

## From Korean Wave to Korean Living: *Meteor Garden* and the Politics of Love Fantasies in Taiwan\*

*Fang-chih Irene Yang\*\**

This paper uses an inter-Asian TV drama, *Meteor Garden* (also called *Boys Over Flowers* in Japan and S. Korea), as an example to illustrate the formation of women's desire within the context of nation formation and neoliberal globalization. It argues that women's rights to Korean dramas are predicated on a politics of recognition which essentializes and naturalizes women's desire for love. This desire for love, when historicized as an institution for nation building and globalization, should be seen as a cultural technology of control which aims to depoliticize women, reducing women's citizenship to the intimate domain. Korean dramas and Korean living, based on consumption as a fantastic solution to

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\*\* Fang-chih Irene Yang is Professor in the Taiwanese Literature Department, National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan. She received her Ph.D. in the Department of Speech Communication, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A. Her research focus ranges from transnational feminism, Asian popular culture, to globalization/localization and the politics of national identity. Her recent publications include "Constructing Shou-nyus' Identity and Desire: The Politics of Translation in Taiwanese Sex and the City" in *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (2011) and "Rap(p) Korean Wave: National Identity in Question" in *East Asian Pop Culture: Analyzing the Korean Wave* (2008). E-mail: fcyang@mail.ncku.edu.tw.

social and systemic inequalities, reduce democratic politics to life politics; however, paradoxically, they also provide an occasion for understanding of women's "disagreement" rooted in their unhappy reality and this disagreement is the basis of democratic politics.

**Key Words:** Korean Wave, Feminism, Life Politics, Ideological Fantasy, Love, Cultural Right, East Asian Pop Culture

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## I. Introduction

Faced with the sweeping popularity of Korean dramas in Taiwan, the Minister of Information Bureau proposed to restrict Korean dramas to non-primetime slots in the name of protecting local TV industry in 2006. This news offended many fans. One TV drama critic, Heiniào Lizi, in her weekly column in *China Times* (January 14, 2006), pleads to the government that "drama fans are people who love to dream" and the government should "Give Dramas Fans the Right to Beautiful Dreams."

How does one make sense of this phenomenon when women's rights to cultural recognition and emotional needs through Korean dramas are in tension with national culture? Is the recognition of women's cultural right to be celebrated as those theorized in scholarships on cultural citizenship and right? What does it mean to conceptualize right to Korean dramas as a form of cultural right and what are its implications for national, transnational, and gender politics? To answer these questions, I will use an inter-Asian TV drama, *Meteor Garden* (also called *Boys Over Flowers* in Japan and S. Korea), as an example to illustrate the formation of women's desire within the context of nation formation and neoliberal globalization. This paper argues that women's rights to Korean dramas are predicated on a politics of recognition which essentializes and naturalizes women's desire for love. This desire for love, when historicized as an institution for nation building and globalization, should be seen as a cultural

technology of control which aims to depoliticize women, reducing women's citizenship to the intimate domain. Korean dramas and Korean living, based on consumption as a fantastic solution to social and systemic inequalities, reduce democratic politics to life politics; however, paradoxically, they also provide an occasion for understanding of women's "disagreement" rooted in their unhappy reality and this disagreement is the basis of democratic politics.

This paper investigates the question of women's desire within the conflicted space of the national and the regional/global through *Meteor Garden*. Given the particularity of *Meteor Garden* in East Asia in terms of production, consumption and circulation, it is necessary to premise that this drama, in its various adaptations, be seen as an "iteration of East Asian pop culture" (Cho, 2011: 388). Cho proposes to see East Asian pop culture as a "cultural geography" within which the Korean Wave is recognized as "an historic accumulation as well as a sign of the simultaneous presence of different national cultures" (*Ibid.*: 390). The constant cultural traffic among Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong makes up the cultural geography of an East Asian pop culture within which the Korean wave is conceptualized as an iteration of East Asian pop culture, which in turn, constitutes East Asian pop culture. The concept of iteration acknowledges the mutual borrowing of East Asian pop culture historically while conceding the presence of national differences, even though this borrowing is uneven. Originally called "*Boys Over Flowers*" in Japan, *Meteor Garden* is a paradigmatic case of "iteration of East Asian pop culture." It was first created as girls' comics by Kamio Youko from 1994 to 2004 and was adapted into animation in Japan. The dependence of Taiwan's TV industry on Japan for creative resources facilitated the adaptation of the comics into TV idol drama in 2001, followed by a sequel in 2002. The popularity of the Taiwanese *Meteor Garden* in Asia led Japan to remake the comics into trendy drama in 2005, followed by a sequel as well as a movie adaptation. The Koreans remade *Boys Over Flowers* in 2009, followed by the Chinese adaptation of *Let's Watch the Meteor Rain* in the same year, even though the Chinese version is based on the Taiwanese *Meteor Garden*.

The concept of the Korean wave as iteration also points to genre analysis as a proper theoretical and methodological concern. As genres promise to fulfill audiences' expectations, "with details varying the theme," iteration as repetition with (national) difference constitutes the singularity and the varying details in *Meteor Garden* (Berlant, 2008: 4). In Taiwan's public discourses, the manufacturing of romantic fantasy is considered the most essential element in constituting the genre of idol dramas. This paper uses the notion of "fantasy genre" to analyze *Meteor Garden*, with particular attention to the Korean and the Taiwanese adaptations as they are the most favored versions for many fans in Taiwan.

## II. The Fantasy Genre of *Meteor Garden*

In conceptualizing *Meteor Garden* as a fantasy genre, I draw on two theoretical strands, one on genre and the other on ideological fantasy. Genres are "social contracts between a writer [producer] and a specific public" with the aim to "specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (Jameson, 1981: 106). They are constituted through the rules of rhetorical or semiotic conventions drawn from social roles, typifications of recurrent social needs or exigencies, and commonsense responses to socio-historical and material conditions, and by enacting these conventions, they also regulate the reproduction of reality (Barwarshi, 2000). Moreover, Linda Williams (2006: 36) makes the claim that genres address the persistent problems in our culture; however, they also thrive in their ability to "recast the nature of these problems;" as such, they should be seen as specific "cultural form of problem solving." In other words, genres are ideological. "They operate as conceptual schemes that also constitute how we negotiate our way through discursive reality as producers and consumers of texts" (Thomas Beebe, quoted in Barwarshi, 2000: 349).

The notion of genre as ideological leads to a conceptualization of *Meteor Garden* as an ideological fantasy. I draw on two theoretical strands in theorizing fantasy, one from film theory which draws upon

Laplanche and Pontalis' notion of fantasy; the other from political theory which focuses on Žižek's notion of social ideological fantasy. In Laplanche and Pontalis' influential article, "The formations of Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," two ideas are significant for understanding film or TV dramas as fantasy. First, fantasies are like myths which claim to "provide a representation of, and a solution to the major enigmas which confront the child, whatever appears to the subject as something needing an explanation or theory, the beginning of history" (quoted in Mayne, 2002: 35). In this sense, fantasy functions as a foundational narrative for the formation of a child's subjectivity. Second, fantasy is not the object of desire, but "a staging of desire" and "a form of *mise-en-scène*," within which the subject itself is caught in the sequence of images. Two questions can be raised with regard to the notion of fantasy as scene: "if fantasy is the *mise-en-scène* of desire, whose desire is figured in the film, who is the subject for and of the scenario? ... second, what is the relation between the contingent, everyday material drawn from real life, i.e., from the social to the primal or original fantasy?" (Cowie, quoted in Mayne, 2002: 36). Cowie's questions aim to uncover the relationship between the social and the psychological, with fantasy functions as mediation: what elements from the social and the everyday are drawn into the narrative fantasy which functions as the instrument for the formation of subjectivity?

The concept of fantasy as mediation between the social and the psychological allows a linking to Žižek's social ideological fantasy. Žižek proposes that ideological fantasy functions as a concealment of social antagonisms and divisions. The symbolic order or the society is by nature never complete but full of divisions and contradictions and these contradictions are manifested through antagonisms. However, the authority (the father) wishes to present his power through the law which, though impotent in reality, appears as omnipresent in order to unify a coherent society. Ideological fantasy functions to "mask this essential inconsistency in the socio-symbolic order and to maintain the illusion of a unified and cohesive society" (Homer, 1999: 85). There is a duality to social ideological fantasy as it is "at once a neces-

sary support for social reality, in the sense that it maintains social division and antagonism, and at the same time operates as a defense, masking the inherently fissured nature of all societies" (*Ibid.*: 86).

Two criteria are essential to the constitution of ideological fantasy. First, ideological fantasy requires a paradoxical constitution: the establishment of the public law as well as the simultaneously enjoyment obtained through the transgression of that law. It is, in particular, the enjoyment brought about by the transgression of the law that consolidates the public law. Without enjoyment, there is only the punitive side to ideology which would easily lead to violence and oppression and thus, rebellion against it. Second, ideological fantasy requires the construction of the Other. Rather than induced by love for the public law, it is hatred for the Other, constructed as stealing our happiness or what we deserve from us, that motivates the formation of a community with adherence to the public law or authority (*Ibid.*: 85-87). Jason Glynos (2008: 287) summarizes the content of ideological fantasy as composing of three key dimensions: First, "it has a narrative structure which features, among other things, an ideal and an obstacle [the Other] to its realization, and which make take a beautiful or horrific form." Second, "it has an inherently transgressive aspect *vis-a-vis* officially affirmed ideals." Third, "it purports to offer a foundational guarantee of sorts, in the sense that it offers the subject a degree of protection from the anxiety associated with a direct confrontation with the radical contingency of social relations."

The reading of ideological fantasy, along with that theorized by Laplanche and Pontalis and re-interpreted by Mayne and Cowie as well as the notion of genre, enable a textual analysis that addresses these questions: What are the scenes constructed? What social elements are dramatized? Whose desire is figured? Who is the object? Who is constructed as the Other? What are the social problems dramatized through the conventions of the staging of narratives and desires? What enjoyment is obtained through the transgression of public laws? What public laws? How are the problems solved in what particular cultural forms deployed? What are the social realities that are maintained through stabilizing the contingency character of the social?

Jameson refers to the split and hierarchical constitution of society (the unsimulatable trauma of collective history) as the domain of the real or History which, according to him, can only be analyzed through narrative or textuality (Homer, 1999: 87). The following section analyzes the textuality of *Meteor Garden* within the political and economic configurations of nation-state formation and globalization in order to unpack the work of ideological concealment.

### III. *Meteor Garden* as Ideological Fantasy

All the versions of *Meteor Garden* share the basic narrative structure proposed in the girls' comics, *Hana Yori Dango* (*Boys Over Flowers*), with variations in details in each version. The "singular" story is about the love story between a rich young man and a poor young woman and how they conquer all sorts of obstacles and finally stay together. In a word, this is a love genre that uses love as a way to create a community where an intimate public composed of women connect through feeling and mutual recognition and where historical antagonisms and injustices experienced in everyday life which are the foundations of this community are "bracketed" (Berlant, 2008: 4). This section analyzes how love functions as a solution to historical antagonisms and social contradictions.

Kamio Yoko historicizes her comics by chronicling the major historical events along with the publication of each comic series, including "the ice storm age for employment." Yoko began the comics by prefacing the historical context in which she was writing about — the breakdown of the bubble economy in Japan. What is dramatized from the real is a particular pattern of economic inequality — the rich belong to the transnational capitalist class who own multinational corporations and the poor are constantly threatened with unemployment. This dual economic structure is experienced as the economic reality in many East Asian countries as a result of neoliberal "reregionalization" (Barlow, 2007). The polarization of wealth between the rich and the poor becomes the background in which the love story is

narrated.

The story takes place in an elite high school (and in the case of Taiwan, a university) for the rich. The female protagonist, Makino Tsukushi, is constructed as “us”— we are young women from ordinary families but we rely on our labor power to survive, without being dependent on the rich. Because of her class background, she is the target of violence from the F4 group (Flower Four) — the beautiful and rich boys who rule the school. Here, class privilege is constructed through personal violence — class is personalized through these four boys’ violent acts toward other peers, in particular, those poor ones. Tsukushi gets the attention from the leader of the Flower 4, Tsukasa Domyoji, who falls in love with her, because she stands out as a fighter who refuses to be bullied and see her friends being bullied.

Tsukushi, as her name indicates, is like a weed that grows everywhere. She is hard-working, good-hearted, perseverant, and persistent. In a world dominated by the rich, her resistance against them can only be made through her body, demonstrated through her signature “kick” and her labor power. In addition to the slow-motion “kick” every time when she fights Domyoji, she is also constantly featured in engaging in part-time work for survival, and her survival itself indicates her power. With these virtues, Tsukushi is able to conquer all the obstacles and marry Domyoji, the richest man in the nation.

Three public laws are transgressed and restored for the enjoyment of female audiences in this ideological fantasy. First, it is class antagonism that is dramatized and tamed. Despite the different representations of class — the Taiwanese version appeals to the stigmatization of the stereotypical image of the ethnically-marked (Hokklo) working class while the Korean version emphasizes visual extravaganza in the portrayal of the rich’s lifestyle — class difference as defined through the gap between the rich and the working or the lower-middle class is something that is experienced as reality. Class transgression is central to understand the enjoyment offered in this ideological fantasy. The neoliberal re-regionalization process beginning in the 80s in Asia leads to a polarized economic structure in the twenty-first century where most women are like Tsukushi, who



constantly juggle through many part-time, temporary jobs. Powerlessness constitutes her living conditions, but despite this, she persistently fights for survival and justice. Her resilience makes up the first transgression against class difference — transgression of the public law that the powerful can always have their way. Secondly, the Korean *Meteor Garden* offers a visual extravaganza of the rich's lifestyle, part of the transgressive enjoyment comes when, like Cinderella, Tsukushi is offered the proper glamorous attire through the last-minute friendly "magic" to participate in the rich's parties. This fantastic partake of the lifestyle of the rich constitutes the second sense of class transgression — she crosses her class boundaries. This is why she is the target of scorn for other rich women because she is seen to steal their wealth and happiness. However, these two transgressions of class laws which indicate the potential or desire for equality are resolved through love. Despite the material deprivation, Tsukushi is empowered through her choice of love between two members of the F4 group. Eventually, she chooses Domyoji because he transforms from a violent man to a tender, responsible man who is able to protect Tsukushi. This love resolves class antagonisms in two ways. First, class violence is healed through love. By personalizing class violence into individual violence, by constructing Domyoji's violence against the poor as caused by his lack of family love, the restoring of love through Tsukushi heals class violence, thereby making invisible the exploitative, violent process of capital accumulation and class formation. Second, with the gaining of love, the male protagonist is able to maintain the dual class structure by changing the exploitative practices of chaebol operation to a more compassionate, human-centered capitalist operation, as the Korean version demonstrates. Within this dual class structure, the imaginary solution is for women to marry into the rich as a way of redemption from her dire conditions. However, women's class mobility is premised on her unique personality — her difference from her working-class peers who have no taste as well as those rich women who know not love but money. This makes class mobility a personal(ity) thing rather than a structural determinant.

Second, it is the patriarchal family law that is transgressed and

restored. As fantasies rely on the construction and elimination of the Other in order to naturalize social relations, the major obstacle that prevents Tsukuchi and Domyoji's happy marriage is Domyoji's mother, or the future mother-in-law. The mother who is in charge of the transnational corporations afflicts various cruelties to prevent Tsukushi from marrying Domyoji and forces Domyoji to marry a wealthy woman in order to strengthen her corporation's power and profit. Tsukushi's resistance against this mother enables a sense of transgressive enjoyment for young women who are the target audiences — to transgress family authority as symbolized by the mother. However, the construction of an ambitious, career-oriented mother as the Other, the ultimate bad woman, hence, the "elimination" or transformation of this character also assures the maintenance of the patriarchal family law. It is, again, through love, that this public law of patriarchal family is restored. The final episode of *Meteor Garden II* in Taiwan makes explicit this point when Domyoji vents his anger on his mother: "Love? What do you know about love? You only care about power and self-interests, you even use my happiness in life to exchange for your profits." This capable and strong mother who crosses the boundary of domesticity cannot provide Domyoji with proper family love and this causes his violent behavior against the poor. This lack is fulfilled by Tsukushi who provides him with family love, thereby restoring his humanity; and hence, class harmony. The restoration of the patriarchal family order as the foundation of the capitalist economic order is most emphasized in the Korean version as the mother portrayed there metaphorically castrates the father and takes his position as the head of corporations. Only when the father is brought back and hands his power to Domyoji and the mother steps down to her secondary position can the family order be maintained and the economic crisis resolved (from exploitative to compassionate capitalism).

Third, it is the law of reality that is transgressed and restored. Many fans claim that they like *Meteor Garden* because it is a fantasy; similarly, love dramas are seen as "dreams" — the opposite of "reality" for women. For fans, everyday life in the neoliberal regime is consti-

tuted by pain, alienation, hopelessness for the future, and anxiety (of losing their jobs). According to Richard Sennett in *New Culture of Capitalism*, social capitalism provides a stable time for people's life narrative to take place in a continuous way. One can plan one's life because the institutions which provide people a sense of continuous time to shape their everyday life is stable. Consequently, people who work under social capitalism have a stable sense of self. However, the new neoliberal capitalism is characterized by flexible labor which disrupts the stable sense of self as people are now required to change their jobs, hence, identities very often. This transformation of work and the self involves much pain and anxiety (Walkerdine, 2006). The flexibility of work as the new "reality" demands that people spend more time in improving themselves to the extent that lifetime learning becomes the axiom of the day. Love dramas, as fantasies or dreams, are seen as diverting attention from reality, from time for hard/real work; hence, indulging oneself in fantasies constitutes a kind of transgressive enjoyment. What needs to be emphasized is that the transgressive fantasies are channeled into love dreams for women. Love dramas have worked out a generic form at the aesthetic level to define dream in terms of love. In *Meteor Garden*, as in many other idol dramas, flashbacks of happy moments between the male and female protagonists are repeated in many episodes, accompanied by melodramatic love songs. In the Korean *Meteor Garden*, two love stories are emphasized — between Tsukushi and Domyoji and Tsukushi and Rui Hanazawa (another member of the F4) — each of the love stories is given a theme song and repeated in flashbacks. These love flashbacks accompanied by melodramatic songs best characterize fans' experiences of "indulging in dreams." However, if indulging in these love dreams constitutes transgression against reality, this reality as public law is maintained rather than challenged. For example, one fan, after posing a long comment on the Korean *Meteor Garden* in a fan chat-room, said: "I need to go to study for my exam, I will come back later to tell you more about what I feel." In this sense, transgression of reality is only a temporary diversion, people come back to real life after dreaming, feeling rejuvenated. The structures of exploitation that

constitute the everyday reality of women remain unchallenged.

Lauren Berlant (2008: 10) calls the intimate public formed through women's genres "juxtapolitical": "what counts as collectivity has been a loosely organized, market-structured juxtapolitical sphere of people attached to each other by a *sense* that there is a common emotional world available to those individuals who have been marked by the historical burden of being harshly treated in a generic way and who have more than survived social negativity by making an aesthetic and spiritual scene that generates relief from the political." What needs to be emphasized is the notion that women are marked by the "historical burden of being harshly treated" and that this experience is being channeled through spiritual or aesthetic scene, in this case, love scene, that "generates relief from the political." In this case, "the gender-marked texts of women's culture cultivates fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real — social antagonisms, compromised intimacies, the attrition of life" (*Ibid.*: 5). In my analysis, the historical antagonisms that are emphasized and resolved through love are class antagonisms and gender inequality experienced by the majority of women in the age of neoliberal globalization. What this points out is the significance of love as ideological fantasy in maintaining social order in Taiwan's society. How do we make sense of this phenomenon? What are the politics of love in the context of Taiwan?

#### IV. The Politics of Love

It is widely acknowledged that the popularity of the Korean wave in Taiwan has a lot to do with the domestic industrial structure. Faced with the price hike of Japanese dramas and the demand to fill program slots in many cable channels opened up after liberalization, the local media industry actively seeks to import and promote the low-cost Korean dramas. Given the domestic audience structure, the industry selectively imports Korean love dramas which are similar to Japanese trendy dramas and Taiwanese melodramas — the two

dominant women's genres in Taiwan. In general, it is love and family dramas that are promoted as Korean dramas and after a decade, this genre remains the predominant mode of the Korean wave in Taiwan (Yang, 2008).

This brief history of the emergence of the Korean wave is meant to bring out the historicity of an already formed "intimate public" whose preference for a particular kind of emotional belonging is recognized by the media industry which continues to operate through conventionality — not only in the sense of meeting a demand which acknowledges and reflects the consumers' shared lived experiences through conventional aesthetic expressions but also in the sense of shaping desire and belonging (Berlant, 2008). What are the "broadly historical experience" and the "commonly lived history" (*Ibid.*: 8) that have become the foundation for the formation of the community of female consumers who desire conventional love stories such as *Meteor Garden* or Korean love dramas?

Three factors come to mediate women's desire for love in the context of Taiwan: the historical experiences of Chinese nation-building, the ethnic-economic structure of the culture industry, and the ascent of neoliberalism in the age of globalization. The history of nation-building is the most significant in understanding the politics of love. Yvonne Chang (2001) proposes the concept of "feminization of genre" (wenlei nyuxinghua) to explain the predominance of love genre in Taiwan. She argues that the authoritarian KMT regime, in legitimizing their minority rule, imposed censorship to divert attention from the everyday lived experiences in Taiwan in order to construct Taiwan as a Chinese nation, women's genres are used as a tool to achieve the goal of depoliticization — to turn away from the injustices of the here and now which is the foundation of politics. Moreover, women's genres also function as cultural technologies which shape women's subjectivity. In a culture where almost everything related to the local is censored, only the virtuous, domestic women who are well-versed in Chinese culture and literature can be dramatized as the good heroines in women's genres. The twining of domesticity with Chineseness facilitates the construction of the family as the founda-

tion of the Chinese nation, with women placed at the center of the family.

This history of Chinese nation-building in Taiwan, despite the Taiwanese consciousness movement in the 1990s and the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) more Taiwan-centered ruling from 2000-2008, is still inscribed within the dominant structure in the present Taiwan. Two examples will suffice. National Public Television in Taiwan contracted the director Zhuang Yi-zeng to make a documentary, *Hand in Hand*, about the life story of a political dissident couple, Tian Chao-ming and his wife, Tian Mama. As this couple were both vocal advocates of Taiwan's independence and were quite active in Taiwan's democratic movements, the director dived into the history of Taiwan's democratization process, which directly challenged the official history invented by the KMT party (the current party in power). NPT demanded the director to eliminate this political history and "just focus on their love stories" because "the history could cause controversies and unrest in Taiwan" (Lan and Huang, 2011). What this event indicates is the instrumental use of love as a means of depoliticization to maintain the status quo. With this historical legacy operating as a strong force in the present, any kind of love story produced or imported in Taiwan needs to be read within this context of KMT Chinese nation-building and de-politicization.

My second example is about the theme song for the Centennial Birthday Celebration for the Republic of China in 2011. The theme song, composed of a series of popular songs, narrates the nation's growth through a woman's growth. Visually, the theme song juxtaposes the growth of the nation from poverty to prosperity, accompanied by popular songs starting from *Hot Rice Dumplings* (shao rouzhong) which illustrates the poverty of life and ending with *Song for the Republic of China* (zhonghua minguo song) which expresses nostalgia and desire for the homeland, China, with a woman falling in love, getting married, raising children, and later in her old age, enjoying family love surrounded by her children and grandchildren. The cruel violence that is fundamental to the building of the Chinese nation and the exploitation of women's emotional and physical labor

are made invisible in the name of a woman's love life. This theme song best captures the relationship between femininity and nation-building. The nation is founded on a woman's domestic role — her life can only be narrated through her romance, marriage, and children. This conception of woman, though emerged out of particular historical demands, is constructed as normative femininity. This normative femininity, supported by material arrangements (economic and familial), underwrites women's genres which emphasize women's ahistorical, natural aspirations for love/family.

McClintock (1993: 64) describes the significance of the family trope in nation-building powerfully: "[Firstly] the family image was thus drawn on to figure *hierarchy within unity* as an 'organic' element of historical progress, and thereby became indispensable for legitimizing exclusion and hierarchy within non-familial (affiliative) social formations ... Secondly, the family offered an indispensable trope for what was often violent, *historical change* as natural, *organic time*." In other words, "[n]ational 'progress' (the invented domain of male, public space) was figured as *familial*, while the family itself (conventionally, the domain of private, female space) was figured *beyond history*" (*Ibid.*: 67). Love/family, when functioning as a trope for the KMT's Chinese nation-building project, itself a historical construction, has now become women's desire, naturalized and ahistoricized. These two examples point out that women's desire for love/family needs to be seen as an essential part of the nation-building project which aims to depoliticize women by displacing the political to the realm of feelings and intimacy.

Secondly, Taiwanese women's desire for love dramas needs to be explained through the ethnic-economic structure of the culture industry which is also a product of Chinese nation-building. In TV industry, Mandarin was imposed as the official language, reducing programs in Taiyu, the lingua franca in Taiwan, to only two hours a day from the 1970s to the late 1980s. This language policy severely restricted Taiwanese entertainers' career opportunities, making Mainlanders (Waishengren, those who immigrated to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek) the dominant majority in the TV industry. Moreover, the

Mainlanders were able to control the TV industry because the KMT party saw the media as the “ideological state apparatus” for nation-building. As the majority of the Mainlanders were segregated from the local Taiwanese (Bengshengren), they were ill-equipped to produce programs that pertained to the politics of the everyday experiences of the Bengsheng Taiwanese. This ethnic-economic structure, buttressed by the cultural strategy of “feminization of genre,” enables the TV producers to excel in making love stories located in an imaginary China, abstracted from the local. Since the late 1990s when discourses of globalization/regionalization gain momentum, most Mainlander entertainers and producers, as a result of their language privilege and industrial capital, move to China for career development. This leads to the reinforcement of the strategy of de-contextualization as the imaginary China is now transformed into a non-specific modern city in Asia in order to reach regional audiences. The Mandarin-centered love drama is now constructed by the culture industry as Taiwan’s competitive advantage in Asia and Taiwan is said to excel in selling love. In the meantime, indigenous dramas featuring Taiyu is derogated as vulgar and too local to generate profit for the nation.

Thirdly, depoliticization through love is deepened as a result of neoliberal regionalization. Neoliberalism can be characterized as both an economic project which consecrates the market as the sacred form and a project of cultural technology which aims to produce self-responsible individuals (Brown, 2005). In both senses, the dimension of the social is eliminated. Elsewhere, I argue that in translating foreign culture, including American feminism, *Sex and the City*, and Japanese dramas, romantic love is domesticated as the focus of the story at the expense of the social (Yang, forthcoming). Similarly, in terms of the reception of Korean *Meteor Garden*, the social that can be opened up to politics, such as the exploitative practices of multinational corporations, is made invisible; instead, it is a woman’s choice for a rich man that is “ordered,” in the Foucaultian sense, as the most legitimate interpretation. The focus on love to the exclusion of the social is made more prominent as Taiwan now positions itself as “the center of Chinese language cultural productions.” This profit-oriented



cultural policy sees China as the market for Taiwan's drama productions. This economic imperative leads to a confusion of identities as Taiwanese-made idol dramas are now called "Chinese dramas" (huajyu) since 2011. The historicity of the ethnic-economic structure of the culture industry gets turned into strategic advantage in producing de-contextualized Mandarin love stories located in modern Asian cities which accentuate individual choice of love and downplay social inequality. As Ranciere (2004) points out, the social is the domain that mediates the personal and politics. Any form of politics needs to be nourished in the social. The elimination of the social or the resolution of social inequality through love reintroduces individuality at the expense of politics.

In this section, I provide the "broadly historical experience" and the "commonly lived history" for understanding "women's desire for love." I emphasize that the use of the love/family trope for nation-building has not only legitimized the violence and hierarchy within the nation but also emptied out the historicity of love/family as an institution, making love/family an individualized, naturalized, and private affair. This historical legacy of love/family as a tool for de-politicization is further reinforced in the age of globalization/regionalization where the pursuit of society and collective life is eliminated in favor of individuality, a tendency that fits perfectly well the depoliticized and individualized form of romantic love. In other words, the promotion of love in Taiwan's context needs to be understood as essential to the operation of the de-politicization of politics in maintaining the status quo. As Žižek succinctly points out, "today's politics is more and more about the politics of jouissance [love], concerned with the ways of soliciting or controlling and regulating jouissance [love]" (quoted in Stavrakakis, 2007: 181). Strategies of domination require not only prohibition, but positive "pleasure," and it is through the promotion of love and the suppression of other desires that emotions and investments are attached to heteronormative love materialized in the family form and hegemony maintained. In the case of *Meteor Garden*, the love genre produces normativity which assigns women to the private sphere of feeling, emotion, love,

marriage, and the family. The predominance of this role in the private sphere which emphasizes women's choice of husbands has crossed over to the political domain where politics for women become a matter of "choosing husbands."

## V. From Korean Wave to Korean Living as Life Politics

In commenting on her love for *Meteor Garden* in *Liberty Times* (August 21, 2007), a woman named Young Beauty Obason (meishaonyu obason) acknowledges that "the popularity of *Meteor Garden* lies in its fulfillment of every woman's fantasy of happiness and this fantasy is about a woman being pursued by more than one rich and handsome man." Central to her idea of enjoyment is the choice of an ideal prince, which is accentuated in the Korean adaptation where the latter part of the plot diverges from the original script to emphasize the long and entangled competition between Domyoji and Hanazawa for the love of Tsukushi.

The ideal hero portrayed as "rich, handsome, and loyal" in the Korean *Meteor Garden* "sticks" in women's imagination of love in Taiwan. With the success of the Korean *Meteor Garden*, another Taiwanese idol drama, *Summer Bubble*, copied its plot and was much criticized. The TV industries, including GTV and Sanli defended the "rich, aristocratic prince devoted to love" (chiqing duojin guigongzi) as the ideal hero in guaranteeing good ratings. "These male characters do not have to be perfect ... as long as they are wholeheartedly devoted to the female heroine, female audiences will always fall for them ... the reason that idol dramas are popular is because of the power of love" (Chu, 2012).

The power of love as a form of enjoyment lies in the industry's acknowledgement of women's choice of a loyal husband as empowerment. The de-politicized love and choice in the domain of consumption, however, crosses over to the political domain. The year 2008's presidential election marked the first case of this crossing over and the entanglements of capitalist economy (capitalist production and

consumption of Korean and Taiwanese idol dramas), inter-subjective desire (a particular socio-cultural administration of love), and power (a particular power/political regime) since Taiwan's first direct presidential election in 1996.

In this election, the dominant rhetoric about choosing a president is transformed into "choosing a loyal husband" for female voters. The mainstream media construct President Chen Shui-bian, then the DPP president, as a liar who makes the worst husband in the world; while Ma a devoted and honest husband. Ma Ying-jeou is likened to "Bae Yong-jun in Politics" (zhengtān de peiyongjun), a popular Korean drama hero from *Winter Sonata* (Sima, 2005; Jiang, 2006). In these reports, Ma is constructed as the male hero in the Korean dramas whose charisma "lies in his tall and fit body and his star-like appearance." He is even voted as "the most handsome politician," "the forever dream-lover" (Jiang, 2005; Jiang, 2006), "the most desirable object of women's sexual fantasy," "the best sperm donor," and "women's dream-lover" (Jiang, 2005). These nominations reveal strong erotic love for Ma. The renowned relationship expert, Jiang Ying-yao, demonstrates her intensive feeling in her second encounter with Ma: "He uses his big hands to hold mine closely and warmly, tilting his body toward me and his eyes looking at me with sincerity as if he can see through my body and heart. He smiles pleasantly to me with his low, husky, and tender voice: 'Of course, I do [remember you]!' Suddenly, I am completely conquered by him. No wonder all the women in Taiwan fall in love with Ma Ying-jeou" (*Ibid.*). The intimate affect revealed here is that of a female fan for a male idol transformed/transferred into a (female) citizen for a (male) political leader.

In an article, "The Idol Charisma of Ma, Ying-jeou: The Last Man Who Would Betray A Woman," published in *Brand Fashion Magazine* (2005), Jiang claims Ma as the "new good man" as opposed to the traditional chauvinists in that "he would stay at home to take care of domestic chores ... and take his family out to restaurants on weekends." Moreover, Ma's loyalty to his wife is praised as the most significant personal trait. "All women dream of having such a husband ... Our 'Little Ma Brother' (xiamage) is ... only and possibly the

last man in the world who would betray you and lie to you. He brings hope to those women who suffer from unfaithful husbands... This faithful image is similar to Bae Yong-jjun ... whose charm lies in his devotion and loyalty to pure love in *Winter Sonata* and *Hotelier*. This is what all women want."

Faced with the overwhelming popularity of Ma among female voters/fans/lovers, the DPP elected a female presidential candidate, Tsai Ying-wen, in the 2012 presidential election. Despite her support of women's rights, she still faces challenges in competing with Ma in courting female voters. As a result, the DPP appeals to the existing identity of female voters as (popular culture) fans and lovers/wives as one of their campaign strategies. One campaign ad, titled "Xiaoying (nickname for Tsai Ying-wen) Girls' Decision for Future Happiness" (xiaoying nyuhai de xingfujueding), features a group of young and beautiful girls (zhengmei) who protest, in tears: "President Ma, you hurt our hearts, we will break up with you in 2012," followed by "Tsai Ying-wen, it is great to have you, we want to be with you" (Li, 2011). Another campaign strategy that DPP adopts is to issue a women's magazine, called *NQ* (Next Queen) in reaching young women. *NQ* is an imitation of the most popular women's magazine, *Queen*, in Taiwan, which teaches women the skills in pruning femininity, including offering consumer information on beauty and fashion products and make-up skills. The first issue of *NQ* features a bride in her wedding gown as the cover page and includes consumer information similar to *Queen*, with the difference of adding Tsai Ying-wen's autobiographical anecdotes as forms of entertainment for young women, in the hope of using depoliticized forms of women's genre to attract female voters. These examples point out that, in the political sphere, women are constructed as fans of love. The concept of citizen as fan becomes the way politics work in Taiwan, as the *United Daily News* point out, "the problem Ma Ying-Jeou faces is 'Fans Management.' If he can manage to win back the feelings that fans have for him, his political crisis will be resolved" (Ma, 2010). Here, politics is not about the struggles over rights, resources, recognition, equality, and justice, but about how to win women's love through consumer

manipulation. These examples illustrate that in the political sphere, women's identity as voters, mediated by their identity as wives in pursuit of love/family, has been transformed into consumers of Korean idols. Consumption of Korean dramas, while motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and empowerment which enables fans to identify themselves as the female protagonist choosing between different devoted and rich prince lovers, is now transformed into choosing a loyal and devoted president husband. Politics for women is reduced to a matter of choosing husbands and for the government, a matter of managing women's sustained love and attention to their political idols.

Spivak (1988) points out the double meaning of "representation" to include both political representation and symbolic/cultural representation. In cultural representation, as my analysis of *Meteor Garden* illustrates, women's injuries arising from class and patriarchy are channeled into *individualized and depoliticized* desire for love and mobility through marriage. While in political representation, this desire is reinforced and channeled into choosing political representations who are good lovers and loyal husbands. The convergence of political representation with cultural representation is predicated on women as consumers and lovers and consumers of love. This is the paradigmatic case of what Zygmunt Bauman (2002: 171) calls "life politics." Life politics is characterized by individualization and individualism. It is "self-centered and self-referential" which leads to the emergence of idols instead of political leaders/authorities in offering temporary promises to fulfill individual needs. "Life politics ... is from the beginning to end enclosed in a framework of individuality: the individual body complete with the 'inner self,' personal identity claimed and granted, 'the space' one wants as a rule to have 'more' of ... [The question of] 'what shall I be?' is inextricably bound up with 'how shall I live?'" (*Ibid.*). Idols fit perfectly well with life politics as they do not translate private grievances into the political domain and public affairs into rights and obligations for private individuals but "offer themselves as examples" (*Ibid.*) who function as models for us in solving individual problems (such as extramarital affairs).

Consumption is inextricably bound with life politics. Consumption is essential in sustaining life politics as consumption offers transitory promises, just like idols offer temporary and “biographical solutions to systemic contradictions.” Both consumption and political idols offer women the promise of romantic love in forming a family. Life politics in Taiwan, founded on the complex of love and consumption, cannot be divorced from Korean dramas. Not only do the Korean dramas move laterally to articulate with and transform politics but also penetrate into the everyday life experiences, making Korean culture “a whole way of life” in Taiwan. In other words, life politics in Taiwan is connected with “Korean Living” (hanhuo) (*Liberty Times*, October 16, 2011). “Korean Living,” as *Liberty Times* demonstrates, is about the consumption of Korean cosmetics, stars, food, fashion, and so on in Taiwan’s cultural landscape. Two ideas are central to the concept of Korean Living. First, women’s identity is defined as fans as evidenced by the article, “Three Strategies in Pursuing Korean Stars,” which teaches women how to be good fans/consumers. Second, the idea of proper femininity can only be achieved through consumption, as evidenced in the article “Steps in Making Up,” which teaches women how to apply makeup in order to be properly feminine. Reading these articles together, it can be concluded that for women, pruning femininity through their consumption/beauty skills is the key to be the heroine who deserves the love of the male hero in Korean dramas. From Korean dramas to politics back to everyday life, women are now reified as consumers/fans motivated by the desire for love/marriage/family.

## VI. Women’s “Reality,” Love, and Cultural Rights

It is significant to point out that consumption of fantasies offers minorities or minor subjects temporary and individual promises to problems of systemic and institutional contradictions and injustices experienced in everyday life. Such promises are what Berlant (2008), following Jameson, calls “fantasy bribes” which aim to secure hege-

mony. That is, all ideological fantasies are rooted in unhappy realities which, according to my analysis of *Meteor Garden*, consist of three intersecting institutional matrixes: class antagonism, patriarchy, and neoliberal globalization. This is the reality currently experienced by young women. The simultaneous “entrance” into the information and service economy since the late 1980s and early 1990s marked the beginning of neoliberal globalization in Taiwan. This process has accelerated since 2000s, in particular, 2008, with Ma government’s “trickle-down” economic policy which cuts taxes for the rich and welfare for the poor. The result is twofold: first, the gap between the rich and the poor has accelerated tremendously; second, young working-class women are the hardest hit amongst all the groups. According to statistics, the top 20% of families earn 5.18 times more than the bottom 20% in 1990 and 6.3 times in 2010; and the top 5% of families earn 30 times more than the bottom 5% in 1998 and 75 times in 2009 (Lin et al., 2011). Moreover, there is an increase in part-time and temporary jobs, especially for women. Saskia Sassen points out succinctly that in globalization, the service economy which demands continued low-wage, labor-intensive power and the information economy which “tends toward growing capital-labor ratios, growing productivity, and intensive use of the most advanced technologies” are conjoined to create a polarized economy, with “women and the immigrants” occupy the low end. “These set of characteristics in each set of industries contribute to a type of cumulative causation” (Sassen, 2006: 159-160).

Moreover, Taiwan’s government also devises gender policies that contribute to the polarization of the economy in the name of gender equality. In Taiwan’s gender mainstreaming policies, women are seen as human resources, responsible for the reproduction of human labor and the production of economy. In a report commissioned by the government for devising gender policies, called “Research on Improving The Use of Female Labor Power” which “aims to probe the relationship between the development of Taiwan’s industrial structure and the application of female labor force in our country in the context of global knowledge economy” (Wang, 2008: 5), women are seen as fitting for

this economy because of their flexibility (due to mothering roles) for part-time and temporary jobs and their caring and feminine ability in interpersonal communication.

This is the reality for women — a reality constituted by the intersection of patriarchal conventions and neoliberal globalization which contributes to class difference. Women's frustrations caused by systemic contradictions are channeled into imagining romance and marriage as a solution. This fantasy bribe of love and marriage, as I argue, needs to be situated within the context of nation-building and neoliberal globalization, which aims to de-politicize women through consumption, thereby sustaining gender and class hierarchy.

Finally, given the structural determinants of women's desire which is now intricately embedded in life politics, what does it mean for Taiwanese women to claim their cultural rights to Korean love dramas? Theories on cultural right usually celebrate minorities' claims of rights to their own cultures which are degraded by the dominant culture (Stevenson, 2001). This is a form of cultural right based on the politics of recognition. However, my analysis demonstrates that women's culture and women's desire are shaped historically and it is through a process of depoliticization that such desire is seen as natural and essential. The claim to cultural right based on the politics of recognition suffers from what Nancy Fraser (2000: 108) calls, "the problem of displacement" which ignores the exacerbating global inequality and "the problem of reification" which reifies separate group identity, "freezing the very antagonisms it purports to mediate" in the age of globalization. Cultural recognition ignores "institutionalized significations and norms" such as femininity and ignores distributive justice (*Ibid.*: 110). As such, claims to Korean dramas do not challenge the masculine nature of the ongoing Chinese nation-building project, nor the "hypermasculinity" of globalization, but facilitate these twin processes as they reify women's identities as private and emotional and offer consumption of marriage promises as a solution to systemic contradictions — the foundation of patriarchal global capitalism. In this way, I would conjoin Nancy Fraser in rethinking recognition as "status" politics: "[t]o view recognition as a



matter of status means examining institutionalized patterns of cultural value for their effects on the relative standing of social actors... [it aims to examine] institutionalized relation of social subordination" (*Ibid.*: 114). That is, one needs to understand women's claim to cultural right to Korean dramas as shaped by the historical and institutional forces that put women in a subordinate position, and that claim is, in fact, a claim of one's unhappiness with the existing status quo. Korean love dramas and Korean living, based on individualized consumption, cannot offer solutions to women's existing frustrations and they can even privatize politics, but they can point to a deep sense of unhappiness. The presence of this unhappiness, as Bauman (2002: 125-126) points out, "makes it obvious that reality needs not be as it is and is not the sole reality that can be" and "makes suffering unforgivable, pain an offence, humiliation a crime against humanity." This unhappiness is the source of power which enables women to voice their "disagreement" (Ranciere, 2004) in demanding equal cultural rights. This demand, in Ranciere's term, constitutes the beginning of democratic politics.

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