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문학석사 학위논문

American Feminism as Seen Through
the Lens of Korean Drama Fandom

미국의 한류 드라마 팬덤에 나타난
여성주의 연구

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[Abstract]

American Feminism as Seen Through the Lens of Korean Drama Fandom

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Both feminism and Hallyu (or the “Korean Wave”) have enjoyed high amounts of visibility in the United States in the past few years. However, previous research has shown that one branch of Hallyu contents, television series (“K-dramas”), are described by fans and researchers as causing tension with feminist beliefs. This study takes advantage of this situation to explore popular American feminism by examining the ways it discusses K-dramas as “unfeminist” media from a foreign, non-“Western” country. An audience study, comprising interviews with Americans who self-identify as K-drama fans and feminists or non-feminists, is conducted to accomplish this. In its focus and methodology, this study draws on the few examples of previous research into feminism among media audiences, as well as the larger tradition of feminist studies of audiences. At the same time, earlier studies of K-drama viewers in the U.S. and other countries provide perspective for my findings and make it possible to expand on

existing understandings of American Hallyu. A constructionist approach to data interpretation allows me both to examine how feminist and non-feminist K-drama fan identities are built in the space of the interview and to connect this to the larger cultural context.

I begin by investigating the contents of participants' discussions of feminism and gender issues in general. I consider the similarities and differences between feminist and non-feminists in this area, and the implications of these findings for U.S. feminism. The descriptions of participants' beliefs about gender issues, which largely center around gender equality, are then connected with their ways of discussing representations of gender in K-dramas. While much of feminist and non-feminist talk in this area is similar, and thus can be seen as representing a general American reaction to K-dramas, it is also possible to distinguish particularly feminist approaches. I point out the relationships these approaches have to factors like the online K-drama fan community and feminism's history with romance media. Then, by investigating participant answers to an explicit question about the connection between their feminist/non-feminist identity and their fandom, I determine the meaning of modern feminism for K-drama fans. After confirming that it is seen even by feminists as almost exclusively negative towards dramas, I argue for the adoption of more positive attitudes which also point out the ways that media such as dramas are useful or even friendly to feminism.

Finally, I explore how feminism deals with the fact that dramas are not just supposedly-unfeminist media, but unfeminist media from the non-"Western" country of South Korea. After examining participant descriptions of dramas' "Koreanness," or the connection between the shows and the real country of South Korea, I focus on how Koreanness is used by feminists

and some non-feminists to justify watching K-dramas despite their portrayal of the shows as in conflict with their beliefs on gender issues. The two ways that this is done, which relate to multiculturalism and a narrative of social “progress,” are criticized for their tendency to imply American superiority over South Korea. I point out that greater knowledge of forms of feminism sensitive to divisions besides that of gender, which are often better suited to deal with culture differences, would make it possible to avoid such problems. Noting that both these forms and the media-positive ones mentioned above are widespread in academic feminism, I conclude that action must be taken to make such alternative beliefs better-known outside of the academy.

Keywords: U.S. feminism, Hallyu, Korean television drama, audience study, fandom, feminist media study

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1 Introduction

1.1 Objectives

This study looks at the intersection of two movements currently gaining increased visibility in the United States: feminism and Hallyu (한류). The former, of course, is not new. At least since the movement to earn voting rights for women that stretches back into the 19th century, through the “second wave” of the 1960s and 1970s with its diverse and conflicting goals, and on (in a variety of forms) to today, feminism has long been a part of the American cultural landscape. And yet, from the start of the yearly anti-rape culture parade ‘Slutwalk’ in 2011, to pop star Beyonce declaring herself a feminist in 2013, to the nationwide Twitter discussion about difficulties women face under the hashtag “YesAllWomen” in 2014, the prominence of feminism seems to be increasing again – especially on the Internet – and more women and men seem to be declaring themselves part of it. This study explores popular understandings of feminism in the U.S. during this exciting time.

Like feminism, Hallyu, a term referring to the popularity of South Korean pop cultural contents outside of South Korea, also owes a lot of its increasing visibility in the United States to the Internet. “K-dramas” (television series), which along with “K-pop” (pop music) make up one of the two main branches of Hallyu in the U.S., are watched and discussed by fans mainly on the Internet. The fact that K-dramas are mainly consumed through the Internet and not broadcast television does not mean, however, that Hallyu is a negligible niche in the U.S.; it may not be mainstream, but

K-drama fans alone number in the millions (Heine, 2014, May 15). This study focuses on these K-drama fans. The choice to concentrate on this side of Hallyu was made because as 홍석경 (2014, p. 26) points out, dramas are believed to contain more of Koreans' "concerns and sensibilities"¹⁾ than K-pop. That these subtitled and clearly "foreign" television series are gaining popularity in a country that is much more famous for exporting television series is surprising. However, there has been very little research that has explored this phenomenon. Though the purpose of this research is not to offer a comprehensive answer to the question of why dramas are achieving popularity in the United States, it aims to contribute to an understanding of how American fans connect with them.

Feminism among media audiences in general is an under-researched subject. I have chosen to study it within K-drama fandom because I have long felt and noticed, as an American feminist and drama fan who is active online, that the two have a difficult relationship. Schulze (2013) touched on this fact in her study of English-speaking fans online. Through an examination of discussions about the "wrist-grab" (a [usually male] character grabbing, and sometimes dragging, a [usually female] character by the wrist), she found that these fans were likely to engage in explicit "self-positioning as a feminist" in order to criticize these scenes. She cites the example of a blogger who wrote, "I've always considered myself to be a feminist... I often find myself cringing when it comes to [dramas'] depictions of relationships between men and women" (Amanda, 2012, Aug. 21, in Schulze, 2013). In this way, many English-speaking online fans (at least some of whom are American) describe feminism as something that doesn't "fit" with K-dramas and yet does not seem to make it impossible

1) "고민과 감수성"

to watch them. This situation thus provides an opportunity to study American feminist ways of interacting with “non-feminist” media. When the factor of dramas’ being from South Korea is included, drama fandom also provides an opportunity to study feminist interactions with a foreign, non-“Western”²⁾ country. I explore these multiple themes through an analysis of interviews with both feminist and non-feminist Americans who are not of Korean descent and who identify as fans of K-drama.

The main objective of this complex study, then, is to investigate and critique modern popular American feminism, its forms, approaches to media, and views of a non-“Western” country, through an audience study of K-drama fans. The inclusion of non-feminists in the study will help to throw these into relief, as well as provide an opportunity to consider some of the challenges that feminism currently faces. This study’s secondary objective is to enhance understanding of the phenomenon of American K-drama fandom more generally, and thus of Hallyu in the United States. With these different-but-connected goals in mind, I have devised the following research questions.

First, “What are current understandings of and attitudes toward feminism among American K-drama fans?” Having asked study participants whether they identify as feminist and what that means to them, I will compare feminist and non-feminist descriptions of feminism’s meaning and place in society, and look for similarities (or a lack thereof) in the way that participants describe their beliefs about gender issues in the process of answering these questions. Patterns found in feminism or gender-related

2) In order to acknowledge that terms like “Western,” non-“Western” and “Third World” are controversial terms, I put them in quotation marks throughout this paper.

beliefs will be used to analyze the findings of later chapters.

The second question addressed by this study is, “How do American fans talk about gender in K-dramas?” I ask what it is in this area that Americans identify as important, and how they criticize or praise it. I will explore how the views on gender issues that participants espouse may predict or constrain what they say about representations of gender in K-dramas. I will also examine whether and how an explicit affiliation with feminism correlates with different ways of discussing this aspect of dramas, thereby revealing what a “feminist” way of talking about media is. Throughout, attention will be paid to how fans describe, imply, or avoid describing the pleasures of dramas.

I then ask, “What role does ‘Koreanness’ play in American fans’ talk about gender issues in dramas?” I hope to look at what situations are likely to bring a mention of the “real” South Korea and the purposes for which the connection between that and dramas is asserted, questioned, or denied. This will illuminate how some American feminist (and non-feminist) positions interact with a foreign culture.

The final question is, “What are the implications of the above for American feminism and for Hallyu in the United States?” With this question I will consider what kind of problems or opportunities are posed for both phenomena by the answers to the preceding two questions.

1.2 Background

In this section, I introduce the historical and theoretical background needed to understand the present study. I first explain the history of Hallyu, narrowing down to focus on K-dramas and the United States. I then review

previous audience studies in that area. The following sections summarize the current state of feminism in the United States and discuss previous feminist audience studies.

1.2.1 Hallyu

“Hallyu,” or the Korean Wave, is generally understood to refer to the international popularity of South Korean cultural products from the late 1990s until the present day. That simple definition belies the phenomenon’s complexity, however. Even in 2008, it “entail[ed] a complex range of transnational or translocal concerns and connection which unfold[ed] unevenly” (K. Lee, 2008) and it has only become wider in scope and more complicated since then. It has both cultural and economic sides, and is simultaneously or at various times an invasion that threatens the domestic culture of the nations in which it occurs (Kim, 2009), a nationalist media discourse within South Korea (김수아, 2013), a series of government policies and projects (홍석경, 2014), a catalyst for or reflection of pan-Asian solidarity (S. Lee and Ju, 2011), and a transcontinental grassroots trend driven by the Internet (홍석경, 2013). This study, because it takes as its subject drama fans in the United States, will focus on the last of these aspects.

Most scholars agree that Hallyu as a phenomenon can be said to have begun in 1997 when the television drama *What Is Love All About* (사랑이 뭐길래) found great popularity in China upon its broadcast on a major network (see, for example, Cho, 2011, and Shim, 2008). K-dramas quickly spread to broadcasters in other countries in the region, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Vietnam. South Korean movies also found success abroad in the early 2000s after the domestic blockbuster *Shiri* (쉬리) became a hit

in Japan and Hong Kong (Shim, 2008). The successful concerts of South Korean musicians in China, also around the turn of the century, appear to have been a large contributor to the visibility of the trend in the press (see for example, 지해범, 2000, Jul. 18). After a slight lull around 2002-3, the phenomenal success of the television drama *Winter Sonata* (겨울연가) in Japan and *Jewel in the Palace* (대장금) in ten different Asian countries (Kim, 2009) brought on the first crest of the wave. News stories appeared about women in Japan and Vietnam mobbing South Korean television stars visiting their countries (Faiola, 2006, Aug. 31) and the Chinese president announcing that he was a K-drama fan (C.-a. Park, 2005, Oct. 27). Exports of TV contents grew from around 42 million USD in 2003 (문화관광부, n.d.) to over 120 million USD in 2005 (문화관광부, 2006) Movie exports grew from around 7 million USD in 2000 to nearly 76 million USD in 2005 (KOFIC, 2006)

However, movies have yet to reach again the high point of 2005 (KOFIC, n.d.), and the growth rate in the export of dramas – although it has remained positive – also slowed for a time after that year (문화관광부, 2006; 문화체육관광부, 2009; 문화체육관광부, 2013). This may be due to the backlash that Hallyu faced beginning in 2005, which encompassed both popular discontent (especially in Japan) and government policies designed to limit the amount of South Korean media contents being imported (in Taiwan and China) (C.-a. Park, 2006, Jan. 16). By the late 2000s, the wave was being declared over or at least in serious danger (see, for example, Shim, 2010).

Then, around 2009, “Hallyu 2.0” emerged, and is considered to be ongoing at the time of this writing. In this phase, the major driving forces are dramas and pop music, and the scope has spread beyond Asia. While a

handful of K-pop artists were active internationally before this period, it is from this time that the number of artists performing abroad, the number of foreign concerts they hold, and the scope of the countries they hold them in have grown quickly. The annual exports of music grew a stunning 94.4% between 2008 and 2012 (문화체육관광부, 2013). Of course Psy, although not considered a typical representative of K-pop, also raised South Korean music's profile considerably with "Gangnam Style," a worldwide hit that became the first YouTube video to reach 1 billion views (Gruger, 2012, Dec. 21).

As for the United States, though older movies such as *Oldboy* have had some cult success and there are newspaper articles about Americans watching K-dramas from as far back as 2005 (for example, Ha, 2005, Oct. 18), Hallyu 2.0 and K-pop in particular make up the lion's share of its participation in Hallyu. This is largely thanks to various artists' concerts around the country and appearances on network television (Benjamin, 2015, Mar. 6), as well as the ease of watching K-pop videos on the Internet. However, as 홍석경 (2013) notes about France, music's popularity has in turn fed the popularity of dramas, as some fans have been pulled in by watching dramas in which their favorite K-pop stars appear. Dramas thus seem to be the current second largest component of Hallyu in the U.S. The composition of the Los Angeles session of KCON USA 2015, a "convention dedicated to bring 'All Things Hallyu' to the American fan base" (KCON-USA, 2015a) reflects this. While music-related events are the most numerous at 25, drama-related events are in second place with 17, followed by fashion/beauty-related events at 10, by my count (based on KCON-USA, 2015b). The convention, which grew from 10,000 attendees in its inaugural year of 2012 to 75,000 in two locations in 2015 (Benjamin, 2015, Aug.

10), is perhaps the single most visible representation of Hallyu in the U.S.

However, being Internet-based, much of Hallyu fandom takes place behind closed doors; this is especially true of dramas, as television is of course usually watched alone or in small numbers. In fact, because dramas are broadcast on U.S. television only in certain markets (Chung, 2011), most viewers watch them in an even more individualized manner, using computers or other devices to access legal and illegal websites that offer streaming and downloading of subtitled shows. Though the illegality of much of American drama consumption makes it difficult to find accurate viewing statistics, the premiere legal streaming site Drama Fever claims to have attracted 3.4 million viewers in April 2014 (Heine, 2014, May 15). Based on a combination of Drama Fever's site statistics and its own survey conducted in late 2014, the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) estimated that there are currently around 18 million Americans watching K-dramas (한국콘텐츠진흥원, 2014). In addition, only about 15% of Drama Fever's viewers are of Asian descent (S. Park, 2013), indicating that dramas' popularity is not simply the result of diaspora from South Korea and Asian countries with a history of Hallyu fandom. Finally, there are many U.S.-based websites dedicated to "recapping" (summarizing), explaining, and discussing dramas and providing related entertainment news. Reading and posting on these sites is a popular activity that has allowed a fan community of sorts to spring up. One of the most famous of these sites, Soompi.com, has more than 2.2 million posts on its "k-dramas & movies" forums as of July 2015 (Soompi, 2015). Thus, while they may not be nationwide phenomena like they have been in Asia, K-dramas are increasingly becoming a part of the American cultural landscape.

1.2.2 Previous studies of K-drama audiences

In this section, I will introduce previous academic explorations of K-dramas that are relevant to the present study. This study locates itself mainly in the tradition of audience studies, which examines “how people ‘read,’ use, and respond” (J. Kitzinger, 2004, p. 167) to a text. At the same time, because the online fan community surrounding dramas seems to both demonstrate and influence these audience-text interactions, I also take inspiration from the newer field of fan studies, which investigates such communities (Harrington and Bielby, 2005). The studies discussed below reflect these two foci.

The two previous studies that are closest to this one in terms of focus and context, respectively, are Schulze’s (2013) and 오미영’s (2014). Schulze’s study in particular, of how English-speaking fans on the Internet culturalize K-dramas, was one of the major inspirations for this study. As I explained in the introduction, she points that out that dramas bring forth not only gender-related, seemingly-feminist criticism from these fans, but often *explicitly* feminist criticism. In this way, discussions of dramas are a window onto English-speaking popular feminism, its concerns, and its view of non-“Western” cultures. The present study attempts to explore this phenomenon in greater detail in the specific context of the United States. (Though the nationality of many of those on the websites and blogs from which Schulze drew her data could not be known, a plurality - about 40% - of those who disclosed their nationality were American. Thus it is safe to assume that at least some of the criticisms that she describes were made by Americans.) I hope to answer questions that Schulze’s study raises, such as: Would feminist fans also mention feminism when talking about dramas “in real life”? What is feminism as fans understand it? Is feminist fandom always

expressed through criticism? Do non-feminist fans talk about dramas in a noticeably different way?

As for the first of these questions, 오미영 (2014)'s in-depth interviews with members of a Korean language exchange group in Southern California on their consumption of dramas and other Hallyu media do suggest that feminist criticism may be less common in a face-to-face situation. She reports nothing but positive comments about dramas, noting that participants say they like dramas' "wholesomeness and purity" (23)³⁾ in their focus on romance, as opposed to the violence and sexuality of American television, the close relationships between music and dramas, and the fact that drama series are comparatively short (again, relative to American television series). This makes the lack of feminist criticism seem less like a notable absence and more like the result of a choice to focus on why fans *like* these contents, not any ambivalence they might feel toward them. It may also be related to researcher's identity, as participants may have felt uncomfortable complaining about dramas (or other contents) to a South Korean person, especially in a way that implied problems with South Korean society. Still, her results give the impression that feminist fans are either not as common or not always as vocal as they seem in Schulze's study. Thus, in addition to providing a way to check whether the general viewing and fandom habits of this study's participants are shared with other American fans, 오미영's study also demonstrates how dramas are talked about by American fans when feminism and gender are not at issue.

Koreanness is also the focus of and touched on, respectively, in Schulze's and 오미영's studies. Schulze explains that fans' making claims about how the gender-related "problems" in dramas reflect the values of

3) "건전함과 순수함"

“real” Korean culture was a fairly common occurrence but also a source of conflict, as other fans would argue instead that dramas reflect only the imaginary and cliché-filled world of “K-dramaland.” In many cases, people with “lived experience” of Korean culture (having been raised in South Korea, having been raised in America by Korean parents, having lived in South Korea as an adult, etc.) stepped in to settle disputes about what is and is not “really” Korean. 오미영 simply writes that fans felt that through dramas they learned about “how South Korean people live, what South Korean society is like, and what the customs, traditions, or family relationships are like” (79⁴); she does not mention them disputing this connection, and this again suggests that the ambiguities of Hallyu were either not apparent in or not the focus of her study. However, she does thus highlight the point that Koreanness – in whatever form it is perceived – is one of the pleasures of dramas for foreign fans. This study will thus consider, like Schulze, different ways of explaining the connection between dramas and South Korea, with special attention to the function these have in building a feminist or non-feminist identity in the interview context, while also noting whether and how perceived Koreanness increases the pleasures of dramas.

In addition, 홍석경 (2013) offers a look at K-drama fandom in a relatively close cultural context with her ethnography of a French Internet community for drama fans, as well as quantitative and qualitative research into French Hallyu fans more generally. She finds their viewing and online discussion habits to be much the same as those of the English-speaking sphere, with the notable exception of a lack of feminist criticism. Unlike

4) “한국 사람이 어떻게 살아가는지, 한국 사회의 모습이 어떠한지, 관습이나 전통 및 가족관계는 어떠한지”

오미영, 홍석경 does note the existence of other criticisms of dramas (for example, of exaggerated comic acting) by foreign fans, so this absence is conspicuous. The fans do describe the gender roles in dramas as somewhat old-fashioned, comparing them to those written centuries ago and now found in childhood storybooks, but it is not clear whether this type of characterization extends into criticism. She also finds these fans giving many of the same reasons that the American fans in 오미영's (2014) study do – series length, use of music, and focus on romance – for liking dramas. Here again, the non-sexual way that romance is portrayed receives praise for its contrast to the fans' native culture, although (especially male) characters' sexual purity is seen as excessive in some cases.

A further addition to this list of joys is the perception that dramas are largely made for a (heterosexual) female audience. 홍석경 notes that the attractiveness of male drama stars is one of the most common reasons that the mostly-female French fans give for liking dramas, and points out that dramas encourage this kind of feeling by providing “fan service” scenes in which, for example, a muscular actor is shown taking a shower (pp. 314-315). Viewers appreciate that, as she argues, the masculinity of the actor's body is used not to show “male superiority,” as with Hollywood stars, but to “give pleasure to audiences” (p. 317)⁵, and particularly to them as heterosexual women. She argues that this is part of K-drama men's - and, perhaps even more so, K-pop artists' - presentation of a new kind of masculinity, one that is similar to metrosexuality but more overtly masculine. Female viewers find this appealing, and thus feel that dramas cater to them in a way that Western media contents do not. Particularly because it could be framed as a feminism-friendly feature, I hope to

5) “남성적 우월성”; “수용자들에게 즐거움을 주기”

explore feminist and non-feminist interactions with these and other examples of dramas' quality of being "for women."

The final points that 홍석경's study raises relate to Koreanness. First, though many of the French fans are as suspicious as Schulze's (2013) English-speaking fans as to the accuracy of dramas' portrayal of South Korean life, she notes that they are still very interested in this. Even pointing out the stereotypical aspects of dramas and joking about the unlikelihood that they represent South Korean society can be sources of pleasure. Also, while it is not clear if this is explicit in French fans' talk or writings about dramas, 홍석경 makes the intriguing argument that Koreanness functions as a kind of buffer that eases tensions created when watching. She brings this up in reference to adult fans of young "idol" actors (those who are also pop singers, and who are usually in their mid-teens to early twenties). Being infatuated with such young men could be considered "improper" (304)⁶ in France, but the very distance of the country of origin of the contents in which these men are featured and thus impossibility of the realization of their fantasies relieves this possible discomfort. In this way, Koreanness, even when viewed cynically, offers fans opportunities for pleasure, as well as a way to avoid uneasiness caused by some aspect of their own cultural context not "fitting" with that of South Korean media. I hope to determine whether this use of Koreanness to mitigate culturally-tied discomfort extends beyond views on age-appropriate fandom to encompass views on proper (feminist or non-feminist) gender roles and relations.

Finally, there have been several qualitative interview-based studies of Asian audiences of K-dramas, mostly from Hallyu 1.0, that touch on the

6) "불온한"

themes of gender issues and transcultural understanding in ways relevant to this study. For one, they throw into relief the fact that excitement about Koreanness is tied to location or perceptions of culture, as fans in these studies are more likely to talk about how dramas convey shared Asian values than express curiosity about difference. For another, they have corroborated the tendency to see dramas and feminism as incompatible. Lin and Kwan (2005)'s female Hong Kong fans, Lin and Tong's (2008) female Hong Kong and Singaporean fans, and Chan and Xueli's (2011, though the research was conducted in 2006) Singaporean female fans all describe enjoying the portrayal of romance in dramas, naming in particular the chivalrous men and the lack of explicit sexuality. However, they all also characterize these relationships or related elements like the submissive femininities of dramas as irreconcilable with women's current status in the real world, at least in their own society. Chan and Xueli's participants, in particular, use dramas (as well as personal sources and in some cases, trips to South Korea), to argue that South Korea is a "patriarchal and 'male chauvinistic' society" (296), and contrast it with Singapore, where "men and women are on an equal footing" (300). In all three studies, modern women's equality is described as being proven by their increased workplace participation and success. Obviously, it is not just the English-speaking Internet that makes seemingly-feminist criticism of dramas, nor is such criticism exclusive to Hallyu 2.0.

However, while the authors call such criticism "feminist," it is not clear if the women they talked to view it the same way. Though feminism likely influenced the cultural contexts from which these fans were speaking, they themselves might very well have disavowed feminism if asked. By making participants' feminist or non-feminist affiliation explicit in this

study, I hope to distinguish arguments and descriptions which are perceived as feminist by participants from those which merely seem feminist to me. This will provide a clearer outline of how feminism is understood in the United States. The presence of non-feminist participants will both allow me to consider whether such a social division leads to different interactions with Hallyu among those from the same country (a point that seems to have been largely ignored by previous studies), and make possible a look at how formerly-feminist ideas may have become a depoliticized part of the general cultural context.

Another point that the studies above demonstrate is that in describing South Korea, participants usually describe their own countries as well, in contrast. Thus, feminist and non-feminist characterizations of the United States will be considered in this study. I will also explore the comparison thus made between the two countries, paying special attention to the element of time. The associations that the three studies above describe, between the past of one's own society and South Korea's supposed present, is discussed further in S. Lee and Ju (2011). The authors claim that the Japanese fans they interviewed find a sense of "Asianness" in dramas, but the quotes they provide to support this actually seem to highlight instead their secondary claim that dramas play on fans' nostalgia for a past Japan in which human ties were supposedly valued more. Contrasting this with South Korean fans' opinions that dramas do reflect (current) "Asian" values, the authors suggest that the different sense of time in the two countries' fans may be due to Japan being further along in modernization, which they equate with Westernization. Dramas' Koreanness thus makes possible what Jung (2010), also writing about Japanese fans, terms "counter-coevality," or "a colonial gaze that sees

temporal lag” (39). The presence of such a gaze in the studies of other Asian fans above suggests that it does not necessarily come from a colonial relationship, but it does seem to entail a similar sense of superiority. This time gap is not as clear in the studies of “Western” audiences, although it is somewhat implied in 홍석경’s (2013) French fans’ description of the romance in dramas, and 오미영 (2014, p. 68) mentions that American fans say that dramas have new elements but also something that “American contents used to have but no longer do”⁷⁾, without specifying what it is. As within several types of *academic* feminism there have long been warnings against assuming that one’s own country has “evolved” further than other (especially non-“Western”) countries (see, for example, Mohanty, 1988), the way that temporality is talked about in this study, especially among feminist participants, will be one area of interested inquiry.

Thus the elements found in previous studies that this study will focus on are feminism (both explicit and implicit) among K-drama fans, fans’ portrayals of the connection between dramas and “real” Korean culture and this Koreanness’s tendency to provide pleasure, ease tension, and foster counter-coevality, and dramas’ other pleasures such as wholesome romance and catering to women. Though my primary concern is these elements’ significance for American feminism, I also explore the implications of my findings for K-drama fandom and Hallyu in the U.S., as I stated in the introduction. The two main focuses in this area, as the research introduced above would suggest, will be the reasons that fans give for liking (or disliking) dramas and their descriptions of South Korea; a

7) “미국 문과 콘텐츠가... 예전에는 가지고 있었지만 지금은 가지고 있지 않은”

later section in this chapter also cover some basic information about the Hallyu habits and histories of this study's participants.

1.2.3 Popular feminism in the United States

In this section, I will briefly introduce the current state of popular feminism in the United States. I define popular feminism as feminism among “average” people (those who are not academic or professional activist feminists), and with this in mind, also include some consideration of discussions of feminism happening in the public sphere.

Academic feminists in English-speaking countries have been worried about for the state of popular feminism for at least the last twenty years (see, for example, Faludi, 2009, and McRobbie, 2009). Walby (2011, p. 14) provides a comprehensive overview of the problems said to erode support for feminism from within and without: “‘backlash’ that seeks to re-domesticate women; attacks on the gains of maternalist feminism; the prioritisation of diversity over inequality; co-option into postfeminism by transforming feminist demands for sexual liberation into raunch culture; [and] incorporation by neoliberalism.”

Walby also declares, though, that feminism is “vibrant” and “taking powerful new forms” (1) despite these challenges, and indeed, studies of feminism “on the ground” have only partially born out the pessimism of some academic feminists. Houvouras and Scott Carter (2008), summarizing other studies, point out that the percentages of Americans who express support for “egalitarian gender roles, gender equality, and the ‘women’s movement’” have only increased since the 1970s (235). A poll conducted in early 2015 found that 85% of people believe in “equality for women,” and 76% believe that this has not yet been achieved (PerryUndem, 2015, pp. 15-

16). This should temper concerns that this is a “postfeminist” era in which most believe that “feminism is no longer needed” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 8). However, also in keeping with previous studies, the poll reports that the percentage of those who actually identify as feminist is much lower, at a mere 18% (PerryUndem, 2015, p. 15).

One cause of such gaps, studies have consistently found, is that not everyone sees feminism as representing a belief in equal opportunity for men and women; that is, as more or less that which is called “liberal feminism” (Tong, 2009, p. 12). Instead, non-feminists employ what Quinn and Radtke (2006) call “extremist feminism” to explain their rejection of it. The American college students in the study done by Houvouras and Scott Carter (2008) were more explicit than Quinn and Radtke’s Canadian women about what this extreme form of feminism entailed: non-feminists in the former’s study “were more likely to define a feminist as one who supports female superiority, dislikes men, discriminates based on gender, has negative personal characteristics, and is lesbian or butch” (234). These responses indicate that unpleasant, homophobic stigma against feminism may be one factor that keeps Americans from associating themselves with it. Words like “superiority” and “discriminate” also highlight that one of the central factors in the choice to identify as feminist or non-feminist is the perception of which side promotes equality. (Alternatively, a claim of promoting equality could be used to justify the decision that has already been made based on a factor such as the stigma.) While to some extent this focus on equality seems to come from the researchers themselves in these studies, it also must be acknowledged that equality is often a central factor in debates over social justice in the United States (see for example, Chapter 3 of Bacchi, 1996).

In addition to stigma and differing interpretations of equality, Houvouras and Scott Carter suggest that the gap in feminist identity might be due to a perception among some non-feminists that being a feminist involves political activism, in which they do not engage (251). Finally, Zucker and Bay-Cheng (2010) propose that in some cases there is a “critical ideological divide” between feminists and non-feminists based on the latter’s “values favoring adherence to social conventions and norms, their lower prioritization of social justice and equality, and their comparable degrees of support of social hierarchy and meritocracy” (1915). Both groups may *believe in* gender equality, but they differ in the reasons for this belief and in corollary beliefs about the extent of current gender inequality and the actions necessary to resolve it; this affects their decision to claim the feminist label.

Though the recent poll results above do suggest that no large changes have taken place recently among the American populace, there has certainly been an upswing in public attention given to feminism in the United States within the last few years. One reason for this is an increasing number of celebrities, both male and female, taking on (or sometimes, repudiating) a feminist identity. In addition to Beyonce’s striking mid-performance announcement, Jennifer Lawrence, Taylor Swift, Emma Watson, and others have come forward as feminists (Gay, 2014, Oct. 10), each time causing a flurry of media activity. (Swift’s declaration, in particular, echoed the studies above, as she contrasted her current understanding of feminism as wanting “equal rights and equal opportunities” with her past belief that it meant “that you hate men” [Hoby, 2014 Aug. 23].) The interest in celebrity feminism has grown so large that TIME magazine included “feminist” in an online poll of words that should be “banned” in 2015, purportedly because

“issues” should be more important than whether or not a celebrity claims a certain label. Then - perhaps proving feminists’ growing power online - the magazine later apologized for putting the word in the poll, as “its inclusion has become a distraction from the important debate over equality and justice” (Steinmetz and Gibbs, 2014 Nov. 12).

This growing online power is especially apparent in social media. Social-media based feminist activity, particularly on Twitter, has become a prominent part of contemporary feminism. Perhaps the most famous example of this, the #YesAllWomen campaign that was begun in response to a misogynistic shooting rampage in California in May 2014, amassed in its first four days more than 1.5 million Tweets about sexism on personal and social levels (Makarechi, 2014 May 27, in Thrift, 2014). This and other feminist hashtags “have made an indelible mark on the popular vernacular and mainstream discourse” (Portwood Stacer and Berridge, 2014, p. 1090).

In addition, intersectionality – awareness of the “interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p. 68) - has become one of the keywords of online feminism, in my experience. Whereas academic feminism still struggles to implement the concept despite vocal support for it (Davis, 2008), the ease with which the voices of all types of people can be heard and amplified in media makes it a relatively conducive environment for the consideration of difference that intersectionality promotes. Platforms that allow for in-depth discussion, in particular, “provid[e] a space where feminists can learn from each other about why things some feminists see as harmless can be hurtful and offensive to others” (Thelandersson, 2014, p. 529) because of their dissimilar

backgrounds and social positions. Thus while the studies above show that the dominance of equality-centric liberal feminism (at least as the intentional public face of the movement) in the United States largely continues, popular feminism may now be more “difference-sensitive” - attuned to the problems of diverse groups of women - than it has been in the past.

K-drama fans’ discussions of feminism and dramas will be analyzed with consideration of this social context. In addition, I will explore how their characterizations of feminism show a continuation or break with the popular understanding of feminism that previous studies have found, and discuss possible reasons for the findings. Finally, the analysis of how their descriptions of feminism correlate with certain ways of talking about dramas will expand the field of knowledge about the concrete effects of specific feminist (or non-feminist) approaches.

1.2.4 Feminist audience studies

This section provides an overview of feminist audience research relevant to the present study. “Feminist audience/reception studies” has usually meant a feminist perspective on the audience study. For example, many explored what kind of relationships female audiences have with certain texts or genres, especially those that are considered problematic by the feminist academic herself or others (see for example Radway, 1991, on romance novels and Seiter et al, 1989, on soap operas). This approach has received criticism from Ang (1996) and others for its tendency to draw a line between “ordinary” women and the feminist researcher who knows that conversion to feminism would solve all of their problems. It is partially in response to this criticism that “feminist audience studies” more similar to the present one, in which feminism *among* audiences is the target of

inquiry, have come out. Two such studies offer particularly relevant notions to consider for this study.

Claims that audiences are making use of a feminist discourse can be found in other studies (like the studies of Asian K-drama fans in the previous section, and in an American context, Press, 1991), but Thomas (2002) appears to be the first to examine it in detail. Her study asks how British fans of two British texts (one television series and one radio series) construct their identities through talk about them. Though she does not confirm that these participants identify as feminists, she argues that “feminist subcultural capital” is being used by some participants and by herself in two of her focus-group studies. That is, by criticizing the gender roles and relations in the object of their fandom, they can take on the subject position of “critical reader, whose status in a feminist alternative culture gives her permission to enjoy ‘ideologically unsound’ popular texts” (78). This criticism (for example, of the oversexualization of female characters, or lack of lesbian characters) is often done in a humorous way, and indeed for some participants appears to be part of the pleasure of being a fan, as they say they engage in this kind of criticism regularly with people they know. However, Thomas also cautions against drawing too firm a line between a feminist “subculture” and a “mainstream,” noting that it is mainly the well-educated or even professional academics - i.e., holders of mainstream cultural capital - who express feminist opinions.

Another part of Thomas’s study that is particularly relevant to mine is the complicated relationship she notes between seemingly-feminist viewers and the romance aspect of one of the texts, the television series *Inspector Morse*. In *Morse*, the title character is frequently shown genteelly courting women without success. While the long-term unimportance of female

characters that this leads to is a source of critical humor in one focus group that discusses the show, Thomas argues that the way that participants joke about it also signifies a genuine attraction to the character's vulnerability. She writes that his being portrayed as ultimately unfilled without love "seem[s] to be providing the beginnings of a feminist fantasy where female power can be combined with romance" (86). In this way, certain forms of romance are not necessarily at odds with feminism, and can even be a source of pleasure for the feminist fan.

Petersen (2012), one of the very few who takes the focus on feminism in audiences (or in this case, among readers) even further, is also concerned with romance. She asks how young, self-identified feminist American women - including herself - get pleasure from *Twilight*, the series of romance-focused young adult novels that has what she calls "conservative, regressive, decidedly postfeminist values" (51). Though she is studying feminists, she defines the (American) cultural climate as one of postfeminism, in which feminism has become either defined as respecting whatever choice women make or seen as irrelevant, since gender equality has already been achieved.

Petersen first examines her participants' email responses to the novels' central romance. Similar to Thomas' feminist fans of *Inspector Morse*, the participants explain that they like the main male character's "devotion" (57) to the main female character. Unlike Thomas, Petersen argues that this reflects not feminist desires but "desires that have been repressed" (56) by feminist politics, among other pressures. I believe that this difference in interpretation of a similar pleasure may spring from the widespread perception that the *Twilight* lead's attitude is unacceptably paternalistic and his behavior controlling (Taylor, 2014). This suggests that,

while the fantasy of being desired appeals to feminists (as well as to others, presumably), the particular behaviors and thus the power dynamic that accompany that desire can make the fantasy more or less compatible with feminism.

Notice also that both Thomas' and Petersen's discussions of audiences' reactions to the romance in their texts touch on the historical tension between feminism and romance media. Early second-wave feminism's approach to romance media was marked by outright "antipathy and dismissiveness" (Gill, 2007, p. 220), but more nuanced studies that attempted to take seriously, and consider the positive aspects of, the pleasures that female fans get from romance media started coming out in the 1980s (for example, Radway, 1991). Romance media itself also began to "incorporat[e] many of the themes of liberal feminism" (Gill, 2007, p. 226) at around that time, as heroines became more autonomous and their ideal relationships more egalitarian (Jones, 1986 in Gill, 2007, p. 226). Since then, feminists have been debating the genre's "pleasure and danger," as Johnson (2007) argues that they have been doing with regard to mass media more generally. Thanks to the Internet, this discussion has spread past academic feminism to become open to anyone interested in romance media; there as well, arguments for both its problems and its advantages in comparison with other types of media can be found (see Gill, 2007, p. 224).

Given this widespread knowledge of tension between feminism and romance media, it is perhaps unsurprising that Petersen argues that "the single best way to characterize feminist readers' response to *Twilight* is *ambivalence*" (61; emphasis in original). Respondents go on to criticize the main female character's passivity and absorption in her relationship, as well as the text's perceived pro-life and pro-abstinence messages. Petersen

explains how some readers deal with this conflict by employing “methods of compartmentalization” (62) such as separating the text from their beliefs about real life gender issues or simply appreciating some parts while keeping in mind the problematic implications of others. She suggests that it is the need to ease this ambivalence that also leads some participants to argue that the postfeminist aspects of *Twilight* are valuable because they can be used to open up a dialogue about feminist issues, especially with young (and presumably non-feminist) fans.

Like Petersen’s, this study focuses on self-identified feminist audiences. However, it differs from hers in that I ask what feminism means to the participants. She seems to imply that doing so would “limit or legislate the definition of what feminism could or could not mean” (52), but I do not think this is necessarily the case. There is no reason that describing and looking for patterns in how the participants understand feminism requires passing judgment on what is and is not truly feminist. In addition, it allows a look at how certain feminist views are “put into practice” when the participants discuss dramas. Another way that this study diverges from Petersen’s is that it includes non-feminist participants, which enables some amount of comparison between feminist and non-feminist views. A third difference is that, of course, I add the aspect of the media coming from another culture.

However, both Thomas’s and Petersen’s studies suggest a variety of aspects to consider while analyzing K-drama fans’ talk: how perceived power dynamics affect enjoyment of romance, feminist tension with romance, feminist subcultural capital (feminist criticism as a sign of being a critical reader and as a source of pleasure), and compartmentalization as a way of reconciling feminist views with a perceived non-feminist text. These last

two, especially, will be explored in greater detail in an attempt to refine and flesh out their use as analytical tools.

1.3 Research participants

Participant recruitment ran during the month of January 2015. I attempted to attract participants through a variety of Internet-based methods, including posting a call for them on Facebook fan pages for dramas and directly contacting leaders of groups in California (the place where in-person interviews were conducted) which meet in person to share their interest in South Korea. However, there were only three methods that actually seemed to work. The first was having a friend who runs The Grand Narrative, a blog dedicated to “Korean Feminism, Sexuality, and Popular Culture,” post my advertisement on his blog, Facebook page, and Twitter. The majority of participants who told me how they found me said it was this way. The other way that several participants mentioned was through my posts on Dramabeans, a website dedicated to “recapping” (summarizing in detail) and discussing K-dramas. I posted advertisements for participants on their weekly “Open Topic” thread for three weeks in a row. Finally, there was the “snowball” method, in which a few participants were referred to me by other participants.

My recruiting ads, a typical version of which can be seen in Appendix 1, specified that I was looking for Americans who have spent little or no time in South Korea. I chose to define “Americans” not by citizenship but by those who “have spent all or most of [their lives] in the U.S.” in order to exclude recent immigrants who would be less influenced by the American social context. Arguably, excluding non-Americans, new

Americans, and Americans of Korean descent is drawing arbitrary lines through a very diverse fandom. I chose to do this because, as I explained in the introduction, I am interested in how Americans talk about a culture with which they have little personal experience.

Also, it is important to note that I did not specifically seek feminist participants, and carefully avoided mention of representations of gender. This is because I was at first more interested in whether gender would “naturally” come up during interviews with “average” fans. However, it belatedly occurred to me that having advertised using The Grand Narrative (which was a choice born mostly out of desperation, as other methods that I tried did not seem to be working) probably skewed my participants to include many who would be interested in gender issues. At 14 feminists and 7 non-feminists, I certainly ended up with a higher percentage of feminists than is generally found in the population at large, according to previous studies (see the overview presented in Houvouras and Scott Carter, 2008), but whether there is more of them than a representative sample of all K-drama fans would include, I of course do not know.

In Tables 1 and 2, respectively, I have provided basic demographic information about feminist and non-feminist participants. Besides this separation, which is made for ease of reference, I do not go into the participants’ understanding of feminism in this or the next section because it is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

Table 1. Feminist participants

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Level of education	Occupation	Year started watching	Number of series watched
Maylinn	18	Caucasian	High school diploma in progress	High school student, waitress	2013	Approx. 5
Greta	18	American, Caucasian	Bachelor's in progress	Student	2012	5-6
Lillian	25	White	Master's degree	Unemployed/jewelry design	2012	Approx. 11
Faith	27	Caucasian/ Middle Eastern	Bachelor's degree	Actor/teacher	2014	30-40
Amanda	27	Scottish, Japanese, Swedish	Bachelor's degree	Financial	2009	6-7
Celia	28	African American	Master's degree	Instructional/Media technology	2009	Approx. 85
Tanya	28	White/Native American	Master's degree in progress	Student	2011	20+
Elliot	30	African American	Law degree	Policy researcher	2010	Approx. 50
Rose	38	White (of Western European descent)	Law degree	Attorney	2007	Approx. 47
Sarah	38	White (of Western European descent)	Master's degree	City planner	2007	23
Kelly	39	Chinese	Master's degree	Author	2009	100+
Laureen	40	White	Two master's degrees, some doctorate-level study	Teacher, freelance writer	2014	Approx. 35
River	40	Caucasian	Bachelor's degree	Administrative/dental office	2012	87
Janice	69	Italian-Austrian American	Master's degree	Museum director	2010	50-100

Table 2. Non-feminist participants

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Level of education	Occupation	Year started watching	Number of series watched
Mei	24	Chinese	Law degree in progress	Student	2009	87
Iris	25	Hispanic	Master's in progress	Prep supervisor	2005	20+
Hannah	28	Caucasian/ Hispanic	Associate's degree	Administrative assistant	2013	Approx. 20
Donna	37	Caucasian (American mutt – no particular heritage)	Bachelor's degree	Technical editor	2011	100+
Brenda	Early 40s	American, but mainly English, German, French, Dutch, Scotch, and a bit of Native American	Some university	Homeschooling mom, part-time bakery worker	2013	93
Nancy	57	White	Bachelor's degree, some master's level study	Writer	2011	98
Patricia	63	Caucasian	Bachelor's degree	Museum director, author, speaker	2013	105

The participants whose lines are shaded were those whom I interviewed online. As my in-person research was conducted in California, this means that every person whose line is unshaded lives in California, and every person whose line is shaded does not. The participants who do not live in California are scattered pretty evenly across the continental United States. I do not include a “Gender” column because every single participant identified as female with the partial exception of Amanda, who said that she does not mind being referred to by male or female pronouns and explained,

“I would say that I have a body which is called ‘female’, and I present myself in ways that are comfortable to me, whether it be considered ‘womanly’ or ‘manly.’” Also, though I standardized and edited for clarity participants’ answers in other sections, I have left their answers to the “Ethnicity” section untouched, because I do not feel comfortable editing this sensitive detail.

Obviously, the one thing feminist and non-feminist participants have in common - besides being K-drama fans who have spent most of their lives in the United States - is that they are all women. This is interesting because male fans do exist; S. Park (2013) claims that for the streaming site DramaFever, at least, they make up close to half of viewers. Schulze (2013) guessed the ratio of women to men active on the websites that she examined to be four to one. This is still obviously a greater representation for men than can be found in this study, but I believe that the three ratios can be set on a continuum that shows that the less anonymous the activity, the less willing men are to participate. Dramas thus have a public image as a women’s genre, as several participants also mention in their interviews. Again, this quality is something that previous research has pointed out (see the discussion of 홍석경, 2013, in Section 1.2.2 above) and that this study will explore.

There is a wide range of ages and a variety of ethnicities; racially, what could be called “White” has a slight majority. In this way, the composition of participants skews older and whiter (principally at the expense of Asians and Hispanics) than existing U.S. fan statistics describe (S. Park, 2013; 한국콘텐츠진흥원, 2014). All of the participants except one have college degrees or plans to get them, and about half have or are getting postgraduate degrees; the feminist participants have a slightly higher

level of education on average. Though I have not displayed it on the table because of space constraints, I also collected information about marital status: of the feminist participants, one is engaged to be married, three are married, and two are divorced; of the non-feminist participants, two are married and one is divorced. I did not ask about children, but during the interviews, three feminist participants and three non-feminist participants mentioned having children. Obviously, percentage-wise, non-feminists seem more likely to be married and/or have children.

Only three started watching dramas before 2009, placing the majority of them firmly in Hallyu 2.0. There does seem to be a slight tendency for young participants to have watched fewer dramas, and also for feminists to have watched fewer dramas.

Before moving to the next section, I would like to introduce some general features of participants' descriptions of their relationships with dramas, Hallyu, and South Korea. Unless otherwise noted, the generalizations that follow describe both feminist and non-feminist participants.

About half of the participants discovered K-dramas online; in a slight majority of these cases it was because a video streaming site such as Netflix or Hulu recommended it to them. Most of the remaining participants were introduced to dramas by a friend or family member. A few gave specific reasons for starting to watch dramas, such as to study the Korean language, but most gave no reason or said they were simply curious or looking for something new. Several, including some of those who received recommendations from video streaming sites, also connected their drama watching with earlier consumption of Japanese anime or manga, giving the impression that these had opened them up to East Asian media contents.

This last connection was also found by 오미영 (2014) in her study

of Southern Californian Hallyu fans. The parallels between the participants in this study and that one are even stronger in the area of current drama-related habits. For example, the participants in this study also watch dramas almost exclusively online. They expressed a preference for the legitimate streaming sites like DramaFever, Viki, and Hulu, but when a drama they want to see is not available there or not available fast enough, they admitted that they may seek out an illegal site. They go to a variety of sites that recap and discuss dramas; in fact, one runs and one is a contributor to such sites. Dramabeans seems to be the most popular among these, and I do not think this is only because it was one of my sources of recruitment; it was mentioned frequently even by participants who had not found me through it.

In addition to drama-focused sites, participants also said they discuss or read about dramas on general-interest social networking sites like Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook. For about a third of participants (three feminists and four non-feminists), this activity and the sense of community and fun that it provides is one of the major pleasures of dramas. However, talk about the online community was notable for the fact that several participants, even some of those who are enthusiastic members of it, distanced themselves from what they described as the “average” K-drama fan: a silly, sometimes-rude teenager. (The teenage part of this, at least, is supported by an Internet survey conducted by the Korea Creative Content Agency, in which those between the ages of 16 and 20 made up by far the largest group of respondents [한국콘텐츠진흥원, 2014]). Thus, while every participant admitted to some experience of having read content related to dramas online, many were quick to name the sites that they do not visit or to downplay their involvement with the online fandom in general.

Many mentioned reading or watching content related to Korea more generally, though in many cases, this is to provide an explanation for what they see in dramas. Again, Dramabeans (which is run by two Korean American women) looms large in this area; Eat Your Kimchi, a video-focused site about Korean culture run by two Canadians who live in South Korea, and Ask a Korean, a question-and-answer blog run by a Korean man who immigrated to the United States as a teenager, are also frequently cited. (Notice that all three of these demonstrate Schulze's [2013] point that fans are most comfortable connecting themselves with sources that have "lived experience.") In answer to the question, "What do you do when you see something in dramas that you don't understand or want to know more about?" however, the actual most frequent answer was some form of "Google it," indicating that many participants are not attached to one particular site for information. If the portrayals of South Korea in dramas and on the Internet clash, fans tend to trust the latter, especially if the source claims lived experience.

As the sentence about going to illegal sites hints, many participants said they watch dramas "as they air"; that is, they watch each episode as soon as it is available instead of "marathoning" them (waiting until the drama has finished airing and watching the episodes in quick succession). Most of the fans who have seen more than thirty dramas used a similar narrative in describing the trajectory of their fandom: they started by marathoning older dramas, and then as they became more passionate about dramas, they came to watch new ones as each episode aired as well.

In addition to watching dramas, participants discussed watching South Korean variety shows and movies, enjoying K-pop, eating (and less frequently, cooking) Korean food, and studying the Korean language (both

on- and offline). This supports 오미영's (2014) findings that dramas lead to, or in some cases, reflect, a more general interest in Korean culture. K-pop fandom leads to watching a drama featuring an idol singer, a dinner scene in a drama leads to an interest in trying Korean food, a destination variety show leads to a wish to travel to a certain place in South Korea, and so on. To focus on the last and most major of these for a moment, several participants said they planned to travel to South Korea in the near future, and I know that at least three have done so since the interviews were conducted.

In fact, three more had already visited South Korea before the interviews: Rose and Sarah for eight days, and Donna for two weeks. Donna went mainly to see the musical version of a drama that she liked, and Rose and Sarah went to attend a Korean friend's wedding. These visits played surprisingly small roles in the interviews, rarely coming up outside the times that I explicitly asked about them; this may be because visiting the country as tourists did not give many special insights into the culture. The personal "lived experience" that did seem to play an important role was, for Rose and Sarah as well as many others, having Korean friends and acquaintances. About half of participants told of talking about dramas and Korean culture with Korean and Korean American friends and language exchange partners; a few also mentioned non-Korean acquaintances who had themselves lived in South Korea; and a few listed acquaintances from other places in Asia as sources of help with understanding an "Asian" culture of which Korea is presumed to be a part. They frequently compared what they saw in dramas with what they heard from their friends or saw from the way they lived. In this way, around half of participants had some non-Internet sources of knowledge about South Korea.

In addition, as far as discussing dramas “in real life” goes, half of the participants referenced a relative or friend not of Korean descent with whom they regularly talk about dramas. Sixteen made comments that indicated that they bring up dramas with other people as well; as with those who claim enthusiastic participation in the online fandom, this group is disproportionately non-feminist. Thus there does appear to be a connection between non-feminism and willingness to be known (to me or others) as involved in drama fandom. At the same time, feminists are represented proportionately among the eight who said they go so far as to encourage non-fans to try watching dramas, which indicates that feminists who are open about their fandom are just as enthusiastic as non-feminists. As for the reaction that public declarations of fandom bring, about a third of participants described common reactions to be those of confusion (as in, “Why would you like those if you’re not Korean?”) or suspicion (as in, “Do you have a fetish for Asian men?”). Still, many expressed a belief that drama fandom in the U.S. would only continue to grow, although it would likely not attract many male fans.

Finally, all but a few said they watch at least some American-made media contents, and these ran the gamut from primetime soaps similar in content to K-dramas, to police procedurals, science fiction shows, and nature documentaries. One notable pattern in the other contents that participants mentioned watching, however, was the dependable presence of media not just from other countries but from other *Asian* countries, another point which 오미영 (2014) and 홍석경 (2013) also found. As explained above, several found dramas after first becoming fans of Japanese contents, though some no longer consume these. Other participants mentioned exploring other Asian (Chinese, Taiwanese) television series after starting with K-dramas.

The basic details of participants' fandom outlined in this section above suggest some preliminary implications for Hallyu in the United States. One is that the importance of the online fan community cannot be overlooked. Though there is discomfort about being associated with some of its members, it is a major source of pleasure and of information about K-dramas. Websites provide background to some elements of dramas and dispute the realism of other elements. Another is that drama fandom is part of a larger interest in South Korea and in many cases, in East Asia. The more general interest in South Korea is often encouraged by the interconnectedness of the various branches of Hallyu. This point suggests that the phenomenon does have the potential to continue growing, as the fans themselves believe. However, the more general interest in East Asia may indicate that Hallyu in the U.S. is merely the latest step in a path through East Asian contents. This path, made immeasurably easier to traverse by the advent of the Internet, started with the earlier popularity of Japanese media, and may already be starting to extend past Hallyu to China, Taiwan, or other countries. In like manner, this East Asian boom is also part of an even more general globalization of TV series that also includes Indian and Latin American contents (홍석경, 2013 p. 237). Therefore, this larger interest may be a less positive sign for Hallyu's future. Chapter 5 will consider these topics further in light of the study's other results.

1.4 Methodology

I conducted nineteen semi-structured interviews from late January to early March of 2015. Of these, nine were done in-person, at locations like the participant's home (one), university (one), workplace (two), or a café

(five). The other ten were conducted from mine and the participant's homes using Skype's video-calling function. The length of the interviews ranged from twenty-six minutes to two hours and ten minutes; the average length was about one hour. One in-person interview and one Skype interview each involved two people who already knew each other; hence a total of twenty-one people were interviewed once each.

I recorded each interview and transcribed them myself, except for all of one and part of another, which were done by acquaintances familiar with the research. I checked and edited those two transcripts for accuracy. The Skype calls themselves had almost no technical problems, but the computer program I used to record them unfortunately had a few. These were mostly of the nature of small skips that I was able to fill in from memory; however, a large part of the recording of Mei's interview was of such poor quality that I was able to transcribe only the gist of what she was saying from my notes and from memories sparked by the few recognizable words. During the interviews, I took short notes of keywords, further questions to ask, and impressions of the participants during interviews, and wrote longer notes of my impressions of each participant and the tone of each interview immediately after it was finished.

Before the interviews, I had participants fill out a sheet that asked for the basic information represented in Tables 1.1 and 1.2. The final version of the interview itself can be seen in Appendix 2. Several parts of it require some explanation. The first of these, how I operationalized "gender in K-dramas," will be discussed in Chapter 3. The second is my choice to ask about feminism near the end of the interview. I thought that asking it earlier would "taint" participants' answers by making them feel the need to prove their feminist or non-feminist identity through their answers.

This reflects an earlier study design, and for my current interests that alternative would have been better; in the analysis, I try to take into account the relative level of explicit feminist talk that had already happened when gender-related comments were made. In a similar but more problematic vein, the fact that there was only really one question related to feminism meant that my exploration of this topic was limited; I focused on the “meaning” of feminism to participants and ignored ancillary but important factors like when and how feminists came to choose that identity. This means that the portrait of their feminism that emerges is somewhat lacking in historicity and context, which is unfortunate given the current exciting situation in which American feminism finds itself.

With the exception of asking about dramas’ portrayal of gender before asking about feminist identification, I tried to change the order of the questions somewhat to fit the flow of conversation, in keeping with the format of a *semi*-structured interview, and followed other relevant topics that participants brought up, such as the experiences that some have of visiting South Korea or running a drama-related blog.

About half of the participants asked me questions in return, mostly at the end of the interview when I explicitly asked if they had any questions. Usually, they were curious about the purpose of the study and my own history with Korea; a few asked me to explain something they saw in a drama, which suggested they saw me as one of the “Korea experts” that Schulze (2013) mentions. Also, as I had mentioned this was okay to do, three participants (Elliot, Rose, and Patricia) sent me an email after the interview to add something that they wished they had said during it. I include the content of these emails, with appropriate consideration of their different form, as part of the data.

I started my analysis of the transcripts using coding; that is, by carefully reading each transcript, making notes on what kind of themes regularly came up, and then grouping related themes (Merriam, 2014). As the scope of my interview questions ranged a little bit wider than the scope of my final research questions, however, in this study I focus my attention on the themes that are relevant to the latter.

I take a constructionist approach to determining the meaning of these themes. As Kitzinger explains:

“Constructionism... disputes the possibility of uncovering ‘facts’, ‘realities’, or ‘truths’ behind the talk, and treats as inappropriate any attempt to vet what people say for its ‘accuracy’, ‘reliability’, or ‘validity’ – thereby sidestepping altogether the positivist problems raised... From this perspective, what women say should not be taken as evidence of their experience, but only as a form of talk – a ‘discourse’, ‘account’ or ‘repertoire’ – which represents a culturally available way of packaging experience.” (C. Kitzinger, 2004, in Silverman, 2006, p. 129)

My research questions, which focus on *talk* about feminism, gender issues in dramas, and Korea, reflect this approach. “Talk” may seem like an inappropriately informal word to describe interview data, but as Kitzinger demonstrates, this is common usage in constructionist analysis. Although this study’s participants are talking not about their experiences but about their beliefs, understandings, and opinions, I still feel that an approach that sees what they say as not necessarily representing fixed and easily transmittable “truths” about their mental processes but “a culturally available way of

packaging” them is more valuable. In particular, similar to Thomas (2002), I look at how a feminist (or non-feminist) identity can be communicated, both when talking directly about feminism and when discussing related topics. In this way, I hope to avoid what Hermes (2000: 363) names as one of the dangers of audience research: “overly psychologized readings of sets of haphazardly assembled individuals.” While largely refraining from psychological or psychoanalytical analyses means that this study’s ability to address issues that participants do not speak about is limited, the relative concreteness that a speech-centered approach entails makes it, ultimately, the more appealing option. In addition, focusing on identifying and situating the culturally available discourses that participants use makes it possible to connect this study’s results to the larger world in a meaningful way despite the small number of participants.

One way that constructionism questions the “truth” of interview data is by requiring consideration of the context in which it was produced. Rapley writes that for constructionists, “interview data may be more a reflection of the social encounter between the interviewer and interviewee than it is about the actual topic itself” (Rapley, 2004 : 16). Though I think this may be going too far in the case of my study, as much of what participants said seems to reflect earlier discussions, thought, or reading on the topic, I believe that a limited use of it is valuable. This means that I consider the interview setting itself, the tone of each interview, my own easily knowable characteristics such as being a youngish white American woman living in South Korea, and what else participants know about me (for example my status as a K-drama fan or feminist) in understanding participants’ remarks.

Finally, this is a feminist audience study. Not only do I focus on

feminism in audiences and employ the concepts developed by earlier feminist researchers described in Section 1.2.4, but I myself am a feminist who would like to see feminism develop and spread. In some ways my approach is similar to what McRobbie (1982, p. 52, in Ang, 1996, p. 103) calls a “recruitist” one, which, as I mentioned at the beginning of Section 1.2.4, has been criticized for assuming the superiority of the feminist researcher. To avoid such possible pitfalls of this approach, both my focus (on feminism, in an audience of which I am a part) and methodology take into account and attempt to reflect such criticism. For example, following Ang (1996), I do not assume that feminist identification would improve the lives of the non-feminist fans in this study. I instead assume that their choice to reject a feminist identification is rational, examine the reasons they make it, and consider simply how and if feminism could better appeal to them. This study also does not “start from the premise that something is wrong” (Gill, 2007, p. 20) with either feminists or non-feminists watching dramas. While I share online feminist fans’ (and this study’s feminist participants’) feeling that watching dramas can often be difficult as a feminist, the purpose of this study is not to argue against the practice but to take advantage of the opportunities that it thus offers to learn about popular feminism in America.

In general, I attempt to refrain from seeing my participants as “dupes,” as the old feminist media studies expression would have it (see, for example, Hollows, 2000, p. 72). I conceive of them as having the agency and ability to question and resist elements of dramas even as they enjoy them, and their discussions of dramas as reflecting but not dictated by discourses at work in their current social context. At the same time, my hope to further develop American feminism requires me to consider critically

the implications of what they say. Thus, like Petersen (2012, p. 55) my goal is “to produce [a study] that employs engaged criticism, yet resists reinterpreting or debunking [viewers’] own opinions.”

1.5 Organization

Chapter 1 has introduced the goals, background, participants, and methodology of this study. Chapter 2 examines participants’ stated opinions about feminism and gender issues. I look first at some general features of how they discuss feminism, and then focus on what they say it means or does not mean. I note the concerns and beliefs they espouse regarding gender issues and identify similarities and differences both within each group and between the groups. The implications of these sets of findings for American feminism are discussed.

Chapter 3 asks how participants talk about feminism and gender issues in relation to dramas. It notes patterns in the way they talk about the portrayal of men and women, and connects these with their opinions about gender issues in general from the previous chapter. I also identify some differences that correlate specifically with feminist or non-feminist identification. Finally, I discuss how participants describe the relationship between K-drama fandom and feminism (or non-feminism) when asked about it directly.

Chapter 4 examines how participants deal with the fact that dramas come from South Korea. It focuses attention on how participants speak about feminism and representations of gender in dramas in connection to the fact that dramas are the products of a different culture. I ask how they describe the relationship between dramas and “real” Korean culture and in

what situations they bring up “real” Korean culture. I highlight problematic and constructive examples of the latter.

Finally, Chapter 5 considers the results of the previous chapters in light of the research questions presented in Section 1.1. I also discuss the limitations of this study and give suggestions for further research.

2 Feminism among American K-drama fans

In this chapter, I examine how participants answer the questions of whether they consider themselves feminist and what they mean when they say “yes” or “no.” The first section discusses some general features of how participants discuss feminism. The second section concentrates on the content of their feminist (or non-feminist) beliefs about gender issues. In the conclusion, I highlight findings that will connect with later chapters and examine some of the implications of the analysis for American feminism.

2.1 Contrasting views on feminism’s meaning and place

This section introduces how participants describe not the content of feminist beliefs, but feminism more generally and its place or necessity in American society. This provides context for the discussion of their opinions about gender issues in the following section.

First, I would like to examine the way that feminist participants speak about feminism. Perhaps the most notable feature is that they describe it as a set of beliefs, not as, for example, actions or membership in a group. They use expressions like “[Being a feminist] means I believe in” and “It means I think that.” This is in contrast to the non-feminist participants, as I will discuss below.

Also, about half of the feminist participants portray feminism as having different varieties or having a meaning that is under dispute. For example, Amanda qualifies her answer to the question of what feminism means by saying, “I know there’s been some a little bit of confusion online

about what feminism means and so it's sort of hard to answer that question." For a few of these participants, this point is also used to separate the speaker from a more radical form of feminism, such as one that, as Sarah says, thinks "men are evil." This is reminiscent, in content and function, of the "extremist" form of feminism decried by non-feminists in previous studies (Quinn and Radtke, 2006; Houvouras and Scott Carter, 2008). The other half of the participants speak in a way that does not indicate there may be other understandings or varieties of feminism. Similarly, only two participants portray feminism as a movement or system of beliefs that has changed over time (Kelly mentions its "waves," and Lillian calls one variety "traditionalist"). The participants' explanations of feminism are thus of something fixed and somewhat monolithic.

There is more dynamism in their description of feminism's place in American society. They often say or hint that gender relations were worse in the past and imply that these gains can be attributed to feminist activism. Janice, for example, says:

"I think that so much of Korean culture, certainly in male/female roles, is American culture, pre-World War II, and then with World War II when women went out and had to work... we ended up with you know the feminist movement um... which goes on today and you know it's not a battle we've even come close to winning."⁸) (Janice)

8) A note on my quotation conventions: I use a comma to denote a short pause, and an ellipsis to denote a longer one. An ellipsis in brackets means that some of the participant's words were cut out. I include laughter and some other extra-language actions in brackets. I cut out all of my small responses (like "mm-hm") and mark my interjections that remain with [M:]. I use a question mark for utterances that ended with rising intonation, and a period for those with falling intonation. In general, I try to capture participants' ways of speaking while also making their quotes easy to read.

Though she seems to reconsider this statement toward its end (perhaps because of its negative implications about Korean culture, as I discuss in Chapter 4), her initial point is that American society has made progress in male and female roles since World War II because of the feminist movement. However, her point that there are still gender-related problems in America is one echoed by many participants. For example, Sarah says, “I believe in equal pay for equal work which we don’t have,” and Maylinn describes an incident in which she saw parents scold their daughter for not being “ladylike.” These descriptions and examples are used as justification for identifying as a feminist. The participants also mostly express pessimism about the current place of feminism in American society. Kelly says feminism is “a four-letter word nowadays” and Greta and Tanya describe their friends as hesitant to identify with it and indifferent to it, respectively.

Finally, two feminist participants characterized feminism as something related to more than just gender issues, in ways that relate to later sections. When talking to Kelly, who identifies her ethnicity as Chinese, I was reminded of the sentence, “My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit!” the title of an Internet essay by Flavia Dzodan (2010) that has become a popular kind of slogan on Tumblr, a social networking site famous for its social justice bent. This is partly because Kelly twice mentions Tumblr in connection to feminism, but also because when asked to describe what feminism is for her, she begins with views similar to other participants’ but then quickly shifts gears: “But I also feel like you know in terms of this intersection of um because I’m very interested you know as an author and as a, political thinker nowadays about, the people who are um underrepresented.” At this point, she begins

to talk about the representation of people of color, LGBTQ people, and the disabled in American children's literature and how she has been glad to see more representations of the last of these in recent Korean dramas. The belief that one cannot talk about gender without talking about other forms of oppression that exist is one hallmark of intersectional feminism (Carastathis, 2014).

Elliot, who has already mentioned earlier in the interview that she is a feminist, answers my question about the meaning of feminism to her like this:

“It's like so many different, ways to look at it because [...] Black feminism looks completely different from mainstream feminism and so I try to kinda look at it through both lens equally? [...] To be recognized um really is probably like the biggest thing um, as a African American I would say the biggest thing is to be recognized um, you know. Cause I think that once you're recognized, then we can start talking about equal treatment.” (Elliot)

She thus distinguishes between Black feminism and mainstream feminism. Here and in other parts she does not give a definition of what mainstream feminism is (though she does seem to be hinting that it is “equal treatment”), but explains Black feminism as demanding recognition and promoting strong women. She also allies herself with both types of feminism here, which, if what the majority of the other participants say is taken as “mainstream feminism,” fits her discussion of her beliefs about gender issues. That is, she is mostly in agreement with the other participants, but sometimes gives a different explanation for her opinions.

While on the surface it would seem that Kelly's and Elliot's ethnicities are the "causes" for their approaches to feminism, I would like to take a moment to consider another possibility. One way in which Kelly and Elliot stand out from all other participants is that they both claim a large amount of experience with academic feminism. Elliot's undergraduate major was Women's Studies and Kelly says she had almost enough credits for a second major in Women and Gender Studies. No other participant mentions taking more than one or two classes. I believe they may thus have these different approaches to feminism because of their having studied it in depth; especially Elliot, who draws as she says from more than one tradition of feminism. Although the ethnicity of each was probably (in Kelly's case) and certainly (in Elliot's case) a factor in the forms of feminist discourse they chose, it is quite likely that their education was as well, in that it may have given them access to these forms. Kelly's intersectional approach may also have been influenced by the Internet. Finally, as with other participants, these approaches to feminism have a bearing on how they discuss gender issues.

As for the non-feminist participants, before starting this study, I assumed that they would find the questions about feminism annoying or uncomfortable, but this assumption seems to have mostly been wrong. Nancy does seem to find the topic awkward at first, and I expect this is due to the fact that she has guessed that I am a feminist, which means that her disavowal poses a possible disruption to the heretofore intimate, mutually supportive tone of our interview. As she goes on, however, perhaps warming to her subject or seeing that I do not argue with her, she seems to become more comfortable talking about it. Also, Iris appears to find the questions annoying, giving the impression she has not thought

much about feminism and does not care to; as I discuss in the next chapter, this is echoed in her responses to questions about gender issues in dramas. The other five non-feminists, however, are unhesitant and even eager to talk about their relationship with and understanding of feminism.

As I mentioned above and will demonstrate in the next section, feminist and non-feminist participants' description of their beliefs on gender issues are largely similar. As shown in Section 1.2.3, this is not uncommon among modern Americans. In fact, as many as six of the seven of my "non-feminists" would be called "non-labelers" in other studies; for example, in Duncan (2010), who defines them as people "who embrace some feminist principles, but who eschew self-identification as feminists" (499). Nancy and Donna even ascribe the same beliefs to the feminist movement as do feminists, and choose not to identify as feminist for other reasons. For example, Nancy explains that she finds the feminist movement's tactics lacking in respect for its opponents. Neither she nor Donna is critical of any of the ideals they ascribe to feminism, only the actions of some or all of its followers. However, in accord with previous research showing that the choice to identify as feminist or not is significant no matter the cause (Yoder, Tobias, and Snell, 2011) and my own belief that the decision represents a political act, I will continue to call them and the others "non-feminists" instead of "non-labelers" or a similar term.

Three other participants that express similar beliefs about gender issues as feminists do, however, take the opposite approach. As their quotes in the next section make clear, Hannah, Mei, and Iris portray their beliefs as being *in contrast to* feminism. For example, Hannah and Mei say they believe in equality but that feminists promote women as better than or deserving more than men. Those two and Brenda, furthermore, describe

feminism or feminists as acting unfairly towards men, an image of feminism that Chapter 1 showed is often used to justify non-feminism. That Hannah and Mei bring up feminists who criticize men for holding a door open for them also suggests that the stigma of feminists as personally unpleasant has not disappeared, though no participant engages in the name-calling that Houvouras and Scott Carter (2008) report. In addition, Brenda says:

“It seems like the people in my lives who’ve been– in my life who’ve been feminist or consider themselves feminists are always um, real negative about men. You know, don’t trust a man, don’t rely on a man [...] men are no good.” (Brenda)

While this seems at first glance like the recitation of a stereotype, by repeating that she is speaking from her own experience, Brenda both justifies her descriptions and limits their reach. In fact, most of the non-feminist participants do at some point qualify their statements about feminists by using expressions like “some” or “a lot of.” At the same time, there is less explicit acknowledgment among non-feminists that there may be different types of feminism and no acknowledgment that it may have changed over time.

Note also that the non-feminist participants tend to focus on the *actions* of individual feminists or the feminist movement. This is in contrast to the belief-focused approach of feminist participants, and this split echoes the findings of Houvouras and Scott Carter (2008). Their feminist participants also described feminism as involving some kind of action, but left the specifics of those actions vague by saying, for example,

a feminist is “someone who works for equal rights with men” (248). Non-feminists, on the other hand, said that a feminist is “someone who protests about controversial issues, such as abortion and sexual harassment” (248). Houvouras and Scott Carter’s suggest that this simply indicates different understandings of the level of commitment required to qualify as a feminist. Though this explanation can also be applied to some extent to this study - the non-feminists may not recognize some of the everyday practices that they engage in as feminist activity, whereas feminists would - I think it is important to acknowledge the negativity of their descriptions of feminist actions. This negativity appears to reflect stigma against feminists, as well as differing interpretations of how best to achieve the ideal of “gender equality,” more than it does opinions about the level of required activity.

One other element that I would like to highlight is how, in keeping Zucker and Bay-Cheng’s (2010) findings discussed in Chapter 1, feminists and non-feminists describe the current state of gender issues in the United States differently. Unsurprisingly, most non-feminist participants do not characterize this nearly as negatively as feminist participants do. Three of the non-feminist participants do not mention the topic at all. Two go so far as to emphasize that they have not experienced discrimination. Patricia, who is quite critical in general about American society, says that she has not had to act masculine in order to succeed in business, which implies that American workplaces are fair towards women, and Nancy denies that discrimination has ever affected her, thus implying at least that the scale of discrimination must be limited. Similarly, Mei mentions discrimination but downplays it:

“So if you want to do special classes that are like, things that girls are interested in then by all means like make it separate like that but don’t, don’t add a sense of entitlement that just because there’s discrimination and there has been like hi– a lot of historical discrimination that like you shouldn’t feel entitled now, going forward.” (Mei)

In her focus on the pastness of discrimination and its irrelevance to the present, Mei shows that there is a postfeminist element to her rejection of feminism. The only non-feminist participant who goes into detail about current gender-related problems in American society is Hannah. While she criticizes the influence of feminism in making relations between men and women less caring, she also brings up the problems of the prevalence of male-on-female rape (about which she indicates she agrees with a feminist position) and domestic violence, as well as media that glorifies abusive (heterosexual) relationships in which the man is in control. At the same time, she has a tendency to follow each point with a comment that mitigates how much men are to be blamed for and women are victimized by these phenomena; for example, she mentions that domestic violence also occurs between same-sex couples. This has the effect of ultimately portraying these problems as caused by cruel individuals and not systematic inequality, again suggesting a more postfeminist than feminist approach (Anderson, 2015, p. 5). Also, most of Hannah’s negative descriptions of the United States function, as I describe in Chapter 4, to deflect criticism away from K-dramas and South Korean society, instead of to justify her position in relation to gender issues.

2.2 Shared ideals of equality and choice

In this section, I introduce some of the opinions that participants state about gender issues. Again, feminist participants are describing these opinions as part of how they understand feminism, while most non-feminist participants are describing what they understand feminism *not* to be.

In keeping with the previous research into popular feminism introduced in Section 1.2.3, the most noticeable common feature in participants' explanation of their views on gender relations is the prominent featuring of some form of the word "equal," or in Lillian's case, "even"; all but four use this word. The following are some representative examples:

"I would say in general I'm, I want a world where everyone has equal opportunities regardless of their personal details [...] and when that specifically has to do with women's issues I am a feminist." (Amanda)

"It means that I I feel that gender roles are, absurd um I feel that um... my mind is the equal, of any man's mind who happens to be as smart as I am." (Janice)

"I feel casting everything [...] as being like discriminatory is actually not, good. [...] because it's teaching us to feel entitled—it's teaching girls to feel entitled to special treatment? When what we really want isn't special treatment? It's just equal treatment." (Mei)

"I believe, men and women, are equal. Um I believe, women can

kick butt and take names and men can raise babies if they want to. But the feminist *label*, there's been too many things I disagree with that have been, that have been um, associated with that so I would not call myself a feminist um, so, um but I guess, you know I'm an egalitarian." (Donna)

As these examples and Sarah's quote about equal pay in the previous section show, each person focuses on a slightly different area in which men and women are or should be equal. In about half of all cases, this equality clearly relates to the workplace or other institutional settings. In this, they echo the interpretation of gender equality espoused by the Hong Kong and Singapore fans in previous Hallyu studies (Lin and Kwan, 2005; Lin and Tong, 2008; Chan and Xueli, 2011).

In addition to Patricia's rejection of it discussed below, one feminist participant does raise a question for this discourse of gender equality that has long been put forth by others (see, for example, Young, 1990):

"In short, [feminism] means, uh... a good old fashioned like democratic liberal belief that everybody is entitled to equal dignity and, of course that's actually a really awkward answer because dignity is um that's where [...] people get into arguments over what that is." (Laureen)

As Laureen points out, the term "equal dignity" is vague and could be interpreted in different ways, making it difficult to realize. This argument can be extended to varying degrees to the "equal opportunity," "equal treatment," and "equal pay" components of equality discourse, all of which

are mentioned by participants. It is almost certainly one reason why there is tension between the ideal of equality (which nearly everyone appears to share) and the actual actions the feminist movement has taken to realize it (which are controversial). However, having made this point, Laureen still goes on to endorse equal pay, which indicates the power of this discourse.

The second most common theme was that of choice, which was only mentioned by six participants (four feminists and two non-feminists):

“I’m probably not a, what people think of when they think of feminists because I think that if what a woman wants is to stay home and have children and be [...] a homemaker and a stay-at-home mom then that’s absolutely what she should do.” (River)

“Like I mean, should women vote? Yeah. Um... do I think it’s okay that a, woman gets to stay at home and raise their family and be there to help their husband? Yeah. Like if it’s if that’s what they choose um, and if they choose to work then they choose to work.” (Iris)

Tanya calls herself a “bad feminist” because she prefers for her husband to do traditional male household tasks, but then says:

“[The core of feminism to me is] being treated equally and basically um... being able to do what you want in life. Without being held down by other standards. So like if you wanna go take out the trash that’s fine. [laughs] [...] But lots of people see [me not doing it] as not being equal because [...] that’s like um, American household men job. And I don’t wanna do it I’d rather do the woman jobs.”

(Tanya)

Tanya's (and to a lesser extent, River's) explanation of feminism thus contains a hint of criticism of it in the implication that it can, in some forms, limit women's choices. Iris's quote makes this criticism more explicit, as she juxtaposes feminism and choice. However, Celia (not quoted here), who also condones choice and specifically mentions being a housewife as an example of an acceptable choice, makes it seem like this *is* a common feminist belief. Again, all participants characterize women being able to make choices individually as an important component of their beliefs about gender issues.

Finally, Patricia's views were unique among all participants for her emphasis on the natural differences between men and women. After having mentioned, in her response to a question about the portrayal of women, that she is not a feminist, she is here answering the question, "Would you mind talking a little bit more about why you don't consider yourself a feminist?":

"I'm a real believer in that we we are the ones who-who carry the children. It is just na- it is Mother Nature we are more, caregivers than the men are. It's th- the tendency back in the 70's and 80's to try to make boys and girls be the same totally failed. Totally failed. Because the reality is boys and girls are different. Men and women are different and [...] a woman trying to be the same as a man in every way is, [...] it makes me sad when I see that." (Patricia)

The characterization of feminism that Patricia provides here is surprisingly similar to that described by feminist participants. Though I think most of

the feminist participants would argue that they are not trying to make boys and girls *the same*, they are obviously hoping to narrow the gap between the social expectations and possibilities of the two groups, especially – as will be shown in the next chapter – by allowing women to act tougher. Also, it is worth pointing out that Patricia’s view of femininity is actually found in several forms of feminism (see, for example, Tong, 2009, on “care-focused feminism”), just not the liberal feminism that is perhaps the best known in the United States; hence she sees it, as other participants likely would, as in opposition to feminism. I will argue in the next chapter that sexual difference is difficult to reconcile with equality, so the fact that Patricia is the only one that emphasizes it is not surprising. As with the other participants and the beliefs that they espouse, Patricia’s use of sexual difference discourse has implications for her talk about gender issues in dramas that I discuss in the next chapter.

2.3 Summary

In this chapter, I looked at how participants explain their views on feminism and gender issues in general (that is, not in relation to K-dramas). For the purposes of the rest of the study, the most important finding is that, among these particular K-drama fans, support for “equality” between men and women is widespread whether or not one identifies as a feminist, and that about a quarter of participants also promote women’s “choices.” I will use these keywords as tools to help understand participants’ answers in later chapters, bringing in other elements of feminism or non-feminism they mention when useful. To briefly put them into context here, however, previous studies introduced in Section 1.2.3 show that the presence of

“equality” here is no surprise, while “choice” has also appeared in more recent studies of feminist identification (Kelly, 2015). It appears that, despite its age, liberal feminism is still one of the more persuasive forms, with third-wave feminism (as represented by choice; see Snyder-Hall, 2010) also enjoying some support. That the ideas of these two forms were shared across the line of feminist identification also supports the existence of postfeminism, in which feminist ideas have been stripped of their provenance and absorbed into the general cultural context. At the same time, these differing descriptions of these ideals’ relationships to feminism suggests that, though these connections to academically-defined types help situate participants’ stated opinions, they may not be helpful beyond that, as they may bring implications of aspects of those varieties of feminism that participants may not espouse. Therefore, as stated above, I will focus on the simpler keywords of equality and choice.

Another finding from this chapter that connects with later chapters is the lack of intersectionality in most of the feminist participants’ explanations of feminism. This was unexpected given my impression of its increasing presence in popular feminism, and suggests that it not yet that widespread or powerful. Throughout the interviews, most participants do show caution in discussing the foreign, non-white country of South Korea, in a way that suggests they are concerned with other axes of oppression. However, the fact that only Kelly and Elliot mention these other axes in their definition of feminism indicates that this concern is not part of feminism but extrinsic to it for most feminist drama fans. Kelly’s and Elliot’s backgrounds also suggest that academic experience with feminism is important in this regard. This lack of difference-sensitive feminism influences my interpretations in Chapter 4 of participants’ mentions of “real” Korean

culture.

There are also several findings that may *not* have any particular implications for Hallyu, but which are still worth discussing further for their implications for American feminism. One is that feminists tend to bring up the gender-related problems that plague American society, whereas non-feminists take a postfeminist approach and characterized such problems as in the past or avoided describing the current situation altogether. Each side is likely using their particular strategy in order to position their feminism or non-feminism as reasonable in the interview context, but the difference may also reflect the divide between the groups that Zucker and Bay-Cheng (2010) mention. That is, some non-feminists may genuinely see the current situation as fair, or at least as “natural” and thus difficult or dangerous to change. If this is the case, feminists should continue to draw attention to the gender-related problems that remain in U.S. society and offer alternative visions of life without them. In particular, attempting to put more emphasis on the structural and cultural factors that make so many women “choose” to be stay-at-home mothers and proposing, for example, a work culture more conducive to family life for all, is paramount. This could finally reduce the opinion, present even among feminist participants, that feminists are condemning individual women for such “choices.” Whether or not this actually “converts” anyone to feminism, it is one of the basic steps necessary in order to enact social change.

An additional significant finding is the difference between feminists’ positive, belief-focused descriptions of feminism and non-feminists’ negative, action-focused description. As I wrote above, I believe this is a reflection of both negative stereotypes about feminists in particular as well as the difficulty that any movement must face when putting abstract ideals into

practice: the fact that not everyone will agree on whether a certain action is in keeping with that ideal. Because of this second factor, this gap is inevitable to a certain extent; but that does not mean it could not be minimized. Houvouras and Scott Carter (2008, p. 253), responding to a similar finding, suggest that “greater dissemination” of the feminists’ belief-focused interpretation of feminism “may promote feminist identification among currently self-identified nonfeminists.” However, Quinn and Radtke (2006) question the usefulness of forms of feminist identification that carry no requirement for political action. They propose instead that modern feminism “could productively focus on negotiating the margins around socially acceptable feminist practice” (196), both in the sense of reconsidering what “counts” as feminist action and in the sense of making it safer for women to engage in feminist actions. This would seem to suggest that the feminist movement should, as it long has and any movement must, make efforts to control the framing of its actions.

However, the very phrasing of this last sentence highlights the difficulty posed by a third finding: the fact that many feminist and non-feminist participants describe feminism as a mostly-unified movement. If feminists do acknowledge a different type, it is usually the “extreme” type found in previous studies and they bring it up in order to reject it. Similarly, portraying feminism as a unified movement may be a way of denying legitimacy to such negative alternative definitions of feminism. However, this tactic seems to make it easier for non-feminists to criticize feminism and reject it wholesale. Thus, similar to Swirsky and Angelone’s (2014, p. 242) recommendation to promote feminism as a “continuum,” I would like to tentatively suggest that emphasizing that there are different types of feminism could be one way of appealing to more people. Perhaps

people would be more comfortable specifying, “I am a ___ feminist” than simply “I am a feminist.” While there is the danger of deepening divisions between types and in splitting into factions, different types making it known that they have different focuses that sometimes overlap with those of other types could help to bring new active supporters to feminism(s) without weakening its power.

3 The intersection of feminism and dramas

After introducing the characteristics of the “typical” drama, this chapter examines participants’ talk about gender issues in dramas. I identify themes in the way they talk about the portrayal of men and women, and connect these with their talk about feminism in the previous chapter. Differences that relate specifically to feminist or non-feminist identification are discussed. I then focus on how participants explicitly describe the relationship between K-drama fandom and feminism (or non-feminism) and note the variety of factors that affect this.

3.1 The meaning of “dramas”

In this section, I will describe in more detail the dramas that participants mentioned by name. This explanation of the kind of dramas participants may draw on when they say, for example, “Dramas always...”, will provide context for later sections.

When I wrote in Section 1.3 that participants start by watching “older” dramas, I was very much using the word in its comparative sense. The vast majority of the dramas they talked about came out within the last 10 years; of the slightly earlier classics of Hallyu 1.0, one participant mentioned *Jewel in the Palace* and no one besides me mentioned *Winter Sonata*. Yet despite this relatively short interval for possible shows, participants brought up no fewer than 138 different dramas during the course of interviews. These were shows that they had seen all or part of, had plans to see, or, in a few cases, were determined to avoid because of

reviews they had heard or read. This breadth of drama knowledge was impressive, especially in light of the fact that it does not represent all that they know about, but only those that they happened to mention.

Of course, some dramas were mentioned more frequently than others, and I would like to discuss these in greater depth in order to give a sense of what participants may have had in mind when they discussed “dramas.” The six most common, which were each mentioned by at least seven different participants, were *Boys Over Flowers* (꽃보다 남자; 2009), *You’re Beautiful* (미남이시네요; 2009), *The 1st Shop of Coffee Prince* (커피프린스 1호점; 2007; hereafter “*Coffee Prince*”), *City Hunter* (시티 헌터; 2011), which was widely recognized as appealing to men and good to recommend to non-fan friends, *Healer* (힐러), which had recently ended, and *Kill Me, Heal Me* (킬미, 힐미), which was airing at the time of interviews. These shows have several features in common: they originally aired at primetime on terrestrial networks, they are all set in modern times, and they center on unmarried characters who are mainly under the age of 30. Most also take place largely in and around Seoul and include at least one wealthy character.

As is common for primetime dramas, they are all one-season miniseries, made up of between 16 and 25 one-hour episodes. As 오미영 (2014) and 홍석경 (2013) also found, this length was a common reason that participants gave for liking K-dramas, in contrast to American television shows. Some gave the same explanation for praising this feature that 오미영’s fans did, which is that it keeps the show from becoming stale. Elliot complained about the American show *Scandal*, which was then in its fourth season, in contrast: “How many times can [the main character] go back and forth between these two guys like, just make a decision.” It is easier for K-

dramas to avoid causing such viewer fatigue. Others described the appeal as not requiring as much of a time commitment from would-be marathoners as multiple-season American shows do, and thus more appropriate for a busy lifestyle. However, I suspect that another possible reason why no less than two-thirds of participants listed dramas' length as one of their major attractions is that it is an obvious, easy-to-explain, and non-controversial feature, and thus makes a simple answer to a difficult question.

Another characteristic of these shows as primetime dramas is that they are of relatively high quality. Cheaply-made daytime dramas are rarely made available to overseas fans, and the few participants who mentioned those shows' existence did so disparagingly. Actually, despite the noticeably higher production values, there was some uncertainty among fans about primetime K-dramas' overall quality as well; but most insisted that elements such as acting, writing, and directing were top-notch on the shows that they had liked, at least. Several of the shows above, in particular, also feature beautiful foreign locations, exciting action sequences, and catchy soundtracks featuring songs by K-pop stars, which may add to the expense and care perceived to be involved in making them.

There is some difference between the six dramas listed above in the area of genre, though this is complicated by the fact that it is extremely difficult to fit a drama into a single genre. In its survey of American K-drama fans, the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) listed "action/crime," "historical," "medical," "melodrama," and "romantic comedy" as the possible genres; yet it is well-known that all but the most slapstick of "romantic comedies" usually devote several episodes to angst (caused by, for example, parental disapproval of the lead couple's relationship), and even "action/crime" shows tend to have regular intervals of silly comedy. With

that disclaimer, the first three shows above are generally considered romantic comedies, *City Hunter* and *Healer* fit into the “action/crime” category, and *Kill Me, Heal Me* is a melodrama.

That the most-mentioned shows are mainly romantic comedies is certainly related to the fact that my questions about gender portrayals led to a lot of discussion of romance in dramas. However, it also matches what participants (both feminist and non-feminist) say about the genres they like, and it appears to be representative of American tastes in K-drama in general, as an overwhelming 72% of those who participated in KOCCA’s study chose romantic comedy as their favorite genre (한국콘텐츠진흥원, 2014). In addition, the widespread popularity of these particular three shows is supported by the fact that they ranked #1 (*Boys Over Flowers*), #4 (*Coffee Prince*) and #6 (*You’re Beautiful*) among answers to an open-ended question about fans’ favorite dramas in the same study.

These three shows share numerous additional elements besides those stated above and the obvious generic requirement to focus on the development of a romantic relationship. Unless otherwise stated, everything that follows is true of at least two of the three shows. There is a male and a female lead. The heroine is plucky and morally good but also poor, awkward, and messy. She does not do very well in school or have a high-status job, and other characters remark that she is not pretty. The hero is rich, capable, handsome, and stylish, but has a bad personality (brooding, quick to anger) that is largely attributed to an unhappy family life. He is part of a small group of also-handsome men with distinct personalities. Somehow, the two leads are forced into regularly spending time together; for example, the female lead, in order to fulfill her responsibility to others, may disguise herself as a man in order to join the hero’s group of men. At

first they mutually dislike each other and in fact clash spectacularly in a way that is often humorous. Soon one and then the other develops romantic feelings. One way that they realize this or the audience is shown it is by the hero rescuing the heroine from physical danger. It is not clear whether their relationship during the course of the drama becomes more physically intimate than kissing, though it is never less intimate than that.

Around the time that they realize that they are attracted to each other, the tone of the drama becomes more serious; from this point there is significantly more crying (by both leads, as well as others) and less comedy. The main relationship is challenged by one or more of the (wealthy) second leads, who attempt to compete for the affection of the leads. The second male lead, who is kinder and gentler than the hero, simply supports and confesses his feelings to the heroine, whereas the second female lead, who is more self-possessed and (supposedly) more beautiful than the heroine, tries to trick the hero into distrusting the heroine. However, the leads do not develop romantic feelings for or a physical relationship with the second leads. They also face the obstacle of disapproval of their relationship by the hero's female relatives, who suspect that the heroine is only interested in his money and want him to find a mate from the same social class. The heroine deals with their rude treatment of her with patience and politeness. Subplots dealing with business problems, other characters' romances, and the leads' families are woven throughout the show. It ends with a time jump that shows us that the leads will continue to date and gives an idea of what their lives will be like in the future.

In short, the "typical" drama involves, as Kelly says, "Mr. Darcy and Cinderella coming together," if Cinderella were clumsy and supposedly plain. Quite a few of the elements above are found in other well-known

dramas as well; for example, in *The Heirs* (상속자들, 2013), *Secret Garden* (시크릿 가든, 2010-11), and *My Name is Kim Sam Soon* (내 이름은 김삼순, 2005), which were all in the top twelve most-mentioned dramas. Such similarities between dramas in the same genre, and this structure in particular, may account for the fact that there was little difference in how participants talked about dramas according to how many they have seen. With the exception of Maylinn, participants who have seen relatively few seemed equally confident as those who have seen relatively many when making generalization about plot points, characterizations, etc.

Of course, even with the same basic structure there is a wealth of difference between these dramas based on factors like pacing, tone, and characterization. It is particularly the last of these that I believe accounts for participants' very different appraisal of *Boys Over Flowers* versus the other two shows. *Boys Over Flowers* was mentioned by more participants than any other drama, but a large portion of what was said about it was criticism. In fact, no feminist participant made an unequivocally positive comment about it, in contrast to five praising *You're Beautiful* and four praising *Coffee Prince*. In this way, the (stated) tastes of this study's participants do appear to diverge somewhat from those of American fans in general as represented by the KOCCA study. The content of their criticism, as it is mainly feminism-related, will be discussed in the following sections.

3.2 Representations of gender in dramas

In this section, I examine participants' talk about representations of gender in dramas. Though at this point in the interview, most participants had actually not disclosed their feminist or non-feminist identification,

differences that relate specifically to feminist or non-feminist identification are also discussed. I then consider the implications of the results for the concept of feminist subcultural capital.

First, some explanation is necessary here: I usually introduced the gender-related portion of the interview by saying, “One of the focuses of this study is gender issues in dramas,” but the exact phrasing of my two “gender-related” questions is “What do you think of the portrayal of women/men in dramas?” Unfortunately, these questions take for granted what some varieties of feminism have spent the past 25 years questioning: the categories “men” and “women” (see, for example, Butler, 1990). I chose this wording, however, because I wanted something that was simple, open-ended, and not too academic, and while three participants do criticize the portrayal of gender as a regulatory system, it is true that no one directly challenges my questions’ underlying assumption. Thus, although it likely set certain parameters on the discussion, I believe that it was in many cases a parameter that would have been there anyway. Also, this question formation is the reason that the results below are organized in the particular way that they are.

One general difference between feminist and non-feminist participants in this section is that feminist participants are much more likely to spontaneously mention something about K-dramas’ portrayals of men, women, or the relations between the two. Whereas only three of the seven non-feminist participants bring such elements up before I explicitly ask, every feminist participant except Maylinn does so. This indicates that – unsurprisingly – either feminists are more interested in gender roles and relations in dramas, or they feel a greater need to bring them up.

3.2.1 The portrayal of women: not “strong” enough

When both feminist and non-feminist participants talk about the portrayal of women in K-dramas in general, their comments are largely negative. When they do make positive comments, these are mostly in describing one certain drama in contrast to “most” dramas, which means that these positive remarks actually function as a larger criticism. One exception to this pattern of making criticism when speaking in general is the tendency to say dramas these days are improving in their portrayal of women; I discuss this further in Chapter 4.

What was by far the most dominant theme is one I will call the “strong woman” discourse, which covers related traits like assertiveness, autonomy, and competence:

“That’s another thing I really like about *Heart to Heart* [하트 투 하트]. The girl in it? Is just fine by herself. She doesn’t need him, she doesn’t need his money she doesn’t need his grandfather’s money when he tries to slide her the envelope of money to go away. You know she is doing just fine by herself.” (River)

“I’m always pleased in the first few episodes at how um complex they are, and then... [sigh] I guess some of the time you do... you do wish they would um, not make the choices that maybe women are expected to make once a man comes in the picture.” (Amanda)

“It’s really frustrating when you have you’re given a setup that’s supposed to be like where the lead female character is like strong and capable and she does not turn out to be strong and capable it’s

like very flimsy. So [in *Pride and Prejudice* (오만과 편견)] they have her like in a power suit and heels [but] like nothing she does in the whole drama if you watch it and this is so annoying to me almost all of her moves are dictated by the guy.” (Mei)

As you can see, the participants criticize dramas’ weaker female characters and single out for praise dramas or scenes that portray assertive, autonomous female characters. Amanda’s quote by itself is unclear, but she goes on to clarify that one of the choices she dislikes is that of giving up one’s career and thus, one’s autonomy. In this way her comment points out a trend that several other participants note with frustration: the character who starts the drama as strong and then loses that quality as the drama goes on and she gets more involved with the male lead. (Mei describes the similar problem of the female character who is said to be smart and strong but whose actions do not demonstrate that.) This trope, which can be discerned in the drama overview given in Section 3.1, is the most common reason that participants give for disliking *Boys Over Flowers*. As Faith humorously puts it, female lead Jan-di becomes “Jan-distressed” soon after meeting the male lead; she is constantly put into danger, and, her previous bravery and physical strength having suddenly disappeared, he and other male characters must step in to save her.

Note also that Faith’s joking tone here is not unusual. Similar to what Thomas (2002) also found, feminist (and feminist-like) criticism of the portrayals of both men and women is often expressed through humor. Many participants say or imply that they read, hear, and make similar jokes with fellow fans on- and offline.

There is one area where the opinions of feminist and non-feminist

participants clearly diverge with relation to “strong women”: sexual explicitness. As audiences in previous studies have noted and as the overview of the typical drama in the previous section hinted, dramas generally feature much less sexuality than American television shows. With the exception of one person, the five participants who mention that they like the lack of sexual scenes in K-dramas were non-feminists.

“A lot of times I don’t feel like I could watch American TV in front of my children because it’s sending my daughters the wrong messages about, dating and stuff. Whereas, I like, with the Korean dramas how everybody takes their time where handholding is a big deal and I want, y– holding hands to be a big deal with my children.” (Brenda)

This prevalence of non-feminists here is interesting for several reasons. While it would be overreaching to use this as evidence of non-feminism among the participants in all of the previous Hallyu studies in which such a sentiment was expressed, it does strongly suggest non-feminism among 오미영’s (2014) American fans. As I explained in Chapter 1, there is also a total lack of feminist criticism in her description of her interviews. Though that was part of a lack of criticism of dramas in general, this correlation I have found between non-feminism and praise for dramas’ “sexually sanitized treatment of romance” (Chan and Xueli, 2011:299) implies that 오미영’s participants may indeed have been largely non-feminists.

A second implication of this finding is raised by Hannah, who is responding here to the question of what types of dramas she likes and dislikes:

“I’m not so much on the side of like, um like the *I Need Romance* [로맨스가 필요해] series like they’re they’re okay but they’re just like, kind of racier than I, prefer to watch [...] It’s not really necessarily related to my faith of being a Christian like it’s kind of a personal choice and it’s like eh I don’t really wanna watch, shows about like just sex.” (Hannah)

Hannah brings up Christianity in order to deny that that is the reason why she does not like shows with sex in them, but her mention of it at all is interesting. Actually, of the five participants who assert or otherwise make clear their religious faith (Christianity, in every case), four are non-feminists (though the fifth is Elliot, perhaps the single most ardent feminist in the study). These numbers cannot help but suggest a tension between Christianity and feminism, which likely reflects wider trends in America that have been in existence for decades (see, for example, Faludi, 2009). However, besides Donna, who mentions that she does not believe in female preachers, none of the Christians brings up their religion when discussing feminism. This suggests that if there is a connection between being a Christian and not being a feminist, it is either not conscious for the participants or they do not feel comfortable discussing it in the interview situation.

In contrast, while a few feminists mentioned the lack of sexuality as a neutral (albeit somewhat humorous) difference from American media, a few more went further and argued that the portrayal of sexuality is a gendered issue.

“The guys have to initiate, um, the kisses, like the first kiss. Oh

Heirs. Oh god *Heirs*. [...] Oh God, it made me so mad. [...] when he would first kiss her and then she would just close her eyes and like back away and, but did she actually wanna kiss him? It, it was very maddening but he had to make that move she never makes that move.” (Greta)

Elliot, perhaps feeling that she had not covered this issue adequately in our interview, sent me an email a few hours afterward that was almost entirely about it.

“Generally, women in dramas have no control over their sexuality (ex: very passive towards intimacy or feminine identity to the point where a man gives her a makeover). [...] Really any physical contact between the couple is introduced by the man and it’s almost shocking to see when the woman does.” (Elliot, by email)

Thus some feminist participants argue that the *way* the limited amount of sexual activity that does appear on screen is depicted implies that “good” women do not display sexual agency, or even interest in sex. Greta’s comment also touches on the fact that this apparent disinterest means that it is all-too-often unclear whether the female character even consents to the physical intimacy that is taking place. In this way, non-feminists see the lack of sexual explicitness as a gender-neutral positive point of dramas, whereas feminists see it as a negative point that disadvantages women. Yet interestingly, none of the feminist participants bring up this facet of sexuality in their definitions of feminism. Though their comments suggest a certain amount of sex-positivity, they are careful to keep to the issue of

equal agency in this area. No one, in fact, expressed a wish for dramas to become more sexually explicit, which could very well reflect the fact that it might be awkward (possibly due to the same ideology of female purity that some are repudiating!) to reveal such a desire to an interviewer whom one is meeting for the first time.

Participants' support for strong women interacts with the different discourses of feminism that they use. Elliot explicitly connects it with Black feminism in answering the question, "It sounds like from what you said before you feel that being a feminist sits awkwardly with being a Korean drama fan. Is that right or can you talk a little more about that?" like this:

"In a Westernized, version of what, of feminism and as an African American feminist I think it has to. [...] They just can't I think um, and then just with with my background where you know black women are taught to be strong and independent and not to let a man control you. [...] the idea that you know you would, that you're sitting and you're kinda waiting to be Cinderella [is] at the basis of every, Korean drama." (Elliot)

Similarly, while Kelly does talk more generally about female characters at other points, she also specifically praises the "kickass Asian female" trope. This comment, likely a reaction to the way that Asian women are often portrayed as submissive in American media (Prasso, 2009), can be seen as reflecting intersectional feminism in its attention to the portrayal of not just gender but also race.

As is hinted by Gill's (2007) claim, mentioned in Section 1.2.4, that the appearance of more autonomous heroines in romance novels reflects

elements of liberal feminism, there is also a connection between talk about strong women and discourses of equality and choice. Critics of varieties of feminism that espouse equality discourse have long argued that it implicitly accepts male standards and a male view of the world (see, for example, Jaggar, 1983 on liberal feminism). This leads to a situation – especially in the workplace, which much of the participants’ equality discourse relates to – in which women need to “catch up” by adopting traditionally (in the United States, at least) “male” traits like strength. My participants are not so one-sided in their demands; they also, as I describe below, want male characters or men to be less aggressive, both physically and emotionally. Nevertheless, equality discourse does in the American context imply to some extent a woman who is strong enough to hold her own against men. Similarly, an endorsement of “choice” implies an active (assertive, autonomous) subject who makes her own choices.

However, Celia’s talk about housewives in dramas demonstrates one of the difficulties that can arise when both choice and of strong womanhood are endorsed. When she first mentions housewives, her point is in keeping with her later statement that one of the choices that feminism supports is that of becoming a housewife:

“One of the characters um, she, starts yelling at her sister-in-law because her sister-in-law’s at home cooking and cleaning she’s like I’m a feminist and I believe that you know what you’re doing is wrong [...] and housewives are dragging down this country and all this other craziness and I was like she’s a terrible feminist! [laughs]”
(Celia)

However, between this quote and her explicit use of choice discourse, she says:

“But usually with those family dramas, she kind of eventually has some kind of self-awareness that she comes to and realizes that she doesn’t want to be just a housewife and being it isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, that kind of stuff.” (Celia)

This seems to suggest that being a housewife is less fulfilling, enjoyable, and respectable than holding a job. These two quotes together show the tension between the discourse of feminism-as-choice and the strong (autonomous, self-supporting) woman discourse. A similar disconnect can be seen between River’s support for housewives in Section 2.2 and her praise earlier in this section for the female character who does not need a man or his money. The financial dependence that accompanies being a housewife makes it difficult for women in that position to be seen as sufficiently autonomous.

In contrast, Iris, who juxtaposes feminism and choice and does not engage in strong woman discourse, has no criticism to make of women’s portrayal in dramas. Nor does Patricia, who explicitly denies an interest in equality in her answer:

“I like the way the young– the young women are portrayed, I have no problem with that I’m also, I’m not a feminist in the sense that I think [...] that a lot of women don’t understand the power of a w-that a woman has and and without having to be the head of a corporation or without having to be equal to a man and and so I

like the, the femininity.” (Patricia)

“Umm... hm... I... I dunno I, I think it’s... sort of the same [as the portrayal of men], I don’t know. [Iris and M laugh] [...] they’re portrayed as women but you see them in the working field you see them as mothers you see them, you know um, being respected by and protected by the guys that love them um, so, I don’t know. [M: So kind of like mostly positively?] Yeah.” (Iris)

Patricia’s views on young women are in complete agreement with her explanations (here and later in the interview) of what not being a feminist means to her. Her phrasing (“I have no problem with that,” intimating that others do) and explanation of being a feminist do seem to imply that she knows this is not a common answer or not the answer that I may be expecting. This can be explained by her familiarity with the online fandom, in which she later confirms she has encountered feminism.

In contrast, Iris, who has a very low level of involvement with the online fandom, seems more flustered than defensive in her answer. She gives the impression of not having thought about this issue before, unlike every other participant in this study except Maylinn (who also does not read much about dramas online). Still, she describes a portrayal that fits well with her support of women’s “choices,” and offers a value judgment that echoes Patricia’s in its praise for one of the same characteristics that most participants criticized: women being portrayed as “protected” by men. Therefore, it appears that when a drama fan lacks both a feminist identity and a vocal commitment to gender equality, they feel little need to condemn the stereotypical female drama character.

I summarize and discuss the results of this section together with those of the next at the end of the next section.

3.2.2 The portrayal of men: too strong?

In this section I will discuss what participants say when asked about the portrayal of men in K-dramas, and use it to highlight patterns in their characterizations of romance. There is less consensus between feminist and non-feminist participants in this section; echoing Asian fans in previous studies (Lin and Kwan, 2005; Lin and Tong, 2008; Chan and Xueli, 2011), they are divided over whether K-drama men are patriarchal or chivalrous. Because of this divide, I will mostly discuss their answers separately.

For the feminist participants and Hannah, the element that involved the most emotion in this section was criticism of the infamous “wrist-grab,” which Schulze (2013) also found to be a source of conflict for English-speaking online fans of K-dramas. Half of the feminist participants complain about it:

“Ok I guess I feel like I’m just like beating my feminist drum today um, I just [laughs] I hate the wrist-grab. Like I hate how domineering some of like in a lot of dramas the men kinda come off like for me that is just like such a turnoff.” (Elliot)

“It’s like the arm grab. Oh my word if a guy I knew grabbed my arm and pulled me away so we could have a conversation cause he’s mad at me about something we wouldn’t be speaking anymore until he had finally figured out why that was wrong.” (Sarah)

Like Elliot, several (feminist) participants explicitly connect hating the wrist-

grab to feminism. This is unsurprising, in that such displays of naked force differentiated by gender have no place in equality discourse, and perhaps this is not just because they are a violation of the bodily autonomy of an individual. As described in Section 2.2, in contrast to some of the non-feminist participants, only one feminist participant says there are natural differences between men and women when talking about feminism (while another explicitly says there are not). A man-on-woman wrist-grab that goes unchallenged or is even romanticized not only portrays a stereotypical physical difference that favors men, it seems to celebrate it. Also, like Sarah, several emphasize the importance of the woman's response. The fact that in many cases female drama characters do not shake the men off or even seem upset at being grabbed seems to be frustrating for many participants. I believe that such comments are part of the strong woman discourse, in that they reinforce the existence and importance of women's agency, especially in the face of this possibly-natural disadvantage.

However, I must note that the fact that the wrist-grab is much more widely criticized among feminist participants suggests that it is not only tied to opinions about strong women and equality; it may be tied especially to feminism. Considering that Schulze found that in the online fandom the wrist-grab is often explicitly connected with feminism by the person criticizing it, this might again be a reflection of the online fandom. Non-feminist Brenda, in fact, gives wrist-grabs as one of the main reasons she thinks American feminists would not like K-dramas. This indicates that making or avoiding criticism of the wrist-grab is one way of the main ways to establish or avoid a feminist identity when discussing dramas.

As Elliott's quote above suggests, the wrist-grab is one part of feminist participants' overall characterization of male characters as controlling

and aggressive. As with talk about strong women above, disapproval of domineering male characters is partly seen through praise for non-domineering men or traits that seem to weaken otherwise domineering men. For example, stereotypically feminine traits are noted with approval by participants:

“And I really like that too it’s not just like the man like in the box you know like, all masculine like, supposed to just look good and like not have any emotions they definitely have a much more emotional side to them.”(Maylinn)

Men in K-dramas are praised for crying, expressing emotions, and showing investment in romantic relationships, in explicit and implicit contrast to men on American television. Interestingly, this praise for alternative masculinity does not extend to the physical appearance of K-drama men, in contrast to 홍석경’s (2013) claim about the appeal of their muscular metrosexuality to French fans as described in the first chapter. Several feminists do mention an attraction to certain actors, but with the exceptions of Greta, who simply calls them “better-looking and better-dressed,” and Faith, who as described in the next section likes the way they are filmed, there is little generalization about the appearance of K-drama men. One possible reason for this is found within 홍석경’s exploration of the topic: the possibility that such indiscriminate adoration represents a form of Orientalism (pp. 316-319). Feminists could be afraid of seeming to fetishize Korean men, a tendency that River says is indeed often attributed to drama fans. The stereotyping and objectification that such a fetish implies would make it something to be scrupulously avoided. They may indeed see an alternative form of

masculinity in K-drama men's appearance – and like it – but the fact that it is tied to a certain ethnicity makes it risky to discuss.

It is also slightly more common for feminists to use praise of K-drama men's personalities in a way that implies problems with other men within dramas. For example, this can be seen in several participants' endorsement of gentler "beta males," either as the male lead in a drama or (much more commonly, as Section 3.1 showed) as the second male lead.

“[Sarah:] If you can have a relationship where the guy's in charge why can't you have a relationship where the girl's in charge and that guy be considered the equal of the domineering types. You know I don't know why you've gotta have one type of, male that, [Rose:] Yeah. Which I mean sometimes they're not, it seems like in in more recent years they've had more like beta males type [Sarah: Mm-hm.] leads.” (Rose and Sarah)

Rose is one of the participants who maintain throughout the interview that dramas are changing for the better, and I believe the observation that there are more beta male leads these days (a claim which other participants also made) is part of that for her. Thus these participants and several others show a clear preference for what Elliot calls “good guy” beta males, who are typically less domineering and more responsive to the lead female character. Similarly, a few voice a preference for “*nuna* [누나] romances,” which feature an older woman dating a younger man, because as Celia says, “that does kind of change up the dynamic of how the story goes” in that the female lead is “the one who has to be respected.”

Feminist participants in this study thus talk about the pleasure of

romance in a very specific way. Only relationships in which the power balance is equal or even favors the woman are described as acceptable and enjoyable. These qualifications, which are in marked contrast to almost every previous K-drama audience study mentioned in the introduction (Lin and Kwan, 2005; Lin and Tong, 2008; Chan and Xueli, 2011; 홍석경, 2013; 오미영, 2014), strongly suggest that the relationship between feminism and (heterosexual) romance in the United States is still generally understood to be strained, as it has been for decades. There are certainly a few feminist-tinged anti-romance comments, as when Kelly says that “[drama] narratives still want to really put women in their place, the way that all romances kind of do.”

However, the limited ways in which they do express some affinity for romance support the implications of the previous studies of feminist audiences described in the first chapter (Thomas, 2002; Petersen, 2012), in which the power dynamics in a romantic relationship determine how feminism-friendly that relationship is seen to be. Thus, a heterosexual romance in which the female half of the couple is shown as autonomous and the male half as at least respecting that autonomy can be considered acceptable and even pleasurable. If the devotion of male characters to the female lead, which is textually unambiguous by the end of a romantic drama, is expressed as more paternalism than vulnerability, however, it receives feminist criticism. At the same time, it must be pointed out that the fact that feminists consider themselves fans of romantic comedy dramas despite characterizing them so negatively in general does suggest that there may be a kernel of truth to Petersen’s (2012) point that sometimes even male-dominated romance can appeal to feminists, perhaps because it represents desires repressed by feminism. Alternatively, these desires may not

be repressed, only frowned upon and kept out of the interview because they do not fit the feminist identity the participant is building.

In what is perhaps a reflection of the small number of non-feminist participants, there is no real consensus among them about K-drama men. While Donna, Hannah, and Nancy similarly describe male characters as overly aggressive, the other four non-feminist participants describe them much more positively. Brenda says, “I kinda like macho guys anyways, so [laughs].” Similar to Patricia’s talk about the portrayal of women in the previous section, she thus shows some agreement with feminist descriptions of male drama characters but expresses a more positive evaluation of the same trait. In this case as well, this position likely reflects knowledge of online discourses, as Brenda is a very involved fan. Patricia and Iris express largely positive opinions:

“I do think that there’s seems like there’s a trend toward these these men to be, good citizens good husbands good lovers good good friends, and it’s portrayed that way.” (Patricia)

“Um, just like the cute little things like the guy always like you know gives the girl a piggyback ride and they’re like you know, in distress or something like, just like stuff like that just that chivalrous acts even though sometimes they can be mean in the beginning because they’re like you know bratty guys and then they fall for the girl.” (Iris)

Patricia’s answer is notable for the way that she explicitly connects the portrayal of men in dramas to the characteristics of real Korean men;

Section 4.3 will show how she often makes such a connection in order to criticize the United States. As in the previous section, Iris casts the element of men protecting women in a positive light; she dismisses unkind treatment of the female lead as temporary and not serious. In addition, Mei is extremely critical of the portrayal of men in dramas but for the reasons that they are usually focused on love and getting “a good job car house.” She explains that she dislikes this because “they’re setting this very like specific stereotype of what men should achieve in life for success.” She criticizes the narrowness of the stereotype more than its content, and there is no mention of men’s treatment of women.

In this way, a slight majority of non-feminist participants do not characterize male characters in dramas as unpleasantly domineering at all, in contrast to feminist participants. Also, even the ones who do are still more comfortable expressing generalized support for romance in dramas. They are more likely to characterize it as an *important* (not just unavoidable) and enjoyable part of dramas. This underlines the existence of tension between a feminist identity and romance fandom, and, as was the case with praise of chaste romance, suggests that 오미영’s (2014) American drama fans may have been largely non-feminist.

Finally, two of the non-feminists actually criticize some K-drama men for not being masculine *enough* in their appearance. Donna and Brenda both mention young, pretty “flower boys” (꽃미남) disparagingly and express a preference for characters with a more manly look. Hannah also brings up this issue, contrasting K-drama actors and K-pop idols with the “outdoorsy rugged [idea of] what a man is” that she describes as dominant in the parts of the United States where she has lived. She does not make a value judgment on this difference, only criticizes other Americans who

perceive Korean men as gay because of it. All three responses, however, do seem to show a level of discomfort with this feature of K-dramas.

To summarize the results of this section and the previous one, participants' discussion of the portrayals of men and women in K-dramas is either generally critical or narrowly positive; in particular, being an American fan of K-dramas means being (or claiming to be) constantly disappointed in female drama characters. This is in contrast to 오미영's (2014) study of American Hallyu fans, which both likely reflects the high numbers of feminists in this study and shows that asking fans pointed questions about "gender in dramas" brings a more critical response than asking them why they like dramas. However, there are a few who do not describe such feelings, and to some extent, feminist identity is less important in this regard than are beliefs on gender issues. That is, participants who describe their beliefs as endorsing equality between men and women or women having choices generally express a wish for stronger, more independent female characters and less aggressive male characters. I argue that this can be seen as asking for equality in the portrayals of men and women in regards to strength, as it brings both towards a central ideal. Participants who do not promote equality in general do not promote strong women and weaker men, and in fact do not criticize drama portrayals of the two sexes. It thus appears that equality-focused feminism and egalitarianism are related to an emphasis on power differentials in relationships more than, for example, solidarity between women.

At the same time, the fact that the theme of heterosexual power differentials also appear in the discussions of the two participants who gave alternative descriptions of feminist beliefs indicates that it is a primary concern of several forms of feminism. It is the dominant theme of much of

Elliot's discussion of dramas after the topic of feminism was introduced; it is important in Kelly's, though she also spends substantial time on K-dramas' heteronormativity, another possible feminist issue largely ignored by other feminist participants. Praise of strong women, especially, appears to be intimately connected to Black feminism and some facets of intersectional feminism. It must be noted that both of these participants also espouse gender equality, which could account for some of their focus on power differentials. In addition, I suspect that my separating men and women into groups and asking about the portrayal of each encouraged the "battle of the sexes" approach.

There are some differences between the participants that are related not just to stated beliefs about gender issues but to identification as feminist, and looking at these indicates what an American *feminist* approach to dramas is. One unsurprising point is that feminists are more likely to bring up representations of gender without being asked, which indicates that it is a more salient feature of dramas for them. Another is that non-feminists speak more positively about romance, both in general and in dramas, whereas feminists limit their praise to relationships in which there is no power differential or it favors the woman. The latter point shows that not all romance is perceived as unfeminist, but this general difference does suggest that the long-standing tension between romance in media and a feminist identity is still intact, a finding that will be discussed further in later sections. A third is non-feminists praising chaste sexuality as a positive, gender-neutral feature while most feminists either find it humorous or condemn it as one more way in which female characters are depicted as passive. As I pointed out above, this may be related to the apparently high percentage of overt Christians among non-feminists; it also suggests some

degree of sex-positivity among feminists. The non-feminist reactions to the appearance of K-drama men may also be related to a certain conservativeness regarding gender, even though two of the women who are uncomfortable with flower boys also criticize domineering male characters. They may want the men to act more sensitively (femininely), but they do not want them to look that way. In contrast, the feminist silence on K-drama men's appearance as a group may reflect a wish not to appear to fetishize Korean men.

The difference in characterization of the wrist-grab, which half of the feminist participants complain about and only one non-feminist participant does, is likely attributable to criticism of it being a well-known signifier of feminism in the online fandom. This difference in particular brings up the issue of what feminist subcultural capital is in these interviews. Its description in Thomas (2002) would suggest it is any (especially humorous) criticism of the portrayals of men and women in line with supposedly-feminist ideals. This is certainly present, and for the feminists who display it, at least, it does seem to have the function of proving that they are sufficiently aware of feminist ideas that they are in no danger of being taken in by dramas' gender ideologies. At the same time, praise for ideologically *sound* dramas or characters also appears as a way of marking a feminist approach to dramas (though this is often because it implies criticism of other unsound texts).

The fact that several of the participants who engage in seemingly-feminist criticism do not actually identify as feminist requires deeper consideration. It could be argued that this phenomenon reflects the difficulty of determining feminist identity or the fluidity of such identities, but I propose instead that it demonstrates the extent to which ideas that were

once distinctly feminist have become mainstream. I feel that it is unlikely that the non-feminists would implicitly try to align themselves with a movement which they later explicitly and firmly repudiate, and this complicates the concept of feminist subcultural capital as Thomas explains it. It should be pointed out that expressing this kind of criticism in particular is actually not that uncommon among non-feminist female audiences. Rockier (1999) writes that college-aged watchers of *Beverly Hills, 90120* prefer “strong and intelligent” female characters to “weak and helpless” ones, and notes that Radway’s (1991) adult fans of romance novels do as well, while in neither case do the researchers believe that their subjects are feminists. Again, it appears that McRobbie’s (2009) argument that feminism has been absorbed into modern Anglo-American culture is true to some extent, though the presence and beliefs of the feminists in this study suggest that it is too early to declare it completely extinct.

Thus the non-feminist participants may still be building an identity of critical reader within the interview context through a critique of female drama characters, but this identity is not one that is located in “a feminist alternative culture” (Thomas, 2002: 78). Instead, it further supports the link between feminism and mainstream cultural capital that Thomas also noted. The analysis, distancing, and ironic humor that characterize a feminist look at media are also common to intellectuals in general, according to Thomas’ Bourdieuan view, and this is likely what non-feminist participants who make seemingly-feminist criticism are drawing on. The reason that much of this criticism focuses on gender may simply be that that is what I ask them about. As mentioned above, non-feminists do not spontaneously mention gender nearly as much as feminists do; they are more likely to prove critical reader status through discussion of other topics, such as K-drama genre conventions

or the entertainment industry.

However, the fact that what appears to be feminist subcultural capital is in some cases revealed to be mainstream cultural capital does not mean that the former does not exist. As feminist and non-feminist descriptions of the place of *explicit* feminism in current American culture suggest that it is not considered the dominant cultural form, I would argue that it is still appropriate to consider feminism as a kind of subculture. Criticism of the wrist-grab can be considered a clear display of feminist subcultural capital in these interviews, because it ties the person who makes it to a feminist alternative culture within the context of the English-speaking drama fan community. This finding suggests that the concept of feminist subcultural capital, while it is helpful in describing how a feminist identity is built in fan discussion, requires some care in its application; knowledge of whether the speaker identifies as feminist, and what some feminist tropes within the fandom (if the viewer is part of it) are, may be required in order to distinguish it from cultural capital.

3.3 Feminist discomfort with drama fandom

Though I limit the use of the concept of feminist subcultural capital above, I do think that for feminist participants, the criticism of representations of gender in K-dramas in general is one way to build up such capital and indirectly justify their fandom. By complaining about domineering men and weak women, they show that they are not being duped by dramas, and that despite being fans, they do not accept dramas' portrayals of gender as inevitable, let alone desirable. They thus gain "permission," as Thomas puts it, to watch them. In this section, I turn to

the question of how feminist participants *directly* explain their feminist fandom. Right after finally asking participants about their affiliation to and understanding of feminism, I asked about the relationship between that and their drama fandom. Because of the different implications of this question for feminist and non-feminist participants, I focus on feminists' answers to that question here, and analyze non-feminist responses in the next section. I connect them to the findings of the previous sections and Chapter 2 when possible.

There are several types of answers to this question, and it is common for one participant to mention more than one of these types. However, this variation does follow, to a certain extent, the level of intensity with which the participant has just described their feminist beliefs, as well as the number of dramas they have seen. (By "intensity" I mean factors like the length of time they speak about feminism and how much they qualify their connection with it.) Those who talk about feminism less passionately *and* have seen fewer dramas are more likely to describe feminism as something like, as Lillian says, a "lens" through which they watch dramas, while those who speak about both more passionately are more likely to mention compartmentalization or bring up alternative ways of understanding the relationship. There is also some connection with the way that I asked this question, as the participants who were asked if feminism and fandom "clash" were understandably more defensive than those who were asked how the two "interact."

For example, Maylinn, who has seen very few dramas, and Tanya, who claims a low level of involvement in both feminism and drama fandom, simply describe how feminism affects the way they watch dramas, when asked about the interaction of the two.

“Like I feel like, I want, the girl to play a much more, important role in the relationship you know? [...] and I feel like, that does happen in a lot of the cases though so it makes me happy.”
(Maylinn)

“I think it causes me to, criticize Korean dramas more than some of my friends do? Because I, notice the stereotypes more than they do and the conventions [...] I do like it [but] it just makes me mad.”
(Tanya)

Maylinn’s comment verges on criticism of dramas but then becomes tempered praise instead, and Tanya describes feminism as causing her to get “mad” but not so much that she stops liking, let alone stops watching, the drama that is prompting that feeling.

As the number of dramas seen and the interest shown in feminism increase, more participants mention employing methods of compartmentalization. Some describe a type that Petersen (2012) did not mention, one that is available to fans of a large category of content instead of a limited series of books like *Twilight*: that of choosing another text entirely. Lillian says, for example, “If something really does bother me, then I would, just stop watching it.” Because there are dozens – if not hundreds – of dramas available online and new ones continue to be made, fans can stop watching one they do not like or avoid starting another that has a bad reputation (online, usually) without that meaning the end of their fandom. *Avoiding* problematic dramas, especially, seems to be quite common among feminist fans. This method of compartmentalization differs from those below in that it most completely resolves (or avoids) tension between feminism

and drama fandom. Instead of juggling pleasure and feminist indignation, the fan removes the content that is causing the two feelings. Though there may still be some social discomfort in that others who are aware of non-feminist elements of K-dramas may question the K-drama fan's commitment to feminism (for example, a feminist non-fan whose image of K-dramas is *Boys Over Flowers* may wonder how any self-respecting feminist could like them), the fan herself knows, and can try to argue, that she does not like *that kind* of drama.

Other participants bring up methods of compartmentalization like those that Petersen described. For instance, similar to the selective praise described in previous sections, some claim to compartmentalize between parts that they like and do not like within a single drama. Sarah provides the strongest example of this as she explains that when she re-watches the drama *Can't Lose* (지고는 못살아), "there are a couple episodes I don't watch cause, um I feel like it's portraying the female lead like there's something wrong with her even though [the male lead]'s clearly in the wrong." She likes the drama as a whole enough to have watched it multiple times, but has to make it more feminism-friendly by effectively re-editing it. The control that she thus takes over the drama is reminiscent of fans of other media who are "subverting the canon" (Leow, 2011) with feminist fan-fiction; however, without actually releasing an edited version to others, this control is much more limited.

Several others describe compartmentalizing between dramas and their real-life views, as Kelly does here:

"Also the fact that it is fantasy you know like you will forgive a lot of things that happen in Kore- K-dramas that if you were to see in

real life? It would just be like no. [...] [laughs] You know I do not wanna be around your ridiculous machismo insecur[ity].” (Kelly)

This has the effect of showing that, although the participant may like media that is agreed to have problematic elements, she would react much more negatively to those problematic elements in real life. Despite some feminist theorists’ worries about women who consume “unfeminist” media, Ang (1985) has argued that (media-initiated) fantasy can be “a fictional area which is relatively cut off and independent” from “social practice [and] moral or political consciousness” (135); the participants who mention this method of compartmentalization seem to take a similar view. While the preceding sections have shown that their feminist views do influence how they watch dramas, they maintain they are able to, as Elliot says, “flip that switch off” at times in order to simply enjoy them. To some extent, this position is to be expected from conflicted feminists who continue to watch dramas; someone who has stopped or avoided watching dramas as a whole for feminist reasons may very well espouse the opposite view.

A few feminist participants offer alternative approaches to the connection between the dramas and feminism. For example, two argue that the problematic parts of dramas call for feminist action in response. (Below, Faith has answered that she feels the two do clash occasionally and has been asked how she reconciles that.)

“I do feel conflicted sometimes with certain plot devices, um... and I— but I don’t think the answer is to *ignore* them but I think the answer is to, is for [the companies making the dramas] to be aware that people are discussing it... [...] so in that way, we all have to

watch them so that they can know of people's criticism." (Amanda)

"By having conversations you know? You can watch something and enjoy something and still separate yourself from it. You don't have to [...] limit yourself just because something is flawed. You know, I think it's just as important to have that conversation." (Faith)

Thus both participants say that talking about the problematic parts of dramas (whether to the companies making them or to other fans) is a favorable feminist response to these parts, which is a tactic that Petersen (2012) also finds. Amanda's answer indicates that compartmentalization by "ignoring" a certain element is more problematic than compartmentalization by criticizing that element, suggesting that some types of compartmentalization are seen as more properly feminist than others. Elliot also says that she makes Internet comments when she feels like the other commenters, whom she characterizes as young and impressionable, need to hear "a voice [laughs] of reason." These are the examples of feminism-as-action that I mentioned briefly in Chapter 2; note, however, that such actions do not come up in these participants' initial definitions of feminism.

Faith also goes on to describe a way in which she feels dramas are not just tolerable but actually compatible with feminism, and Laureen makes a similar point, though on a different basis.

"Like we talked about before I feel like in a lot of ways it panders to women and so I appreciate that equality [...] I appreciate being able to objectify men a little bit as opposed to, constantly being force-fed these images of women's like asses and breasts." (Faith)

“Um... sometimes it’s– sometimes I feel like it’s in tension with it. At the same time as I feel like, one of the thing I believe as a feminist is that, the stories women like should be considered just as important as the stories that men like.” (Laureen)

Faith is one of the feminists for whom “good” female characters being portrayed as without sexual desire is a frustrating trope and a feminist issue. Here, she draws on another point she has made earlier in the interview, that men in K-dramas seem to be looked at with what she jokes is a “female gaze,” citing the fact that they are often shown in the shower. She uses this to argue that at least the sexual desire of audience members like herself is respected and indulged in dramas. Faith thus agrees with 홍석경’s (2013) argument that there is a kind of visual pleasure for heterosexual female audience members to be found in dramas that cannot be found in “Western” media, but she locates the difference only in the way they are filmed, not in the men themselves. Thus her argument does not seem to support a new ideal of masculinity, as 홍석경 argues that French fans’ love of K-drama men does (though as I pointed out in Section 3.2.2, silence on this topic may come from a fear of seeming to fetishize Korean men). Both she and Laureen, on the other hand, prove 홍석경’s point that for some fans, watching dramas is partly a reaction to typical “Western” media’s disregard for heterosexual female audiences. They argue that this reaction is, in addition, a feminist one. In this way, dramas’ image as media for heterosexual women becomes the basis for feminist approval of them.

Additionally, one of the most common elements of feminist participants’ responses to the questioning of feminism and K-drama fandom’s interaction or clashing is a mention of “real” South Korean society, which

appears regardless of level of involvement in fandom or feminism. I discuss this in detail in the next chapter.

In conclusion, the variety of ways that participants respond to this type of question is related to the question phrasing and their relative level of involvement with dramas or feminism. It is surprising that low involvement with dramas results in less justification of feminist fandom, as it seems like feminism would be the more important factor in this regard. I suspect that in some cases this connection reflects less contact with the feminist criticism that can be found in the online fan community, while in others it seems to spring from a general refusal to get too involved in and passionate about dramas in any way, negative or positive, in the interview situation.

As described involvement with dramas and feminism rises, talk about various types of compartmentalization becomes more common. Compartmentalization is thus a sign of tension between feminism and fandom, as Petersen (2012) found. Spoken out loud in the interview setting, it has a similar effect as that belonging to feminist subcultural capital, in that it justifies fandom in the face of feminist criticism of dramas. While one new type of it that I identified (distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable dramas) seems to best resolve this tension, all types appear to be considered feasible, effective, and feminism-friendly by those who bring them up. (The one exception to this being Amanda's point that compartmentalization by ignoring the parts of dramas that seem unfeminist is inferior to compartmentalization by criticizing those elements.) Again, it would be interesting to compare explanations of feminism and dramas in this study with those of people who have avoided or quit watching dramas for feminist reasons; that is, those who perhaps cannot or will not claim

compartmentalization in a similar way.

Lastly, some participants challenge the ideas that feminists “shouldn’t” watch non-feminist media or that K-dramas are wholly non-feminist. Faith and Laureen’s strategy in particular throws into relief the fact that, for the most part, feminist drama fandom as described in this section involves not “claiming respect for women’s pleasures which have previously been treated dismissively,” as the two of them do, but “ideological critique” (Gill, 2007: 22). Both attitudes, in regards to romance media, are well represented in contemporary feminist media studies and Internet feminism, as I explained in Section 1.2.4. However, previous audience studies of feminists have found a similar negative bent (Thomas, 2002; Petersen, 2012); this is obvious with Petersen’s compartmentalization, and Thomas’ feminist subcultural capital may be used in a joyful way, but is still largely disparaging of the media contents being discussed. There is some feminism-related enjoyment in feminist participants’ talk about dramas, such as when they describe a time that a female character did something cool. Still, only Faith and Laureen label taking pleasure in dramas as a feminist act in itself. It seems that most feminist participants’ conception of feminism is as something that is mostly negative, at least when it comes to dramas. I will discuss this finding further in the conclusion of this chapter.

3.4 Non-feminist comfort with drama fandom

In this section I discuss what non-feminists say about their fandom after I ask them if they are feminists, and attempt to compare the results to the findings of the previous section. Even more than with the feminist participants, this section is complicated by the different questions that I

asked different participants. As Appendix 2 shows, there were no less than three. For simplicity's sake and because the number of non-feminist participants is smaller, I discuss the answers to each question separately.

One version of the question is, "Do you think that American feminists would like K-dramas?" The answer here is a resounding "no," and the three participants that I ask it to give the following reasons for that:

"Because um, the men are too macho. And um... they wouldn't like all that wrist-grabbing and [laughs] and you know all of the guy trying to tell the girl what to do all the time and stuff like that."
(Brenda)

"Because [...] in Korean dramas like even, in in a lot of cultures the woman is portrayed to stay at home and to, um run the household and and be there to, you know, help and submit to their husband um, that's very traditional and I think a lot of women would probably not um feminists would appreciate that." (Iris)

Donna's answer, which was longer, included the following points: dramas do not pass the Bechdel test⁹⁾, they show women having to do all of the cooking at holidays, and feminists may not like romance media in general because "they want something deeper." With these descriptions of feminists, who they have made clear they are not among, participants make claims both about feminism and about themselves by implication. Brenda's

9) The website TVTropes describes the Bechdel Test as "a litmus test for female presence in fictional media" and explains that "in order to pass, the film or show must meet the following criteria: 1) It includes at least two women, 2) who have at least one conversation, 3) about something other than a man or men." (TVTropes.org, n.d.)

description fits closely with her answer about the portrayal of men in the previous section, in which she praised macho men but indicated that this may not be a universal opinion. Iris's answer clarifies further her description of feminism, by spelling out that it does not support wives who do not work. Donna expresses explicit agreement with the second of the three positions she ascribes to feminist drama fans, but not the first or third. She thus underlines the perception that romance and feminism do not mix, and gives the impression that her enjoyment of this feature might be another reason that she avoids calling herself feminist despite espousing many of the same beliefs regarding gender issues. By not identifying as a feminist, she does not have to qualify or compartmentalize her pleasure in romance media.

Patricia and Mei were asked the question, "Have you noticed feminism in the online K-drama fandom?" Mei's answer mostly focuses on the Koreanness of dramas, so I discuss it in the next section instead of here. Patricia's says that she has noticed feminism, but goes on:

"I've also noticed, that, that the majority of women, love how Korean men are portrayed love how these romances are portrayed. Which to me implies that they're more feminine and they're more into the role of being a female reproductive caregiving female than they are trying to break through a glass ceiling and be equal to men." (Patricia)

Her claim that the majority of women love the portrayals of Korean men and romance implies, like Donna above, that romance and feminism do not mix; also like Donna, she expresses some approval of romance in dramas

at other points. She goes somewhat further than she had in her previous explanation of her non-feminist beliefs by implying not only that women should not try to be the same as men but that they should not try to be equal. Notice here that equality is defined, as many feminist also imply, in relation to the workplace. The last sentence also seems to be justifying her non-feminism by arguing that her position is the most common one among fans. Unlike Donna's, Brenda's, and perhaps Iris' answers above, Patricia does not allow that some criticism of dramas on gender-related issues is valid. This is in agreement with the strength of her non-feminist views, and in keeping with her answers throughout, which implicitly acknowledge but do not endorse opposite views.

Finally, Hannah and Nancy were asked how the views they have just expressed in relation to feminism interact or clash with their drama fandom. Nancy responds to the "interact" question by reinforcing the division between herself and feminism, and by minimizing her criticism of dramas:

"Now you've got me thinking I mean if I were someone who really were were, um, very opinionated in my feminist views [...] I wonder if I would find because I'm not, uh you know I'm not, that's why I don't have a problem with them and I enjoy them."
(Nancy)

In this way, she reinforces the idea that dramas and feminism do not match, but justifies her continued fandom by distancing herself from feminism. Hannah engages in some compartmentalization in her answer to the question of whether drama fandom and her view on gender issues

“clash,” by criticizing as unacceptable the gender relations in one particular drama. Then, however, she goes on to say this about male and female leads in dramas in general:

“It’s not necessary that he’s, better than her for being a man or for being rich. It’s usually that he’s kind of at a disadvantage because he’s kind of a brat and you know spoiled or whatever and then and she’s this strong person with all this life experience or whatever and so, and I don’t think that’s necessarily fair to the man either [...] I don’t necessarily see something in terms of gender roles that disturbs me.” (Hannah)

Here, Hannah justifies being an “equalist” - as she jokingly calls herself - and K-drama fan by describing the gender relations in dramas as more or less equal. The male lead may be rich and handsome and the female lead poor and (supposedly) plain, as she has described shortly before this excerpt, but when their personalities are taken into account, they are equal or the man is even “at a disadvantage.” In this way, she neatly turns what could be considered additional criticism of the makers of dramas into a sympathy for male characters that justifies her fandom. This meshes with her view of feminism as being unfairly positive towards women and negative towards men. Though she does not explicitly distance herself from feminism, as Nancy does, what she says thus has a similar effect.

The difference in question phrasing in this section makes it difficult to compare the results of this section to the results of the analogous section on feminist participants. Also, the small number of non-feminist participants makes it difficult to generalize about them. However, it

does seem clear that non-feminist views correlate with less justifying and compartmentalizing of drama fandom than feminist views do. The common thread between the views of Brenda, Iris, and Patricia, all of whom distance themselves from feminism from the beginning of the interviews, can be summarized as “feminists don’t or wouldn’t like K-dramas.” It is also worth noting that Brenda and Patricia, who spend more time in the online fandom than Iris does, make characterizations of feminist fans’ beliefs that are more in line with those found by this study. Though the issue of housewives that Iris brings up certainly does come up, the more widespread and heated criticism by feminist participants targets the portrayals of women as weak (Patricia’s “feminine”) and men as domineering (Brenda’s “macho”). This underscores the importance of the Internet in building and spreading feminist (and other) discourses in English-speaking K-drama fandom. Finally, Hannah’s, Nancy’s, and Donna’s answers show that, even when a non-feminist has described her beliefs as similar to feminist ones, the clash between them and drama fandom is not seen to be very serious as long as she does not actually identify as a feminist. This suggests feminist identification has an extra meaning that feminist-like views do not have; the former much more strongly requires justification from the fan. This difference likely explains the tendency, noted in Section 1.3, for non-feminists to be more involved online and portray themselves as more open about their fandom offline: it seems to be more comfortable for non-feminists to be drama fans.

3.5 Conclusion

The results of this chapter can be summarized as “the relation of

popular U.S. feminism to K-dramas is largely a critical one.” At the most basic level, the extra tension among feminists shows that, as expected, social differences among fans from the same country do connect with different approaches to Hallyu. In this section, I will discuss some of the details and further implications of this relationship.

The first section explains that the K-dramas that fans frequently bring up by name are high-quality primetime shows from the last 10 years. There is some variation in genre, but they are largely romantic comedies. While it is possible that the premise of this study encouraged this focus, it is also true that this genre is most frequently listed as a favorite by participants before gender is mentioned in the study. Also, previous studies of American K-drama fans show that these dramas in particular are widely liked within the fandom; therefore mentions of these dramas, if not the opinions given about them, appear to be representative of U.S. fandom. A comparison of three of these shows reveals that there is a considerable number of similarities in their characterization and plot points, several of which appear in participants’ gender-related criticism of dramas.

This gender-related criticism supports Schulze’s (2013) assertion about the connection between feminist criticism and dramas, but it also shows that a viewer need not be a feminist to articulate some dislike for the portrayal of men and women in dramas. Instead, she merely needs to espouse certain types of feminist-like opinions. I argue that the preference for stronger (assertive, autonomous) female characters and weaker (responsive, nonviolent) male characters that feminist and some non-feminist participants express reflects in most cases the two most common feminist-like discourses identified in Chapter 2: those of equality and choice. Strong female characters are able to make active choices, have successful careers

and retain agency in relationships like men. Non-domineering men do not stand in the way of these actions, especially by not taking advantage of a stereotypical physical difference between the sexes. At the same time, talk about certain female characters exposes the tension between choice and strength-focused equality when the “choice” made is seen as giving up one’s autonomy. Also, there is some evidence that this focus on the relative power of men and women is common not just to equality- or choice-focused feminisms but to Black feminism and intersectional feminism as well; this issue is clouded by my question phrasing, which may have encouraged this focus.

However, in the areas of romance and sexuality, there are some differences connected with feminist identification, and this indicates that there is indeed a specifically (American) feminist approach to dramas, and highlights the benefits of asking about participants’ feminist identification instead of assuming it based on their attitudes. The feminist approach is more immediately concerned with representations of gender, is more critical of male characters and must mention the wrist-grab (but not flower boys), sees sexuality as a gender-related issue and expresses limited praise for romance if any at all. In short, it is in a variety of ways more critical than a non-feminist approach, and the only point that the two groups really seem to agree on is that they would like to see stronger female characters. Some feminists claim that such a change is already in progress, and that male characters are also getting somewhat less domineering.

Despite the disagreement over romance, I do think that it is one of the major pleasures of dramas for all participants. For feminist fans, the power differentials of many K-drama relationships seem to make them difficult to like wholeheartedly (or to admit to liking wholeheartedly), but

the fact that most do list romantic comedy as their favorite genre cannot be ignored. Lauren's point that scripted, optimistic romance does not seem to be a current focus of the U.S. television industry is insightful, anecdotal though it may be. In addition, the non-sexual portrayal of romance is one factor contributing to the enjoyment of dramas for non-feminists; the next chapter will show that several non-feminists describe conservative values more generally as one of the advantages of dramas. Community, another key pleasure of K-drama fandom which was mentioned in Section 1.3, also appears in this chapter: feminist (or feminist-like) criticism is one of the many types that can be employed to humorous effect within the online fandom, as well as within personal relationships. A final salient *advantage*, if not pleasure, of dramas that was discussed in this chapter is their shorter series length compared to American TV shows.

The results summarized in the second paragraph of this section indicate two points in relation to previous studies that have discussed feminism among audiences. The first is that Thomas' (2002) concept of feminist subcultural capital, despite being useful in understanding how feminists justify watching "unfeminist" media, must be employed with caution. What may seem like feminist criticism to the researcher is not always described that way by the person making it. The researcher must be careful not to "clai[m] *for* feminism" (Hollows, 2000, p. 108, emphasis in original) participant remarks that fit with the researcher's understanding of feminism, without confirming in some way that these remarks also fit the participant's understanding of feminism. While these comments do likely reflect ideas originally created and spread by feminist movements, the fact that the participant does not see them that way is significant and must be taken into account. The second and related point is that it is useful to ask

participants what feminism means to them. Along with allowing the researcher to check whether and how her understanding of feminism overlaps with those of participants, this makes possible analysis of how specific ways of conceptualizing gender issues are reflected in discussion of a text. Future research on feminism in audiences would do well to consider these points.

Finally, the differences in the way that feminists and non-feminists explicitly justify their fandom in light of their stated positions on gender issues further supports the existence of a specifically feminist approach to dramas. In particular, it is a negative one. Though some non-feminist participants also speak somewhat defensively about the connection between their fandom and their views on gender issues, feminists describe the negative effects of their beliefs on the way they watch or use methods of compartmentalization to justify their fandom, whereas non-feminists seem more likely to simply further distance themselves from feminism. There is clearly a perception among non-feminists that feminism and dramas do not match, and seemingly a secondary belief that if one is not a feminist, holding feminist-like beliefs as a drama fan is not a position that requires justification. The former of these is also shared by most feminists, but the latter is a rather curious idea, and brings up the question of how the interviews with non-feminists might have been different if I had not introduced the word “feminist”. In that case, would those who espouse feminist-like beliefs have felt compelled to use other approaches to explain their fandom? I expect that some would have, while others might have just brought up their non-feminism themselves, at that point.

In some ways, feminism is necessarily a critical worldview, and one that has long been especially - and often rightly - critical of mass media.

However, the prevalence of the idea that feminism is critical of the vast majority of K-dramas, and that the only way to deal with the discomfort this causes is by compartmentalization of some kind, is alarming. Again, it appears that the disapproving side of academic feminism's approaches to media is being represented by participants more strongly than the condoning side. It is unlikely that non-feminists choose non-feminism based on this feminist negativity about dramas, but this factor is certainly not helping. The more positive approach that also emphasizes ways that dramas are compatible with feminism provides a possible alternative. The combination of this with the idea that online and/or offline discussion of the gender issues in dramas is a feminist act could produce a feminist drama fandom that both publicly calls out problematic elements of dramas *and* celebrates aspects and moments friendly to (various types of) feminism. As several non-feminists' answer in the previous section hinted, feminism is currently only brought up - or at least only recognized as such - in the online fandom when it is critical; changing this situation could improve the perception of feminism. I do not mean to imply that those who see feminism as a lens or talk about compartmentalization are "doing feminist fandom wrong," especially since the unavoidably partial picture I have of their fandom may have left out the very thoughts and actions that I am suggesting. In fact, this approach is in itself a form of compartmentalization, but one which expends as much effort to praise positive features as it does to disparage or ignore negative ones. This approach could help assuage feminist guilt and be more engaging to non-feminists.

4 Koreanness in drama fandom

In this chapter, I examine what part the fact that dramas are made in South Korea plays in participants' talk about them. Paraphrasing Lie (2012), I first ask, "To American fans, what is the 'K' in K-drama?" and analyze participants' explanations of the connection between "real" Korean culture and dramas. Then, expanding on the results of Chapter 3, I look at how they bring up this "real" Korean culture when discussing the interaction between drama fandom and feminism. I identify two main ways it is used and analyze their effects and implications. A particular non-feminist approach to Koreanness is also introduced.

First, a note on the idea of "culture." Throughout this paper I refer to South Korean culture outside of dramas as "real Korean culture," but I have put quotation marks around the word "real" in order to draw attention to the fact that culture is not actually a "distinct, tangible, homogenous, locally bounded entit[y]" (Schulze, 2013). Unfortunately, I was not able to explore this point with interviewees, and in fact my questions often, for simplicity's sake, presuppose the existence of such a "Korean culture." At the same time, none of the participants directly challenges the idea that there *is* such a Korean culture somewhere, though they are careful about the connection between that entity and K-dramas, as Schulze also finds. Also, several participants do bring up diversity that may exist within "Korean culture": between generations, classes, the city and the countryside, those who control or work in the media industry and those who do not. It thus may be seen as distinct, tangible, and locally bounded, but it is not entirely homogenous; also, it changes over time, as Section 4.3 shows.

4.1 K-dramas and the “real” South Korea

In this section I explore the way participants talk about the connection between K-dramas and “real” Korean culture and society, and point out a relevant difference between feminist and non-feminist participants.

In keeping with previous findings about non-Asian audiences, the feeling that one is learning about some elements of South Korea is one of the most frequent and most emphasized sources of pleasure that participants mention. Two features in particular that many cite are language and scenery. More than half of the participants say that they like being able to pick up some Korean words or see in practice language points that they have learned elsewhere. As for the scenery that they enjoy, it includes not just natural landscapes but also city streets, home and commercial interiors, food, and fashion styles. Thus, while they may not be comfortable including male stars’ appearances on this list when talking to an interviewer, as Chapter 3 showed, it is indisputable that dramas do offer visual pleasure to American fans. I also believe that participants emphasize language and scenery as what one can learn about from watching dramas because these elements seem less likely to be faked or distorted for the screen. (However, the frequent remarks about the prevalence of rich characters do suggest awareness that certain locations and fashions may be overrepresented.) They are two areas in which the pleasure of Koreanness can be acknowledged with little risk of seeming to misunderstand –or fetishize – the culture.

At the same time, like the online fans studied by Schulze (2013), they are also quite cautious about the connection between dramas and South Korea, especially in relation to elements like social relations and practices.

They often mention talking to people they know or searching the Internet for more information, as I described in Section 1.3. More often than not, they qualify claims about Korean society with prefaces like, “From dramas you would think...” indicating that dramas are not trustworthy sources of information. Several also make jokes about the idea that dramas could be indicative of the “real” Korea, as when Janice says, “If that’s accurate I never wanna get medical treatment in Korea because no matter what happens the doctors all get hysterical.” In addition to echoing 홍석경’s (2013) finding that even a suspicious approach to the Koreanness of dramas can be enjoyable, this shows that the use of humor to build a critical reader identity is not limited to feminist topics.

One participant’s comment suggests that this cautious approach to Koreanness is related to the American cultural context. In answer to a question that implied that she may base her image of South Korea on dramas, Elliot says this:

“I feel like because I am African American? I, I feel like I know better than to base my opinion on what I see on television. Um, just because like it happens to African Americans I try not to like, jump to any conclusions um, like that.” (Elliot)

In this way, she explains that her cautiousness comes from knowledge of the part played by mediated images and those who accept and generalize from them in perpetuating racism in the United States. Other participants, even those who are not part of an ethnic minority group, are likely to be aware of this ongoing and painful issue. Dramas are an example of South Korean media portraying (mainly) its own majority ethnic group, but

because members of that same group count as an ethnic minority in the United States, viewers in this context may still feel they need to be extra-careful about making vocal assumptions about real people based on drama characterizations. 오미영's (2014) American fans' claims of a transparent connection between dramas and "real" Korean culture do suggest that this cautiousness may not be a universal American approach to foreign contents, but again, that her study appeared to largely avoid criticism and uncertainty in the Hallyu fandom means that it may simply not have been mentioned.

When directly asked about the relationship between the two, there are several ways participants describe understanding dramas other than as a straightforward reflection of life in Korean society. One is that dramas show an exaggerated or idealized version of Korean society. In the following, Greta is answering the question, "What do you think the relationship is between dramas and the real Korea?" and Kelly is answering the question, "With regard to gender roles and relations, how closely do you think dramas resemble real Korean culture?"

"I think it's, exaggerated definitely [...] I guess the only experience I have with like non-drama or non K-pop Korea is uh, Eat Your Kimchi on You Tube? So, when they interview like, native Koreans or just go around Seoul, I guess that's my only window [laughs] [...] the real people seem more down-to-earth and, friendly and normal, I guess than drama characters." (Greta)

"I think they're an ideal? Um, I actually think um, I think they're an ideal the way that you know, a lot of, romances and rom-romantic comedies in the United States are an ideal, meant to

entertain.” (Kelly)

Many participants give similar answers to these questions, or say such things at other parts of the interview. Like Greta, they compare dramas with their limited experience with Korea or Koreans outside of dramas, and note the differences. Like Kelly, they argue that American media is not a straightforward reflection of American society, so the same is likely true for South Korea.

In addition, some took the additional step of saying who is responsible for this distortion or for what purpose they might do it. Here, Laureen is answering the question, “What do you think about the way that men are portrayed in dramas?” and Faith is answering the question, “How do you think the way that women and men are portrayed reflects real Korean culture?”

“Well that’s a tough one because I have seen like, because I can see all the [...] experiments going on, the writers and directors and actors you know always trying to come up with a new tweak on the hero, you know what kind of hero is going to [...] sell coffee best this week you know I mean these people need to make money.” (Laureen)

“I feel like a lot of it has to be, I don’t wanna say propaganda but sort of what is supposed to be, appropriate? You know? Because um, I asked my [Korean American] friend [name] you know, is everybody super prude there like are people really, um, you know like is everybody a virgin and and he said well no.” (Faith)

Here Lauren implies that the creative teams behind dramas and their sponsors attempt to create characters that will win (South Korean) audiences' attention and approval. She thus calls attention to dramas' constructedness. Faith does not say who creates or benefits from dramas being nearly propaganda but its purpose is clear: to teach people what is appropriate behavior for men and women. (Though as her next sentence shows, it is not entirely successful.) I have asked her how dramas *reflect* Korean culture, but she rejects this premise and tells me instead how they are attempts to influence it in this area.

Finally, one interesting claim that was made by two feminist participants is that dramas represent attempts to influence not South Koreans but international audiences.

“I don't really feel like I learned lot [about] the country itself? Because, I mean... when you watch a TV show you don't really learn too much about the country you learn what they want you to see about the country. [...] They want you to see that, I mean it's all stereotypical stuff like girls get piggyback rides and, everybody gets the rich guy [laughs]” (Tanya)

This type also portrays what is shown in dramas as purposive, though as in Faith's comment above, who exactly is in control is left vague.

Interestingly, talk of who is responsible for dramas and why they are made the way they are is nearly absent among non-feminist participants; most simply describe the connection between dramas and “real” Korean culture as Kelly and Greta do above. Mei and Hannah draw attention to audiences by asserting that dramas influence their perceptions or teach them

about life, but do not mention the makers of dramas. The only non-feminist participant who does is Patricia, who says there is less “slapstick” comedy in the first few episodes of dramas these days. She attributes this change to “writers and directors” having “more awareness [...] that there’s an international audience watching.” Like Tanya, she thus relates what is shown in dramas to international audiences. However, she describes it as an attempt to appeal to international audiences, not to influence them. The focus is less on control by the powerful (as in Tanya’s and Faith’s quotes); also, it is not related to gender. In this way, non-feminist participants are less concerned with and suspicious of the intentions of drama-makers. This suggests that while questioning a straightforward connection between K-dramas and the everyday lives of South Koreans is something that all viewers do, questioning the *purpose* of dramas and especially their portrayals of gender issues may be part of asserting a critical feminist identity. In this case, assigning a certain type of “Koreanness” (that of a reflection of the wishes of some powerful South Koreans) to dramas is a way to display feminist subcultural capital.

Another conclusion to be drawn from these types of descriptions is that there is still assumed to be some kind of connection between dramas and Korean society; it is simply not always a straightforward one. “Exaggerations” imply some kind of basis, “ideals” imply someone who holds them, and the two other types of comments imply the existence of (South Korean) people who choose what is appropriate or what is important to show to audiences. Laureen and Patricia spell out that these people are the directors, writers, and actors; Faith seems to suggest that it is what could be called “the powers-that-be”; and other participants leave it at a vague “they” or general “Koreans.” Though some of these involve a level

of separation from “average” South Koreans, they are still all Koreans. (Laureen’s characterization also suggests that what appears in dramas often represents that which appeals to average Koreans.) Schulze (2013) found that some online fans connect dramas to the “real” Korea and others deny that connection by arguing instead that they reflect only “K-dramaland. Here, it appears that they do both, as their talk asserts or implies that K-dramaland has some grounding in the real place of South Korea. This impression becomes stronger in the following two sections, in which the same participants who are suspicious about the connection above appear to assume it in order to mitigate feminist criticism of dramas.

4.2 Koreanness as cultural difference

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, a very common element in feminist participants’ response to the question of how K-drama fandom and feminism clash or interact was a mention of “real” Korean culture or society, and a non-feminist participant brings it up in the analogous section as well. In this section, I begin the discussion of these answers. First, I examine the participants who bring up dramas’ Koreanness as a way to reject or mitigate gender-related criticism of them. For example, River said:

“I know people that get really worked up about that stuff and oh you know he grabbed her wrist he’s an asshole or whatever [laughs] but I try to just go, [...] that is supposed to be [...] a romantic gesture so I will take it as such. [...] I try not to inject, my own values into it too much? Except [...] if there’s something that’s just like, I don’t care about what the culture says is ok that’s just not ok? Then I’ll call that out.” (River)

By characterizing what appears in dramas as “what the culture says is ok,” River claims a connection between “real” Korean culture and K-dramas. She thus expresses hesitancy (but not, ultimately, refusal) to judge dramas for the reason that they are products of a different culture. This can also be seen in part of Greta’s answer to whether feminism and K-drama fandom clash. After describing ways feminism makes her critical of gender roles in dramas, she says:

“I don’t know cause, I don’t know too much about Korean feminism but it’s not as big in the US as in the US like, so, maybe um, [laughs] I feel like I want to, help? But I don’t know [laughs] I don’t know, if that’s like too weird cause, feminism as like a Western ideal ugh, it’s so complicated [laughs] conceptually.”

(Greta)

Greta and I do laugh often throughout her interview, but the unusually high concentration of laughter here and the frequent stops and starts indicate a degree of discomfort with this topic. She seems to be saying that she would like feminism to be more popular in South Korea than she understands it to currently be (implying, presumably, that this would lead to better portrayals of gender relations in dramas), but promoting this may represent forcing a “Western ideal” onto a non-“Western” country.

Mei, in answering a question about her feelings about feminist in the online K-drama fandom, appears to use the same line of thinking to justify her non-feminism:

“A lot of these feminists are actually the ones who are not Korean?”

It's like, yes you have, you have a right to watch these dramas. You have the right to criticize these dramas. You can even criticize the society that these dramas portray. But, I feel like a number of the feminists [...] do the thing of like, well, the women in Korea should do this and this and that, in the sense of like, [...] oh we're gonna look down on Korea because it's a little less equal in terms of like, you know sexes, and [...] it's just like, you don't have to put down that country's culture." (Mei)

She thus brings up "real" Korean culture in order to censure feminists who single it out for criticism. Though she says at first that non-Korean feminists have a right to criticize South Korean society (which she connects straightforwardly with dramas), the rest of her comment strongly implies that they should not. Note that this rationalizes her non-feminism despite her downplayed agreement here with feminists that Korean society is "a little less equal" in terms of gender issues.

These participants thus call on the long-present tension in the United States between mainstream feminism and multiculturalism. Multiculturalism "condemns intolerance of other ways of life... and encourages cultural diversity," (Cohen et al., 1999, p. 4). While it is more associated with the issue of conflicting cultures within one nation, this is often a stand-in for encounters between cultures in different nations (Volpp, 2001, p. 1186), and thus I use it for the latter situation here. On the other hand, "in its demand for equality for women, feminism sets itself in opposition to virtually every culture on earth" (Pollitt, 1999, p. 27), and thus friction between the two – especially when feminism is in this equality-focused, liberal form – is seen as inevitable. This is further complicated by

the fact that feminism in general is commonly associated with the “West,” as Greta’s comment indicates. Multiculturalism can be seen as legitimizing the oppression of women, while feminism can be seen as pushing non-“Western” cultures to accept “Western” ideas, as part of a “lingering legacy that once justified colonial intervention in other worlds” (Koptiuch, 1996, p. 216)

Participants’ expressions of a multiculturalist hesitation to judge another culture at this point in the interview suggests it is a way of justifying their fandom in the face of drama elements that are considered unfriendly to feminism. It can be described, perhaps, as another method of compartmentalization, one of putting a separation between “my culture, where I know feminism to be right,” and “their culture, where it may not be.” By placing dramas in the latter, their perceived conflict with feminism (or in Mei’s case, egalitarianism) is lessened. Though the function of this tactic is particularly clear at this point in the interview, the tactic itself can also be seen in other parts; for example, in Faith’s answer to the question of the portrayal of women. After criticizing dramas’ emphasis on virginity and contrasting it with her own explicitly left-wing and feminist beliefs, she concludes, “But I know that that’s just a cultural thing.” Because this aspect of dramas is “cultural,” it is protected from harsh feminist criticism. Thus, as 홍석경 (2013) argued that Koreanness makes it possible for French fans to reconcile certain aspects of Hallyu media fandom that would normally be considered problematic in their cultural context, so it appears that Koreanness has a similar function for the feminist beliefs of American fans. (This even suggests an alternative interpretation of 홍석경’s finding: in addition to the distance and subsequent impossibility of somehow acting on their “inappropriate” fandom that Koreanness provides, the fans’ perception

of greater acceptability of such fandom within South Korea may contribute to their willingness to indulge in and admit to it.)

Given that 홍석경 found that these problematic practices are even some of the pleasures of Hallyu, I do not think it is overreaching to take this idea a step further and propose that dramas' Koreanness similarly offers American fans a way to not just tolerate but *enjoy* narratives and characterizations that would be uncomfortable to watch in an American context and in the English language. As I wrote in the previous chapter, I do believe it is likely that romance, even in its less equality-friendly forms, is one of the main draws of dramas for all fans. Taking that feature as an example, one could imagine how romantic scenes that would seem unfeminist or at least awkward if they were played in English by two American actors may become engrossing when played in Korean by two South Korean actors. In short, indulging the desires either repressed or made unspeakable by feminism that I mentioned in the previous chapter could be more comfortable with the distance provided by a different cultural context.

However, some of the particulars of this multiculturalist approach are problematic. One is the way it seems to lead to characterizing gender relations in dramas as unquestionably representative of "real" Korean culture, in surprising contrast to the overall trends discussed in the previous section. By then portraying feminism *as a whole* as being incompatible with, or having little influence in, Korean culture, these participants imply that Korean culture is more patriarchal than U.S. culture. Though three out of these four participants are careful to note that U.S. society has gender-related problems at some point in the interview, they still characterize it as a place where feminism has more power and where sexism is less tolerated.

Elliot's answer to the question of whether fandom and feminism

clash, also quoted in Section 3.2.1 above, suggests a way to avoid these problems:

“In a Westernized, version of what, of feminism and as an African American feminist I think it has to. [...] Because um, it just doesn’t fit into our society like it it, if a man [laughs] if a man just walked up to you and you’re sitting at dinner and he just pulled your arm and walked off with you? There’s no way that that will work out.”
(Elliot)

As she has done throughout the interview, she highlights the existence of different varieties of feminism. This has the effect of characterizing South Korean feminism as not a weaker version of American types of feminism, but as a different type entirely, that has other concerns. Elliot still portrays real Korean culture as being accepting of sexist behavior, but it is clearer that this might reflect different problems, not more of them. She is thus in a accord with Volpp (2001, p. 1217) in implying that “attempts to make normative judgments... must be premised on the understanding that cultures, including our own, are patriarchal – not more or less so, but differently patriarchal.” This demonstrates the benefits of awareness of difference-sensitive types of feminism.

However, it is Lillian’s way of bringing up cultural difference that I find most appealing. The following comes from her answer to the earlier question, “Do you consider yourself a feminist?” although I have prefaced it by saying, “Another part of this [study] is to kind of look at the intersection of American feminism with Korean drama fandom.”

“That was something I was worried about before as well like sort of, how white feminism corresponds to world feminism? [...] Uh, you know, it’s sometimes dangerous to, it’s still sort of that colonialist thinking almost in a way like this should correspond more to like what is ok in the West. So that’s something, I think could be delicate probably like, as a K-drama fan to really say, like what it says about, Korean men or Korean women because I think it’s such a weird idealized version of both.” (Lillian)

Like Elliot, she avoids casting Korean society as necessarily more patriarchal than U.S./“Western” society, but she also adds several important elements. C. Young (2014, Jan. 10) defines white feminism as the mainstream type in the U.S. and, among other things, “the feminism that doesn’t understand western privilege or cultural context.” By distinguishing between types of feminism in this way, Lillian describes the conflict as not between feminism per se and multiculturalism but between white feminism and multiculturalism *or* other types of feminism (likely postcolonial). Because “white feminism” is itself a critical term, her use of it implies that she takes sides against this mainstream form, though she does not directly say so. She thus justifies the coexistence of feminist identity and K-drama fandom by distancing herself from the kind of feminism that would arrogantly criticize the products of another culture. Also in contrast to those above including Elliot, she is careful to continue to separate “Korean men and women” from what is shown in dramas. While, as I argued in the previous section, some sort of connection is still implied, the existence of competing discourses within South Korea regarding gender issues is still recognized.

Interestingly, Lillian’s answers to the later direct questions of what

feminism means and how it interacts with drama fandom do not contain further examples of this other type of feminist discourse (which is why I did not discuss it in Chapter 2); for the latter question, especially, it is possible that she simply feels she has already made her point. Similarly, the lack of intersectionality in most feminist participants' description of feminism that I described in Chapter 2 is why I characterize the comments of the other participants in this section (except for Elliot) as reflecting tension with multiculturalism rather than culture-sensitive types of feminism.

One common criticism made of multiculturalism (see for example, Anthias, 2002) that every participant in this section does avoid is that of portraying an Other culture as something that does not or cannot change. There is widespread agreement that dramas have “gotten better,” and some go so far as to claim that Korean culture has or will, as well. The other set of problems that this way of talking brings is the subject of the next section.

4.3 Koreanness as counter-coevality

In this section, I discuss participants' mentions of change in connection with “real” Korean culture. As in previous studies of Asian fans (Lin and Kwan, 2005; Lin and Tong, 2008; Chan and Xueli, 2011), a few participants characterize South Korea as being “behind” the United States in a negative way. In fact, going one step further, they use this counter-coevality to justify their fandom. Here, Janice and Rose are responding to the question about how drama fandom and feminism interact for them, and Hannah is responding to the first clearly “gender”-related question I asked:

“The way I respond to [sexism in Korean dramas] now is, well

that's cultural and they'll get over it and, they won't have an easy time getting over it but then again neither are we [chuckles].” (Janice)

“If you look at older dramas versus now you can see how things have changed a little bit, and, you know I feel like things are changing there and I don't wanna say oh Korea's backwards you know Korean culture isn't backwards it's just that element has not evolved as much as, I hope that it will. Um for the sake of Korean women. And Korean men.” (Rose)

“Well just in terms of knowing that Korea has gone from, being a third world country to a first world country so quickly? I know that there's a lot of things still trying to catch up um and so in my brain at least like, the way that women are portrayed and are or are treated within dramas I try to take that with a grain of salt and go okay well, in terms of culturally like they've made this huge leap economically but, not necessarily traditionally in all the— in all the ways I mean, in America we're still trying to figure out gender roles [laughs] and equality and traditional values and all those different things.” (Hannah)

These comments share an indication of a belief in “progress” in gender relations; that is, that gender relations in a given society move from more sexist to less sexist (here defined generally as “equality,” as discussed in Chapter 2) over time. This is pretty explicit in Janice's comment, as she says that Koreans “will” stop being sexist or showing sexism in dramas.

Rose evokes a sense of progress and of moving to greater sophistication with the verb “evolve,” and Hannah implies forward motion with words like “leap” and “catch up.” Hannah’s remark also suggests that, as with the Japanese fans that S. Lee and Ju (2011) talked to, the reason that South Korea is currently behind is because of a late start on what could be called modernization; this is quite likely the idea that the others are drawing on as well.

How this progress discourse can be used to justify fandom becomes clearer when we look at one excerpt from Kelly’s interview. Kelly engages in progress discourse several times throughout her interview before stopping herself and making this comment near the end (not in response to a particular question):

“I don’t know if comparing them Korean culture to American culture is the right thing to do [...] if I do it it really does make me like, oh uh the United States went through this progression and then Korea will do the same progression which is kind of, horrible in a certain way because that’s not necessarily what’s gonna happen to Korea? Because, but um, but I think for me in order to be able to, be okay with it? [laughs] I have to think of it that way! So I’m just gonna say that now for the record.” (Kelly)

By calling herself “horrible” for implying that Korea will or should change in a certain way, and using legal language as if defending herself in a courtroom when she says “for the record,” she is likely acknowledging the multicultural (or postcolonial feminist) argument that one’s own society should not provide the standard by which others are judged. However, she

also goes on to explain in the part immediately following this quote why she feels she has to believe that Korea will go through similar changes: “There’s so many patterns I feel that it you know because I mean [...] gay people must exist in Korea. You know and and people with mental illnesses absolutely exist in Korea.” By asserting the existence of two of the groups that she has previously explained have gained increased positive representation in American media within the last few decades, she is implying that South Korea is in a situation that requires it to follow a similar progression or “pattern.” This explains why, I believe, she says she has to think that Korea will do so “in order [for her] to be, able to be okay with it.” She questions American-centric progress discourse, but ultimately justifies her use of it by arguing that change in the same direction as the U.S. is both warranted and something that will make Korean media more acceptable to feminism as she has described it.

Similarly, Janice’s and Rose’s quotes in this section imply that Korean culture’s past or future change for the better is one way to resolve their feminist identities with K-drama fandom: dramas are connected in some way with Korean culture, and as Korean culture gets less sexist (as they assert or imply it must), dramas get less sexist too. Though Hannah does not identify as a feminist, recall that the opinions about gender issues that she expresses often match those of feminists; therefore, she also can be seen as justifying her fandom in the context of those opinions. In effect, they describe a method of compartmentalization by *time*: Korean culture is in a different stage of progress from the United States, and thus its products should not be judged by the U.S.’s (current) standards.

As I mentioned in Section 1.2.2, a counter-coeval view of dramas and South Korea is not uncommon among drama fans from various

countries. However, as I also pointed out in that section, those in a “Western” country taking such a view of a non-“Western” country has long been criticized in varieties of feminism such as postcolonial feminism, and in the wider academic world. This is largely because of the approach’s inherent ethnocentricity, to which Kelly alludes, and the history of intervention based on it. Tipps (1973), in criticizing modernization theory, which was popular in the mid-20th century and similarly espoused a “unilinear process of progressive change” (216), connects it with social evolutionary thought that had been used to support colonialism: “[modernization theory] continues to evaluate the progress of nations, like its nineteenth-century forebears, by their proximity to the institutions and values of Western, and particularly Anglo-American societies” (206). Mohanty (1988, p. 80), writing in the context of feminism, challenges later developmentalist interventions by pointing out that the idea of “‘underdevelopment’... is nothing less than unjustifiably confusing development with the separate path taken by the west in its development.” Hannah’s comment that connects sexism in Korean dramas to an incomplete transition to “First World” status clearly illustrates this particular view. Though the U.S. is also portrayed as not yet perfect, South Korea is denied cultural “First World” status based on its perceived dissimilarity from the United States; it becomes “underdeveloped” instead of different. Thus, similar to some of the approaches described in the previous section, defining progress by how the U.S. has changed cannot help but lead to characterizing Korea as more, not differently, patriarchal.

The participants’ comments in this section suggest that they sense these problems of talking about progress. Kelly fairly explicitly acknowledges them, but the others also show signs of trying to lessen the

risks. Rose rejects the starker term “backwards,” and Janice and Hannah spell out that the United States also has a lot of problems in the area of gender relations, which at least mitigates the implied time difference. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Hannah also discusses the U.S.’s problems in detail when asked, later in the interview, about the interaction of her egalitarian views with her drama fandom. For Kelly, the tension that endorsing U.S.-centric progress causes may be related to her intersectional view of feminism, with its sensitivity to alternative axes of oppression. For the other three participants who do not mention such elements in their description of feminism or gender issues, however, I would argue that this tension more likely comes from the more widespread ideology of multiculturalism.

Finally, four other feminists, while not bringing up “real” Korean culture, also emphasize at other points in the interview positive change in dramas in relation to gender issues. This, of course, has the same effect (the implication that dramas have made or are making progress in a way that makes being a fan of them easier to reconcile with being a feminist) without bringing in the problematic claim that Korean society itself is “following” American society. Section 4.1 showed, however, that dramas and “real” Korean culture are connected in participants’ talk, and thus claims that dramas are changing for the better strongly suggest that, in some way or another, Korean society is also changing for the better. (Hence my assertion at the beginning of the chapter that many participants portray Korean culture as not fixed but dynamic.) Nearly half of the feminist participants, then, bring up progress as a way to justify fandom.

In contrast, several non-feminist participants, including Hannah, evince a *nostalgic* counter-coeval approach to South Korea at various points in their interviews, similar to Japanese and American fans in past studies

(Jung, 2010; S. Lee and Ju, 2011; 오미영, 2014). The criticisms of American culture that are discussed here are not an afterthought like those above, but the main point of what the participants are saying. They describe Korean culture in K-dramas as having some positive quality that the United States no longer does. Perhaps the most common area in which they contrast America and South Korea in this way is that of the young showing respect for their elders. Brenda differentiates between American and South Korean *television* in this respect, while Donna, Patricia, and Hannah directly compare American and Korean culture. Donna says:

“I think, that watching dramas and seeing, the innate the built in respect that you that you see people giving to elder– the eld– especially the older people, but, um... it kinda makes me regret that America’s lost that?” (Donna)

Compare this with Celia’s comment about respect for elders, which, like Donna’s, is in response to the question, “Has watching K-dramas ever made you realize something about American culture?”

“One of the reasons why I enjoy watching Korean dramas is uh the kinda respect for elders because that’s something that I recognize, um something that I was raised up on was kinda a strict listen to your elders, and you know, listen to what they have to say first, that kind of deal and so it was something that, it was a connection point for me in Korean dramas.” (Celia)

Celia’s comment is typical of the way that several feminist participants bring up respect for elders in Korean dramas and culture; that is, so that the

criticism of America is merely implicit and carries no connection with a bygone era. Though both Donna's and Celia's quotes portray respect for elders as something that is uncommon in America, Celia actually does not seem to be saying that to make a criticism of America so much as to praise South Korea. Donna, on the other hand, goes on to complain at length about experiences she's had with rudeness in America.

This kind of critical nostalgia can also be seen at other points in Patricia's and Hannah's interviews. Patricia praises South Korean entertainment companies for hiring "good kids" who "have a work ethic and [...] responsibility toward their parents and their families that that's really really strong," in contrast to "our rap stars." This carries an indication of nostalgia because rap is a relatively new genre of music. Hannah says that American men used to have a protective nature like K-drama men but now have lost it. In this way, these three non-feminist participants portray American culture as changing but not in a positive way; hence I describe it as "anti-progress" discourse.

In contrast, feminist participants rarely criticize the United States in a way that implies that it used to be better. Laureen does complain about American media's negativity about romance in a nostalgic way, as touched on in Chapter 3, but she also contrasts this with the situation "in reality," where she says "the possibility to emotionally connect with a partner" is better than it has ever been.

Thus, non-feminism has some association with using Koreanness to criticize the way that the United States is changing. Notice, however, that South Korea is still implied to be temporally *behind* in this formulation, as the participants describe it as "still" having something that the United States used to have, not as better for having evolved further and attaining

something that the U.S. has not. Therefore this anti-progress discourse is based on a similar problematic assumption of the U.S. as in the present, as the standard by which other cultures can be judged, and Korea as in the past. Perhaps because participants frame these characterizations of Korea as praise, this formulation does not seem to be accompanied by hints of tension with multiculturalism. Hannah's anti-progress comment, however, is arguably an extension of the steps she takes to make her progress comment quoted earlier in this chapter more culturally respectful.

Unlike the feminist progress discourse, it is not clear in this anti-progress discourse if South Korea will change in the same way that the United States has. As assumed future progress was used to justify feminist fandom for feminists (and egalitarian fandom for Hannah), this brings up the question of what the effect of non-feminists' nostalgic criticism is. Hannah's seems to justify non-feminism, as it mitigates her earlier feminist-style complaints (made before the word "feminist" was used in the interview) about the portrayal of men in dramas and is an implicit criticism of feminists, who are blamed for men no longer being chivalrous. Patricia's and Donna's have the similar effect of separating them from the majority of Americans that they criticize. Though their points are not related to gender issues, I believe they reflect a social conservative outlook that does likely have a connection to their non-feminism; both conservative beliefs and conservative political party affiliations have been found to be correlated with non-feminism (McCabe, 2005). Conservativeness can also be seen in non-feminists' praise for dramas' chaste portrayal of romance, which I described in the previous chapter. Some non-feminists thus use drama fandom in a similar way that Faith and Lauren do in Section 3.3; that is, as a kind of rebellion against what they characterize as the current situation in the U.S.

As in the previous section, one participant finds a less problematic way to address these themes. In answer to the question of whether watching K-dramas has made her reflect on or realize something about American culture, Amanda says:

“I do, find myself wondering if there was a timeline for, um, women’s issues as they develop in different countries. Where they would intersect and where they wouldn’t, between the States and Korea [...] whether you can predictably say that one social change is going to lead to another, or how often culture changes that trajectory to something you wouldn’t expect.” (Amanda)

She thus neatly (and I think, intentionally) avoids implying that one country is behind the other by portraying them as on separate paths. Also, instead of claiming that they *will* follow a certain path, she says that dramas make her *think about* what kind of paths they do follow; this is similar to the open-ended phrasing that Lillian uses. There is still progress implied in expressions like “develop” and “lead to”, but it is less taken for granted. In this way, Amanda brings up interesting and valuable points for American feminists to consider while providing a model for how to talk about progress without denigrating Korean culture.’

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, the value of studying U.S. feminism’s interactions with K-dramas in particular, as opposed to other types of media seen as unfeminist, has become clear. I have shown that dramas’ Koreanness does indeed play an important role in how – particularly feminist – fans talk

about them, and thus that their discussions have several implications for American feminism.

I first examined the way participants explain the nature of this Koreanness, or what relationship dramas have to “real” Korean culture. Describing dramas as portraying gender issues or other elements in a certain way because their makers or other powerful entities have certain goals was found to be a way to assert a critical feminist identity. Also, participants generally deny, in various ways, that dramas portray the lives of real, “average” South Koreans. However, as the following sections showed, most participants do seem to talk about “real” Korean culture in connection to dramas. I thus suggested some ways that their characterizations of the connection in this section also imply that dramas have some basis in the real country of South Korea.

I then turned to times when participants bring up “real” Korean culture in answer to questions about how drama fandom and feminism interacts or clashes. The majority who do this seem to use dramas’ Koreanness as a reason to show caution in criticizing them. I identified this as engaging in multicultural (or postcolonial feminist) discourse, and suggested that it represents a method of compartmentalization comparable to those identified in the previous chapter. By separating feminism (or white feminism) from K-dramas as the products of two different cultures and intimating that one culture should not judge another, they relieve the tension that their previous description of each has built. However, those who separate feminism as a whole from Korean culture in this way also portray Korean culture as *more* sexist than American culture, instead of simply differently so.

Next, I examined those who engage in progress discourse to justify

their fandom. These participants say that gender issues in both the U.S. and South Korea are becoming better over time, but that South Korea is currently behind the U.S. in this area. This becomes a way to compartmentalize the two countries by time, and argue that K-dramas cannot be judged by the U.S.'s current and more feminist standards. Obviously, this ethnocentric assessment of South Korean development entails the same problem as some manifestations of the multicultural approach above. Some non-feminist participants also characterize "real" Korean culture as counter-coeval with American culture, but claim that this gap favors Korea, as it is said to still have some positive value or practice that the U.S. has "lost." The functions of this nostalgic approach are a little less clear than that of feminists' progress narrative, but they appear to be justifying non-feminism and explaining one's fandom in a way that expresses displeasure with current American culture.

This last point underlines the fact that dramas seem to hold special pleasures for non-feminist Americans as social conservatives. In addition to the non-sexual portrayal of romance described in the previous chapter and found in previous studies, points brought up in this chapter include age-based respect, chivalry, and the behavior of celebrities. More than half of non-feminists mentioned one or more of these as reasons why they like dramas (or in the case of the last point, drama culture), and emphasized that they were lacking in American culture and media. On the other hand, the pleasures of seeing South Korea and learning the Korean language are widely claimed by participants regardless of feminist identification. The direct and indirect connections drawn between "real" Korean culture and dramas in this chapter also suggest that learning about the former more generally may also be an attraction, even though it must be approached

more cautiously; as described in Section 1.3, Internet research to confirm its authenticity is required. Dramas clearly both quench and create anew Americans' thirst for knowledge about South Korea.

One of the major themes that emerged in this chapter is that the Koreanness of dramas allows feminists or those with feminist-like beliefs to reconcile disapproval of them with continued fandom. Because dramas come from a different culture, and one which may even be seen as in a different era, their perceived unfeminist elements are ultimately not a serious problem, despite being fair targets of criticism; I suggested that these elements may even become enjoyable. Koreanness thus appears to offer fans additional methods of compartmentalization, and like those found or proposed in the previous chapter, some of these methods are more constructive than others. It should also be noted again that this effect is not limited to feminism and gender issues; 홍석경 (2013) has shown that Hallyu contents' Koreanness allows French fans to overcome cultural beliefs about masculinity and age-appropriateness in order to indulge in fandom of flower boys or very young "idols," while Jung-Kim (2014) pointed out that American audiences were unperturbed by one character's drinking habits in the original *My Sassy Girl* (엽기적인 그녀) movie but found the same behavior "borderline alcoholic" (90) in the American remake. Clearly, products from another culture being allowed to be "weird" or "problematic" in ways that those from one's own culture would not be, and fans not just tolerating but even enjoying the weird or problematic elements of them, is a more general phenomenon.

At the same time, the tension found in this study, between feminist disapproval of another culture's practices and the idea that one should respect and refrain from judging other cultures, has specific implications for feminism. Based on the characterizations of feminism in Chapter 2, I

identified the latter idea as likely coming from knowledge of multiculturalism in most cases, instead of a difference-sensitive form of feminism. Multiculturalism appears to be powerful enough that most critical mentions of “real” Korean culture include some acknowledgment of it, if not powerful enough to preclude critical mentions altogether. While it is a rational and respectful approach to a culture with which most fans have little direct contact, I found that when it is pitted against a general “feminism,” it can end up denigrating the culture that is being discussed. In contrast, acknowledging that feminism does or may also exist in South Korea, in a different (not weaker) form, is shown to avoid this problem. Thus again, as in Chapter 2, it seems that increasing awareness of different forms of feminism, especially difference-sensitive or non-American types, is an important project for American feminism. This also highlights the importance of recognizing and exploring the variation in participants’ conceptions of feminism in a feminist media study.

It is worth noting that previous studies discussed in Section 1.2.2 show that such superiority over South Korea is also expressed by those in some non-“Western” countries. I believe that, in fact, the Americans in this study display a higher level of cautiousness in talking about South Korea than was found in this previous research, and that this is due to nervousness about the country’s status as non-white and non-“Western.” This can be seen in several areas: feminists’ avoidance of making generalizations about Korean actors in the previous chapter; Elliot’s connection of a suspicious view of dramas’ reality with anti-racism; and the multicultural or postcolonial feminist approach to drama criticism. Even those who express negative counter-coevality seem to demonstrate a discomfort with this viewpoint that was not evident in the previous Asian studies. The U.S.

cultural context of sensitivity to issues of race and ethnicity, while it does not preclude problematic assertions, does appear to affect the way that dramas can be discussed. This tendency is clearer among those who are members of minority ethnic groups and/or socially progressive feminists, but not exclusive to them. It must also be noted that the *interview* context likely affected this, as participants may have been careful in anticipation of criticisms like those that I have indeed made of how they talk about South Korea. However, I believe that much of the questioning and uncertainty about Koreanness that Schulze (2013) describes among online fans who are predominantly American could also spring from a larger cultural tension. Though this feature may not be exclusive to U.S. fans, it is one that could be said to be a hallmark of their approach to K-dramas.

I ended each of the latter two sections of this chapter with descriptions of participant responses that brought up “real” Korean culture while avoiding the negative implications that those above make. In addition to the specific ways that they did this, like separating between types of feminism or possible paths of social change, one part of these responses that I especially liked is that they did not make claims but asked questions. This may seem wishy-washy, but I would argue that there is no particular reason for an average K-drama fan to take a definite stance on “real” Korean culture and sexism in Korean society. Instead, using dramas as a catalyst to think about difference and its implications for feminism and to raise these questions to others using the platform of the online fandom, while being careful to acknowledge the equal specificity of one’s own country or brand of feminism, may be more useful. As Volpp (2001, p. 1216) points out, making judgments is less conducive to dialogue than

“acknowledging that women in the West also have a problem with epidemic rates of male violence against women, sharing strategies that have been attempted to combat this violence, and asking how immigrant and Third World women are grappling with violence in their own communities.”

As Sections 1.3.1 and 4.1 describe, asking questions and exploring different sources for information about dramas and the “real” Korea is already a common activity for fans. South Korea (especially as it is portrayed in dramas!) is not a “Third World” country, and strategies for combatting male violence against women may not be a popular topic on K-drama fan sites; yet the point still stands that dramas can be the basis for dialogue about feminism and difference. The diverse, international quality of the English-speaking K-drama fandom means both that there are many opportunities to learn from others and that there is ample reason for U.S. fans not of Korean descent to be careful about the claims they make about non-U.S. countries and the certainty with which they make them.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary of results

In this section, I will summarize the results of this study, focusing on the answers to the first three research questions.

My first research question was, “What are current understandings of and attitudes toward feminism among American K-drama fans?” Compared to previous studies and polls of American women, the percentage of feminist-identified participants in this study was disproportionately high, but that does not necessarily reflect their real percentage among K-drama fans. In other ways, participants’ responses closely matched those of Americans in previous studies. Those who identified as feminist described feminism mainly as a belief in equality, and to a lesser extent, in women’s choices. Though my analysis mostly focused on these narrower concepts, I pointed out that the former’s implication that liberal feminism, with which it is most strongly associated, may still be seen as the most appealing or most persuasive form of feminism in America; this point is supported by the way that all but one of those who identified as non-feminist similarly expressed beliefs in gender equality. Some of this group described beliefs in equality and choice as in opposition to feminism, while others agreed with feminist participants that they were feminist beliefs. What the non-feminists had in common was a tendency to portray (at least some) feminists as taking action that is unpleasant in some way, whether it be unfair or overly-aggressive. In contrast, feminists spent more time describing the experiences or negative state of social affairs that justified their feminism, points that non-feminists

largely denied or omitted.

There was more recognition among feminists than non-feminists that there are different types of feminism, though in several cases these were the same simple types found in previous studies (“extreme” feminism and “reasonable” feminism). Also, following not previous studies but my own anecdotal experience of current feminism, I expected types of feminism that acknowledged the differences between women or fought against a variety of inequalities beyond that based on gender would be more common. However, only two participants talked about feminism in such a way, and they were the two with the most academic experience related to feminism.

My second research question was, “How do American fans talk about gender in K-dramas?” with a focus on the influences of gender-related beliefs and feminist identification in this area. In order to provide context for participants’ discussion of this topic, Chapter 3 started with an overview of the kind of dramas that they were likely drawing from. These were found to be mainly romantic comedies featuring unmarried younger people, with a few of them sharing a large number of plot and character elements. I pointed out that these dramas are famous among American K-drama fans in general, but that the participants in this study had a much more negative opinion about certain of them.

I then used responses to questions about the portrayal of men and women in dramas to address the topic of gender in dramas. I found that criticism of most female lead characters as lacking assertiveness and autonomy, or as losing those traits after they become involved with the male lead, is widespread regardless of feminist identification. Talk about male characters was more varied, but a majority of participants described them as unpleasantly domineering. Thus, American fans can be said to talk

about gender in K-dramas mostly in terms of power differentials in (heterosexual) relationships, though women's place in the workforce was also regularly mentioned. While this was likely encouraged by my phrasing "gender" questions in terms of two discrete and possibly opposing groups, I argued that these characterizations of gender in K-drama were also related to participants' stated beliefs about gender issues in general. In particular, the focus in Chapter 2 on "equality" was echoed in the intimation that female characters should be stronger in their relationships and workplaces and male characters should temper their strength; the former point also appeared to connect to alternative feminist discourses. At the same time, the difficulty of endorsing both choice and strong womanhood became apparent when participants discussed "choices" seen as giving up one's autonomy. Also, participants who did not espouse a belief in equality, especially, focused less on power differentials and had little or no criticism of gender in dramas. That feminist-like drama criticism, based on feminist-like beliefs, was present even among non-feminists showed the extent to which feminist ideas have been integrated into American culture more generally.

However, there were also some differences connected not to stated beliefs about gender but specifically to feminist identification, which showed the importance of explicitly asking participants about their stance (as well as considering differences among Hallyu fans from the same country more generally). Feminists complained about women's passivity in regards to sexuality, whereas non-feminists were more likely to praise the lack of sexuality in dramas as a non-gender issue. A few non-feminists expressed dislike of or discomfort with flower boys, while feminists said nothing about them. Perhaps the element that could most be said to represent a display of feminist subcultural capital, however, was criticism of male-on-female wrist

grabs. This could be seen in how a large number of feminists condemned them and in how several non-feminists, including those with feminist-like beliefs about gender issues, refused to. I attributed this shared conception of the significance of wrist-grabs to the online K-drama fandom.

One other difference was that, while several non-feminists expressed enjoyment of dramas' portrayal of romance in general, almost all feminists would only praise types of romance in which the relationship was seen as fairly equal. I argued that this reflected longstanding tension between feminism and romance in media. Based on their reported favorite genres, I suggested that feminist participants may also like dramas' more patriarchal portrayals of romance, but have been uncomfortable admitting this in the interview because of the aforementioned tension.

Dramas also provided some pleasures more clearly shared by both groups: a basis for community in the form of the online fandom or, for some participants, with people they already knew; a comparatively quick and convenient viewing experience; and the opportunity to learn something, whether it be language, visual elements, or even the values of the powers-that-be, about South Korea. For non-feminists, conservative values exemplified in respect for elders or the lack of (especially premarital) sexuality were also described as a major draw of dramas. While again, the goal of this study was not to answer the question of why American feminists and non-feminists watch dramas, these findings do at least shed some light on the way that this topic is handled by these fans in an interview setting.

The section in which I asked feminist and non-feminist participants about the interaction of their beliefs on gender issues and their fandom showed most clearly the negative relationship that dramas and feminism are

seen to have. At the very least, feminists described their feminist beliefs as a critical lens, and most go further and describe them as requiring some form of tension-relieving compartmentalization in order to lessen the friction they cause with dramas. Non-feminists guessed that feminists would not like dramas or downplayed their own feminist-like beliefs, seemingly suggesting that they were not that important if they did not actually come from feminist identification. I highlighted the approaches of a few fans who gave alternative, constructive interpretations of the relationship between fandom and feminism that echo those found in recent academic and Internet feminism, such as considering dramas the basis for feminist action or emphasizing the feminism-friendly elements of them. I argued that these more balanced approaches may provide a way for feminists to enjoy dramas more freely and could be more appealing to non-feminists.

With the third research question, I asked, “What role does ‘Koreanness’ play in American fans’ talk about gender issues in dramas?” I found that the conception of dramas’ Koreanness was quite complicated. When directly asked, about it, participants would give a variety of descriptions that denied that it was an accurate or straightforward reflection of “real” Korean culture. One way that they did this - that of saying dramas are made for the purpose of influencing others - helps build a critical feminist identity. However, in other parts of the interview, such as when they were asked about the interaction of drama fandom and feminism, they did appear to connect the two. Thus I suggested that even in their more suspicious approaches to this connection, there was still a connection implied.

I then showed how Koreanness was used in additional methods of compartmentalization to justify fandom in spite of feminist (or feminist-like)

criticism of dramas. By emphasizing that dramas came from another culture, some fans implied that it should not be judged by American feminist standards. By placing it in a separate culture that is in a separate stage of “progress,” others implied that it should not be judged by *current* American feminist standards. I further suggested that these kinds of compartmentalization may even enable pleasure in dramas’ “unfeminist” elements. Both the culture- and time-based approaches were problematic when they portrayed South Korea as more sexist and less developed than the U.S. Some non-feminists’ “anti-progress” nostalgia, though it appeared to be made in order to describe a pleasure of dramas, similarly privileged U.S. development.

I identified most participants’ cautiousness or discomfort in criticizing Korean culture as representing multiculturalism. However, cultural sensitivity based not on multiculturalism but on awareness or endorsement of different types of feminism was found to lead to the most respectful approach to Korean culture. In a similar way, portraying the U.S. and South Korea as on separate paths instead of at different places on the same path avoided the problematic ethnocentricity of most mentions of “progress.” Finally, I argued that an attitude of asking questions, instead of making claims, is more inclusive and fruitful, especially in the space of the online fandom.

The final research question is addressed in the next two sections.

5.2 Implications for Hallyu in the United States

The non-representative sample of participants (likely a little older and more feminist than the average Hallyu fan, and lacking those of Korean

descent, new Americans, or those who have spent much time in Korea) means that, while the results of this study do reflect how dramas are actually talked about by American fans, certain of the issues or opinions here may not be as salient or common in the wider community. Still, I believe a few valuable points have emerged with regard to the characteristics of K-drama fandom and the future of Hallyu in the U.S.

First, this study has demonstrated that K-drama representations of gender are indeed troubling for many American fans, as Schulze's (2013) look at the English-speaking online fandom suggested, and that fans are not averse to expressing this opinion offline. Even most of those who later explicitly rejected a feminist identity did initially make feminist-like criticism of gender, especially with regard to female characters. On the other hand, the points that such criticism was brought up by non-feminists mostly in answer to my direct questions and that no such criticism was found in the previous audience study of American K-drama fans (오미영, 2014) make it clear that, though representations of gender are seen as problematic, these faults are ultimately forgivable. Feminists, who claimed greater difficulty reconciling their beliefs with their fandom and even mentioned avoiding or abandoning certain dramas for gender-related reasons, still did not bring up the possibility of quitting drama-watching altogether.

Instead, one of the major ways that feminists were found to relieve this tension was by emphasizing that dramas are the product of another country much different than their own; that is, by emphasizing dramas' Koreanness. Koreanness, in whatever form it is understood, also accounts for much of feminist and non-feminist enjoyment of and interest in dramas. These findings, which are in keeping with previous studies of non-Asian audiences, show that K-dramas benefit from perceptions of their textual and

extra-textual connections with South Korea. At the same time, fans' hesitations during discussions on this topic reflect the fact that the American cultural context makes Koreanness (as non-“Western” non-whiteness) a somewhat-perilous subject. While the perception of danger was likely exacerbated by the interview setting, I connected it to similar behaviors in the online English-speaking fandom. This cautiousness, which deserves further exploration in other contexts with a similar history of ethnic strife, may temper the value of dramas' Koreanness.

Also, despite this wariness, the conception of South Korea that several participants describe has some troubling aspects. Namely, there is a tendency to portray South Korea as more sexist than and temporally behind the United States. Americans' most frequently-mentioned dramas, which are set mostly in modern-day Seoul and usually include wealthy characters, do show a South Korea that *looks* as “modern” and “developed” as anywhere in the U.S.; the high production values of the shows themselves add to this image. For those who had little knowledge of the country before, dramas must make an imposing first impression. However, it is clear that watching and enjoying them does not always preclude a colonial(-like) gaze on South Korean social relations, as has been found in studies in other countries. This gaze is even sometimes present when fans are describing Korean culture as superior to current U.S. culture. Though I believe that Hallyu in the U.S. is ultimately a constructive phenomenon because of the intercultural curiosity, respect, and understanding fostered, there is clearly a limit to these positive effects.

At the same time, it must be pointed out that K-dramas themselves may have little responsibility for these positive effects or the colonial-like gaze of fans. Dramas do affect Americans' images of South Korea; they

mostly influence the images of what South Korea literally looks like, but they also influence understandings of the culture, even if they are taken as representing only “what is allowed on TV.” As has been shown throughout this study, the online English-speaking fan community has a very strong effect on how dramas are discussed and interpreted. It appears that K-dramas’ role is more that of sparking curiosity about the country and culture, which is then satiated offline, by a variety of people with lived experience of South Korea, or online, mostly by blogs and forum comments by the same, or Wikipedia. Fans trust these sources much more than dramas themselves to teach them about the “real” Korea. This means that the control that the makers of dramas have over the effects of Hallyu is actually limited. If they were to try to improve Americans’ perception of, for example, gender equality in the South Korean workplace through changing its portrayal in dramas, they could not be successful without confirmation from these on- or offline sources that the “real” Korea had also changed. In fact, the extent to which American fans trust those who claim lived experience seems a little troubling in itself; but the fact that they tend to use multiple such sources makes it likely that they do often get an accurate (that is, complex) picture of whatever area of Korean culture they are researching.

The other pleasures of dramas described in previous studies were confirmed in this study, although each was found to differ somewhat depending on feminist identity. Praise for dramas’ lack of explicit sexuality was shown to have a connection with non-feminism. While another seemingly-conservative element – the respect shown by younger characters to their elders – was attractive to both groups, it also elicited more enthusiastic praise from non-feminists. Similarly, feminists demonstrated discomfort

praising drama romance in more than certain limited ways (though I suggested that, as one of the most salient feature of dramas, it is ultimately one of the main pleasures for them as well). These points show, as does feminists' greater tension with representations of gender and some non-feminists' nostalgic counter-coevality, that dramas are a more comfortable "fit" for Americans who have socially conservative beliefs like non-feminism. (The one exception to this is some non-feminists' expressed unease with many K-drama men's insufficiently masculine appearances.) This divide has not been noted in previous studies either in or out of the United States, and shows that an approach to Hallyu that considers differences within a single country can be fruitful. Finally, mention of dramas being mainly watched by women was widespread, but praise of them as *for* (heterosexual) women was limited to two feminist participants. I discuss the advantages of this approach for feminist fans in the next section, but I will note here that its wider adoption would obviously benefit U.S. Hallyu as well, by making it possible for this group of fans to become more involved.

Even without this particular positive feminist approach to dramas, however, feminists' claims that dramas are currently getting better, both in the area of representations of gender and in overall quality, do bode well for the future of Hallyu in the U.S. In fact, both groups were quite optimistic about this. They portrayed the K-drama fandom as marginal but growing, and likely to continue doing so, at least among women. Of course, this study's results in themselves cannot prove that, and I do think that fans' interest in other East Asian contents hints that some caution may be necessary in assessing the phenomenon's sustainability. However long Hallyu lasts, what is clear from this study and others is that it provides a valuable opportunity to look into a variety of issues in the countries where it

appears.

5.3 Implications for American feminism

The single most important point that has emerged from this study is that the existence of different types of feminism must be made known. The endorsement by nearly all participants of gender equality suggests that there is good reason for feminists to define feminism as simply equality. However, as I pointed out in Chapter 2, increasing awareness of a wide variety of feminist beliefs beyond that would reduce the perception that feminism is a single, homogenous movement, or at best, two movements, one of which is basically equality feminism and the other of which is “extreme” feminism. With greater knowledge of other feminists approaches, people could align themselves with the type that most appeals to them and engage in certain feminist actions related to that while declining connection with others. This could thus appeal to some non-feminists, as well as opening up the possibility for new ways of thinking about gender and society for feminists.

In particular, difference-sensitive forms of feminism must be more widely publicized, even among feminists. Though endorsing equality and choice does not necessarily preclude this, knowledge of intersectionality and difference-sensitive forms seem to lead a feminist fan to contrast not “feminism” and multiculturalist respect for another culture, but mainstream American feminism and difference-sensitive types *or* types that may exist in the other culture. In this way, the fan refrains from painting the country that has produced “unfeminist” media as backwards and unavoidably more patriarchal than the United States, because of its perceived lack of

mainstream American feminism. This is, as I wrote above, an important first step in not alienating those from another country, whether it is the country that produced this media or not. The fact that two of the three participants who mentioned difference-sensitive forms of feminism or appeared to endorse them were those who had the most academic experience with feminism suggests that they are indeed being taught in women's and gender studies classes, but that they are harder to come across outside of the academy. Again, it appears that my perception of their growing visibility on the Internet was mistaken. The different effects of various forms of feminism also demonstrate that future media studies of feminists or feminism in audiences would do well to explore what exactly the participants understand feminism to be (as well as whether they do actually identify as feminist).

The second point to be emphasized is that framing feminism as not only critical but also positive about some aspects of media can be valuable. This is especially true for media that, like dramas, are seen as problematic. Obviously, all fans get some kind of pleasure out of the object of their fandom, but those in this study who have found ways in which that pleasure is feminism-friendly seem to feel most comfortable with feminist fandom. For example, as with all romance media, which still appears to cause a great deal of tension with feminism, the point that K-dramas take heterosexual women's interests seriously could be emphasized as a feminism-friendly feature. In short, I am suggesting that feminist fans allow themselves to indulge a little more, or a little more openly, in the pleasure side of the "pleasure/danger" divide that Johnson (2007) has identified in feminist approaches to television. As those on the danger side would argue, this approach entails some risk of weakening feminism by framing the

watching of certain media products as unconditionally “empowering” simply because it is a choice that a woman makes. However, in dramas’ case at least, feminist fans have shown that they are more than willing and able to criticize from a feminist standpoint, so even an attempt at positivity is more likely to lead to a balanced approach, in which fans recognize that K-dramas “contain a mixture of feminist, postfeminist, antifeminist and pseudofeminist motifs” (Johnson, 2007, p. 19), than an overly-positive one.

I would also like to specify that it is important to make this attempt publicly. While all feminist drama fans show some amount of positivity when talking to me (such as when they praise a certain strong female character), the negativity that non-feminists in this study attribute to feminist fans suggests that they do not always make such comments in the Internet fandom. It may be that social stigma against feminists as negative and aggressive is causing non-feminists to only perceive critical writings as feminist, and of course, this perception is somewhat unfair, as this study has shown that non-feminists also make quite a bit of feminist-like criticism in the interview situation. However, this impression of a connection between explicit feminism and criticism is also shared by Schulze (2013), and either way, the point stands that online feminist fandom could benefit from a little positivity. As starting conversations about gender issues is also a constructive approach to feminist fandom found in this study, it simply requires one more step for the feminist fan to find something positive to say (or write) about the media in question, at least some of the time, in explicit connection with feminism. This approach could thus be less off-putting to those currently outside of feminism, and provide a more welcoming basis for these conversations on gender issues.

Finally, though the similarity between feminist and non-feminist

views of gender issues is promising, the disagreements between the two groups about a variety of issues related to feminism suggest certain tasks for feminism, as I discussed in Chapter 2. One of these disagreements was about the extent to which gender equality had already been achieved. Non-feminists portrayed gender discrimination as a thing of the past or as not having affected them personally, and thus not widespread. Another point of controversy was whether feminism allows women to make the “choice” of becoming a housewife; even some feminists seemed uncertain about this. The third and perhaps most major difference was non-feminists’ critical focus on feminist actions, and feminists’ near-silence on the same subject. I suggested that American feminism thus focus on raising awareness of current inequalities, emphasizing the systems that make being a housewife a common “choice” for individual women, and changing the perception of certain feminist actions. The first of these two are reasonably straightforward, and may be possible; as Section 1.2.3 showed, the similarly-simple push to define feminism as *for*, not against, equality has gained traction in recent years, at least with celebrities. The third, on the other, is so complex as to be nearly impossible. There have always been and will continue to be different interpretations *among* feminists about what kinds of actions are necessary and justified, and so attempts to create a unified perception of these outside cannot but have limited success. That is one of the reasons why, as I explained above, I suggested raising public awareness of the different types of feminist beliefs, so that women (and men) can claim and engage in action to support the types that appeal to them with less connection to the types they do not like.

5.4 Limitations and suggestions for further research

Perhaps the main limitation is that the constructionist approach to data analysis, while making possible a study grounded in participants' own words but connected to the larger social context, meant that the treatment of certain topics was insufficient. This is most glaring in the area of the pleasures of dramas, where considering only what participants actually *say* resulted in considerable weight being given to shallow factors like series length. I suggested that more charged elements like old-fashioned romance may be a reason that even feminist fans like dramas, but did not explore this possibility in detail or analyze how it might work. A psychoanalytic approach that allows more conjecture about fans' mental processes in connection with dramas would be able to fill in this gap.

Another limitation, which I acknowledged throughout this study, was that the way that I operationalized "talk about gender issues" was problematic and may have pushed participants toward emphasizing power differentials. While asking about "how men/women are portrayed" was appealingly simple and clear, finding another, more open way to ask about representations of gender may have resulted in the participants choosing different focuses within that area.

In addition to research that corrects or addresses these issues, there are several other directions for future research suggested by this study. With regards to K-dramas, one possibility was mentioned in Chapter 3: interviewing American feminists who have quit watching dramas for feminist reasons. Their discussions of dramas could show the limits of compartmentalization and bring into relief the kinds of feminist beliefs that are drama-friendly and drama-unfriendly. It would also be interesting to

explore in more detail how K-drama fandom interacts with social divisions besides that of feminism/non-feminism. Ethnicity, which I have touched on, is one good candidate for this; (fan) gender, an element that I was not able to examine, is another. Studies into such factors would provide further insight both into American discourses on foreign, non-“Western” media and countries and into Hallyu in particular.

For American popular feminism more generally, one question that this study raises is that of how feminist viewers discuss media that is generally agreed to be feminist-*friendly*. The answer might provide a very different picture of U.S. feminism, as well as make it possible to flesh out concepts used in this study and develop additional ones.

Appendix 1: Participant recruitment advertisement

My name is Marilyn, and I'm a graduate student researching the Korean Wave in the U.S. Specifically, I'm hoping to interview K-drama fans about why they like dramas, how they started watching them, etc. If you are a K-drama fan (even a casual one!), have lived all or most of your life in the U.S., are not of Korean descent, and have never lived in Korea, then I would really like to talk to you about K-dramas. Please email me at [email address] if you can help me out.

Appendix 2: Interview questions

1. How did you come to start watching dramas? (When?)
2. How do you usually watch dramas? (example: TV broadcast/download/streaming, marathoning/1 episode per __, with others/alone)
3. Do you like all types of dramas (rom-com, melo, sageuk, thriller)? (Why like/dislike some?)
4. Do you have a favorite drama? What did you like about it?
5. What do you think that Korean dramas do better than other types of shows, at least for you personally?
6. Is there anything that annoys or bothers you about dramas? (Thing that made you angriest? Tried to watch but couldn't get through?)
7. What do you think you have learned about Korea from watching dramas?
8. Do you regularly visit websites that discuss Korean dramas? If so, which ones? Do you comment on them or just read?
9. Do you personally know any Koreans or Korean-Americans? If so, do you ever talk about Korean dramas or Korea with them?
10. Are there other ways that you learn about or have learned about Korea? (What are they and what did you learn?)
11. Are you interested in other aspects of Korean culture?
12. When you're not watching K-dramas, what other kinds of shows or videos do you usually watch?
13. What do you think about the way women are portrayed in dramas?
14. What do you think about the way men are portrayed in dramas?

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15. How do you think the way women and men are portrayed reflects Korean culture?
16. Do you consider yourself a feminist? (Why or why not? What does that mean to you?)
 - a. (If so) How does that interact with being a drama fan?
OR Do you feel those views clash with being a drama fan?
 - b. (If not) do you think that American feminists like Korean dramas? Why or why not?
OR How do those views interact with being a fan of K-dramas?
OR Have you noticed feminism in the K-drama fandom? What do you think about it?
17. Has what you've seen in dramas ever made you reflect on American culture? Like, "Oh, I didn't think about it before, but we do that differently"?
18. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me? Something I missed or something you'd like to add to what you've already said? Or, do you have any questions for me?

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[국문초록]

미국의 한류 드라마 팬덤에 나타난 여성주의 연구

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최근 몇 년 간 미국 사회 내에서 여성주의와 한류는 각기 주목의 대상이 되어 왔다. 그런데 한류 콘텐츠들 가운데서도 한국 드라마(K-dramas)의 미국 내 수용에 있어서, 여성주의와의 갈등과 긴장을 언급하는 기존 연구들이 존재한다. 본 연구는 이 점에 착안하여 한국 드라마가 미국에서 비-서구(non-“Western”) 국가의 “여성주의적이지 않은(unfeminist)” 미디어로서 수용되는 방식을 분석함으로써 미국 내 여성주의에 관한 대중적 인식을 살핀다. 이를 위해 연구자는 자신을 여성주의자 혹은 비-여성주의자(non-feminists)로 정체화하는 미국의 한국 드라마 팬들에 관한 수용자 연구를 수행했다. 본 연구의 문제의식과 방법론은 미디어 수용자들 사이의 여성주의에 관한 기존 연구들을 참조한 것임은 물론, 더 넓게는 여성주의 수용자 연구의 전통에 기대고 있다. 미국을 비롯한 다른 국가들에서 한국 드라마를 시청하는 수용자들에 관한 선행 연구들은 연구자가 가설을 수립하고 미국 내 한류에 관한 기존의 이해를 확장하는 데 도움을 주었다. 연구자는 또한 인터뷰 자료 해석에 있어 구성주의적 접근의 도움을 받았다. 구성주의적 접근은 인터뷰를 통해 여성주의자이거나 여성주의자가 아닌 미국인들이 한국 드라마 팬으로서 자신의 정체성을 형성해가는 과정을 분석하는 데 유용했을 뿐 아니라, 이를 문화적 맥락과의 연관 속에서 바라볼 수 있도록 했다.

본 연구는 인터뷰를 통해 만난 연구 참여자들이 여성주의와 젠더 이슈에 관해 가지고 있는 의견들을 살피는 것에서부터 출발했다. 연구자는 우선 여성주의자와 비-여성주의자 간의 젠더 이슈를 둘러싼 의견에 있어서의 공통점과 차이점을 도출하고 이것이 미국 여성주의에 가지는 함의가 무엇인지를 논했다. 그리고 젠더 이슈에 관한 연구 참여자들의 의견이 한국 드라마 속 젠더 재현에 관한 이들의 입장에 영향을 미친다는 점

을 밝혔다. 여성주의자들은 한국 드라마에 대해 비-여성주의자들과 대체로 비슷한 반응을 보이면서도 다르게 반응하는 것으로 나타났는데 이는 이들이 접하는 온라인상 한국 드라마 팬 커뮤니티나 로맨스 미디어에 대한 기존 여성주의의 논의 등과 연관이 있는 것으로 보인다. 그리고 연구 참여자들의 여성주의에 관한 입장과 그들의 팬 정체성 사이의 관계를 살핌으로써 이들이 여성주의를 어떻게 의미화하고 있는지를 논했다. 연구 참여자들은 대부분 한국 드라마와 여성주의가 대척점에 있다고 인식하고 있었지만, 일부 참여자들은 한국 드라마가 여성주의에 유용하거나 친화적일 수 있다는 의견을 피력했다. 연구자는 이러한 입장이 한국 드라마에 대한 미국 내 비평장 내에서 보다 가시화되어야 할 필요가 있다고 본다.

미국에서 한국 드라마는 여성주의적이지 않은 드라마임과 동시에 비서구 국가인 한국에서 생산된 문화 콘텐츠로서 인식된다. 본 연구는 연구 참여자들이 이야기하는 “한국적임(Koreanness)”, 즉 한국 드라마와 한국의 현실 사이의 관련성에 관한 이들의 언급을 분석함으로써, 미국 내 한국 드라마 팬들이 한국 드라마를 시청하는 자신들의 행위를 정당화하는 매커니즘을 밝혔다. 이는 주로 다문화주의와 사회 진보론과 관련되는데, 한국에 대한 미국의 우월성을 내포하고 있다는 점에서 비판될 수 있다. 연구자는 이 문제를 다루는 데 있어 젠더 이외에도 문화 차이와 같은 차이의 이슈를 다루는 데 민감하고 적합한 여성주의 이론들이 기여할 수 있으리라고 보고, 이러한 여성주의의 이론적 자원의 대중화가 필요하리라고 본다.

주제어: 미국 여성주의, 한류, 한국 드라마, 수용자 연구, 팬덤, 여성주의 미디어 연구

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