
HANBOKS, VAMPIRES, AND CROSS-DRESSING WOMEN: THE APPEAL OF KOREAN HISTORICAL DRAMAS AMONG AMERICAN VIEWERS

Brittany Tinaliga

University of San Francisco

Abstract: The goal of this study was to determine the appeal of historical Korean dramas among non-Korean Asians and non-Asians in the US and in turn what this implied for Korean production companies. This study incorporated a multi-methods approach, including CDA application, online corpus analysis, and quantitative data, to answer these research questions. The results revealed that both non-Korean Asian and non-Asian Americans found cast and acting ability and storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters to be the most appealing drama elements. Also, non-Korean membership did not hinder overall enjoyment mostly because viewers wanted to learn about Korean history and culture, enjoyed the storyline, and were able to relate to the characters and themes. After comparing and contrasting the results to past literature, the following ideas were reinforced: the viewer's ability to relate to story themes affects reception and dramas are not analyzed in a "we vs. Korean" perspective. Furthermore, US K-Drama fans consult a K-Drama "scorecard" where they examine shows according to factors such as cast acting ability, plot believability, and themes. Fans also partake in a K-Drama "expert" culture instead of taking a Korean culture expert/non-expert stance. Overall, these K-Drama "experts" are drawn to dramas with familiar/reliable actors and relatable storylines, characters, and themes—a promising prospect for Korean production companies.

Keywords: *Critical discourse analysis, Korean dramas, Korean pop culture, fandom, fan culture*

Introduction

The Hallyu wave (Korean cultural wave) and its globalization has continuously been a growing topic of interest in scholarly research.¹ In line with this research

1 Searching the keywords "hallyu wave" or "Korean pop culture" in any academic journal search engine will reveal a myriad of academic pieces centered on the different media forms within the Korean

trend, this study will focus on a specific aspect of the Hallyu wave, namely Korean dramas (hereafter referred to as K-Dramas). As will be discussed later, K-Dramas have an audience not only in Korea or in its neighboring Asian countries but outside of Asia as well - even in the United States. A Korea Times article reports that according to a survey and visitor numbers to streaming sites analyzed by the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), nearly 18 million Americans watch K-Dramas.² Crystal Anderson, in her research on America's impact on Hallyu, states that American viewers are attracted to K-Dramas due to the cultural elements and "lack of the sex and violence" that seems to largely permeate American television.³ In fact, K-Dramas have been broadcasted in online streaming sites available in the United States, such as *DramaFever*, *Viki*, *Netflix*, and *Hulu*. Online communities within forums like *Dramabeans*, *Soompi*, and other K-Drama related sites enjoy participation from American and other international fans as seen when one browses through the user profiles.

As Korean dramas seem to have gained some footing with US audiences, so to can it be expected for the US K-Drama fandom to have been exposed to *saeguk* (Korean historical dramas). The purpose of this study is to gauge what elements in Korean historical dramas are especially appealing, relevant, or serve as the viewers' point of connection and relation. Since these dramas highlight a history that is not the viewers' own cultural background (assuming of course that the viewer is not Korean), is there a need for the viewer to identify Korean cultural membership with the cultural aspects and values, or do the other drama elements serve as the main appeal? This study will also examine the implications of this research for Korean production companies looking to make historical K-Dramas appealing to the US audience.

How are the international, non-Korean audience, drawn into this form of entertainment that concerns a complex history that is not their own? There are few, if any, rigorous studies on K-Dramas within the US market, specifically in regards to the non-Korean Asian v. non-Asian context.

culture wave. This includes a range of pieces focused on Korean pop and Korean dramas and their reception, perception, performance, and the culture surrounding them domestically and internationally. Researchers outside of Korea have taken to this phenomenon and have even presented their findings at conferences.

- 2 "About 18 Million Americans Enjoy K-dramas: Korea Creative Content Agency," *The Korea Times*, November 24, 2014, accessed November 20, 2016, <http://www.koreatimesus.com/about-18-million-americans-enjoy-k-dramas-korea-creative-content-agency/>.
- 3 Crystal S. Anderson, "HallyuU.S.A: America's Impact on the Korean Wave," in *The Global Impact of South Korean Popular Culture: Hallyu Unbound*, ed. Valentina Marinescu (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014), 127.

Korean Drama Analyses and Reception

Eunwoo Joo's study on the Korean historical drama *Chuno* suggests that the historical events in the drama are related to contemporary Korean society specifically in regards to the rise of socio-political and economic inequalities, forced competition, and a crisis of democracy. He argues that the social mobility, modernity, and capitalism elements are appealing to contemporary viewers. Lastly, Joo points out the similarities between *Chuno* slaves and neo-liberal Korean non-regular workers which viewers may find appealing since it provides a point of relation which Joo suggests was intended by producers.⁴

Moving on to the reception of cultural groups rather than individuals, Belinda Espiritu's research examines the reception of specific Korean television dramas among Filipino women in college. She argues that whether or not students had middle class backgrounds, attended Catholic, urban, or provincial schools in addition to the groups' overall Filipino culture and psychology influenced their discourse and showed what values/ideologies they subscribed to. Espiritu also argues that this study demonstrates how self-identity is reflexively created as the women were able to relate to the Korean characters and storylines but unable to relate to local melodramatic dramas. This study also touches upon the "theater of struggle" Filipino women participate in when engaging with Korean dramas where they simultaneously affirm cultural similarities with Koreans and/or other Eastern Asians and assert their Filipino identity.⁵

Swee Ho's study, on the other hand, focuses on Japanese women's reception of the Korean drama *Daejanggeum* in regards to themes and portrayals of women. The Korean historical and cultural context did not have as much relevance as their personal expectations, desired identities, and self-image. Overall, Ho states that these dramas allow the women to create shared meanings, become aware of contemporary problems, and find ways to change the realities of society.⁶

A study by Marion Schulze looks at how international drama fans examine Korean dramas and fans do not approach and discuss Korean dramas with a culturalist stance. Korean elements are not just labeled as "other," but viewers

4 Eunwoo Joo, "A Historical Imagination of a Neo-liberal Society: Considerations on the Korean Historical Drama *Chuno*," *Review of Korean Studies* 14, no. 2 (2011): 35, accessed November 20, 2016, book.aks.ac.kr/lib/down2.asp?idx=2818.

5 Belinda Flores Espiritu, "Transnational Audience Reception as a Theater of Struggle: Young Filipino Women's Reception of Korean Television Dramas," *Asian Journal of Communication* 21, no. 4 (2011): 370, accessed November 20, 2016, <http://o-web.b.ebscohost.com.ignacio.usfca.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=61fa7427-8a26-4ae1-851f-008b32c4511e%40sessionmgr102&vid=1&hid=125>.

6 Swee Lin Ho, "Old Texts, New Desires: How the Korean Television Drama *Daejanggeum* Evokes Reflexivity, Renewal, and Resistance among Japanese Women," *Review of Korean Studies* 14, no. 2 (2011): 109-10, accessed November 20, 2016, <http://profile.nus.edu.sg/fass/sochsl/Old%20Texts%20New%20Desires%20RK2010.pdf>.

actively position themselves culturally or as feminist. Finally, there are no set definitions of Korean culture in dramas because Korean culture is imagined, negotiated, and reconstructed within interactions between the international audience and proclaimed cultural experts.⁷

The Study and Research Questions

As demonstrated above, there is literature surrounding the popularity, analysis, and reception of K-Dramas. Specifically, researchers have sought to provide frameworks in regards to analyzing and reading them. Other studies have examined how certain groups make sense of dramas according to their unique backgrounds. This suggests that certain drama elements can be appealing to certain groups depending on their social situation, values, and backgrounds amongst other factors. These studies also indicate that these dramas can be used as tools of critique and discussion when examining contemporary events, values, and conditions. Lastly, imagined Korean culture, meanings, and analyses are constantly negotiated and reconstructed. While there has been research on the reception of Korean dramas across several non-Korean cultural groups, there is very little specifically on just the US viewer pool, especially in regards to their interaction with the historical genre. Furthermore, when examining this reception from US viewers, the non-Korean Asian v. non-Asian dichotomy is neglected. This brings us to the question of whether one's shared (or unshared) "Asian values" have an effect on the viewer's ability to reflect on and connect to certain Korean drama themes as this may also factor in to overall viewer enjoyment. Additionally, research on this dichotomy should consider how American values have any influence, if at all, on the appeal towards historical dramas.

This proposed research on the reception of Korean historical dramas among American viewers is significant because, as mentioned, the United States is no stranger to Korean dramas. It also touches upon outsiders' interactions with and perception of the projected history of a complex culture. This research will illustrate just how far this aspect of the "Korean media wave" has traveled within the United States and will demonstrate how a "non-modern" part of the Hallyu wave has gained traction in contemporary times. For Korean production companies looking to target the American market, this research would be helpful to determine what drama elements are successfully drawing in American viewership among non-Korean Asians and non-Asians, while still

7 Marion Schulze, "Korea vs. K-dramaland: The Culturalization of K-dramas by International Fans," *Acta Koreana* 16, no. 2 (2013): 392-3, accessed November 20, 2016, <http://0-web.b.ebscohost.com.ignacio.usfca.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=9662078b-8b72-4e9d-ae6c-232e757b370b%40sessionmgr101&vid=1&hid=125>.

keeping the unique cultural and historical aspects in these dramas. Thus, the following research questions guide this study:

- RQ1: What is the appeal of Korean historical dramas for non-Korean Asians and non-Asians in the United States?
- RQ2: What then are the implications for Korean entertainment production companies?

Method

This study used a mixed methods approach combining primary Korean drama media, quantitative, and online discourse corpus to form a rigorous set of sources. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework was used to engage with the drama material. This framework connects discourse and ideology. It can also be utilized to critique social injustices and power, which is ultimately connected to language. Fairclough explains that a textual analysis can involve (1) identifying the main themes or the presented "main parts of the world" and (2) pointing out the perspective or angle these themes are presented within.⁸

Participants

The comprehensive online discourse analysis focused on the following sources: *Dramafever*, *Dramabeans*, and *Soompi*. Participants who did not speak Korean posted the comments. Notably, there was no way of accounting for each commenters' country of origin, but these sites are open to worldwide participation so it is assumed that this is an international participant pool.⁹ In the quantitative portion, 131 participants, strictly from the United States, participated in the online survey. Most participants identified as female at 90.8% (n= 119) while 8.4% (n= 11) identified as male.¹⁰ Ages ranged between 13 to 56 years old with an average age of about 22. 52.7% (n= 69) of the participants claimed to be of non-Korean Asian descent while 26% (n= 34)

8 Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (Routledge, 2003), 129, accessed November 20, 2016, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjrn-nhtczQAhXCzFQKHULJB1MQFggjMAE&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdisciplinas.stoa.usp.br%2Fpluginfile.php%2F270695%2Fmod_folder%2Fcontent%2F0%2Fii.%2520Norman_Fairclough_Analysing_discourse.pdf%3Fforcedownload%3D1&usg=AFQjCNFKHKfPIT9uYfSxgS30M1MQPOG8FQ&bvm=bv.139782543,d.cGw.

9 Comments written in non-English languages were not accounted for as I could not adequately translate them. Notably, almost all of the comments written in non-English languages were in Spanish. This may be of relevance especially for the Latino viewership.

10 This is a notable finding as my past research on K-Pop yielded a similar result. In this participant pool, however, the ratio of males was slightly larger. This leads me to question whether K-Dramas are more acceptable for males to openly admit they like (rather than K-Pop) or if just not that many males had access to my surveys.

claimed non-Asian descent. Additionally, 20.6% (n= 27) identified as “other” and 0.8% (n=1) identified as Korean. Other background information revealed that most participants have been K-Drama fans between less than one year to five years at 45% (n= 59), followed by five to nine years at 41.2% (n=54), then ten years and above at 13.7% (n=18). A majority of the participants mentioned they were drawn into watching Korean dramas because of family or friends’ recommendations, followed by K-Pop influences, or just by chance (e.g. coming across a Korean drama on *Netflix* and deciding to check it out). Next, they were asked about their favorite Korean drama genres to which the majority proclaimed their favorite was romance (n= 75), then historical (n= 65), and finally romantic-comedy and comedy (each n=42). 97.7% (n=128) of the participants stated they utilized English subtitles, while 2.3% (n=3) stated they did not use English subtitles.

Procedures

The textual analysis was performed on three Korean historical dramas: *Sungkyunkwan Scandal*, *Scholar Who Walks the Night*, and *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo*. *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* was chosen because of its fair reception domestically, cult popularity, and number of awards received. It was also broadcasted internationally to seven other countries.¹¹ *Scholar Who Walks the Night* had international viewership through online streaming sites and a few notable awards.¹² *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo* was chosen for its more positive international, rather than domestic, reception and its award accolades.¹³ I examined specific scenes and dialogue and focused on how themes disparaging power were played out.

Next, I focused on three websites with a platform for international viewers to hold discourse surrounding Korean dramas—*Dramafever*, *Dramabeans*, and *Soompi*.¹⁴ These sources were chosen for their popularity within the online Korean drama community. Also, these dramas aired during different times from 2010 to 2016, which provides us with a longitudinal view of how Korean dramas have been discussed over time. As previously mentioned, these dramas garnered decent viewership and therefore plentiful discussions from a diverse international audience. Overall, I examined comments under

11 “Sungkyunkwan Scandal,” Wikipedia, accessed November 27, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sungkyunkwan_Scandal.

12 “Scholar Who Walks the Night,” Wikipedia, accessed November 27, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scholar_Who_Walks_the_Night.

13 “Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo,” Wikipedia, accessed November 27, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moon_Lovers:_Scarlet_Heart_Ryeo.

14 *DramaFever* is an online streaming site best known for streaming K-Dramas. *Dramabeans* is a site run by contributors who regularly post K-Drama recaps. *Soompi* is a site that provides media coverage of all things Korean pop culture and is known for their active forum.

nine online-streamed videos, comments following nine drama recaps, and comments within three forum threads. I analyzed roughly 500 comments from each drama for each source, which amounted to 3,915 comments in total. I sifted through the comments for frequency of positive audience reception. The purpose of coding was to pick out significant drama elements that indicated audience appeal, if at all. Lastly, for the online survey, I circulated my Google forms survey across multiple relevant sites such as Facebook drama fan pages, Hallyu forums, and my own social media platforms to gather participants.¹⁵ A disclaimer in the beginning of the survey assured participants that their identities would be anonymous. I used findings from the coding analysis to tailor questions to address my research questions.

Results-CDA of Korean Historical Dramas

Sungkyunkwan Scandal

Overall, *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* occurs during the Joseon dynasty and is mainly about Yoon-hee Kim who is disguised as her brother in order to support her family through jobs at the bookstore. During a particularly dangerous job in which she substitutes as a test-taker for the Sungkyunkwan entrance exam, she is caught by the morally upright Sun-joon Lee who ends up not turning her in and actually advises her to pursue her education. In the rest of the series, she must deal with characters at the school, avoid trouble with the student body president, maintain her secret identity, and work through her feelings for Sun-joon. Two themes presented in this drama are the struggle for “gender” and “education” equality. One scene in which these themes are present is in episode 18. As a bit of context, Yoon-hee ends up asking her mother about her father’s death. Her mother tells her that she doesn’t wish for her to “rebel against the world” like her father, leading Yoon-hee to believe that his death was wrongful. Yoon-hee then speaks with her brother, Yoon-shik, about her dead father who she believes she did not have the closest relationship with. Yoon-hee asks him what kind of father he was as she could not recall his face since she would always be outside the door while their father read to Yoon-shik. Yoon-shik then replies that during that time, their father was actually reading to her by sitting near the door and as loud as possible. The scene then cuts to a portion of their late father’s lecture notes where he talks about his daughter:

15 I would like to give a special acknowledgement to 24hr KPOP-TV, a music and entertainment TV channel based in San Francisco, for kindly promoting the survey and providing a prize for participants.

To watch my daughter advance in her studies is a painful thing. If I were her teacher, I would have wanted to teach her. But is it right to teach her to have aspirations in a world where she cannot fulfill them? I am a foolish father who cannot provide any opportunities to his talented daughter. I listen with abated breath as my daughter reads aloud, and today, once more, I weep deep inside my heart.¹⁶

For this particular dialogue sequence, the themes are performed through the lens of those disadvantaged by the ideologies of the higher powers—specifically a female with aspirations in her education and a supportive father who is actually an esteemed scholar himself. Yoon-hee feels as if her father had set her aside when in reality, her father was aware of the education and gender inequalities that would have quashed her higher aspirations. In the show, females were not afforded the luxury of an education and the path to get into the Sungkyunkwan school was not an easily accessible one given the notoriously difficult entrance exam. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the overall plot stems from the female protagonist being pushed to dress as a male to get into the school to help her family out. It is clear just how few options females had in regards to job options as the cross-dressing elements arises from a basic need for survival.

Scholar Who Walks the Night

Scholar Who Walks the Night's takes place during an alternate Joseon dynasty and its basic premise surrounds Yang-sun Jo, who cross-dresses as a male bookseller to support her once-thriving family. She eventually comes across Sung-yeol Kim, a Hongmungwan scholar who is actually a vampire with a mission to kill the evil vampire Gwi, in order to avenge his dead lover Myung-hee. Evil Gwi lives underneath the royal palace and throughout the series holds the power to manipulate politics in order to stop the crowned Prince, Yoon, from taking his place at the throne. Some themes presented in this show are government's role, censorship, and the power of the people.

In a particular sequence of scenes within episode 15, Yoon is faced with no choice but to hold state meetings at night as per Gwi's orders. Thus, the statesmen find themselves clustered during their first night meeting where Yoon has to force himself to read a decree ordered by Gwi himself. The decree basically promises harsh punishment against any people who try and challenge the court. As Yoon reads this decree aloud, Gwi walks in and sits on

16 "Sungkyunkwan Scandal: Episode 18," Red Pill, Dramabeans, published on November 4, 2010, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.dramabeans.com/2010/11/sungkyunkwan-scandal-episode-18/>.

the table in front of Yoon, effectively blocking him and the throne before the now confused politicians. One politician points out that the decree might not sit so well with the public and Gwi casually responds that they can just capture all the dissidents, establish martial law, and round up citizens wearing black hanboks (traditional Korean dress).¹⁷ These black hanboks essentially work as the citizens' "symbolic guerilla warfare."

This theme is seen through the people's and the puppet government's perspective. The crowned Prince, Yoon, who is now king because his grandfather recently died, finds himself at an impasse as he must obey evil Gwi's orders. An external power is controlling the government and not allowing the people to voice any concerns or critique against the government. From the court's perspective, Gwi is suppressing them from doing their job for the people. What they have is a sole ruler conducting a job meant for many, which is moving them away from a more democratic ruler. From the people's view, this decree means it is no longer "rule for the people" but just "rule" - and in this case, unbeknownst to them, rule by a single entity.

Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo

This drama takes place in the year 941. Ha-jin Go, a modern-day woman, somehow travels back to the Goryeo dynasty where she wakes up in the body of 16-year old Haesoo. The show depicts her romantic encounters with the different royal princes; she at first falls for the gentle-natured 8th prince, Wook, but then eventually the feared 4th prince, So. Besides these romantic elements, the drama also centers on the competition and politics among the princes as they fight for the throne. One larger theme played out in this drama is class and status.

In episode 11, Haesoo is accused of attempting to poison Crown Prince Mu. The crown prince asks the king to set him aside given his hidden illness but the king is unwilling to give up his first-born son. Later, Prince Wook, one of Haesoo's suitors finds out that his sister was actually behind the poisoning conspiracy, as she did not want him to throw away the chance to be king just because of his infatuation. He begrudgingly chooses to be silent about what his sister did because he realizes he cannot cast aside his family as traitors.¹⁸ Later, Prince So pleads with King Taejo to save Haesoo and asks if he's okay with trading in Haesoo's life just to protect the crowned Prince. The king sees

17 "Scholar Who Walks the Night: Episode 15," Javabeans, Dramabeans, published on August 26, 2015, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.dramabeans.com/2015/08/scholar-who-walks-the-night-episode-15/>.

18 This scene is particularly heartbreaking as he chooses to maintain his family's power to save face rather than save the one he loves. This could also be another example of the power disparage theme whether one's status takes precedence over emotional ties.

no qualms in sacrificing what he sees as a “lowly life” in exchange for the more important one. Prince So in his disgust questions if this is how a king thinks. King Taejo then chastises him and tells him that anyone who begs for her life will be killed.¹⁹

This “class/status” power disparage is seen in this scene between Wangso and his father, King Taejo, as the king is clearly unwilling to do the right thing as Haesoo takes no precedence over a crowned prince. Haesoo, a female of no immediate royal importance to the higher power, is left to suffer torturous treatment while being wrongfully imprisoned. Wangso’s disgust may mirror the viewer’s own feelings as status should not bear weight over questions of morals, however in this context the king sees fit to protect his royal lineage. This theme is seen through the lower status person’s view as Haesoo’s unfair subjection to torture shows lack of justice for those with considerably less power and therefore “less of a voice” in society.

As demonstrated by the analysis across the three dramas, Korean historical dramas are not just mindless entertainment and are worth studying as their themes can serve as points of connection and relation despite the cultural/historical barrier with the viewer.

Online Streaming Site and Forum Comments

Table 1. Positive Korean Historical Drama Reception among International Viewers

	SUNGKYUNKWAN SCANDAL	SCHOLAR WHO WALKS THE NIGHT	MOON LOVERS: SCARLET HEART RYEO
DRAMAFEVER	65 of 97 67 %	115 of 181 63.5 %	206 of 390 52.8 %
DRAMABEANS	64 of 145 44.1 %	63 of 142 44.4 %	103 of 403 25.6 %
SOOMPI	40 of 63 63.5 %	50 of 110 45.5 %	125 of 350 35.7 %

Sources: *DramaFever 2010, 2015, 2016; Gems 2010; Javabeans 2010, 2015, 2016; Kaiskloset 2015; Yeohweping 2015.*

Before narrowing the scope of the research onto strictly American viewers, it was important to gauge the reception of these dramas during their initial

19 “Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo: Episode 11,” HeadsNo2, Dramabeans, published on September 27, 2016, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.dramabeans.com/2016/09/moon-lovers-scarlet-heart-ryeo-episode-11/>.

release among the wider international audience. Table 1 provides a general look at the ratio of positive forum/website comments surrounding these different Korean historical dramas.^{20,21} The overall reception of the pilot episodes indicated the historical dramas were appealing enough to encourage continued viewership among international commenters.²² The following tables provide a breakdown of certain drama elements (that served as “points of appeal”) and their frequency. The first viewer comments examined were for the historical drama *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* (n=1,241) and spanned from August to November 2010. After quantifying the drama elements found across all positive viewer comments, the most prevalent elements/themes were compiled into the tables below:

Table 2. Appealing *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* Drama Elements among International Viewer Comments

	Cast & acting ability	Storyline, plot, dialogue, & characters	Themes	Overall production value & soundtrack	Romance/Comedy genre	Korean historical & cultural elements
DRAMAFEVER	93 of 199 46.7%	68 of 199 34.2%	14 of 199 7%	7 of 199 3.5%	12 of 199 6%	-
DRAMABEANS	82 of 229 35.8%	111 of 229 48.5%	13 of 229 5.7%	-	13 of 229 5.7%	6 of 229 2.6%
SOOMPI	57 of 222 25.7%	100 of 222 45%	16 of 222 7.2%	19 of 222 8.6%	22 of 222 9.9%	-

Sources: *DramaFever 2010; Gems 2010; Javabeans 2010; Red Pill 2010.*

According to table 2, none of the drama elements occurred more than half of the time.²³ However, it is worth noting that across all three sources cast and

20 “Sungkyunkwan Scandal,” “Scholar Who Walks the Night,” “Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo,” *Dramafever*, televised in 2010, 2015, 2016. ; “Sungkyunkwan Scandal: Episode 1,” “Scholar Who Walks the Night: Episode 1,” “Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo: Episode 1,” *Dramabeans*, published in 2010, 2015, 2016, accessed November 25, 2016; “[Drama 2010] SungKyunKwan Scandal,” “[Drama 2015] Scholar Who Walks the Night,” “[Drama 2016]Moon Lovers □ Scarlet Heart Ryeo ~ \^0^/ Thank You Eclipses !,” *Soompi*, published in 2010, 2015, 2016, accessed November 25, 2016,

21 Comments where viewers explicitly stated they liked a certain drama element (even if they mentioned something they did not like) were counted as positive reception.

22 It is important to note that the unaccounted percentages do not wholly account for negative reception. Rather, most of those comments did not indicate the viewers’ perception and instead contained questions, links, recaps, and analyses, to name a few types of content.

23 “Sungkyunkwan Scandal,” *DramaFever*, episode 1, 10, 20; “Sungkyunkwan Scandal: Episode 1, 10, 20,” *Javabeans*, *Red Pill*, *Dramabeans*, accessed November 25, 2016; “[Drama 2010] SungKyunKwan

acting ability; storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters; themes, and romance/comedy genre were consistently present in positive viewer comments. This suggests that there are indeed specific appealing Korean drama elements present in international viewers’ online discourse.

The second examined Korean historical drama was *Scholar Who Walks the Night*. The coded comments (n=1,324) were published between July to September 2015. The following table lays out the most frequent appealing drama elements among commenters:

Table 3. Appealing *Scholar Who Walks the Night* Drama Elements among International Viewer Comments

	Cast & acting ability	Storyline, plot, dialogue, & characters	Romance Genre	Overall production value & soundtrack	Fantasy genre	Korean historical & cultural elements
DRAMAFEVER	110 of 216 50.9%	75 of 216 34.7%	13 of 216 6%	11 of 216 5.1%	-	4 of 216 1.9%
DRAMABEANS	101 of 185 54.6%	53 of 185 28.6%	7 of 185 3.8%	6 of 185 3.2%	-	15 of 185 8.1%
SOOMPI	44 of 137 32.1%	49 of 137 35.8%	30 of 137 21.9%	5 of 137 3.6%	6 of 137 4.4%	-

Sources: *DramaFever 2015; Girlfriday 2015; Javabeans 2015; Yeohweping 2015.*

Compared to the *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* findings, within the *Dramafever* and *Dramabeans* sources, commenters saw cast and acting ability as appealing elements more than half of the time.²⁴ Cast and acting ability; storyline, plot, dialogue and characters; romance genre; and overall production value and soundtrack all occurred consistently and frequently in positive viewer comments across all three sources. The next examined comments (n=1,350) pertained to the drama entitled *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo* and were posted between August to November 2016. Coding of the positive reception comments yielded the following results:

Scandal,” Gems, Soompi, accessed November 25, 2016.

24 “Scholar Who Walks the Night,” *DramaFever*, episode 1, 10, 20; “Scholar Who Walks the Night: Episode 1, 10, 20,” *Javabeans, Girlfriday, Dramabeans*, accessed November 25, 2016; “[Drama 2015] *Scholar Who Walks the Night*,” *Yeohweping, Soompi*, accessed November 25, 2016.

Table 4. Appealing *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo* Drama Elements among International Viewer Comments

	Cast & acting ability	Storyline, plot, dialogue, & characters	Romance Genre	Overall production value & soundtrack	Fantasy genre	Korean historical & cultural elements
DRAMAFEVER	110 of 216 50.9%	75 of 216 34.7%	13 of 216 6%	11 of 216 5.1%	-	4 of 216 1.9%
DRAMABEANS	101 of 185 54.6%	53 of 185 28.6%	7 of 185 3.8%	6 of 185 3.2%	-	15 of 185 8.1%
SOOMPI	44 of 137 32.1%	49 of 137 35.8%	30 of 137 21.9%	5 of 137 3.6%	6 of 137 4.4%	-

Sources: *DramaFever 2016; HeadsNo2 2016; Javabeans 2016; Kaiskloset 2015.*

As shown by the data in table 4, commenters mentioned the storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters element was appealing more than half of the time within the *Soompi* forum.²⁵ Across all three sources, the most common elements of appeal were storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters; cast and acting ability; romance genre; and overall production value and soundtrack. When analyzing the positive viewer comments as a whole, the statistics appear to indicate that there is indeed a significant amount of online discourse about specific appealing drama elements. Overall, certain drama elements were consistently and frequently mentioned which suggests, first, that viewers have a drama “scorecard” of sorts, and second, that international, non-Korean viewers are attracted to these Korean historical dramas despite the absence of a direct cultural/historical connection.

Survey data

First, it was important to glean a general idea of what participants found appealing about Korean dramas overall and whether they considered themselves fans of specifically Korean historical dramas. The most frequent

25 “Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo,” *DramaFever*, episode 1, 10, 20; “Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo: Episode 1, 10, 20,” *Javabeans*, *HeadsNo2*, *Dramabeans*, accessed November 25, 2016; “[Drama 2016]Moon Lovers ♥ Scarlet Heart Ryeo ~ \^0^/ Thank You Eclipses !,” *Kaiskloset*, *Soompi*, accessed November 25, 2016.

Korean drama appeal was the unique plots, storylines, and characters (“the interesting and unique plots”). The next most frequent answer was the cast and their acting ability (“if an actor or actress that I enjoy watching is in that drama, I will give the drama a chance no matter how I feel about it”). Next were the Korean cultural and historical aspects (“it’s always so cool to be able to see the references to actual history...”). Another frequent appeal was the production value/cinematography (“the art direction”). Lastly mentioned was the romance genre (“...they also provide a cliché romantic story lines that are fun and fanciful...appeal to typical girly fantasies...girls can relate to”).

When asked whether they considered themselves fans of specifically Korean historical dramas, 77.1% (n=101) participants claimed they were fans while 22.9% (n=30) stated they were not particularly fans of the genre. The following table illustrates the more frequent reasons for why US viewers considered themselves Korean historical drama fans:

Table 5. Reasons Why US K-Drama Viewers are Korean Historical Drama Fans

Historical drama appeal	Frequency	Percentage
Korean cultural/historical aspect	66	68%
Storyline, Plot	27	27.8%
Cast, Acting ability	2	2.1%
Themes	1	1%

Most participants identified the Korean cultural and historical aspects as their reason for watching these historical dramas (“I’m really interested in Korean history and the clothing from that time is beautiful”) followed by the storyline/plot (“I find the plots interesting...”). The following section of the survey presented the participants with three different Korean historical dramas. They were asked whether they have watched it, what their overall enjoyment rating was and why, what the drama’s appeal was, what their biggest takeaway was, and whether their lack of direct connection to Korean culture affected their enjoyment. As the focus of this paper is on the appeal of historical dramas, only the drama appeals and absence of connection to Korean culture in relation to enjoyment will be mentioned.

When asked about the drama *Sungkyunkwan Scandal*, the top overall appeals among participants were cast and acting ability (18.9%, n=76), storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters (18.7%, n=75), and Korean historical and cultural elements (13.7%, n=55). Specifically, non-Korean Asians (n=69) stated that cast and acting ability (24.6%, n=47), storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters (22%, n=42), and themes (12%, n=23) were the most appealing

elements for this drama. The top appeals for non-Asians were storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters (23.4%, n=32), cast and acting ability (19.7%, n=27), and Korean historical and cultural elements (17.5%, n=24). Lastly, the others group indicated that their top appeal was cast and acting ability; storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters, followed by gender elements, then themes, and finally Korean historical and cultural elements (each at 16.7%, n=2).

Next, when asked whether the participants' lack of ability to connect directly with the Korean history aspect in this drama affected enjoyment, 62.3% (n=43) of the non-Korean Asian group answered no citing the opportunity to learn more about Korean culture and history, enjoyment of the drama itself, and ability to relate as a female. 37.7% (n=26) of the respondents answered "yes" and reasoned they were just not a fan of the historical aspects and a lack of knowledge about the culture made it difficult to follow. 80.5% (n=33) of non-Asians' answers indicated that inability to relate did not affect enjoyment with reasons being they enjoyed learning about history, the drama was enjoyable in and of itself, or they had prior exposure to other dramas. On the other hand, 19.5% (n=8) of the respondents answered "yes" due to disinterest with the genre to begin with and not being a fan of the politics. 75% (n=3) of the "others" group answered "no" because it was an opportunity to learn or they were able to relate as a female. 25% (n=1) of the "others" group stated "yes" due to their unfamiliarity with the traditions.

The next part of the survey presented the drama *Scholar Who Walks the Night*. The most frequent appeals across the three groups were cast and acting ability (21.5%, n=77), the fantasy genre (16.8%, n=60), and storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters (16.2%, n=58). 27.1% (n=46) of the non-Korean Asian pool found cast and acting ability most appealing, followed by storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters (21.8%, n=37), then the fantasy genre (15.3%, n=26). For non-Asians, the topmost appeal was cast and acting ability (23.6%, n=30), then the fantasy genre (22%, n=28), and lastly storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters (15.7%, n=20). Within the "others" group, the most frequent appeal was the Korean historical and cultural elements (28.6%, n=2) with a few other drama elements at 14.3% each.

The next portion asked about viewer enjoyment in relation to one's inability to relate to Korean history. For non-Korean Asians, 75.8% (n=47) responded it did not affect enjoyment because they saw it more as a fantasy show, they enjoyed learning about Korean history, and they still enjoyed the overall storyline. In contrast, 24.2% (n=15) stated that membership in Korean culture did affect enjoyment due to lack of prior historical knowledge and they believed the fantasy genre detracted from their experience. 97.6% (n=40) of non-Asians claimed that non-membership did not detract from enjoyment due to their interest in the history, enjoyment of the storyline, and ability to find

connections with their own experiences. 2.4% (n=1) of the respondents felt that inability to directly relate to Korean history affected enjoyment. Among the “others” participants, 100% (n=3) felt inability to relate did not affect enjoyment because the storyline was entertaining enough.

For the drama *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo*, the top overall appeals among US viewers were cast and acting ability (30.7%, n=103), storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters (25%, n=84), and themes (12.2%, n=41). Among non-Korean Asians, the most frequently mentioned appeals were cast and acting ability (32.7%, n=67), followed by storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters (26.8%, n=55), then romance genre (13.2%, n=27). Within the non-Asian group, the top appeals were cast and acting ability (28.1%, n=34), storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters (21.5%, n=26), and finally Korean historical and cultural elements (15.7%, n=19). According to the “others” group responses, storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters (30%, n=3), cast and acting ability (20%, n=2), and Korean historical and cultural elements (20%, n=2) were most appealing.

Next, when asked about the participants’ enjoyment due to inability to relate to the cultural aspect, most non-Korean Asians (79.4%, n=54) responded there was no effect because they enjoyed the storyline regardless, they related to the characters’ plights, and they appreciated the opportunity to learn more about Korean culture and history. Those that stated there was an effect (20.6%, n=14) reasoned that they saw the show more for its romance aspect. Within the non-Asian group, the majority indicated there was no effect (97.6%, n=41) because they took this as an opportunity to learn about Korean culture/history, they enjoyed the overall storyline, and they were able to connect through parallels they perceived in modern society. In contrast, only 2.4% (n=1) of participants stated there was an effect. For the “others” group, all respondents said there was no effect on enjoyment (100%, n=3) because they found enjoyment in the storyline elements and enjoyed the presentation of Korean cultural/historical elements.

Discussion of Findings

The brief textual analyses conducted on the three Korean historical dramas revealed overall that the dramas all contained scenes that served as critical discourse of certain systems and ideologies. Namely, *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* offered a critique of gender and educational expectations, *Scholar Who Walks the Night* presented a critical look at government’s role, censorship, and people’s agency, and *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo* examined class and status. These particular themes are not specific to Korean culture and would probably be widely understood and grasped by the general audience which

is in line with Schulze's insistence that viewer's do not analyze dramas in a we vs. Korean culture dichotomy. This is also similar to Joo's findings about the drama *Chuno* and how its historical events and themes were appealing among audiences as they could find similarities in contemporary struggles and injustices. This finding is also reflected in Espiritu and Ho's research about unique viewer backgrounds influencing how viewers relate to themes and values. This indicates that these dramas can be thought provoking and relatable among most viewers. Additionally, the established themes may serve as a point of relation for non-Koreans that do not have a direct connection to the history or culture.

Next, the extensive coding analysis of forum and streaming site comments indicated that there was a significant amount of positive buzz for the series' pilot episodes overall which means there is cause for investigating the appeal of these specific dramas. Furthermore, these historical dramas held a certain appeal among international viewers. Among the positive comments for *Sungkyunkwan Scandal*, the most consistent drama appeals were cast and acting ability; storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters; themes; and romance and comedy. Next, in *Scholar Who Walks the Night*, the most present appeals were cast and acting ability; storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters; romance genre; and overall production value and soundtrack. Last, the most frequent elements found in comments for *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo* included storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters; cast and acting ability; romance genre; and overall production value and soundtrack.

Across comments for all three historical dramas, cast and acting ability; storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters; romance genre; and overall production value and soundtrack were the drama elements found to be most appealing within positive international viewer comments. These results are similar to findings in the Joo, Espiritu, and Ho studies in terms of how relating to and reflecting through the storyline, portrayals, and plights of the characters affected overall audience enjoyment. This analysis also reflects Schulze's assertion that viewers do not take on a culturalist viewpoint as, similarly to the CDA findings, commenters largely indicated that it was their connection to the cast, storyline, romance, and overall production satisfaction that affected positive reception.

This apparent consistency in appealing drama elements also suggests that drama fans may have a "scorecard" of sorts that they mentally refer to when evaluating these series. The overwhelming consistency of the drama element casting and acting ability suggests that international viewers, on the surface, place great importance on who they see on the screen and how they perform well, if at all. This also adds another angle to Schulze's finding about expertise being a factor in how Korean culture is defined. Familiarity and reliability with

certain actors and actresses may signal that a viewer is a K-Drama “expert” with experience and knowledge in what makes a drama “good.” As it seems that fans who feel inclined to comment on K-Drama sites may be seasoned viewers, it makes sense that cast and acting ability be a significant appeal as, rather than proclaim to be Korean culture experts, taking a K-Drama expert stance seems to be the less “risky” route as a non-Korean interacting with this cultural product. Also in terms of reliability, in order to connect with the storyline and themes that are being enacted, these K-Drama experts would likely feel some sort of bias towards cast members they’re accustomed to, thereby affecting overall enjoyment.²⁶

According to the survey distributed amongst Americans viewers only, across all three groups, the consistently frequent drama elements were cast and acting ability and storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters. Among non-Korean Asians and non-Asians, the most mentioned elements were the same as the results for Americans in general. However, for non-Asians, another more frequently mentioned appeal was Korean cultural and historical elements. Overall, the majority of non-Korean Asians and non-Asians did not view non-Korean membership as a barrier to enjoyment. Within both the non-Korean Asians and non-Asians groups, most respondents reasoned that they were able to learn about Korea, they enjoyed the storyline, and they found they could relate to characters and/or themes. As mentioned earlier, the cast and acting ability result can be attributed to the viewers’ “K-Drama expert” repertoire. The storyline, plot, dialogue, and characters appeal is once again in line with the idea of viewer background influencing their ability to relate to and find parallels with their own lives. Respondents did not see their non-Korean membership as an influence on reception which reflects Schulze’s finding pertaining to international viewers not analyzing dramas in a we vs. them lens.

In regards to the non-Korean Asian v. non-Asian dichotomy, there were no stark differences in what drama elements were appealing or why enjoyment was not affected. But in regards to drama element appeals, non-Asians also mostly answered that the unique Korean historical and cultural aspects influenced enjoyment. This might suggest that their *non-Asian-ness* played a role in encouraging them to view a historical drama for the educational aspects as well. Notably, lack of Asian representation in the US media being met in these dramas might have been one reason for non-Korean Asians overall enjoyment as was indicated in a few responses. Among the American pool as

26 Future studies should examine whether or not a viewer’s familiarity with the cast takes significant precedence over other drama elements. This “unavoidable bias” may be worth looking into for production companies.

a whole, the distaste of certain American television elements was also a cited reason for why non-Korean membership was not a barrier to enjoyment.

Conclusion

American viewers may not have a direct cultural connection but other drama elements such as cast, story, themes, and genres serve as main points of appeal and relation and help to promote Korean culture and history. Korean historical dramas can be relatable to non-Koreans overall as they contain themes that critique universally, if not mostly, known systems and ideologies. Viewers overall found the most appeal in cast and acting ability which shows the American market's reliance on reliability and familiarity when evaluating Korean dramas. Additionally, a K-Drama expert repertoire and scorecard, which contains factors such as cast and production, seem to come into play when viewers interact with historical Korean dramas. Overall, familiarity with actors, shared experiences with characters, and ability to relate with storylines can serve as points of connection and transcend any cultural or historical differences between viewers and actors. Further, although Korean historical and cultural elements did not come out to be the main appeal for why the majority of viewers decided to watch the shows, the apparent eagerness for viewers to learn about Korean history shows great promise for Korean production companies looking to expand their reach into the US market. As the survey consisted of largely female respondents, future studies should examine the phenomena behind the female saturated market for K-Dramas in the US.