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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Engaging with Korean dramas: discourses of gender, media, and class formation in Taiwan

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This paper attempts to explore the politics of differential engagements with Korean drama, particularly with relation to the formation of gender and class identities. As social identities are mediated through the cultural, discourse becomes a significant site for understanding the relationships between structures and the formation of subjectivities. The imported Korean drama falls mostly into two genres – trendy drama and family drama. Both of them deal with family and love, and both of them aim at women audiences. As such, discourses of femininity provide a productive avenue for understanding: on the one hand, their place in social formation, that is, how women inhabit different discourses of femininity which in turn position them hierarchically in the social domain; on the other hand, how social processes, including globalization and nation formation, play a central role in constituting the different meanings and hierarchy of discourses of femininity. However, discourses of femininity also intersect with discourses of television in structuring women's engagements with Korean drama. This paper therefore traces the transformations of the discourses of femininity and television and explores how they regulate, constrain, or enable women's engagements with Korean drama. In doing so, this paper aims to highlight the hierarchically structured gendered discourses in the process of social formation in contemporary Taiwan.

Keywords: Korean drama; reception studies; cultural hierarchy; class; gender

Given that most Korean dramas imported to Taiwan are carefully selected and promoted as love dramas, I expected to engage with politics of gender, in particular, in relation to women's expression of their discontents and desires through romance as Radway (1991) did with her romance readers. However, much to my surprise and contrary to Erni and Spiers' (2005) argument on the irrelevance of class politics in the consumption of popular culture in Taiwan, intersecting with gender politics, I find a consistent class division in women's interpretations of Korean dramas – an aspect that is rarely addressed, if at all, in the consumption of East Asian popular culture. In this paper, I focus specifically on women's class-specific readings of Korean dramas and situate their readings within the larger context of class formation through an examination of the discourses available to and adopted by Taiwanese women.

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Twenty women from Taipei were recruited as my subjects through several channels: friends of my graduate assistant, postings on Korean drama websites, and snowballing. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by me and my graduate assistant to understand why women are drawn to Korean dramas. Questions such as ‘What is your favorite drama? Why do you like it?’, ‘What do you think about the male/female protagonists?’ and ‘Do you relate the plot to your own experiences?’ were asked. The semi-structured, no time-limit conversations proved particularly fruitful as many respondents used dramatic plots and characters to talk about their everyday life concerns (Kim, 2005; Seiter, 1999). Each interview lasted from two to six hours, depending on the respondents’ schedule and our rapport with them. The interviews were conducted in cafes, the respondents’ workplace, and their homes. After each interview, we asked or helped them, depending on their literacy level, to fill out questionnaires on demographic information, their attitudes toward gender and sexuality, and their experiences with Korean dramas. In analyzing the data, I coded and identified patterns in order to look for connecting elements – cultural knowledge or repertoire or discourse – that structure popular understanding (Hermes, 2003, pp. 388–389).

As education is the most influential factor in determining as well as reproducing class position in Taiwan (Tsay, 2002), I choose to analyze the least educated and the most well educated among my subjects to accentuate class politics. However, I acknowledge that age and marital status also play a part as the older generation of women in Taiwan tend to have more working-class experiences and the younger generation, middle-class experiences, as a result of mass education; and the younger generation of middle-class women, because of their higher education and economic status, have a higher ratio of staying single. The following analysis is based on the in-depth interviews of three working-class women (aged between 37 and 47) – two of them have elementary school education and one has vocational high school education – and four middle-class women (aged between 25 and 32) who have at least an MA degree. The re-presentations of their interpretations of Korean dramas are mediated by my training in feminist cultural studies which view researchers as organic intellectuals and conceptualize knowledge production as a political project in translating and politicizing popular desires (Hermes, 2003). It is necessarily partial and power laden. In particular, as class also intersects with other social forces in a constant flux, even though I find the ideal romantic hero to offer cross-class and cross-gender identifications, I choose to deal with this aspect elsewhere in order to offer a partial picture of class formation.

To begin with, I map out the historical changes of gender and television discourses and contend that women’s uneven access to the hierarchically structured discourses constitutes processes of class formation. In particular, I argue that the ideology of domesticity, promulgated by the Nationalist state for nation-building and supported by the society for economic and political needs, puts women at the lowest rung of the patriarchal family. However, global and local political and economic changes which took place in the late 1980s led to the formation of a new cultural hierarchy, privileging the consumeristic discourse of gender equality while relegating domesticity to backwardness. In the second section, I demonstrate how women of different classes are constituted through the hierarchically structured discourses mapped above. I offer women’s divisive readings of Korean dramas and point out that working-class women tend toward an excessive identification with

domestic ideology, while well-educated women invest in the new gender discourse promulgated by consumer capitalism. The less-educated women's investments in domesticity should be interpreted as an allegory of desire to survive with dignity in a society which not only denigrates them but deprives their means of survival by privatizing care work to the family, leaving them no choice but to rely on their future daughter-in-law's filial piety for survival. Demonstrating the class politics embedded in the ideology of domesticity, in the end of the paper, I argue for a reconceptualization of domesticity, taking into account global capital's role in the process of class formation.

Gender and television discourses in transition

Scholarship in feminist audience studies has demonstrated class-based divisive readings of television (Kim, 2005; Press, 1991; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner, & Warth, 1989); however, most of this scholarship treats gender and class as 'independent variables' and views individuals as pre-given, self-contained categories (Ang & Hermes, 1996; Radway, 1988). Arguing against this, scholars turn to discourses in thinking through the relationship between media culture and subject constitution (Alasuutari, 1999; Hermes, 1999; Radway, 1988, 1996). Hermes proposes that there exists a 'discursive layer . . . which provides cultural resources for meaning production, referred to as "cultural capital", vocabulary or "interpretive repertoires"' (1999, p. 71). The interpretive repertoires, I contend, are not evenly distributed among social groups but hierarchically structured, which function as resources for class distinction.

Borrowing from Bourdieu, Skeggs proposes that discourses of femininity and masculinity (and, I would add, television) can be seen as cultural capital because they are embodied and can be used as cultural resources (1997, pp. 8, 10). However, how cultural capital can be used depends on the specific context defined through its relation to other forms of capital. When cultural capital is legitimized, it becomes symbolic capital and can be conferred to power; but when de-legitimized, it cannot be traded as an asset, and its power is restricted. Thus Skeggs contends, '[i]t is the symbolic struggles that enable inequalities in capital to be reproduced. Analyzing access and legitimation of cultural formations enables us to see how cultural capital is or is not converted into symbolic capital and hence, how inequalities are generated and systematic disempowerment engendered' (1997, p. 10).

In this section, I analyze gender and television discourses that structure women's interpretations of Korean drama with an emphasis on explicating the process of legitimation of capital movement. I argue that as a result of the movements of global capital, a consumeristic discourse of gender equality has replaced the state-centered discourse of domesticity and become the cultural dominant of the present.

The invention and institution of the discourse of domesticity has to be situated within the nation-building project promulgated by the Nationalist party since the 1950s and its acceptance as popular ideology has to be contextualized within the global economic, political, and ethnic structures in Taiwan. Defeated by the Communist party, the Nationalist party retreated to Taiwan in 1949 and used it as a military base to take back China. Various social engineering projects, including Women's Work (*Funu gongzuo*), Building a Strong Nation through Virtuous Wives and Good Mothers Movement (*qijia baoguo xianqi liangmu*), and the Happy Family

Movement (*xingfu jiating yundong*), were instituted to implement the ideology of domesticity, with the goal of recruiting women into national subjects for political mobilization (Yio, 2000, p. 11). Being the dominant discourse from the 1950s to the mid-1980s, the discourse of domesticity upholds the family as 'the foundation of Chinese tradition and morality'. Women's domestic role as virtuous wife and good mother takes on moral and political significance as it is central to the regeneration and reproduction of the nation (Yio, 2000, p. 11). This political view of domesticity converges with the development of the national economy as women are taught to be frugal in their management of the family and are encouraged to engage in home-based part-time work, as promoted in the 'Living Rooms as Factories Project' (Hsiung, 1996; Yio, 2000, pp. 11, 46–47).

This view on women, family, and the nation also frames television's place in the home. The first official regulation on television – 'The Guideline for TV Broadcasting in the Republic of China' – passed by the Press Council (*Xinwen Pingyihui*) in 1974, specified television as a political tool in regulating women's relations to the nation:

[T]elevision finds its place in the center of the home, it thus plays a significant role in shaping the culture, moral standards, and the rise and fall of the nation . . . Television programs should be educational . . . The survival of our nation depends on our mission to take back China which demands the recovery of our traditional culture. Television programs should follow traditional moral and ethical standards . . . For women, television's goal is to promote family happiness and modify women's needs in managing everyday lives. (1974, pp. 61–162)

Placed at the center of the family, both television and women are given the responsibility as the guardians of the nation's moral standards and culture. While television prescribes women's role as domestically circumscribed, in maintaining a happy family, women are required to take television seriously for guarding morality.

However, the rhetoric of 'family as nation' promoted by the state masks the unequal relationships within the family, in particular, women's relation to filial piety. Situating the family within Chinese patriarchy, Hu (1995) points out the disconcerted mother- and daughter-in-law relationship central to Korean (and Taiwanese) dramatic plots. The three features of Chinese family are patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal. The patriarchal family follows a pecking order in which generational relationship comes first, age second, and finally, gender. Patrilocality demands that married women move into their husbands' families and follow the rules of obedience and tolerance. Patrilineality dictates that family lineage and property be carried on through male descendants. This family system creates a specific situation for women: a daughter-in-law is positioned at the bottom of the family hierarchy; her upward mobility can only be secured when she bears a son to continue the family name, which then allows her to move up to the mother-in-law position. During this process of becoming mother-in-law, she is required to be obedient and tolerant of all injustices in order to maintain her membership within the family. For a woman, filial piety means being filial to her in-law and tolerant of abuses from her husband's family who usually treat her as an outsider.

The patriarchal family relation promoted by the state was essential to the making of Taiwan's economy – an economy that was based on the proliferation of family firms. Family firms relied on domestic ideology to justify their exploitation

of unpaid, family labor (usually women) in order to stay competitive as part of a flexible regime of accumulation in responding to the exigencies of the world economy in the 1970s. Moreover, as an attempt to curtail the Taiwanese (as opposed to the Mainlanders) from forming political power (hence resistance), the Nationalist party created a bi-ethnic structure which prevented the Taiwanese from participating in government posts and developing big business. These factors combined to create the family firm as the backbone of Taiwanese economy, along with the enduring myth of domestic ideology as Chinese tradition which supported it (Greenhalgh, 1994). As such, the discourse of domesticity is articulated by the state to the project of modernization (as nation-building) and becomes the celebrated route for women to participate in modernization.

Global restructuring in the 1960s depended upon domestic ideology for Taiwan's successful incorporation into the international division of labor; the second wave of global restructuring in the 1980s, however, facilitated the reworking of the meanings of femininity. With educated, professional women needed in the new service economy, the state regulated the inflow of racialized domestic labor for them to outsource filial piety, housework, and childcare, thereby creating a system of 'continuity of domestic labor' which positions women differently with relation to the organization of domestic labor based on class (and race) (Lan, 2006).

Feminists played a significant role in challenging the state discourse of domesticity. The confinement of women to the patriarchal family is theorized as the root of women's oppression. In Taiwan, feminists' efforts have been largely directed to improve the conditions in the family and the workplace. On the domestic front, feminists called for revisions of civil law in eliminating patrilocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal family structure. In the workplace, feminists successfully (after more than a decade's work) pushed for the implementation of Equal Rights Amendments in the Workplace. Underlying this feminist agenda is the idea that women's liberation depends upon women leaving the patriarchal home in search of personal and economic autonomy. As such, Taiwan's feminist movements have encouraged women to leave home (for work) in search of women's independent selves.¹

Media, international women's magazines in particular, intersect with feminist agenda in challenging the discourse of domesticity to promulgate a new form of femininity which depends upon women's consuming power for liberation. However, while feminists have emphasized collective struggles for structural change, popular feminism relies on individual-based amelioration. The discourse of femininity relies on modernity to articulate a version of gender equality based on 'woman power' or 'feminine power' which is to be maintained through fashion consumption. Modernity is defined through women's participation in the higher end of the service sector; their right to actively pursue sexual pleasure; and their consumption practices in different parts of the world. Constitutive of this new femininity is its other, embodied in the figure of the thrifty, domestic woman who is bound by Chinese patriarchal tradition. Commercial discourses, including Nike, Armani, and Baiter Fashion, rely on this domestic woman for the articulation of a modern woman and promote consumption of Western commodities as the means of liberation from patriarchal tradition (Yang, 2007).

The reconfiguration of femininity involves the relegation of the traditional home to a space of oppression and the redefinition of the modern home to a place for romance and relaxation. The redefinition of home also changes women's relationship

to television. The media reform groups use the public sphere argument to assert television's function in cultivating citizens to make rational political decisions. This ideal figure of citizen/audience, however, is gendered. The ad on Sony's portable TV exemplifies this gendered audience.² The male citizen/audience is portrayed sitting at an airport and logging on his computer/TV to watch TVBS news while the female consumer/audience is seen sitting on a sofa at home using a portable computer/TV to watch Korean drama (romance). In a different ad, HP Pavilion also gives the female audience (lying on her bed at home) the choice of watching Korean drama or getting shopping information.³ The commercial discourse designates two kinds of relationship between women and television. First, television's role has shifted from domestic work to home entertainment for women. Second, television's function remains pedagogical, only that the notion of education is now transformed to educating women about fashion and shopping information. This new pedagogical function characterizes many new television genres, including the extremely popular show *Queen (Nu ren wo zui da)*, which offers women consumer information on beauty products.

Hooper (2000) points out that constitutive of the process of globalization is the renegotiation of the interpretations of gender, which not only involve the power struggles between men and women, but men and men and, I would add, women and women, depending upon the intersecting interests of race, class, and other social cleavages. In reconfiguring the meanings of gender to serve particular interests, certain gendered identities are legitimated and others, devalued. In the case of Taiwan, a new gender hierarchy among women is established as a result of the second wave global restructuring, with the domestic, thrifty, 'submissive' women (who usually work in home-bound, low-paid jobs) relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy, and the 'modern', 'strong but feminine', consumeristic women (who usually work in the higher end of the service sector) elevated to the top. This hierarchy functions as a 'structuring structure', to use Bourdieu's term, in stratifying women into different classes.

Working-class women's identification with domesticity

The confluence of domesticity with television discourse, which highlights women and television's domestic role in maintaining the nation's moral standards, creates subject positions for less-educated women, such as Auntie, her sister-in-law, and Huang, to emphatically invest in domesticity, and Korean drama becomes a means for their practices of domesticity.

Auntie, a 42-year-old woman with an elementary school degree, works as a house painter with her husband. When inquired about the reasons for her watching Korean drama, she pronounced emphatically: 'it's educational and it's sweet and warm'. She referred to *Miss Mermaid* (translated into *Love betrayed, Beipan Aiqing*), a family drama, to illustrate her point. The drama is about a successful television playwright, Ariyoung, who sets out to revenge against her father's betrayal of her mother by seducing her half sister's (her father's daughter with 'the other woman') fiancée. She ends up falling in love with the fiancée, Juwang, and marries into his rich family. However, Ariyoung's grandmother- and mother-in-law resent her lower-class upbringing and create numerous problems for her in the hope that Juwang will divorce her. Insisting on family harmony, Ariyoung takes on the role of a good

daughter-in-law – being filial to her in-law, taking care of domestic work, and bearing a child – in addition to dedicating herself to her career, and finally wins their acceptance. Disregarding the fact that Ariyoung is also a devoted career woman, Auntie focuses only on the interaction of the mother- and daughter-in-law relationships in interpreting this drama.

A: The plot in *Miss Mermaid* is sweet and warm. It's about mother- and daughter-in-law relationships ... Ariyoung puts up with everything ... I think I can learn from her.

A: I think the content in Korean drama is good. Very educational.

Q: Oh ...

A: Like now, yeah, in educating our children ... the young should respect the old, and also, filial piety ... oh, like how daughters-in-law treat their mothers-in-law ... That is, for a woman, a woman's heart needs to go wherever her husband's family is when she is married. She has to respect her in-laws, try to make them happy, she needs to keep doing things, keep doing things, to make them happy.

Q: Um ...

A: The younger generation no longer thinks this way ... But they are our elders, they raise us, they are our parents! Even in-laws are parents, we should be filial to them ...

Auntie repeated the phrase 'sweet and warm' (*Wenxin*) many times and used that concept to articulate the difference between good and bad drama. *The Ministry of Education Chinese dictionary* defines the meaning of *Wenxin* as: 'Sweet and warm; e.g. as in having harmonious family relationships'. The Korean dramas she likes are about how women struggle and finally succeed in achieving harmonious family relationships. Central to her notion of 'sweet and warm' is 'filial piety' (*Xiaoshun*) which, according to her, is the moral foundation of society. In the two interviews I conducted with her, she told us many stories about how she took care of her mother-in-law when she was sick. Complimenting her as a good daughter-in-law, her sister-in-law (also one of our interviewees) used the Chinese saying to describe her: 'A virtuous woman is a woman without competence' (*nuzi wucai bian shi de*). This phrase frames women's place in the home, serving and taking care of the family without other ambitions. And the mother- and daughter-in-law relationship portrayed in *Miss Mermaid* becomes a means for her to articulate her investments in domesticity, along with her dissatisfaction with the changing family relations in society – that women no longer follow their place in the world. On this matter, she kept begging me: 'Teacher, please ask those TV producers to stop producing violent programs which would endanger the young. Please ask them to make programs that educate the young generation on the significance of filial piety.' Here, Auntie's investment in domesticity takes on a larger, moral meaning, mediated through the television discourse of moral pedagogy.

Huang is a 37-year-old, full-time housewife who lives with her mother-in-law, her daughter and two stepsons. She has a degree from vocational high school. During our second interview, rather than talk about Korean dramas, she conversed mostly about how she took care of her family and dealt with family relationships. In managing her domestic life, watching Korean drama has become a means to express filial piety and maintain family order:

H: I watch reruns in the daytime because I have to cook and take care of my daughter in the evening. I watched Korean drama with my mother-in-law. She couldn't

understand it because it's dubbed in Chinese, I had to explain the plot to her. You know, if we don't watch it, there will be four eyes staring at each other . . . I chose to live with my mother-in-law and once I made this decision, I had to do it well. You can't fight with your husband because he wants to live with his parents, fighting with him would only ruin our relationship and your parents-in-law's impression of you. If you fight, you lose everything, but if you step backward, you have a happy and harmonious family. Right?

The notion of 'stepping back' is central to my interviewees' understanding of domesticity. Stepping back means bearing with and taking in the injustice of gender inequality – Auntie, her sister-in-law, and Huang all expressed the significance of stepping back ('*Tuirang*', '*Rennai*') in maintaining family harmony. Auntie further points out that she needs to learn from Ariyoung because she tolerates everything ('*rennali gou*').

Domesticity for Auntie, her sister-in-law, and Huang means maintaining a happy and harmonious family of which filial piety – being obedient to their (mothers)-in-law – is a central component. Stepping back is the means and attitude adopted when facing gender injuries. While Huang uses television to practice filial piety, Auntie sees television's role as educating children filial piety in maintaining a happy family and a good society. These concepts on women's familial role and television's pedagogical function are reflective of the state discourse of domesticity – that as a domestic medium, television's role is to promote Chinese culture and tradition (filial piety) in building a harmonious family and a strong nation.

Well-educated women's identification with consumeristic femininity

Contrary to the working-class women's espousal of domesticity, those well-educated interviewees reject domesticity, in particular, the value of stepping back, and identify it as the weakness of Korean drama. Instead, they all point to their preference for women who are strong, persistent in career, independent, and who are not afraid of fighting back.

Joy: In Korean dramas, bad women just keep insulting and abusing ('*qifu*') you, and what the good woman does is to bear with it, if you slap my face, I will bear with it, whatever you do, I will bear with it, if you take my mother away from me, I will still bear with it . . . That is just too much! The division between good and bad is so obviously ridiculous. Don't you fight back when people slap you on your face?

Q: What about Sun Mi [in *All About Eve*]?

Penny: What's good about her? Let's see, oh, at least, she fights back, when she is offended, she fights back . . . I can't stand Taiwanese drama, they don't fight back, like those idiots . . .

Rejecting domesticity ('bear with it') and embracing the spirit of 'fighting back', these women's interpretations are governed by the new discourse of femininity promulgated by consumer capitalism which privileges women's individuality, autonomy, career development, and (fashion) consumption. Many women express their preferences for those career-oriented female characters as well as shows that 'realistically describe the workplace'. Shows which are 'purely about love' are 'just plain rotten'.

Fran: I like Sung Hye Kyo's character [in *Hotelier*]. She has the courage to ... to manage the hotel and is devoted to learn how to do it ... I think *Winter Sonata* is just plain rotten, I suspect people there don't work ... To some extent, the love portrayed in Korean drama is bloody melodramatic ... I think if you sacrifice everything for love, you also forget about why you pursue love in the first place ...

Directing their life toward career rather than romantic love becomes a life philosophy for these women, as clearly stated by Joy, a journalist: 'I think, if you want to think about whom you will be married to, you'll do a lot better by doing whatever you want to do first'. Mediated through the new discourse of femininity which places gender equality as its central value, these women, like many other educated women in Taiwan, believe that it's better for women to have a career and stay single than be trapped in an oppressive marriage. As such, many women critically express their unhappiness with the negative portrayal of ambitious women:

Penny: In Korean drama ... there is no ambitious woman character. Men are portrayed as having ambitions, but women ... Yes, Young Mi [in *All About Eve*] is ambitious ... But she is portrayed in a negative way ... I don't like this at all. It's like, women can be stereotyped, if you are a woman and you want to have your own life and career, you want a place in the world, but you will be ... Korean drama seems to portray the male characters as perfect ... But for women, all the bad characters are women! Men are all ambitious and successful in their career, but the villains are all women!

This critical evaluation of the gender relations portrayed in Korean drama is enabled through a discourse of modernity which places Korean drama in a time past. The new discourse of femininity relies on the dichotomy between public and private/domestic, consumption and frugality, and progress/modernity and tradition for its articulation. In this discourse, gender equality is constructed as modern while domesticity is relegated to tradition, and Korean drama, with its emphasis on women's domestic role, is relegated to the past:

Q: So you say that we had this type of show before?

Yen: Of course! A lot of people say that Korean dramas just use contemporary style to tell old stories from the 1950s and 1960s ... They feel like those Qiangyao [a popular romance writer] love dramas you watched when you were a kid. Like those very fragile actresses, they put up with everything, and then finally they win the men they want ...

Using the norm of gender equality as a measurement of modernity, phrases such as 'conservative' (*baoshou*), 'traditional' (*chuantong*), 'old' (*laotao*), 'outdated' (*guoshi*) or 'those pitiful Korean women' (*buxing de, kelian de, hanguo nuren*) were used to describe Korean women's situations in many of our conversations. This is reflective of the existing developmentalist discourse which structures the world through temporality, with close proximity to the West (and in Taiwan's case, Japan too) as modern and distance from it as backward. In this discourse, Western gender norms are used as a measurement of a nation's civilizing/modernizing status.

Modernization discourse creates a hierarchy of television programs stratified along national development. The deregulation of television and the concomitant installation of cable TV in the 1990s allow for the fragmentation of audiences and the formation of taste cultures. In this cultural hierarchy, Western programs are

considered quality programs; while locally produced programs (such as variety shows and soap operas) which target mostly Minnan-speaking, lower-class people are singled out to exemplify ‘commercialism gone wild’, and therefore in need of reform (Yang, 2005). In South Korea, with its status as a latecomer in modernity, and its relationship with Taiwan as a ‘brother nation’ (*xiongdi zhibang*) situated in the same time zone, Korean drama is positioned uncomfortably within the existing cultural/taste hierarchy, thereby allowing for some fluidity in articulating social hierarchy through culture.

In terms of gender relations, Japanese and American dramas are constantly referred to by the educated women as more modern and more open in their depiction of gender relations and sexuality. As such, they express a sense of cultural proximity with Japan: ‘I think we are closer to Japan, everything about Japan feels more . . . more intimate’. This sense of cultural proximity with Japan through the discourse of modernity is the determining factor that creates the Hari (Japan Craze) phenomenon in Taiwan (Iwabuchi, 2002; Ko, 2004). But these same women watch Korean drama for fashion information:

Q: So you like women who are successful in their career?

Joy: And with good taste. I watch how they dress themselves. Like that supporting actress in *Yellow handkerchief*, she doesn’t have much screen time, but she shows up beautifully, so I look at her, you know, for fashion reference . . .

The reference to fashion information points toward the intersection of gender and media discourse – that gender equality and career success are to be maintained through fashion consumption and television (Korean drama) functions to inform women how to be fashionable.

The ambiguous status of Korean drama in this cultural hierarchy also enables different classes of women to articulate contradictory readings. On the one hand, the better-educated women use gender equality to relegate Korean drama to a time past, while the less educated see it as embodying the moral values necessary for the harmony of the family and the society. On the other hand, in appropriating current television discourse to explain their critical engagement with Korean drama, the better-educated women see Korean drama as capable of teaching them fashion information. But sometimes, they adopt the discourse of television as home entertainment – ‘I don’t like this story, but because there is nothing to watch at this moment, I watch it just for entertainment’ (interview with Penny). For the less educated, however, they inhabit the residual television discourse which stresses television’s role in educating family values for the survival of the nation.

Alasuutari (1999) points out that ‘it’s just entertainment’ should be seen as the viewers’ attempt to prove one’s discriminating power in the moral hierarchy of television which privileges news program over fictional program. However, situating the formation of hierarchy within the context of globalization in Taiwan, it becomes clear that ‘it’s just entertainment’ is used to specify a woman’s casual relationship to television, a relationship that can only be enabled through one’s consuming power. Hence, the adoption of a particular discourse of media, in this case, the entertainment view of television, should be theorized as practices of status distinction (Seiter, 1999). However, the access to and the adoption of, hence, the putting into practice of media discourses as status distinction is restricted by the material context in which one inhabits (Seiter, 1999; Skeggs, 1997).

Access to discourses and class formation

The flow of global capital changed the constitution of class since the 1990s. With the labor-intensive industries running away to China and places where labor is cheaper, the backbone of Taiwan's economy, the small and medium businesses (the family firms), began to disappear, replaced by the techno-oriented multinational corporations, which require highly educated workers. The previous small and medium business which provided the primary channel for Taiwan's fluid class mobility is now closed off, leaving the majority of people little chance for class mobility. As a result, there is a consolidation of class boundaries (Tsay, 2002). Discourse of new femininity, created by and in conjunction with global capital, also constitutes this process of class consolidation through cultural hierarchy.

Cultural hierarchy simultaneously enables and obscures class distinction. It involves the process of coding middle-class cultural competencies and aesthetics as inherently right and tasteful, making working class' difference from middle class into inequality (Lawler, 2000, p. 116). The discourse of femininity, through its close connection with the global flow of capital and its emphasis on the consumption of global name-brand commodities, takes on cultural legitimacy, and is therefore transformed into symbolic capital, which can be easily cashed in a consumer society in which women are demanded to work and consume. However, the circulation of this discourse is largely restricted to the urban, younger, educated, career women with consuming power – the group of women that are demanded by the techno-oriented multinational corporations as well as the quality niche for transnational advertising corporations.

The inhabiting of different gender and television discourses is a result of women's differential access to discourses/cultural capital, which constitutes their class status in the society. For the educated women with good career future, the discourse of femininity, with its emphasis on autonomy and individuality, speaks to their personal experiences of wanting to 'make it in the world' in the techno-oriented global capitalism. However, for the less-educated working class, instead of identifying with the individualistic and consumeristic femininity, their limited education leads them to be interpellated into the subordinate discourse of domesticity: 'I only had an elementary school education, but I was taught in school the significance of filial piety!' Hu (1995) argues that women with lower social and economic status have a higher stake in appealing to the morality of filial piety. Given the lack of a comprehensive welfare system for the aged population in Taiwan, and given that women tend to outlive their husbands, the only means of survival for older working-class women is to live with their sons and daughters-in-law, as opposed to middle-class women who tend to have the material means to live on their own and even buy houses for their children. For the less-educated women, their economic status enables them to identify with the moral discourse of domesticity as a form of future investment; at the same time, without much future in career development they invest themselves in being good/domestic women. The well-educated women, while having the means to outsource filial piety or practice flexible filial piety, tend to identify with the discourse of seeing television as a (consumer) information machine in the new economy; or they take up the consumer discourse of seeing television as 'just entertainment'. For the less educated, their investments in domesticity allow them to see television as educating children in filial piety. However, this discourse of

domesticity, because of its lack of trading value in the techno-oriented economy, is now relegated to 'backwardness' – a concept again used to constitute a new cultural hierarchy. The new cultural hierarchy, as I demonstrate, involves the changing constitutions of gender, media, and class, and working-class women's access to the cultural dominant is always hampered by their material conditions. The subordinate discourse has a clear moralism to it while the dominant discourse deflates moralism with entertainment, fun, or more seriously, information. In talking about Korean drama, the better-educated women demonstrate their critical engagements with and their knowledge about Korean drama; the less educated, however, emphatically present themselves as moral beings. They constantly refer back to their everyday experiences as mothers and daughters-in-law in order to construct themselves as moral/domestic beings. Especially at the end of my second interview with Auntie and her sister-in-law, their gesture to ask me, many times, to use my power to change the content of locally produced soap opera speaks about their desire to be recognized as somebody who, despite their powerless position in the society, cares about society. This gesture of excessive investment in domesticity and morality speaks of their misrecognition of class power (I have no power to change media content), but more significantly, it points to their desire to be recognized as morally responsible and useful beings. Domesticity for them is the only route to respectability (Skeggs, 1997).

Domesticity as a site of positive affirmation has paradoxical effects. The three less-educated women I interviewed all identified themselves as housewives, though two of them worked (one as a seamstress at home and the other, a housepainter when jobs were available) and the third expressed her plan to work part time in the nearby McDonalds. These women see their own income as only supplementary and consider their real role to be in the family. Through the moral discourse of domesticity, they see their domestic role as making a significant contribution to the nation. However, this positive investment erases their identity as a worker; hence, their contribution to the larger economy and enables capitalism to keep exploiting them through patriarchal gender norms. Moreover, in identifying with the 'backward' discourse of domesticity so emphatically, they have also positioned themselves at the lower end of hierarchy.

Rethinking domesticity

In demonstrating how gender and television discourses organize women's interpretations of Korean dramas, I argue that access to and investment in cultural discourses is enabled and constrained by one's social location which in turn defines one's social class. However, in looking at culture and class formation through the shifting discourses, I find myself not able to redeem my working-class interviewees through the notion of resistance, as Paul Willis (1978/1999) did with the working-class lads. For Willis' lads, culture provides a site for their expression of resistance against middle-class authority, which paradoxically reproduces their own oppression as working class. The reproduction of class depends upon capitalism's conjunction with patriarchy in diverting the lads into seeing their oppression as positive affirmation through patriarchal gender norms which confine working-class girls to domesticity. But unlike Press (1991) who finds that American working-class women tend toward a class-specific reading of television, with an emphasis on issues of immediate survival, as opposed to middle-class women's investment in gender and

interpersonal relations; the working-class women I interviewed invest strongly in patriarchal gender relations. Watching Korean drama as a form of cultural expression constitutes no resistance to patriarchy or capitalism, but an affirmation of a patriarchal discourse which not only subordinates them through unequal gender relations but also exploits their unpaid labor in the economy.

The middle-class women, similar to many findings, express prototypical feminist desires for individuality and independence as a way to escape the classed gender expectations imposed on them (Kim, 2005; Press, 1991; Radway, 1991). However, if the desire to escape patriarchal control by having one's individuality (as in having one's individual time in reading romance) can be interpreted as form of resistance (Radway, 1991), then the feminist rhetoric of resistance through which these desires are produced is classed. As my finding shows, resistance to patriarchal gender relations is appropriated by global capital and expressed as educated women's cultural expressions. This can be seen through their rejection of submissive female characters and the portrayal of ambitious career women as villains in Korean dramas. However, seeing gender equality as an attribute of middle-class cultural expression falls back to a cultural hierarchy that subordinates the working class. Moreover, it ignores how global capital reworks gender ideology at different times to serve its interests. To see domesticity negatively – as something to be abandoned in order to leave patriarchy and enter into modernity as is theorized in numerous feminist literature⁴ – has the unintended effects of creating and reinforcing class inequality. As Lawler cautions: 'the (gendered) behavior of working class people can all too easily be characterized as retrogressive, pre-feminist, repressive, while the (gendered) behavior of middle-class people can be characterized as either not gendered at all or gendered in a more acceptable, liberating way' (2000, p. 124).

I argue that domesticity as positive investment for working-class women needs to be interpreted as an allegory of desire. Allegory calls attention to a practice in which realistic representations refer to 'another pattern of ideas or events' (Tate, 1992, p. 101). Domesticity should be read as an expression of working-class women's desire to be recognized as useful and respectable. This desire has to be theorized in a cultural context in which working-class mothers are constructed as bad mothers who are responsible for the decline of the society (Ning, 2000). Moreover, in a society in which the government privatizes caring responsibility to women and the family, domesticity should be seen as the only means available for working-class women to invest their future life through the filial piety of their daughters-in-law.

In acknowledging working-class women's investment in domesticity as emerged out of particular class structure, feminists need to re-theorize domesticity, taking into account the flow of global capital in the process of class formation. Felski (1999–2000) cautions that if global capital is so intricately intertwined with modernity, public sphere, and movements, relegating the home (in this case, domesticity) to stasis and backwardness, then we need to rethink some of the values we have toward home. Given my analysis on global capital's devaluation of domestically-bound women through modernity, and this devaluation functions as a tool of class formation at the level of culture, I believe abandoning the notion of consumeristic gender equality as modern is the first step to disrupt this cultural hierarchy. We need to recognize that the positivity of domesticity (expressed through morality) lies in its critique of the masculine discourse of modernity which evicts women's active participation. That is, if modernity is defined through its opposition to home,

discourse of domesticity persistently insists on seeing the home as constitutive of modernity and women's contribution to the home as a contribution to the nation's modernization project. This contribution has to be recognized – modernity should not be seen as progress in the public sphere only; instead, women's active making of home and community should also be seen as part of modernity (Johnson, 1996). The recognition of women's contribution also poses challenges to patriarchy since patriarchy is a system predicated on treating women as objects of exchange, thereby abnegating women's value as active producers of the economy. However, this re-reading of domesticity should not prevent us from launching a critique of the patriarchal family structure which, in conjunction with global capital and the state, deprives women of their options to lead dignified existence except through the pernicious patriarchal teachings.

This re-reading of domesticity allows us to break the boundaries of public and private as women's participation in the home constitutes her public participation in the nation's modernization project. As such, stepping out of the home and into the workplace should not be simply seen as achieving gender equality as is reflected in the discourse of femininity. For one, the public is also fraught with gender inequality – a point already recognized and theorized by many feminists. Instead, it should be seen as the working of global capital – which allows for some adjustments in the public/private division of labor. However, the notion of gender equality in discourse of femininity as something to be cherished needs to be maintained as it speaks to those better-educated women's desire to be individuals on equal footing with men and to 'make it in the world'. Their rejection of domesticity (as expressed through their rejection to put up with gender injustice for family harmony) is a rejection of women's oppression in the patriarchal home. Hence, the ideal of gender equality should function as a trenchant critique of domesticity – a discourse predicated on men's domination over women. Without recognizing the ambivalences of domesticity – its positivity in recognizing women's contribution to world-making and its negativity in oppressing women to the benefit of men – and its intersection with global capital, gender equality as an ideal (as promulgated in the discourse of femininity) might fall into the trap of consolidating class divisions among women.

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Notes

1. For example, the Awakening Foundation published three volumes of books in 1996 entitled *Handbook for women to leave home completely* (Vols. 1–3), which deal with property, divorce, and domestic violence. *Stir Quarterly*, sponsored by the Awakening, also published a special issue (1996/10) on 'Leaving home: reports on women's fights against patriarchal families'.
2. Advert on Sony Location Free TV. From *Business Weekly* (*Shangye zhoukan*), January 2006.
3. Advert on HP Pavilion m7380tw. From @Live Digital Fashion (*Shuwei shishang*), June 2006.

4. Young (1997) offers a detailed discussion on the devaluation of home in Beauvoir and Irigaray's writings, as well as the rejection of home as inappropriately imperialistic and totalizing in Bidy Martin, Chandra Mohanty, and de Lauretis' writings.

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