about the potential association of masculinity with power, based on the incorporation of masculine tropes in the name of female power. Looking to *ssen-eonni* (*ssen-unni*), or "strong sisters," Lee and Yi examine the empowerment of a new generation and its potential for changing the landscape of what it means to be female in South Korea.

Part III: *Fans and Fan-Producers*, makes space for an investigation of how fans are the catalyst for Korean Wave transculturation, both in regard to the cultural infiltration and to generations of Korean Wave fan cultures. Stephanie Choi's chapter shows how female-driven fan fiction results in homoerotic performance. Choi teases out the cultural complexities and discrepancies for both the fans and their idols as their mutual engagement influences both written fiction and onstage performances. Reminding readers about the Korean Wave narratives in the non-Western world that make up the understories of Hallyu, Liew Kai Khiun, Malinee Khumsupa, and Atchareeya Saisin discuss new K-pop "frontliners" in Southeast Asia. The authors illustrate increasingly cosmopolitan and women-centric subjects, turning their affections for K-pop into careers and activism, reflecting new forms of feminist mobilities within a more visible trans-pop public that K-pop fans in Southeast Asia have engendered. Moving from the impact in Southeast Asia, Gi Yeon Koo homes in on the Korean Wave fandom through cyberfeminism among women in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Through data collected in Tehran, Koo shows how young Iranian women lead the Korean Wave fandom in Iran and consequently form a community with women around the world. The concluding chapter to this anthology, written by Erik Paolo Capistrano and Kathlyn Ramirez, is aptly titled "Into the New World." Capistrano and Ramirez unpack the rich historical legacy of Girls' Generation (also known

as So Nyeo Si Dae and abbreviated as SNSD). As fans and scholars, the authors offer a close look at the history of the decades-old girl group, the members, and their implicit leadership within the Korean Wave. As Girls' Generation arouses a new world for their fans, we hope this text acts as a springboard for allowing the multifariousness of femininity to expand, unfold, and inspire.

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1

Is Femininity Hard?

Naming Femininities in the Age of Soft Masculinity

Kate Korroch

Introduction: Diverse Femininities

“Is Femininity Hard?” studies two Korean dramas to unpack the potentiality of hard femininity. This is accomplished through scene analysis, the application of soft masculine characteristics, and an understanding of how those tropes are both embodied and rejected within the dramas. I build a nexus of comparison between female characters in the South Korean television dramas *First Shop of Coffee Prince* (2007) and *Secret Garden* (2010) to explore the ways that diverse femininities are depicted through non-romantic homosocial relationship pairings.¹ Engaging discussions central to gender representations and the Korean Wave, in this chapter the characters portrayed as female are released from gender-binary comparisons with their male-portrayed counterparts.

Within scholarship about Korean dramas and popular culture, *soft masculinity* is often employed as a descriptor to discuss characters in South Korean television dramas, evoking a combination of attributes that speak to a gentle yet attractive physique, nostalgic good manners, and (often) neoliberal affluence.² Soft masculinity has received significant attention without considering the complementing characters through which soft masculinity is defined. These traits need to be understood as a masculinity that expands the possibilities of embodying that which is masculine, not a seismic shift in the production of masculinity in South Korea. Rather than feminizing masculinity or disrupting binary understandings of gender, soft masculinity points to a type of gender performance that

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1. The Republic of Korea (South Korea) will be referred to as Korea here on out in this chapter.
 2. Sun Jung, “Bae Yong-Joon, Soft Masculinity, and Japanese Fans: Our Past Is in Your Present Body,” in *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011).

fits within putatively stable gender formations.³ Characterizations of soft masculinity are generally thrown into sharp relief within the narrative through comparisons associated with the male lead's relationship to his female counterparts.⁴

Within binary gender constructions, the *other* to soft masculinity would be hard femininity. This chapter asks if that is indeed the case and shows the complexities of hard femininity through the difficulty, the putative stagnation, and the hybridity of femininity. To emancipate female characters and their femininity from binary gender construction, this comparison requires disorientation. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, and Others* (2007), Sara Ahmed suggests that one does not notice what they are oriented toward until that orientation is disrupted; we must experience disorientation to be able to see orientation.⁵ In that spirit, this chapter disorients the narratives of Korean television dramas to parse characters through relationships that are not prioritized within the diegesis; central narratives are propelled by binary heterosexual(ish) entanglements.⁶ This text, on the other hand, reorients juxtapositions of binary gender towards the comparison of female characters.

Using queer and feminist methodologies to analyze *Coffee Prince* and *Secret Garden*, I discuss the attributes of the female characters without focusing on their male counterparts as a complement or foil and instead use comparison of the female characters to build this analysis. This works against the commonly followed convention of defining qualities of masculinity and femininity in opposition to each other, but my hope is that it also dismantles the normative expectation of femininity as defined as the other to masculinity. I argue that complex relationships between female characters are required to create an interesting, appealing, and convincing soft-masculine character. By decentering the male characters and heterosexual relationships in the foreground of the narrative, I refocus attention on the female characters' relationships to unveil the portrayal of multiple femininities. In this way, diverse femininities can be articulated through the interconnections of a web of female relationships instead

3. Joanna Elfving-Hwang problematizes this in Elfving-Hwang, "Not So Soft After All: Kkonminam Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Popular Culture" (paper presented at the 7th KSAA Biennale Conference, November 16–18, 2011).

4. These dramas are a large component of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) phenomenon. For further reading, see Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi, eds., *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008) and Stephen Epstein and Hwang Yun Mi, eds., *The Korean Wave: A Sourcebook* (Seongnam-si, Gyeonggi-do: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2015).

5. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

6. As will be made clear in Chapter 2 of this book and as offered by Maud Lavin, *Coffee Prince* does not offer a normative heterosexual entanglement throughout the entirety of the drama, but heterosexual binaries (and a desire for participating or not participating in said binaries) are still what drive the narrative.

of using male characters as the other to define femininities. I therefore argue for a discussion of femininities that does not depend on binary sexual difference.⁷ After introducing the dramas, I employ a three-pronged analysis in my endeavor to define hard femininity through these characters. First, I discuss how these characters are presented as *hard*, meaning both difficult in terms of their personalities and their subversive disregard of idealized femininity. Second, I ask what social dynamics are addressed and possibly levelled through these characters. And third, I consider if and how these female lead roles embody or disorient soft masculinity.

Soft Masculinity and Hard Femininity

My question of hard femininity is an adaptation of Judith Butler's play on words in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Butler's book draws attention toward ways in which bodies are marked or hailed as important, but also as that which has physicality. I use *hard femininity* to take up Butler's wordplay and ask questions about how femininity might be understood as unmoving and/or difficult.⁸ My approach to hard femininity first asks why femininity is putatively stable and fixed, particularly regarding femininity's function as the *other* to masculinity. Second, it responds to the soft masculinity phenomenon specific to Hallyu. Unpacking the hardness of femininity responds to said fixity and association and builds upon and offers multiple under-considered dimensions within the female characters.

In the introduction of *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea* (1993), Laurel Kendall references Seungsook Moon's discussion of hegemonic masculinity in South Korea: "Having defended the nation from the omnipresent threat of attack by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (north Korea) [*sic*], men are considered 'true citizens,' a status few Korean women obtain."⁹ Kendall articulates that there is a desire for nonfixity, but that flexibility and acknowledgment of citizenship is often relegated to the male sex. The privilege to be flexible (read *soft*) is often extended only to those of the male gender. Contrary to that, I provide examples

7. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there were a number of texts published about gender in South Korea in English: Elaine H. Kim and Choi Chungmoo, eds., *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Laura C. Nelson, *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Laurel Kendall, ed., *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002); Moon Seungsook, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, ed. Julia Adams and George Steinmetz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

8. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011).

9. Kendall, *Under Construction*, 6.

below of flexibility in socioeconomic status through the interactions of the female characters in *Coffee Prince* and *Secret Garden*. Moreover, Moon's articulation speaks to the focus on the male gender within academic literature and mass media when parsing nondiscursive genders in Korean television dramas.

In her talk "Not So Soft After All," Joanna Elfving-Hwang problematizes the presumption that soft masculinity is a step away from traditional masculinity in South Korea.¹⁰ Elfving-Hwang argues that the *kkonminam* (flower-like beautiful men) actually reassert gender binaries in Korea's homosocial order.¹¹ She states that unlike in the West, there is rarely doubt of "manhood" in Korea.¹²

In contrast to the cosmetic construction and emphasis on outer appearance and demeanor outlined for *kkonminam*, Sun Jung provides an analysis of tender qualities that characterize soft masculinity. In *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (2011), Jung specifies various formulations of Korean masculinities that are shaped by nationalism, audience reception, and heteronormativity.

As Jung details the traits of soft masculinity in the drama *Winter Sonata*, it becomes evident that soft masculinity is articulated through the character's relationship with his female counterpart. In a 2018 interview, Jung states, "I think the phenomenon should rather be explained through the notion of hybrid or versatile masculinity—soft yet manly at the same time—which is different from effeminized."¹³ In agreement with Elfving-Hwang, Jung suggests that the characteristics of soft masculinity are not new but rather repackaged.

Hard femininity takes from these the reliance on surrounding characters to understand the gender of another character as well as the potential of genderedness to be "hybrid or versatile." Femininity is traditionally not allowed that flexibility.¹⁴

10. Elfving-Hwang, "Not So Soft After All," 14.

11. *Kkonminam* (꽃미남) is a combination of the word for "flower" (꽃) and "beautiful man" (미남) in Hangeul. The word likely came into use in conjunction with the proliferation of pretty boys in girls' comics. See Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 58. The term is arguably part of a transcultural flow of masculinities such as the metrosexual, *bishonen* (beautiful young men) in Japan, and *aimel naren* (love beauty men) in China and Taiwan. See Elfving-Hwang, "Not So Soft After All," 2.

12. Elfving-Hwang, "Not So Soft After All," 15.

13. "'Flowerboys' and the Appeal of 'Soft Masculinity,'" BBC News, September 5, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42499809>.

14. Using J. Jack Halberstam's notion of the transgender look, I discuss gender affirmation's reliance on surrounding characters in a queer South Korean context in my chapter "The Isolated Queer Body: Harisu's Dodo Cosmetics Advertisement" in *Queer Asia*. Kate Korroch, "The Isolated Queer Body: Harisu's Dodo Cosmetics Advertisement," in *Queer Asia: Decolonising and Reimagining Sexuality and Gender*, ed. J. Daniel Luther and Jennifer Ung Loh (London: Zed Books, 2019), 165–83.

The Dramas and Their Leading Characters

The writers of *Coffee Prince* and *Secret Garden* employ similar and familiar formulas from the romance genre to develop the dramas' characters and narratives.¹⁵ The female lead is an unexpected, headstrong person from a disadvantaged background. She is paired with an excessively privileged, overtly confident, tall, and attractive heir who falls for her. And, maintaining romantic tropes, two supporting leads that initially complicate the relationships between the main leads end up falling in love. Notably, within the context of exploring soft masculinity, both Sun Jung and Joanna Elfving-Hwang characterize the initial portrayal of the female characters in the dramas as "ordinary."¹⁶ I bring these dramas together for two reasons: (1) their relevance within the analysis of soft masculinity provides an entry to analyzing them through the lens of hard femininity, and (2) the superficial and performative expansion of gender that occurs within the dramas is created for consumption through mass media platforms, which indicates the assumption that these expansions of gender performance are widely acceptable to potential audiences. The following pages look closely at specific scenes from *Coffee Prince* and *Secret Garden* to build a nonbinary framework of femininity.

First Shop of Coffee Prince is a seventeen-episode drama based on a book of the same name written by Lee Sun-mi. Initially aired on Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation in 2007, the drama is still available on streaming sites. The television script was written by Lee Jung-ah and Jang Hyun-joo and directed by Lee Yoon-jung.

At the start of the drama, the viewer meets the female lead, Go Eun-chan (Yoon Eun-hye). She lost her father in middle school and now works multiple jobs to support her sister (who dreams of becoming a singer) and her mother (who has a problematic penchant for shoes). Her male lead counterpart, Choe Han-gyeol (Gong Yoo), is a food conglomerate heir who harbors a desire to design toys but is forced to run a shabby coffee shop as punishment for floundering and not focusing on the family. Through a series of uncanny events, Eun-chan is hired to work at the coffee shop run by "princes" and dresses in an unassuming drag that does not greatly differ from her regular attire (although in one scene she tapes down her breasts as she prepares for work). As the episodes

15. Joanna Elfving-Hwang describes the plot to *Boys Over Flowers* (2009) as such: "The rich main character . . . wins the affection of the less wealthy (yet impossibly cute) girl . . . who initially impresses the male lead with her wit rather than looks. However, and in the tune of the Ugly Duckling, she of course turns out to be unexpectedly beautiful once the male lead's team of stylists have metamorphosed her into nothing short of a fashion icon." Elfving-Hwang, "Not So Soft After All," 10.

16. Sun Jung, "Chogukjeok Pan-East Asian Soft Masculinity: Reading Boys over Flowers, Coffee Prince and Shinhwa Fan Fiction," in *Complicated Currents: Media Flows, Soft Power and East Asia*, ed. Daniel Black, Stephen Epstein, and Alison Tokita (Monash University ePress, 2010).

3

Miss Kim

God of the Workplace

SooJin Lee

This chapter examines the significance of the South Korean television series *God of the Workplace* (직장의 신, aired on KBS2 from April 1 to May 21, 2013, for sixteen episodes) in terms of its representation of women in the postindustrial workforce. Through textual and aesthetic analyses of the drama, and by linking them with statistics and theories of labor and feminism, I will demonstrate the drama's importance as a popular culture construct that critically raised issues with the interrelated problems of gender, class, and workplace power hierarchy in contemporary Korea. My focus here is on deconstructing the main character, Miss Kim (*Miseukim*), and exploring how the show exposes the absurdities of gender and class problems in the Korean workforce structure and culture after the financial crisis of 2008. I will especially highlight how the character performs what I call "cyborg-androgyny." Miss Kim is a thirtysomething single woman who has decided to live an unstable "temp worker" life in the postindustrial workforce, where everyone wants a job that can guarantee social and financial security. During the prolonged economic recession in the 2010s, a fantasy character that is impossible to find in reality, Miss Kim reflected the desires of workforce participants, particularly young female office workers in their twenties and thirties, and exposed the problems of the contemporary Korean workplace that cause such desires.

It should first be noted that *God of the Workplace* is a remake of the Japanese television series *The Pride of the Temp* (ハケンの品格, aired on NTV from January 10 to March 14, 2007, for ten episodes), produced from the original story written by Fujiwara Masahiko. Although heavily based on the Japanese original, *God of the Workplace* is remarkably different in many details that apparently were necessary and considered modifications to reflect and satirize the realities of Korea's workplace, so these differences will be noted and examined in this

analysis. It also should be noted that the literal translation of the Korean remake's title is "God of the Workplace," although a gendered translation, *Queen of the Office*, has been more widely used. In respect to the makers' intended twist for the title, I use the literal translation in this chapter. The fact that they decided to call the female protagonist *shin* ("god") instead of *yeoshin* ("goddess"), especially when the word *yeoshin* was in vogue at the time (overused in the popular media to refer to female celebrities with outstanding appearances and talents), signifies their conscious play on gender issues.

Temp Worker Superhero

Every episode of *God of the Workplace* opens with the below voiceover, which is narrated in the same fashion as a superhero movie.

Sixteen years after the IMF [crisis in 1997], the Republic of Korea is now a country of 8 million temporary workers. Koreans' wish is no longer reunification [of the two Koreas], but permanent employment. While everyone wants a permanent job, there is a person who has chosen to live the life of contract employment. Namely, the nation's very first voluntary temp, Miss Kim. There is no payless work or overtime work in her dictionary. She excludes cumbersome personal relationships, and after completing a three-month contract, travels out of country. It is unknown why she has named herself Miss Kim and why she has entered the world of contract employment.¹

While South Korea achieved rapid industrial and economic growth since the 1960s, during a period of time called the Miracle on the Han River, the era of spectacular progress and prosperity came to an end with the 1997 economic crisis. At the end of 1997, faced with a currency crisis, South Korea accepted a bailout package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on terms that stipulated labor market reforms and opening the economy to foreign investment and ownership, among other requirements. Downsizing became a major social issue, and that's why this economic crisis is called the "IMF Crisis" in Korea. The government officials "encouraged private firms to implement bold restructuring programs, including massive layoffs," resulting in an increase in the unemployment rate from 2.1 percent in October 1997 to almost 9 percent in early 1999.² Before then, South Korean jobs typically meant "lifelong arrangements"

1. The translation from Korean to English is by this author.

2. Kim Dong-One, Bae Johngseok, and Lee Changwon, "Globalization and Labor Rights: The Case of Korea," *Asia Pacific Business Review* 6, no. 3-4 (2010): 133-53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602380012331288502>. These scholars in 2010 found that since the 1997 Asian economic crisis, the unemployment rate in Korea was more unstable and much higher than that in Japan. They write that "the lifetime employment principle has been more frequently violated in Korea than in Japan. Despite the recent economic difficulties, Japanese employers have been more conservative than Korean counterparts in conducting massive layoffs by utilizing various substitutes."

that could not be terminated by employers.³ But following the IMF Crisis, the number of permanent workers significantly decreased as firms sought to rely more on part-time or temporary workers, for whom the employers did not need to pay social insurance.

In *God of the Workplace*, the protagonist, Miss Kim, is indeed portrayed as a superhero in the awfully competitive workforce. She is one of the most in-demand workers in the corporate job market for very ironic reasons: she does not have degrees from prestigious schools, but holds over a hundred certificates and licenses in all sorts of skills, many of which are manual labor skills such as truck driving, aviation maintenance, skydiving, real estate, maternity nursing, hairdressing, and cooking. Unlike most Koreans, who regard permanent and full-time jobs as more secure and desirable than temporary or contract-based jobs, Miss Kim pursues only contract-based temp jobs, taking mostly low-ranking and seemingly trivial but needful and essential roles.

The story of *God of the Workplace* begins as Miss Kim returns to Korea from her vacation in Spain to begin a new contract as an office worker in a food corporation's marketing support team—the main setting of the show. She sits at the end desk to do mostly manual services, such as typing, photocopying, and serving coffee—generally pink-collar tasks expected of so-called “office ladies.” However, no matter how small or insignificant Miss Kim's tasks may be, the first episode makes it clear that her efficiency is well known and she is in high demand by employers across Korea. They compete to hire her as a permanent full-timer, but she has her own strict rule that she works for three months at a time without ever renewing a contract. In declining an offer for a permanent position, Miss Kim states that she does not want to become “a slave bound to a company” (episode six).

The protagonist character is thus set up as the “super-gap temp” a catchphrase the production team created and used to market the show. Conventionally, in a legal contract in Korea, the word *gap* (甲) is used to introduce the first party, and the word *eul* (乙) to introduce the second party. But in the early 2000s, the phrase “gap-eul relationship” began to be used widely in journalism to refer to and critique the unbalanced relationships that often occur between employers (as *gap*) and employees (as *eul*) in the already hierarchical society of Korea.⁴ And *gap* and *eul* quickly became commonplace words used to refer to, respectively, those with and those without (relative) power in any kind of relationship or situation. A related neologism in Korea is *gapjil* (made by combining *gap* and *jil*, a

3. Steven Borowiec, “IMF's Bitter Medicine Brought Growth, But Also Inequality—Analysis,” *Eurasia Review*, February 25, 2018, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/25022018-imfs-bitter-medicine-brought-growth-but-also-inequality-analysis>.

4. The occurrences of the phrase “gap-eul relationship” abruptly increase in number on Korea's popular portal site, Naver, in 2003.

suffix referring negatively to certain actions), which describes abusive conduct or arrogant attitudes of people in positions of power over others.⁵ The emergence of *gap* and *eul* in twenty-first-century Korean language and culture reflects an increasingly widespread belief that society is unbalanced and unfair in terms of privilege. In society's common conceptions, temp employees belong in the lowest stratum in a corporate workplace, and they are considered more *eul* than permanent employees.

Such a class distinction between temp and permanent employees is frequently addressed in *God of the Workplace*. In particular, in episode eight's wedding scene, the bride's father refuses to walk down the aisle after finding out the groom is a temp (and the situation is saved by Miss Kim, who walks the bride down the aisle in place of the father). In the fictional world of *God of the Workplace*, the protagonist is a temp but also a *gap*. The character and slogan "super-*gap* temp" is itself a pungent contradiction that immediately speaks to the audience's awareness of the nexus of societal problems related to work, income, status, values of work, and class within the workplace.

The main storyline of *God of the Workplace* revolves around the mystery of why Miss Kim insists on being a contract worker when she could have a permanent position in any company, and everyone else wants a permanent job. Towards the end of the series, it is revealed that she used to be a permanent employee of a bank and experienced the bank's bankruptcy process as part of the global financial crisis of 2007–2008. Having learned that the corporate world is unreliable and that permanent jobs are just as unstable as temp jobs in the increasingly neoliberal workplace, she decided to never again devote her life to work and established herself as a freelance temp worker capable of all odd jobs. Believing in the persistence of such precarity, she decided to change and reinvent herself. The "super-*gap* temp" character is thus built upon a deeply pessimistic view of work and the neoliberal corporate system. For Miss Kim, work is no longer a means of feeling accomplished or achieving social status. When she says, "I work for nobody, I work for pay and lunchtime," she reveals that she doesn't enjoy her work at all (episode two). She works to make a living and that's all.

The pessimism in Miss Kim's character formation is grounded in and reflects the socioeconomic realities of Korea. Throughout the series, the two financial crises that affected contemporary South Korea—the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the global financial crisis of 2007–2008—are constantly referenced; the former crisis in each episode's opening line (quoted above) and the latter as part

5. *Gapjil* gained international attention with the "nut rage incident" in 2014 when a Korean Air heiress, dissatisfied with the way she was served nuts on the plane before takeoff, ordered the aircraft to return to the gate. For example, see BBC News, "S Korea Employers Could Face Jail under Harassment Law," July 16, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-49000046>.

of the protagonist's traumatic experience that led her to reinvent herself. *God of the Workplace's* opening sequence states that back in 2013, when the show was airing, the number of nonregular workers in Korea was 8.6 million, which is 15 percent of the population.⁶

In her early or mid-thirties in 2013, the Miss Kim character represents the so-called “880,000-won generation” most severely affected by the changed employment market and the changing socioeconomic situation in Korea. Even before the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 began to be felt in Korea, in their much-discussed co-authored book of 2007, economist Wu Seok-hun and activist Park Gwon-il famously coined the term “880,000-won generation,” referring to the country's first generation of unemployed workers among the highly educated populace;⁷ 880,000 won was the estimated average monthly salary that a twentysomething nonpermanent worker made at the time. As the book pointed out, compared to their parents' generation, the current twentysomethings on average had higher education and higher hopes for higher social stability, but they had less chance of getting stable lifelong jobs and made lower income. Commenting on the issue, anthropologist JoHan Hyejeong asserted that the 880,000-won generation is an “anxiety generation” that witnessed the IMF crisis at an early age and grew up sensing a bleak future ahead.⁸ In the age of despair, Miss Kim is portrayed as a hero—not because she fights against injustice, but because she has remade herself into a new model worker fit for the neoliberal employment market. Yet she is not played by the system; she uses it to make a living because she needs to, because she has to, for her own survival.

Redefining What It Means to Work Like a Machine

Regarding the protagonist's tasks and position in the workplace, there is a remarkable difference between the Japanese original and the Korean remake. In the Japanese *The Pride of the Temp*, the protagonist, Oomae Haruko, is an office worker and does not do manual labor outside of the office. But Miss Kim in the Korean remake is often portrayed doing various kinds of physical and miscellaneous labor—for example, cleaning the building, delivering heavy equipment,

6. This is a much larger demographic than what the original Japanese series *Pride of the Temp* identifies as the number of nonregular workers in Japan in 2007: 3 million, which was 2.5 percent of the population.

7. Wu Seok-hun and Park Gwon-il, *88manwon Sedae: Jeolmang-ui Sidae-e Sseu-neun Himang-ui Gyeonjehak* [888,000-won generation: Writing the economics of hope in the age of despair]. Seoul: Rediang, 2007.

8. JoHan Hyejeong, “IMF Mokgyeokhan Bulhaenghan Cheongnyeon-deul ‘88manwon Sedae’ Wuriga Kkyeojanja” [Let us embrace the “880,000-won generation,” the unfortunate youth who witnessed the IMF], *The Kyunghyang Shinmun*, August 28, 2007, https://m.khan.co.kr/view.html?art_id=200708281818411#c2b.

Females, Frontliners, Fringes

K-Pop's Performers and Protesters from Southeast Asia

Liew Kai Khiun, Malinee Khumsupa, and Atchareeya Saisin

Introduction: Southeast Asia, K-Pop's Understory

Debuted in 2016 under the YG Entertainment label, the all-women K-pop group BLACKPINK rapidly shot to global stardom, rivaling their male counterparts BTS on the world stage. Among the group's four members is Lalisa Manoban (Lisa) from Thailand. Non-Korean members of K-pop groups have become common as the industry seeks to broaden their talent pool. In one segment of her self-titled solo music video, released on September 10, 2021, Manoban dons a sabai-style shirt and sarong wrap skirt that pay homage to Thai artistry and fabrics. For the native of the Thai province of Buri Ram Buriram, the efforts to incorporate Thai heritage with contemporary fashion designs and dance choreography stemmed from the desire to conjure the "Thai-style melody line within the song to the music video sets, styling album design and choreography."¹ With more than 70 million views on YouTube within 24 hours of its release, the song "Lalisa" set a new record for the most viewed solo artist on the platform in a day. The video has more than 400 million views at the time of writing this chapter; through K-pop, Lisa has projected Thai cultural aesthetics and heritage onto the world stage.²

Using the analogy of a forest, if the American market represents the canopy of K-pop's globalization, Southeast Asia would be its often-neglected understory. As much as it places the region in the global spotlight, the music video is perhaps

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1. Janelle Okwodu, "With 'Lalisa,' Blackpink's Brightest Star Steps into the Spotlight," *Vogue*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.vogue.com/article/lisa-blackpink-lalisa-pop-breakthrough>.
 2. Angela Patricia Suacillo, "BLACKPINK's Lisa Breaks Taylor Swift's YouTube Record with 'Lalisa,'" *NME*, September 14, 2021, https://www.nme.com/en_asia/news/music/blackpink-lisa-lalisa-break-youtube-record-most-viewed-24-hours-taylor-swift-3045185.

the tip of the iceberg with how it rides on the Korean Wave (Hallyu), where entertainment careers, community networks, and social activism have evolved from the engagement with K-pop. Predominately female-fronted and youth-oriented, these activities have created new publics and frontliners.

From artists to fandom and political activism, this chapter surveys the ongoing trends in the inter-Asia intersectionality of K-pop in Southeast Asia. K-pop performers and social and political activism leveraged from the social networks of K-pop fandom in the public and political spheres. The occupation of multiple positionalities by mainly female subjects reflects upon feminist mobilities, defined by Lilian Chee as the flexibilities in moving between the center and margins and between the domestic and public discourses.³ Such mobilities of contemporary K-pop fandom consciously carve out their public presences simultaneously within the K-pop industry and the sphere of national politics.

Case studies will include those in the following categories of *performers*, *promoters*, and *protesters*. The first category, performers, covers performers from Southeast Asia in both the mainstream K-pop industry and its local adaptations, while the discussion of the second category of promoters comes in the case study of the fan-organized public commemorations of the death of the celebrity Jonghyun from the K-pop group SHINee. The front line is given a new meaning in the case of Thailand, and more recently Myanmar, where K-pop fandom is brought to the forefront of national politics in the recent youth- and women-led pro-democracy protests in the third category of protesters. This regional survey allows for more macro discursive trends to be identified for Southeast Asia, not just as a peripheral consumer market for Hallyu but as dynamic trans-pop cultural frontliners.

ASEAN Fueling Hallyu: Mobilities, Technologies, Demography

Southeast Asia has been serving as a crucial springboard for the transnationalization of East Asia's modern entertainment culture and the formations of more undercurrent Pan-Asian cultural commonalities. With Abrahamic, Indic, and Confucian cosmologies embedded in diverse political models of governmentalities compressed within the monsoon zone, the region is both a vehicle and a reflection of globalization. Beginning in the early twentieth century, modern transnational popular culture interactions between East and Southeast Asia have

3. Lilian Chee, "The Domestic Residue: Feminist Mobility and Space in Simryn Gill's Art," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 19, no. 6 (2012): 750-70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2012.674924>.

been facilitated by Indian and Chinese diasporas, linking new colonial commercial and cultural networks with developments in media technologies.⁴

Although globalization's momentum still rests in the northern hemisphere in terms of market and cultural dominance, Southeast Asia's role in globalizing Hallyu is critical as well. Covering close to one-third of genres watched on streaming sites, Korean television dramas are integral to households across the region, inspiring sustained tourism waves to South Korea for close to two decades.⁵ National chapters of K-pop fandom and related communities spread across Southeast Asia, from recently reopened Myanmar to the Philippines. As they started being visibly present in Twitter estimates,⁶ social media activities from Southeast Asia region became the more significant factor in the 2010s in terms of augmenting K-pop's global prominence. In terms of consumption, a K-pop fan in Southeast Asia spends an estimated US\$1,000 on fan merchandise,⁷ a significant sum for the developing Global South.

The significant digital presence of the region in the K-pop cyberspace is probably buttressed by the rapid adoption of mobile internet by a burgeoning youth population for the otherwise developing economies of Southeast Asia to achieve radical momentum.⁸ A slightly higher percentage of women—51

4. Chan Kwok-bun and Yung Sai-shing, "Chinese Entertainment, Ethnicity, and Pleasure," *Visual Anthropology* 18 no. 2-3 (2005): 103-42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08949460590914813>; Chua Beng Huat, "Pop Culture China," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 22, no. 2 (2001): 113-21; Liew Kai Khiun, *Transnational Memory and Popular Culture in East and Southeast Asia* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Nissim Otmazgin and Eyal Ben-Ari, eds., *Popular Culture Co-productions and Collaborations in East and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013); Rachmah Ida, "Consuming Taiwanese Boys Culture: Watching Meteor Garden with Urban Kampung Women in Indonesia," in *Popular Culture in Indonesia: Fluid Identities in Post-Authoritarian Politics*, ed. Ariel Heryanto (London: Routledge, 2008), 93-110.
5. Kim Hyelin and Kim Hwaya, "SE Asian Interest in Visiting Korea Rises for Five Straight Years," *Korea.net*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=169385>; Nadirah H. Rodzi, Tan Hui Yee, and Raul Dancel, "Streaming Battle: Who's Watching What in South-east Asia," *Straits Times*, September 20, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/whos-watching-what-in-south-east-asia-0>.
6. Adobo Magazine, "Digital: Kpop Continues to Rise on Twitter with 6.1 Billion Tweets Globally in 2019, Philippines Makes Top 5 Tweeting Countries," January 14, 2020, <https://www.adobomagazine.com/digital-news/digital-kpop-continues-to-rise-on-twitter-with-6-1-billion-tweets-globally-in-2019-philippines-makes-top-5-tweeting-countries/>; Tamar Herman, "10 Years On, Twitter Is Shaping the Spread of K-Pop," *Forbes*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tamarherman/2020/09/21/10-years-on-twitter-is-shaping-the-spread-of-k-pop/?sh=2da00d5399a7>.
6. Jung Joo-ri and Lee Jihae, "Map Showing K-Pop's Popularity by Global Region Released," *Korea.net*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=174587>.
7. Franchesca Judine Basbas, "New Research Says Southeast Asian K-Pop Fans Spend over \$1,400 for Their Favourite Groups," *Bandwagon Asia*, November 26, 2020, <https://www.bandwagon.asia/articles/new-research-says-k-pop-bts-army-twice-blackpink-blinks-fans-spend-over-us-1400-for-their-favourite-groups-iprice-november-2020>.
8. For a region where four-fifths of the populace had no internet connectivity in 2010, more affordable smartphones have added around 100 million users a year—the current number stands at 350

Notes on the Contributors

Crystal Abidin is a professor of internet studies, principal research fellow, and ARC DECRA Fellow at Curtin University. She is the founder of the TikTok Cultures Research Network. She is a digital anthropologist and ethnographer of vernacular internet cultures, and researches internet celebrity, influencer cultures, and social media pop cultures. She has published five books and more than sixty articles and chapters on various aspects of internet cultures. For her public scholarship and continual engagements with industry, Crystal Abidin was listed on the ABC Top 5: Humanities (2020), *Forbes* 30 Under 30 Asia (2018), and *Pacific Standard* 30 Top Thinkers Under 30 (2016).

Erik Paolo Capistrano is the Antenor S. Virata Professor of Business Administration in the Cesar E. A. Virata School of Business, University of the Philippines. He is also a principal investigator for the University of the Philippines Korea Research Center. He earned his PhD in international management from National Cheng Kung University. His teaching, research, and industry experience are in the areas of operations management, management of information technology, management of innovation, and the Korean Wave (Hallyu). He is also a moderator for Soshified, the largest international fan forum site for the K-pop girl group Girls' Generation, and an administrator for its Philippine chapter.

Stephanie Jiyun Choi is a postdoctoral associate in Korean studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Her research focuses on cultural globalization, gender and labor politics, and the affective economy of Korean popular culture. She is currently working on her first book project that interrogates how global K-pop fans proclaim cultural diversity, postcolonial feminism, and anti-racism through digital surveillance, media tribalism, and gendered fetishization of K-pop idol bodies.

Douglas Gabriel is a lecturer in the College of Liberal Studies at Seoul National University. Previously he was a 2021–2022 Getty/ACLS postdoctoral fellow in

the history of art and held postdoctoral positions at Harvard University and the George Washington University. His research has appeared in *Art History*, *Oxford Art Journal*, *Art Journal*, *Situations: Cultural Studies in the Asian Context*, and the *Journal of Korean Studies*.

Malinee Khumsupa is an assistant professor in the School of Politics and Government, the Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration at Chiang Mai University in Thailand. She is a political scientist (PhD) and the winner of the Amarin Publishing Prize as the author of *The Underneath Meaning of Democracy Monument of Thailand* (2006). Her research interests include postcolonialism, cultural studies, media studies, and K-pop fan and youth politics. Her coauthored articles include “Counter-Memory: Replaying Political Violence in Thai Digital Cinema” in *Kyoto Review* (2016), “Notes on Camp Films in Authoritarian Thailand” in *South East Asia Research* (2019), and “Film Is Dangerous: Ten Years of Censorship in Thailand’s Cinema, 2010–2020” in *South East Asia Research* (2022).

Gi Yeon Koo is a HK research professor at the Seoul National University Asia Center. She was a visiting senior research fellow of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore. Her current interest focuses on ethos, emotion, globalization, media and social movements in Iran, the younger generation’s popular culture, and Iranian women. Among her publications, she has contributed book chapters to *Participation Culture in the Gulf: Networks, Politics and Identity* (2018) and *Media in the Middle East: Activism, Politics, and Culture* (2017). She holds a bachelor’s degree in Iranian studies from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and master’s degrees and a PhD in cultural anthropology from Seoul National University.

Kate Korroch is a coeditor of *Visual Studies* and PhD candidate in visual studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research interests focus on gender, sexuality, and the body in visual culture. Korroch was the founding managing editor of *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal*. In 2022 Korroch curated *What Is an image?*, a multi-media digital exhibition for the International Visual Sociology Association’s annual conference. Korroch’s publications include “Cover Guys: Trans Male Portraits from *Original Plumbing*” in *Art Journal* (2021) and “The Isolated Queer Body: Harisu’s Dodo Cosmetics Advertisement” in *Queer Asia: Decolonising and Reimagining Sexuality and Gender* (2019).

Maud Lavin has published recently in *JAKE*, *Roi Faineant*, *Heimat Review*, *Afterimage*, and *Red Ogre Review*, and earlier in the *Nation*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Artforum*, and elsewhere. One of her books, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, on the Berlin Dada artist Hannah Höch, was named a New York Times Notable Book.

Another, *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, co-edited with Ling Yang and Jing Jamie Zhao, was nominated for a Lambda. She is a Guggenheim Fellow and lives in Chicago.

Jieun Lee is an assistant professor in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department at Wake Forest University. She holds a PhD in theater and performance studies as well as a graduate certificate in women's studies from the University of Georgia. Lee is currently working on her book project on Korean transnational adoption and adoptees represented in theater and performance in South Korea, the United States, and Europe. She also serves as a volunteer translator for the South Korean feminist journal *ILDA*.

Jin Lee studies media intimacies in social media cultures, particularly focusing on media practices and visibility of social minorities across the "old" and "new" media. Her recent work appears in peer-reviewed journals, including *Communication, Culture and Critique*, *Convergence*, *Media International Australia*, and *Social Media and Society*. She is a postdoctoral research fellow in internet studies at Curtin University, Australia.

Soojin Lee is an art historian and writer, teaching as an assistant professor at Hongik University in South Korea. With a PhD in art history, she previously taught at the University of Chicago, the University of Illinois, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her recent articles include "Public Appearance as Art as Protest as Event: Yoko Ono's Events with John Lennon" (2020), "Yours: Performing (in) Nikki S. Lee's 'Fan Club' with Nikki S. Lee" (2019), and "Emoji at MoMA: Considering the 'Original Emoji' as Art" (2018). Her curatorial contributions include the 2018 Gwangju Biennale and Lee Bul's solo exhibition *Utopia Saved* at Manege, St. Petersburg (2020).

Liew Kai Khiun has been conducting research and teaching on topics relating to the Korean Wave in Asia since the first publication in 2005 on the Korean Wave in Singapore, part of his broader scholarly trajectories on transnational popular culture in Asia. His subsequent publications are related not only to individual localities of Korean pop influences like Hong Kong, China, and Thailand, but also to television dramas and K-pop dance cultures. Kai Khiun is currently an assistant professor at the Hong Kong Metropolitan University.

Kathlyn Ramirez is a filmmaker, photographer, and editor with a bachelor's degree in film from the University of the Philippines Diliman. She has extensive industry experience as a content producer for ShowBT Philippines, a Philippine-based Korean entertainment company that handles the P-pop boy group SB19 and KAIA, and a celebrity social media manager at ABS-CBN, one of the largest

Philippine multimedia companies. She also volunteers as an event photographer for KStreetManila, a Manila-based site focusing on Korean pop culture, and an administrator for the Philippine chapter of Soshified, the largest international forum site for Girls' Generation.

Atchareeya Saisin holds a BA in journalism and mass communication (broadcasting) from Thammasat University and an MA in regional (Southeast Asian) studies from Chiang Mai University. Currently, she is teaching in the Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration of the School of International Affairs, Chiang Mai University. She is interested in media and mass audience culture, an interest derived from her background as a journalist. She also has experience in conducting research on media, including the roles of exile media and the democratic movement in Myanmar and Thai drama series consumption in East and Southeast Asian countries.

Hyangsoon Yi is a professor of comparative literature at the University of Georgia. Her research interests include Korean literature and film, Buddhist aesthetics, and Buddhist nuns. Her book *Piguni wa Han'guk Munhak* [Buddhist nuns and Korean literature] was selected as one of the "Outstanding Scholarly Books of the Year" (2009) by the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Korea. She coedited special issues of *Journal of Global Initiatives* (2010), *International Journal of Korean Studies* (2019), and *Korea Journal* (2020). In addition to two forthcoming books, she is currently working on a book manuscript on Korean Buddhist films.

Index

- 2NE1, 125–28, 160
CL, 125–28
Sandara Park, 160–61
2PM, 160, 191
- AB6IX, 137, 150
Allkpop (allkpop.com), 39, 78, 84–85, 87–88
alpeseu (RPS, “real person slash”), 137–40, 143–49, 151–53. See also *bigepeo*; fanfic
America (American), 8, 34, 36–37, 39–41, 44–47, 51–52, 71–72, 74–75, 80, 83–84, 100, 111, 122, 124, 129, 148, 156, 160, 178, 183, 208–9, 210, 212
North America, 6, 39, 189, 222
South America, 185
United States (US), 34–36, 38–42, 44–46, 49–52, 71, 74, 80, 158, 168–69, 187–89, 205, 208, 231
androgyny (androgynous), 4, 42–45, 50–52, 123
cyborg-androgyny, 54, 63–64
Arirang TV, 38–39
Asia (Asian), 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 41, 57, 158, 163, 190, 208, 217–18
East Asia, 4, 6, 27, 39, 41, 45, 157, 183, 190, 208, 230
inter-Asia, 2, 157, 159
pan-Asia, 157
Southeast Asia, 8, 39, 75, 156–61, 164, 170–71, 183, 232
trans-Asia, 40
- Bae, Yong-joon (BYJ, Yonsama), 2, 18, 26–28. See also *Winter Sonata bigepeo* (“business gay performance”), 137–40, 148–53. See also *alpeseu*; fanfic
Billboard, 116, 201, 209, 215
bisexual (bisexuality), 45, 140, 145–46, 153, 216. See also *sexuality*
BoA, 117, 207
Bong, Joon-ho, 2, 171
BLACKPINK, 8, 77–79, 81, 84–89, 116–17, 124, 156, 160, 163–64, 169 table 8.1, 208–9, 219
Boys Love (BL), 4, 44, 139, 145
Boys Over Flowers, 26, 38, 191
BTS (Bangtan Boys), 2, 156, 169 table 8.1, 171, 192 fig. 9.3, 193 table 9.4, 194, 195 fig. 9.5, 208–9, 219
- capitalism, 2, 8, 28, 49, 107, 128. See also neoliberal; postindustrial
celebrity, 8, 55, 72–75, 78–79, 81–82, 85, 89, 105–6, 143, 151–12, 157, 165, 170, 191–92, 193 table 9.4, 193 table 9.5, 213, 219–21, 223
China (Chinese), 4, 37, 61, 76, 96–97, 99, 103–4, 106, 108, 122, 158, 160–62, 212
class (socioeconomic status), 2, 3, 5, 8, 17–18, 22–26, 28–29, 36, 55–58, 63, 65–66, 74, 101–2, 122, 144–45, 181, 216, 218, 223

- Coffee Prince (First Shop of Coffee Prince)*, 7, 15–31, 34–52
- Confucian (Confucianism), 26, 45, 59, 74, 152, 157, 185
- cosmopolitan, 2, 8, 23, 41–42, 45, 51–52, 71, 76, 81, 159–60, 162, 164, 171, 209, 214
- Dae Jang Geum (Jewel in the Palace)*, 183, 184 table 9.1, 185
- diaspora, 39, 71, 158, 188–89
- erotic (eroticism), 34–38, 41–50, 52, 121, 123. *See also* homoerotic
- ethnicity (ethnic), 41, 75, 84, 161–63. *See also* race
- Europe, 6, 39, 188–89, 208, 210
- EXO, 146, 169 table 8.1, 192 fig. 9.2, 193 table 9.4, 194, 210
- Facebook, 178, 190. *See also* social media
- fan club (fan community), 8, 72, 77–79, 97, 107, 111, 139, 141–44, 157–59, 165–71, 177–97, 204, 217
- fandom, 2–4, 8, 74, 77–78, 86, 139–40, 143–49, 157–59, 165–71, 177–82, 187–97
- fanfic (fan fiction), 8, 139–53
- femininity (feminine; femininities), 1–9, 15–19, 21–23, 25–32, 34–36, 38, 42–44, 46, 48–52, 62–64, 82, 88, 117–21, 123–24, 145, 147, 159, 163, 167–69, 212, 217, 223
- hard femininity, 7, 15–18, 21, 30–32
- feminism (feminist), 2–3, 6–8, 16, 42, 54, 63–64, 118–19, 123, 127, 129–31, 139, 150, 157, 170–71, 176
- cyberfeminism, 8, 176, 179, 181
- #metoo, 130, 220
- postfeminist, 6, 63, 179
- gender (gendering; gendered), 1 3–8, 15–23, 25–27, 29–32, 35–36, 40–47, 49, 52, 54–55, 61–66, 88, 90, 118–20, 123, 128, 130, 138–41, 143, 145–47, 149, 152–53, 159, 162, 164, 178–79, 181–83, 191 table 9.3, 194, 213, 216–18, 223
- gender binary, 3, 7, 15–19, 22, 31, 44
- gender equality / hierarchy, 5, 42, 54, 61, 66, 118, 123, 130, 138–39, 153, 213
- gender performance / performativity, 15, 19, 22–23, 26, 31, 63–65, 153
- transgender, 138
- Girls' Generation (SNSD), 8–9, 105, 169 table 8.1, 201–24
- Girls Love (GL), 139
- God of the Workplace (Queen of the Office)*, 7, 54–66
- Miss Kim, 7, 54–66
- Gross, Ella, 8, 71–72, 76–90
- Hallyu*, 1, 2, 8, 17, 26, 39, 117, 122, 125, 130–31, 146, 157–60, 163, 171. *See also* Korean Wave
- heteronormative (heteronormativity), 3, 18, 31, 37, 46, 138, 144, 151, 153
- heterosexual (heterosexuality), 7, 16, 30, 34–37, 40, 42, 44–52, 140–41, 145–47, 150–51, 153. *See also* sexuality
- Hollywood, 2, 35, 41, 49, 75, 100, 183. *See also* America; West
- homoerotic, 8, 138–39, 149–53. *See also* erotic
- homosexual (homosexuality), 35–36, 46, 48–49, 125, 140–42, 150–53. *See also* sexuality
- gay, 30, 137–42, 144, 146–53
- lesbian, 30, 37, 49–50, 121, 137–38, 141–42, 153
- homosocial, 15, 18, 23, 149
- Hulu (hulu.com), 39–40, 45
- Instagram, 8, 71–72, 80–86, 88–89, 176, 178, 188 fig. 9.1, 190–94, 196, 213. *See also* social media
- Iran (Islamic Republic of Iran), 8, 176–97
- GEM TV, 187, 188 fig. 9.1

- Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), 183, 184 table 9.1
- Japan (Japanese), 3, 35, 44, 54, 58, 60–61, 76, 96–97, 107–12, 122, 123, 139–40, 190, 207, 212–14
- J-pop, 122, 214
- Kyari Pamyu Pamyu, 3
- manga*, 35, 44, 139
- The Pride of the Temp*, 54, 58, 60
- Jessi, 117
- JYP Entertainment, 73–74, 85, 160–61.
See also K-pop
- K-drama (Korean television drama), 1–2, 7, 15–18, 30–31, 34–40, 42–46, 52, 54, 60, 124, 143, 147, 158, 178, 182–87, 190–91, 193, 195, 206, 218–19, 231
- Kim, Eun-sook (Kim Eun-suk), 20. See also *Secret Garden*
- kkonminam*, 18, 25–28, 46
- Koreaboo (korea.com), 78, 85, 88
- Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), 30, 54, 207
- Korean Wave, 1–9, 15, 39, 121, 128, 130, 146, 157, 171, 176, 179, 182–83, 187, 189–90, 193 table 9.5, 195–97, 203, 208, 210, 213, 220
- K-pop (Korean popular music), 1–3, 5, 7–8, 18, 40–41, 71–74, 76–81, 84–89, 105, 111, 116–26, 128, 130–31, 137–49, 153, 157–71, 186–87, 190–91, 194–95, 201–15, 218–19, 221–24
- industry, 3, 5, 72–82, 86–90, 117, 122–24, 129, 137–38, 149, 151, 153, 156–57, 159–62, 167, 171, 203, 205–10, 216, 221, 223. See also JYP Entertainment; SM Entertainment; YG Entertainment
- Lee, Hyori, 117, 125, 128
- Lee, Sun-mi (Lee Seon-mi), 19, 43–46. See also *Coffee Prince*
- Lee, Yoon-jung (Lee Yun-jeong), 19, 43, 46, 48, 51. See also *Coffee Prince*
- LGBTQ, 137–38, 140–41, 146–47, 150–51
- Malaysia (Malay), 162–64
- Mamamoo, 124, 130
- manhwa* (Korean comic books), 27, 35, 44, 36
- masculinity (masculine; masculinities), 3–5, 8, 15–19, 26–27, 30–31, 35, 42–43, 48, 50, 62–64, 117–18, 121, 125–26, 145–48, 150–52, 163–64
- gay masculinity, 147–52
- hypermasculinity, 117–18, 125–30
- soft masculinity, 7, 15–19, 25–28, 30–31, 146, 163
- “men,” 17–18, 20, 26, 38, 43, 46, 50, 64, 74, 118, 120, 127–28, 131, 137, 138, 146–47, 150–53, 163, 180, 185–86
- Middle East, 39, 177–80, 183, 230
- Moranbong Band (*Moranbong Akdan*), 8, 95–112. See also North Korea
- Hyon Song-wol, 96, 102, 104 fig. 5.1, 105–6
- Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), 19, 43, 51, 183, 219, 221
- Muslim (Islamic), 162–64, 176–78, 182, 185
- nationalism, 5, 18, 100
- neoliberal, 2–3, 15, 57–58, 124, 140, 179, 202, 212, 217. See also capitalism
- Netflix, 160, 219
- North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; DPRK), 8, 17, 95–112. See also Moranbong Band
- Kim Jong-il, 98–99, 103, 110
- Kim Jong-un, 98–99, 102–3, 109, 112
- NK-pop, 96, 98
- Pochonbo Electric Ensemble (*Bocheonbo Jeonja Akdan*), 95–96
- Ri Sol-ju, 98, 101
- Unhasu Orchestra (*Eunhasu Gwanheonakdan*), 98, 106

- Wangjaesan Light Music Band
(*Wangjaesan Gyeongumakdan*),
95, 106
- patriarchal (patriarchy), 3, 98, 117–21,
125, 127–28, 131, 145–46, 150, 212
- Philippines (Republic of the Philippines),
158, 160, 231–32
- polymorphous, 34, 37, 46–52. *See also*
erotic; sexuality
- postindustrial, 7, 54. *See also* neoliberal
PSY, 2, 206
- queer, 2–7, 16, 22, 30–31, 49, 124, 130,
140, 145–47, 151, 220
Seoul Queer Culture Festival, 130, 220
- race, 30, 72, 76, 80–82, 89–90, 211–18,
223. *See also* ethnicity
mixed-race, 71–76, 79–80, 84–85,
89–90
- Reddit (reddit.com), 59, 78, 84–86, 88
- Secret Garden*, 7, 15–31, 35, 38, 40, 143
- Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), 20,
205–6, 213
- sexism (sexist), 117, 120, 128–30, 211, 221
- sexuality (sex; sexual), 1, 3–7, 17, 25,
29–31, 34–50, 52, 63, 72, 74, 81–83,
86–90, 118–19, 121, 123–24, 129–30,
138–53, 162, 181, 202–3, 211, 212,
215, 217, 220, 223
- SHINee, 157, 165–66, 169 table 8.1, 171,
190
Jonghyun, 165–66, 171
- Singapore (Singaporean), 161–63, 165
- SM Entertainment, 73, 74, 85, 143, 160,
165, 204–9, 213, 217, 219, 221–22.
See also K-pop
- social media, 8, 62, 71, 72–74, 76–84,
86–90, 110, 130, 140, 143–44,
148, 158, 165, 170, 176, 178–81,
189–92, 208, 212. *See also* Facebook;
Instagram; Telegram; TikTok;
Twitter; YouTube
- Soompi (soompi.com), 78
- South Korea (Republic of Korea; Korean),
1–5, 7–8, 15–18, 22, 25–26, 30, 34,
36–37, 39–40, 42–46, 49, 51, 54–66,
71, 73–77, 79–85, 87, 105–7, 116–17,
119–20, 122–24, 127, 129–31,
137–47, 150–53, 158, 161, 165,
191–92, 194–97, 202, 205–7, 209,
212, 214–15, 217–19, 220, 222
- ssen-unni* (*ssen-eonni*), 8, 116–21, 123–25,
127–31
- Super Junior, 143, 146, 150, 160, 169 table
8.1, 204–5, 210
- Taiwan (Taiwanese), 4, 37, 76 160–61
- Telegram, 178, 190–91, 191 table 9.3, 193
table 9.5, 194, 196. *See also* social
media
- Thailand (Thai), 156–57, 160, 166–71
- theqoo (theqoo.net), 77–79, 84–85
- TikTok, 86, 162. *See also* social media
- tomboy, 7, 27, 29, 34–43, 45–47, 50, 52
- transcultural, 2, 3, 18
- transnational, 5, 42, 52, 157, 159–60, 164,
177, 181, 187–88
- TVXQ, 143, 146, 169 table 8.1, 207, 210
- Twitter, 77–79, 86–88, 107–9, 158, 170,
190, 209. *See also* social media
- Uhm, Jung-hwa, 117, 123
- Viki (viki.com), 39
- West (Western), 2, 18, 51, 65, 76, 80, 90,
99, 105, 107–18, 139, 176–78, 182,
185, 188–91, 196–97, 208–12. *See
also* America; Europe
- Winter Sonata*, 2, 18, 26–27. *See also* Bae,
Yong-joon
- “women”, 1–5, 7–8, 17, 21–23, 34–35,
37, 40–42, 44, 46–49, 51–52, 54,
61–66, 77, 86–89, 101, 107, 110,
116–21, 123–31, 139, 144, 146–47,
150, 157–59, 162–64, 171, 176–82,

185–87, 190–92, 194–97, 204, 211,
214–16, 218, 220–24

YG Entertainment, 8, 71, 73, 74, 77, 79,
80–82, 85–89, 157, 160, 194. *See also*

K-pop

You're Beautiful, 35, 38, 186

YouTube, 39, 72, 89, 126, 137–38, 156,
163–64, 183, 186, 190, 206, 208–9,
219. *See also* social media