

# ESSAYS

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**WHAT'S IN A (STAGE) NAME? PUBLIC PERSONAS, PRIVATE SELVES, AND THE TRANSGRESSION OF AUTHENTICITY**

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**MAYLING AND MAY FOURTH — UNDERSTANDING THE INTERNATIONALISM OF MADAME CHIANG KAI-SHEK'S SPEECH TO THE US CONGRESS IN 1943**

*Joel Petersson Ivre*

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# WHAT'S IN A (STAGE) NAME? PUBLIC PERSONAS, PRIVATE SELVES, AND THE TRANSGRESSION OF AUTHENTICITY

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*The K-pop star often goes by two names: the stage name and “real” name. On the Archive of Our Own, a major fan fiction repository, the tags are designed to facilitate searches for either name. Given that the common practice among K-pop fan fiction writers is to use the “real” name, this paper asks how a specific examination of the stage name in the K-pop medium might redefine the relationship between the stage name and the real name in celebrity discourse. To this end, this paper compares two different constructions of the celebrity text: one constructed by the K-pop industry through reality television and one constructed by fan fiction writers reflecting upon their own craft. This paper argues in favor of a connection between these constructions: namely, that the K-pop industry and K-pop fan fiction are both premised on the construction of a dichotomy between the public person and the private self that is performatively transgressed in order to generate an affect that cannot be evoked by either the public or the private alone. The paper concludes by suggesting that these transgressions point toward a new model of celebrity as embodied by the K-pop idol: not a static “persona” but a dynamic negotiation between the “very-much-public” and the “not-so-public.”*

## What is “Real Person Fiction” (RPF)?

Every year, Tumblr — a microblogging platform and social networking site that Morimoto and Stein define as the “main locus of online fandom activity”<sup>1</sup> — puts out a “Fandometrics” report, a compilation of the most popular topics discussed on the platform that year. In 2015, this report declared that “Larry Stylinson,” a portmanteau

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1 Lori Morimoto and Louisa Ellen Stein, “Tumblr and Fandom,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 27, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1580>.

of the names of One Direction members Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson, was “the number one ‘ship’ [relationship] on the site.”<sup>2</sup> Between 2016 and 2017, Fandometrics reported that the amount of fan fiction about K-pop stars on Tumblr had gone up by ten percent.<sup>3</sup> In 2018, “Jikook”, a portmanteau of Jimin and Jungkook, members of the K-pop boy band BTS, was one of the top five most popular ships on Tumblr.<sup>4</sup> Of the top 100 ships that year, seventeen were pairings between real-life people of which more than half were related to K-pop. At time of writing, the “K-pop” tag had 273,830 works on the Archive of Our Own (AO3), a “noncommercial and non-profit central hosting place for fanworks” and a major destination for posting and reading fan fiction.<sup>5</sup> These are examples of the phenomenon known as “real person fiction,” a genre of fan fiction that writes about “actual people, rather than fictional characters.”<sup>6</sup> It has historically been a controversial practice even within fan fiction communities. Just thirteen years before “Larry Stylinson” became the most popular “ship” on Tumblr, Fanfiction.net banned all fan works about real people from its platform.<sup>7</sup> In the 2013 interview that accompanied the twentieth anniversary edition of *Textual Poachers*, an ethnographic text on fans and fan practices, author Henry Jenkins commented that he “was asked not to write about real person slash”<sup>8</sup> by his subjects while he was working on the book. In her 2018 *Medium* article on RPF, Tonya Riley wrote that the genre continues to raise “murky questions of consent and ownership of public identity.”<sup>9</sup> A Reddit thread from the same year, titled “RPF’s (Real Person Fics): How Do You Really Feel?”, gives some examples of the common questions raised about the issue: Is it just creepy? Is it an invasion of privacy? Is it something you would want someone to do about you (and does that matter)? Is RPF different from simply fantasizing about celebrities in private? What if the celebrity sees it? Can they ask you to stop? Is there a fundamental difference between “real” celebrities and fictional characters? Is RPF a form of obsession? A form of stalking? Is it dehumanizing?<sup>10</sup>

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2 Tonya Riley, “The Dubious Ethics of ‘Real-Person Fiction,’” *Medium*, January 12, 2018, <https://medium.com/s/darkish-web/the-dubious-ethics-of-real-person-fiction-5cd6bd498c16>.

3 Riley, “Dubious Ethics.”

4 “2018’s Top Ships,” Fandom on Tumblr, November 28, 2018, <https://fandom.tumblr.com/post/180587157919/2018-ships>.

5 “About the OTW,” Archive of Our Own, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://archiveofourown.org/about>.

6 “RPF,” Fanlore, accessed May 17, 2019, <https://fanlore.org/wiki/RPF>.

7 Riley, “Dubious Ethics.”

8 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Updated 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), xxxiii.

9 Riley, “Dubious Ethics.”

10 LadyFangs, “RPF’s (Real Person Fics): How Do You Really Feel?”, *r/Fanfiction* Reddit thread, September 26, 2017, [https://www.reddit.com/r/FanFiction/comments/72mv40/rpfs\\_real\\_person\\_fics\\_how\\_do\\_you\\_really\\_feel](https://www.reddit.com/r/FanFiction/comments/72mv40/rpfs_real_person_fics_how_do_you_really_feel).

An example of such “real person fiction” in the K-pop medium is “In the Territory of the Dragon King,” by Archive of Our Own (AO3) user curledupkitten (*chanyeol*).<sup>11</sup> This fan fiction work focuses on the relationship between two members of the K-pop boy band EXO: “Byun Baekhyun/Do Kyungsoo | D.O.” In fact, this is the work’s only tag. The “tag” is a function of AO3, a major fan fiction repository, which allows creators to optimize their work for the archive’s search engine by appending character names, common tropes, or content warnings.<sup>12</sup> The sole tag for “In the Territory of the Dragon King” is a relationship tag. Anyone looking for fanfiction works about the relationship between EXO members Baekhyun and D.O. can use this tag to facilitate their search. The tag “Byun Baekhyun/Do Kyungsoo | D.O.” has a notable punctuative characteristic. The second name, Do Kyungsoo, is connected via a vertical bar to the name D.O., which refers to the fact that the EXO member known as D.O. has two names: D.O., a stage name based on his surname of Do, and Do Kyungsoo. What should we call this second name? His given name? His legal name? His real name? If we call it a “real” name, does this mean that the stage name, and by extension the stage persona, is not real? What does that signify for “real person fiction”?

“In the Territory of the Dragon King” is an “alternate universe” work that reimagines the EXO members as characters in a world where EXO, a massively popular K-pop boy band, does not exist. Instead, the EXO members are given new backstories: Baekhyun runs a small inn on Jeju Island, inherited from his grandmother, and Kyungsoo is a businessman from Seoul who comes to visit.<sup>13</sup> The cast of characters is not limited to EXO members, but is drawn from a wide variety of K-pop idol groups, all of whom are referred to by their “real” names. This is a common practice in writing RPF fanfiction, particularly in K-pop, where many idols use stage names. The AO3 tags have been designed to facilitate searches for both the “stage name” and the “real name” hence, the vertical bar in “Do Kyungsoo | D.O.” Why do K-pop fan fiction writers consistently use the “real name,” while simultaneously claiming that they do not transgress upon celebrities’ “real selves?”<sup>14</sup> In this paper, through a comparison of two different constructions of the celebrity text – one constructed by the K-pop industry through reality television and one constructed by fan fiction writers reflecting upon their own craft – I argue that while both the K-pop industry and K-pop RPF are premised upon the dichotomy between the public persona and the private self, both performatively transgress that dichotomy to generate an affect that cannot be evoked by either the public or the private alone. On one hand, K-pop RPF relies on the theoretical divide between the

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11 Curledupkitten [chanyeol], “In the Territory of the Dragon King,” *Archive of Our Own*, May 17, 2014, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/2160063/chapters/4722243>.

12 “Archive FAQ,” *Archive of Our Own*, accessed November 24, 2019. [https://archiveofourown.org/faq/tags?language\\_id=en#whatisatag](https://archiveofourown.org/faq/tags?language_id=en#whatisatag).

13 Curledupkitten (chanyeol), “In the Territory of the Dragon King.”

14 Grisclair, “RPS, Slash, and K-Pop: 3 Great Tastes that Taste Great Together! Or Something,” *LiveJournal* post, May 29, 2012, <https://grisclair.livejournal.com/77953.html>.

public persona and the private self in order to justify its own existence even as its practices threaten any such clear-cut divide. On the other hand, the K-pop industry constructs this public/private dichotomy *in order to* transgress upon it in the pursuit of authenticity, and that it is this authenticity that fans are seeking when they speak of the “real.” I conclude by suggesting that these transgressions point toward a new model of celebrity as embodied by the K-pop idol: not a persona, a mask or stage name to be removed at will, but a constant negotiation between the very-much-public and the not-so-public.

### Background on Stage Names

On the English-language Korean entertainment news website *Soompi*, Azra\_A describes stage names as “a fun K-pop tradition where performers go by an alias that adds an extra dimension to how we see them.”<sup>15</sup> For example, in EXO, Suho is a stage name that refers to the idol’s position as leader of the group, as the word “*suho*” in Korean also means “to protect.” Idols can change their stage names throughout their career – both GOT7 member Junior (now Jinyoung)<sup>16</sup> and BTS member Rap Monster (now RM)<sup>17</sup> changed their stage names, but the close association between the initial stage name and the K-pop idol can be hard to break. For instance, all the EXO members still go by their original stage names, even if the reasoning behind those names no longer exists. For example, in 2019, EXO’s Chen released two solo albums under the name “Chen” despite the fact that it has been many years since he was promoted as part of the subunit EXO-M.<sup>18</sup> EXO-M was a subunit of EXO, based in China, that sang in Mandarin, and Chen’s stage name was deliberately designed to reflect his membership in that group despite the fact that he neither identifies as Chinese nor speaks Mandarin natively.<sup>19</sup>

Situating the K-pop idol within the broader context of celebrity studies necessitates looking at three different bodies of research: film stars, TV celebrities, and music celebrities. This is primarily due to the multimodal nature of K-pop. Although K-pop is broadly understood “as an abbreviation for Korean popular music,” Suk-

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15 Azra\_A, “12 K-Pop Idols with Unique and Meaningful Stage Names,” *Soompi*, August 22, 2019, <https://www.soompi.com/article/1347136wpp/12-k-pop-idols-with-unique-and-meaningful-stage-names>.

16 J.K, “GOT7’s Junior Announces He’ll Be Using Real Name from Now On,” *Soompi*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.soompi.com/article/887297wpp/got7s-junior-announces-hell-using-real-name-now>.

17 J.K, “BTS’s RM Officially Announces Change to Stage Name,” *Soompi*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.soompi.com/article/1076975wpp/btss-rm-officially-announces-change-stage-name>.

18 Gim Minji, *News1*, August 29, 2019, <https://n.news.naver.com/entertain/article/421/0004169282>.

19 Marggee, “EXO Member Profile and Facts: Chen,” Wordpress post, July 2, 2017, <https://bloggingdiscover.wordpress.com/2017/07/02/exo-member-profile-and-facts-chen/>.

Young Kim points out that “K-pop is a music scene whose Korean origin and global destination constantly vie to define its identity.”<sup>20</sup> Kim embraces the “generative” potential of this identity crisis by suggesting other possible meanings for the “K” in K-pop, such as “kaleidoscopic,” “keyboard/keypad,” “Kleenex,” and “korporate.” It is the “kaleidoscopic” term that I seize upon here to describe K-pop’s place at the confluence of film and music. Kim writes that “kaleidoscopic pop leads to the crucial concept of multimedia... first as multiple forms of performance, combining acting, singing, dancing, and talk shows to create a complex array of multimedia performances rather than just a music genre.”<sup>21</sup> The K-pop star must be understood not only as a music celebrity, but also as someone who embodies what Kim calls “spectacular visuality, which includes good looks, a unique fashion statement, and dance moves.”<sup>22</sup> P. David Marshall also points out the element of visuality present among music celebrities outside of the K-pop context: “the presentation of the star, his or her music roots, style of dress, manner of speech, and public display of sexuality are all significant markers for the structuring and differentiating of youth culture.”<sup>23</sup> Given this kaleidoscopic confluence, the following section considers stage names in all three contexts (film, TV, and music) before looking at stage names in K-pop proper.

Stage names are mentioned briefly in Richard Dyer’s book *Stars*, a film studies text that looks at the development and significance of stardom in Hollywood. Dyer mentions that John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe used stage names while Jane Fonda and Robert Redford did not. He attributes this difference to cinema becoming increasingly “character-oriented,” a term that he borrows from literary scholars who characterize novelistic literature as moving away from “emblematic” characters to “particularized” characters.<sup>24</sup> Dyer also notes that “names can be foregrounded in relation to identity... it is very common for people to speak of a character in a film as having the star’s name.”<sup>25</sup> Here, Dyer discusses the conflation of the film star with their onscreen character, which in his view obscures the original “constructed-ness” of the film star:

*Stars are, like characters in stories, representations of people... However, unlike characters in stories, stars are also real people... Because stars have an existence in the world independent of their screen/“fiction” appearances, it is possible to believe... that as people they are more real than characters*

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20 Suk-Young Kim, *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 8.

21 Kim, *K-Pop Live*, 9.

22 *Ibid.*, 15.

23 P. David Marshall, “The Meanings of the Popular Music Celebrity: The Construction of Distinctive Authenticity,” in *Celebrity and Power: Fame and Contemporary Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 161.

24 Richard Dyer, *Stars*, 1998 ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 97-98.

25 *Ibid.*, 109.

*in stories. This means that they serve to disguise the fact that they are just as much produced images, constructed personalities as “characters” are.*<sup>26</sup>

In Dyer’s turn of phrase here, stars are “*more real* than characters in stories.” Their offscreen personalities, as the word *personality* implies, are always in relation to their onscreen personas. Not only are offscreen personalities just as “constructed” as onscreen characters, as Dyer says, but “realness” as physical existence carries an affective value that transcends and partially conceals this process of construction.

On the television side, Su Holmes’s essay “It’s A Jungle Out There!” looks at the stage name/real name dialectic through the case of Jordan/Katie, a “26-year-old glamour model has found fame in Britain largely due to the size of her surgically-enhanced breasts.”<sup>27</sup> Jordan’s appearance on a reality TV show generated an “*extraordinarily* self-conscious debate about the relationship between ‘Jordan,’ the media image, and the person known in reality as ‘Katie Price,’ who was perceived by the show as being her ‘real’ self.”<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting here that this dual identity was primarily focused through the lens of Jordan/Katie’s romantic relationship with another celebrity on the show.<sup>29</sup> As I will suggest later, the use of real names in RPF fan fiction cannot be disentangled from the depiction of interpersonal relationships between the “characters” in the story. Moreover, the other participants on the show frequently switched between the names Jordan and Katie, a fact that will be significant when I discuss EXO’s own reality TV show later in this paper. Holmes ends her discussion of this case with the note that Jordan/Katie are not as equal in that binary as the “slash” suggests. The Jordan/Katie persona/personalities are not only inextricably bound up with class and gender, but the reality show itself buys into “the notion that there is a ‘core’ to be found, even if this is partly ‘in process’ in the [show]. What is important... is the general suggestion that the public (celebrity) self and the private (‘real’) self may well be blurred, but they can ultimately be separated.”<sup>30</sup> Like in Dyer’s account, the “private/real” carries a value that the “public/celebrity” does not. In reality television, it may appear as though the value of the “real” (the “core”) is being extracted from the public/celebrity “ore” that surrounds it. In fact, this value is generated through the simultaneous processes of blurring and separation. Separating the “real” from the “less real” identifies a “core” to be extracted, but the “ore” in this extended metaphor (i.e. the “public/celebrity”) is not discarded but rather given enhanced value through the process of extraction.

A similar process of value generation occurs in the case of music celebrities. In “The Meanings of the Popular Music Celebrity,” P. David Marshall argues that

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26        *Ibid.*, 20.

27        Su Holmes, “It’s a Jungle Out There! Playing the Game of Fame in Celebrity Reality TV,” in *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Studies*, ed. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (London: Routledge, 2006), 56.

28        *Ibid.*

29        Holmes, “Jungle,” 57.

30        *Ibid.*, 58.

“the transformations that have taken place in popular music in the twentieth century can be attributed to a number of factors... all of [which] have been modalized around concepts of *authenticity*.”<sup>31</sup> Lip syncing, in particular, has come to embody this problem of authenticity in musical performance. In his book *Liveness*, Philip Auslander compares the lip syncing scandals of Milli Vanilli and Ashlee Simpson to discuss how fans of pop music, who do not necessarily conform to the same ideologies as fans of rock music, respond differently to questions of authenticity.<sup>32</sup> Crucially, Auslander mentions that Simpson rehabilitated her image by appearing on *Saturday Night Live* and publicly acknowledging her mistake, as well as introducing (in live performance) a song she wrote about the scandal.<sup>33</sup> Auslander writes that this “positioned Simpson squarely within rock ideology by stressing her authorship of the song and its autobiographical nature.” Auslander and Marshall’s insights suggest that music celebrities are just like reality TV stars in the sense that authenticity (“realness”) is about proving an existence behind the image, which in turn adds value to the image. The acknowledgement of and performative gesture toward *interiority*, the perception of “something else” that lies beneath the public persona, and the idea of *depth* is crucial here, partially concealed but always informing the persona above as *intimacy*. The creative act of writing a song about one’s personal experience connects the “interior” with the “public.” The public scandal is given new depth and weight: the audience, who has previously known only the “public,” feels like they have gotten a privileged glimpse into the “private.” In similar terms, Marshall writes that the love songs performed by teen idols serve as a conduit between the audience (the fan) and the “personal and private realm of the singer” and more generally that “popular music works... [to break] down the distance between the pop star and the individual audience member at the very least in the level of fantasy for the audience member.”<sup>34</sup> The idol’s relationship to celebrity is characterized as a “play between accessibility to the group members’ intimate world and the impossibility of fully entering that world.”<sup>35</sup> In his paper about the Korean pop star Rain, Hyunjoon Shin suggests that the English stage name “Rain”, a literal translation of the Korean stage name “*Bi*”, served to position the star within a global market.<sup>36</sup> However, this does not explain the Korean stage name *Bi*, but rather suggests that the stage name is less about marketing and more about characterizing the “play” between accessibility and impossibility.

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31 Marshall, “Meanings of Popular Music Celebrity,” 150 (emphasis mine).

32 Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (London: Routledge, 2008), 126.

33 Ibid.

34 Marshall, “Meanings of Popular Music Celebrity,” 177.

35 Ibid., 179.

36 Hyunjoon Shin, “Have You Ever Seen the *Rain*? And Who’ll Stop the *Rain*?: The Globalizing Project of Korean Pop (K-Pop),” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10, no. 4 (2009): 514-515.



The claim that idols are always making calculated decisions about whether to refer to their fellow members by their stage names or their real names is not made here. Nonetheless, the *effect* is one of intimacy, a private world that is separate from the world of onstage performances and televised appearances, at which fans can get a glimpse of through these posts and broadcasts. The real name serves as a kind of shorthand for this private world, proof of “the basic and essential authenticity that a ‘real’ person is housed in the sign construction.”<sup>37</sup> In Marshall’s words, the real name represents “accessibility to the group members’ intimate world” while the stage name represents “the impossibility of fully entering that world.”<sup>38</sup> Intimacy, as the *transgression of distance*, can only be created by *first creating distance*, which the stage name does. Marshall uses the term “transgression” in a similar way in his essay ‘The Cinematic Apparatus,’ arguing that the “maintenance of celebrity status for the film actor” involves an “intense search for their meaning and coherence beyond the screen into their private lives.”<sup>39</sup> While there are many factors behind the use of stage names in Korean entertainment, not least of which is a cultural preoccupation with names as a source of good fortune<sup>40</sup>, many Korean celebrities speak of the fact that their real name did not “sound celebrity-like” enough to use.<sup>41</sup> In other words, an important function of the stage name is to create this sense of distance from everyday life, to nominally move the star from the sphere of private ordinariness into the sphere of public extraordinariness. Marshall goes even further and argues that it is this “combination of familiarity and extraordinariness [that] gives the celebrity its ideological power.”<sup>42</sup> Bound up in that is the idea that the ordinary sphere is the “real” and the extraordinary sphere is somehow “false,”<sup>43</sup> meaning that a K-pop star who uses a stage name must periodically gesture back to their real name to prove their realness and to demonstrate their authenticity by performatively transgressing upon the distance they have created.

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37 P. David Marshall, “Preface,” in *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xix.

38 Marshall, “Meanings of Popular Music Celebrity,” 179.

39 P. David Marshall, “The Cinematic Apparatus and the Construction of the Film Celebrity,” in *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 105.

40 “Name Change in Korea,” *Ask a Korean! (Blogspot)*, October 18, 2013, <http://askakorean.blogspot.com/2013/10/name-change-in-korea.html>.

41 Platinum1004, “Why Do Many Korean Actors/Singers Change Their Names: Comments,” Reddit post, June 10, 2014, [https://www.reddit.com/r/koreanvariety/comments/27qp-pl/why\\_do\\_many\\_korean\\_actorssingers\\_change\\_their](https://www.reddit.com/r/koreanvariety/comments/27qp-pl/why_do_many_korean_actorssingers_change_their).

42 Marshall, “Cinematic Apparatus,” 86.

43 Dyer, *Stars*, 43.

## The K-Pop Celebrity Text in Reality Television

In 2013, EXO starred in their own reality TV series called *EXO's Showtime*.<sup>44</sup> *Showtime* purports to depict the “off-stage” life of the EXO members, but actually shows the members participating in highly staged events such as throwing birthday parties (Episode 3), exchanging Secret Santa gifts (Episode 4), and engaging in musical or physical games with each other (Episode 9). In her essay on English-language celebrity reality TV, Su Holmes notes that “reality TV’s claim to present the real, to strip away the celebrity persona, comes into conflict with its status as an openly performative space which is deeply self-conscious about its mediated status.”<sup>45</sup> The footage in *Showtime*, as in most Korean reality shows, does not attempt to pass itself off as raw or unedited; on the contrary, the show features vivid subtitles and visual effects to accentuate the viewing experience. *Showtime*’s claim to authenticity therefore lies not in how it is presented (i.e. its format), but in how the people onscreen comport themselves. The members are shown wearing casual clothing, cracking inside jokes, and perhaps most crucially, referring to each other by their *real names*.

In one segment, other idols at SM Entertainment are asked whether they can identify the EXO members by name. During this segment, TVXQ member Changmin proudly proclaims that he not only knows Xiumin’s stage name, but also his real name, Kim Minseok. This display of knowledge is meant to signify that he is close enough to Xiumin, or at least interested enough in him, to know both his names. A few seconds later, both members of TVXQ are unable to identify Lay’s stage name, although they both know that his real name is Zhang Yixing. Yunho pretends to leave the room (i.e. escapes the camera frame) in embarrassment at not knowing the answer, but Changmin soon reveals that this was a charade; he does know Lay’s stage name. This interaction is a particularly complicated interplay between stage name and real name. Depending on the context, knowing the stage name *or* knowing the real name can be a sign of intimacy (i.e. senior-junior intimacy within a company). Not knowing either or both can be a sign of shame, of a breakdown in relations between neighbors. More generally, this interaction exposes the conflict that Holmes points to in reality TV, between its claim to “strip away the celebrity persona” and its “status as an openly performative space which is deeply self-conscious about its mediated status.”<sup>46</sup> Changmin pretending not to know Lay’s stage name is a staged joke, partially if not completely for the benefit of the camera, yet it paradoxically signifies authenticity and intimacy by bridging the perceived, if not actually real gap between TVXQ, a legendary idol group that has been promoted for more than ten years at the time of the broadcast, and EXO, a relatively new idol group that have been together less than two years. *Showtime* itself gestures to this

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44 *EXO's Showtime*, performed by EXO (November 28, 2013—February 13, 2014; Seoul: SM C&C/MBC Every1), TV.

45 Holmes, “Jungle,” 52.

46 *Ibid.*

conflict: when Suho approaches the members of Super Junior to ask them the same question, he finds two of them rehearsing in their dressing room. The subtitles make note of this fact, but add a little addendum: “Is this a set-up? Or is it real?”

By the ninth episode, the show begins to make distinctions between the stage name and the real name depending on the context. During a rehearsal, Luhan reminisces about a song that Suho used to sing during their trainee days. When Suho begins singing the song in the present-day, the subtitles note, “Suho is singing trainee Junmyeon’s favorite song.” The subtitles give the impression that Suho and Junmyeon (Suho’s real name) are different people, separated not only by their name but their idol/trainee statuses. The stage name/real name dichotomy works here to show that the celebrity has a past, has depth, and more importantly that fans can have access to that depth by knowing more about their past. Similarly, in episode four, the members speak about an incident in which they witnessed D.O. crying while watching anime, and the subtitles denote this moment as “The young boy Kyungsoo was moved by the animation.” Although the members do not specify when this incident took place, the use of “young boy” as well as D.O.’s real name gestures back to a nostalgic past.

Another example of this can be seen in a girl group member’s appearance on a reality show called *Baek Jong Won’s Alley Restaurant*.<sup>47</sup> Solar, a member of the girl group MAMAMOO, was brought on the show to sample a dish served by a restaurant on the show. Her appearance was almost immediately questioned by the show’s hosts, who joked that the name “Solar,” an English name, sounded like a person who would enjoy pasta (typically perceived to be a “Western” food) more than the dish that she had been brought in to sample, *cheonggukjang*, a fermented soybean stew perceived as a typical Korean food. One of the hosts, prompted by a cue card that had been prepared for him by the production staff, then delivered the punchline of the “joke”: Solar’s real name is Kim Yong Sun, a name that all three hosts instantly associate with the countryside, Korean-ness, and other ineffable factors related to *cheonggukjang*. In highlighting the difference between her stage name and her real name, the hosts’ first question verifies Solar’s claim to enjoy this dish. Although Solar does not speak during this segment as she is not in the same room as the hosts, the revealing of her real name is a performative transgression that reinforces her authenticity as a Korean woman who enjoys *cheonggukjang*.

### The K-Pop Celebrity Text in Fan Fiction Meta

The exploitation of the interplay between “accessibility” and “impossibility”<sup>48</sup> is not confined only to the Korean celebrity, the K-pop idol, and the K-pop industry. Fan producers also mine this “gap” in interesting ways. LiveJournal user grisclair, in a post defending the practice of RPF, writes:

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47 *Baek Jong Won’s Alley Restaurant*, “Episode 208,” directed by Jeong Ujin, I Gwanwon, and Yun Jongho, aired November 13, 2019, on SBS.

48 Marshall, “Meanings of Popular Music Celebrity,” 179.

*The thing about RPF is: there is no way for you to know whether the “source text” is genuine. For FPF fandoms such as books or TV shows, the source text is pretty black and white...The source text is predetermined as the “canon” by the original author. In the case of RPF, the “source text” gets a little muddy. What we call “canon” in RPF fandom is essentially TV appearances, interviews, some stalkerish/blurry candid snapshots, anecdotal “fanaccounts,” and such subjective sources. What percentage of these things are scripted, played up, jokes, lies, or plain misinterpretation by fans? What is the guarantee that what these celebrities show on camera is how they are like off-camera/in private life? Fans are just observers trying to interpret this (very choppy, very unreliable) source text.<sup>49</sup>*

This is very similar to Dyer’s contention that the film star is a construction “known and expressed only through films, stories, publicity, etc.”<sup>50</sup> Grisclair’s account suggests that fans are well-aware that both the distance and the intimacy designed to bridge the distance are constructions, and that the “real” personality is as much on-camera as the “stage” persona. Far from being alienating, however, RPF writers like grisclair see that impossibility as productive:

*My source text is unreliable and sketchy as fuck. Real Person and Fictional Persona are similar in superficial characteristics, but the Fictional Persona is absolutely a Fictional Character in my head. I share this Fictional Character with other people in the same fandom, and we make up a Collaborative Fantasy Space where our headcanons interact and build our interpretations of these Real People with personas we happen to love.<sup>51</sup>*

The impossibility of a reliable source text, of truly knowing the celebrity on an intimate level, frees the fan producer from a certain level of commitment to the real. Grisclair quotes another writer in saying:

*While I’m writing about them...I write them in a certain way, a little more thoughtful than they probably are, a little more genuine, a little more confused. I write them trying harder to get through life than I think they really are... I romanticize their problems, their struggles, to give them greater weight and depth than just some fucking rich kid who’s all woe is me, my life is so hard. I do that because I don’t want to read about their bloated, competitive, soulless, consumptive, defensive little lives.<sup>52</sup>*

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49 Grisclair, “RPS, Slash, and K-Pop.”

50 Dyer, “Stars,” 20.

51 Grisclair, “RPS, Slash, and K-Pop.”

52 Ibid.

On the other hand, this describes RPF writers' dependence on what I have discussed previously as the perception of *depth*, the "‘real’ lurking *beneath*,"<sup>53</sup> which the stage name/real name dichotomy gestures toward. Celebrities become more interesting, by these writers' own admission, when they are perceived to have greater underlying problems than "just some fucking rich kid who's all woe is me, my life is so hard."<sup>54</sup> This is what critics of RPF mean when they call RPF exploitative, when fanfiction writers make use of real personal tragedies to lend their characterizations "greater weight and depth."<sup>55</sup>

It is possible to make a comparison here between these writers and Joshua Gamson's "game players."<sup>56</sup> In his research into the relationship between audience and celebrity, Gamson identified game players as a category of audience who "read the celebrity text as semi-fictional" rather than realistic and are "unconcerned with questions of truth and authenticity. Rather, the celebrity system becomes a source of play."<sup>57</sup> Grisclair's earlier comments also bear a resemblance to Holmes' comments about the "ever-present oscillation" in reality TV programming, in which "viewers have not so much abandoned the 'idea of authenticity' as they aim to search out the moment when people seem to be 'really' themselves in an unreal environment."<sup>58</sup> Holmes goes on to say that "this structure is in many ways resonant of our relations with the textual construction of celebrity: we understand the mediated nature of the celebrity image, but we are perpetually encouraged to search the persona for elements of the real and authentic, beckoned by the promise of intimate access to their 'real' selves."<sup>59</sup> This suggests that RPF writers, instead of being characterized as deviant – Sean Redmond writes that "obsessive fans blur and confuse the real and the fictional so that the star or celebrity is imagined to respond to, or get in the way of, their wishes and desires"<sup>60</sup> – should be considered as "an audience highly conversant in the concept of celebrity image production and construction"<sup>61</sup> who are taking up the industry's invitation "not simply to seek out the 'real' self behind the image but also to (apparently) view the processes of fabrication and performance which constitute this entity."<sup>62</sup> The "interplay" between accessibility and impossibility that RPF writers take up in their work is the same play that is "actively precipitate[d]"

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53 Holmes, "Jungle," 58.

54 Grisclair, "RPS, Slash, and K-Pop."

55 Ibid.

56 Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 178.

57 Ibid.

58 Holmes, "Jungle," 53.

59 Ibid.

60 Sean Redmond, "Intimate Fame Everywhere," in *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Studies*, ed. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (London: Routledge, 2006), 34.

61 Ibid., 62.

62 Holmes, "Jungle," 62.

by reality television programs as “integral to... viewing pleasure.”<sup>63</sup> It is a chicken-and-egg scenario where fans’ desire to “search the persona for elements of the real and authentic” is co-opted by the industry’s desire to capitalize on the “promise of intimate access.”<sup>64</sup>

### The Relationship Between the Fan Fiction Text and the Reality TV Text

At first glance, “In the Territory of the Dragon King” appears to have no connection to the EXO members’ real lives. None of the EXO members have any significant connection to Jeju Island, the primary setting for the fan fiction work and the characters are surrounded by characters that are also drawn from public personalities such as other EXO members and other idols at SM Entertainment rather than the idols’ non-public friends and family. Part of Baekhyun’s arc in the fan fiction work involves the loss of his friend, Yixing, Lay, who left Korea to move back to China, but the work was written long before Lay’s effective hiatus from EXO promotions in South Korea.<sup>65</sup> Unlike Tao, Luhan, and Kris, Lay remains nominally part of the group. But the characterizations are notably similar to how the EXO members present themselves in their reality shows. Baekhyun is effervescent and talkative, masking a deep insecurity about his future, and Kyungsoo is shy and reserved until he opens up to Baekhyun over the course of the story. While Baekhyun and Kyungsoo’s relationship in the fan fiction text is certainly beyond what any reality show would suggest, the close friendship between Baekhyun, Chanyeol, and Jongdae in the fan fiction work mirrors the relationship that the three idols show in their reality series. For example, all three characters are the same age and affectionately referred to by fans as the “beagle line.”<sup>66</sup> There is also an unexpected pleasure when curledupkitten includes details like Baekhyun being unable to eat cucumbers in Chapter Four, a strong dislike of which the idol has expressed in shows like *Roommate*.<sup>67</sup> Such references testify to curledupkitten’s dedication as a fan and reward other fans’ close reading, not only of the fan fiction text but of the celebrity text as well.

I take these examples within the context of the meta essays referenced above, and argue that RPF writers are performing the same transgression of authenticity that K-pop stars perform, using the real name to gesture an interiority that can be explored in the narrative world of the fan fiction work. However, RPF writers like grisclair see that interiority as theirs to invent, breaking the relationship between the real name and the star’s “real” interiority.

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63 Holmes, “Jungle,” 62.

64 Ibid., 53.

65 EmmyKookieMin, “What Is the Deal with EXO’s Lay?” Allkpop forum post, January 3, 2018, <https://www.allkpop.com/forum/threads/what-is-the-deal-with-exos-lay.132437/>.

66 Minjiya, “5 Reasons Why EXO’s Beagle Line Is Called the Beagle Line,” *Soompi*, January 26, 2016, <https://www.soompi.com/article/813027wpp/5-reasons-why-exos-beagle-line-is-called-the-beagle-line>.

67 July 27, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_EpbP93bcA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_EpbP93bcA).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that K-pop fan fiction writers and the K-pop industry both negotiate transgressions of authenticity. RPF writers are borrowing the stage name/real name construction and its performative transgression from the K-pop industry, but the industry sets up that dialectic because of the existing fan desire for intimacy/authenticity. In order to prove themselves as being authentic and consists of depth, K-pop idols move back and forth between the stage name and the real name as the situation requires. The notion that they might do it unconsciously is no less indicative of the industry's willingness to exploit the gap that the stage name/real name dichotomy presents. At the surface level, the K-pop industry continues to espouse a "static" model of celebrity in which stars are essentially ordinary people who occasionally don a "mask", the "persona", for work purposes. In actuality, the K-pop idol embodies a dynamic model of celebrity in which value is generated through the constant negotiation between the ostentatiously public and the ostensibly private. RPF exists because the entertainment industry's transgression of authenticity depends on fans being savvy media consumers, to "understand the mediated nature of the celebrity image" while being "perpetually encouraged to search the persona for elements of the real and authentic."<sup>68</sup> But RPF writers turn this back on the industry by performing their own transgressions of authenticity. They destabilize the "basic and essential authenticity that a 'real' person is housed in the sign construction" by substituting their own definition of what makes a person "real." Intimacy is not the reward of the transgression of distance, but rather an affect that is generated through the act of transgression. In RPF, the real name is the vehicle by which writers "reach back" toward an interiority that is theirs to invent. By using real names in their work, RPF writers both give the lie to their statement that they are only interested in the fictional persona of celebrities and expose the real name for what it is: not a true signifier of the celebrity's interiority, but yet another media construction.

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# MAYLING AND MAY FOURTH: UNDERSTANDING THE INTERNATIONALISM OF MADAME CHIANG JAI-SHEK'S SPEECH TO THE US CONGRESS IN 1943

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*This paper analyzes the writings of Madame Chiang Kai-shek (also known as Soong Mayling), one of the most famous Chinese political figures during and after WWII. The paper traces Madame Chiang's writings from her teenage years, through her political career, to an ending in her speech to the United States Congress in 1942. The paper argues that her journey to the United States was not only — as it is often argued — aimed at supporting the immediate war effort, but was also a key moment for Madame Chiang to articulate her internationalist vision of a post-war world order. Therefore, this paper considers her a part of the nationalist movements across the colonized world, which “appropriated Wilsonian language” for their own nation-building purposes.*

## Introduction

*We of this generation who are privileged to help make a better world for ourselves and for posterity should remember that, while we must not be visionary, we must have vision so that peace should not be punitive in spirit and should not be provincial or nationalistic or even continental in concept, but universal in scope and humanitarian in action, for modern science has so annihilated distance that what affects one people must of necessity affect all other peoples.<sup>1</sup>*

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1 Mayling Soong Chiang, “Speech to the U.S. House of Representatives,” *American Rhetoric*, February 2, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200202044247/https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/soongmaylingspeechocongress.htm>.



On February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1943, Soong Mayling—to the world better known as Madame Chiang Kai-shek, wife of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of Nationalist China — delivered a speech to the House of Representatives of the United States Congress. She was the second woman, and the first Chinese national to do so. She was a remarkable historical figure in many ways. She was an American-educated daughter of one of the mightiest families in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China, and her long life was shaped by a close relationship to both China and the United States. She was, for many reasons, a controversial figure in both countries. During her fundraising tour for the Nationalist war effort in the United States, where she gave her speech, American press described her as the “most powerful woman in the world,” and crowds swarmed the events she attended.<sup>2</sup> However, she slowly fell out of favor with the American public as her visit dragged on for eight long months. When it eventually became clear that the Nationalists would never retake the Chinese mainland, she was even blamed for the “loss of China” in the eyes of many Americans.<sup>3</sup> Although it was far from obvious at the time, it would be no understatement to call her speech to Congress the most triumphant moment of her international political career.<sup>4</sup>

In the quote from her speech to the House of Representatives that opens this paper, she lays out an idea of a globalized world that echoes Wilsonian sentiments of the previous World War as well as the more contemporary “vision” of the signatories of the first United Nations declaration, signed in 1942, that became the first step towards the formation of a post-war world order. However, while Madame Chiang was a skillful orator and adept at modifying her message to fit her audience, it would be too simple to assume that she, as some biographers suggest, was simply attempting to “appear idealistic,”<sup>5</sup> suggesting dishonesty on her part, or trying to appeal to “Americans’ deepest emotional need as a nation” in order to “justify her own strange mix of American and Chinese.”<sup>6</sup> She was indeed a strange mix of American and Chinese, but her Americanness is often overemphasized. Her thoughts and ideas were shaped not only by her Christian faith and American

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2 Anne O’Hare McCormick, “Abroad: The Voice of China in the Lend-Lease Debate,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1943.

3 See for example: Perry Johansson, “Fantasy Memories and the Lost Honor of Madame Chiang Kai-Shek,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 23, no. 2 (2016): 109–20. Perry argues that scandalous rumors surrounding Soong Mayling (especially those concerning a supposed affair with US Presidential candidate Wendell Wilkie) were a type of projection of American inability to deal with “the loss of China.”

4 From a realpolitik-perspective, one could argue — and I do in fact argue — that China’s inclusion in the United Nations was a more triumphant moment for Madame Chiang. But as that moment took place in the midst of the Chinese Civil War, I believe that it is fair to argue that her speech to the House of Representatives was at least more triumphant.

5 Hannah Pakula, *The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-Shek and the Birth of Modern China* (Simon and Schuster, 2009), 224.

6 Laura Tyson Li, *Madame Chiang Kai-Shek: China’s Eternal First Lady* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 203.

education but also by her Chinese patriotism. Like many Chinese at the time, she was deeply troubled by decades of humiliation that China had suffered from foreign aggression.

Through the use of four different primary sources representing four distinct stages of her political life, from her return to China from the United States as a young college graduate in 1917 to her 1943 tour of the United States, this paper will provide a new perspective on her speech to Congress by showing that Madame Chiang was a convinced internationalist, albeit for fundamentally nationalist motivations. In so doing, this paper will portray her as a political *thinker* rather than the “larger-than-life”<sup>7</sup> political *persona* that she is often portrayed as. Through this perspective, this paper will argue she shaped an originally nationalistic desire to avenge China into an internationalist vision as a strategy for restoring China’s lost influence on the world stage, making her a key figure in one of the many contemporary anti-colonial struggles which emerged after the First World War, and saw some measure of success after the Second.

### Previous Works on Madame Chiang Kai-shek

There has already been plenty of research done into Madame Chiang’s life. Laura Tyson Li’s *Madame Chiang Kai-Shek: China’s Eternal First Lady* published in 2007, and Hannah Pakula’s *The Last Empress* from 2009 contain two accounts of Madame Chiang’s life written after her death in 2003.<sup>8</sup> Sterling Seagrave’s *The Soong Family* chronicles her entire family and was written in 1985 while Madame Chiang was still alive.

Madame Chiang never wrote an autobiography, but her alma mater, Wellesley College, maintains an archive with some of her correspondence. Especially of note is her long correspondence with Emma DeLong Mills, a fellow student at Wellesley who was her close friend. This correspondence, covering the years 1917-1921, is publicly available on the college’s website. A study with this collection as its exclusive focus is Thomas A. DeLong’s *Madame Chiang Kai-Shek and Miss Emma Mills: China’s First Lady and Her American Friend*.

This paper will divide its primary sources into four categories to be discussed in separate sections. These sources include the abovementioned correspondence with Emma De Long Mills (1917-1921); two publications titled *Madame Chiang’s Messages in War and Peace (1938)* and *China in Peace and War (1940)*, two books that are in fact different editions of each other, allowing for comparison between them; *We Chinese Women (1943)*, a short collection of speeches and writings from

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7 Daniel Palm and Linda Chiang, “‘The Only Thing Oriental About Me Is My Face’: The True Picture of Madame Chiang Kai-Shek,” in *(En)Gendering Taiwan: The Rise of Taiwanese Feminism*, ed. Ya-chen Chen (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 55, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63219-3\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63219-3_4).

8 For a review that compares both works, see: David D. Buck, “The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-Shek and the Birth of Modern China,” *China Review International* 16, no. 3 (2009): 362–66.

1942 that was designed to coincide with her trip to America where she delivered her speech to the United States Congress in 1943, which the final section of this paper will discuss.

### Mayling before Madame

Soong Mayling was born to a Chinese Christian home in Shanghai in 1897. Her father Charles Jones Soong's life is often told as a rags-to-riches story. As a young boy, he left the southern Chinese island province of Hainan and moved to America where he spent his formative years, later converting to Christianity. He returned to China as a missionary where he married Ni Guizhen, an educated woman who belonged to one of China's oldest Christian families dating back to Italian missionary Matteo Ricci. Mr. Soong eventually abandoned his missionary career in favor of a number of entrepreneurial activities, such as bible-printing, which made him rich. He also befriended and became the benefactor of the revolutionary Dr. Sun Yat-sen who is still held in high regard by Chinese of every ideological persuasion as the father of modern China, and who later married Mayling's sister Soong Chingling.<sup>9</sup> In short, the home that Soong Mayling was born into at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was unique by Chinese standards: it was Christian, wealthy, and intimately engaged in the great quest of restoring China to its former glory. Her formative decade in the United States from 1907-1917 is often cited as the main reason behind her Georgia-tinted American accent and the ease with which she took to American ways during her adult life, but given Mayling's family background, her bonds to the West and America were tied long before she was born.<sup>10</sup> Even before travelling to America, Mayling and her two sisters received Western schooling in their home, located in the countryside outside of Shanghai. Removed from Chinese traditions and even physically distanced from the reality of the common Chinese at the time, it is perhaps less surprising that she understood the United States as well as she did, and more surprising that she understood China as well as she did.

Mayling herself seemed very aware of her dual identity and although it would come to be her defining strength later in life, the fact troubled her in her youth. In an often-quoted remark to her American friend Emma DeLong Mills, she wrote that "the only thing Oriental about me is my face."<sup>11</sup> Four months after her return to China, she complained again that "I have not yet assimilated to the things Eastern and

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9 Laura Tyson Li, *Madame Chiang Kai-Shek*, 2006.

10 This was particularly evident in obituaries, see: "Madame Chiang Kai-Shek," *The Economist*, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/obituary/2003/10/30/madame-chiang-kai-shek>; Jonathan Fenby, "Madame Chiang Kai-Shek," *The Independent*, October 25, 2003, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190421194614/https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/madame-chiang-kai-shek-37348.html>."

11 See: Palm and Chiang, "The Only Thing Oriental About Me Is My Face," 53–68.

Oriental.”<sup>12</sup> With these comments, she echoed the words of her own father who, after he returned to China from America, wrote to a friend in North Carolina: “Yes, I am walking once more on the land that gave me birth, but it is far from being a homelike place to me. I felt more homelike in America than I do in China.”<sup>13</sup> Just as her father had expressed this sentiment during a period of despondency before his luck turned around, Mayling penned her comments during a time of her life that was somewhat of an interlude between her return from America and her marriage to Chiang Kai-shek.

### Madame’s Vision

This section identifies the Chinese humiliation at Versailles Treaty as being central to the formulation of her vision, and then traces the evolution of Soong Mayling’s vision after she became Madame Chiang Kai-shek from the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 to her speech to the United States Congress in 1943.

#### *Mayling and May Fourth — Mayling’s Convictions Take Shape*

Despite her ambivalence towards her own status as an American-educated Chinese, it is clear that Mayling was fiercely patriotic and determined to work for the betterment of her country. Biographer Laura Tyson Li suggests that “Mayling carried back to China...an unshakable belief in the quintessentially American notions that one can shape one’s own fate and that one has a moral obligation to better the fate of others.”<sup>14</sup> She was now applying these notions to the enterprise of improving China. She expressed this ambition in her very first letter to Emma DeLong Mills, sent from Vancouver in July of 1917 as she was returning home to China. Mayling described the sorry sight of a group of Chinese workers on their way to the West Front in France and vowed that “[I]f ever I have any influence, I shall see to it that no coolies are being shipped out, for China needs all her own men to develop the mines.”<sup>15</sup> In the following months and years, she continued to bemoan the state of her country in her letters to Mills while at the same time expressing her wish to change it. After the Allied powers gave the German colony of Qingdao to Japan as a part of the Treaty of Versailles, a fuming Mayling wrote to Mills:

*It is thought that because the Japs have bribed certain officials in Peking to agree to the clause regarding Tsingtau [Qingdao], the officials have*

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12 Mayling Soong Chiang, “Letter from May-Ling Soong Chiang, 1917-12-15, Shanghai, China, to Emma Mills,” December 15, 1917, MSS.2, Wellesley College Archives.

13 Laura Tyson Li, *Madame Chiang Kai-Shek: China’s Eternal First Lady* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 20.

14 *Ibid.*, 42.

15 Mayling Soong Chiang, “Letter from May-Ling Soong Chiang, 1917-07-03, Vancouver, British Columbia, to Emma Mills,” July 3, 1917, MSS.2, Wellesley College Archives.

*promised to do away the boycott movement. My heart bleeds for the poor [protesting] students, and I hope those who are so rotten, so damn greedy and inhuman as to sell their country Will Go To Hell [sic]. It is bad enough to hate men of another nation, but to feel perfectly helpless with rage against the very men who by all laws of decency and humanity should be patriotic is Hell. I can understand as I never could before, what France must have gone thru when Alsace and Lorraine went to Germany. With [Qingdao] tho [sic], it is even worse for I feel that it is the first echo of the knell to China's integrity and solidarity. Yet if there be a God, I cannot help thinking that China will be avenged, yet how hard to wait until that day.<sup>16</sup>*

Her rage is palpable in this passage — however Christian her upbringing, nobody could ever charge Soong Mayling of being excessively pious. By saying “if there be a God” she even hints at some agnosticism, though most likely it is no more than a linguistic flourish. She was in fact very much a Christian, and at the time, she was volunteering for several Christian organizations in Shanghai, which also came to be her first training ground in politics. Therefore, the use of profanity in the above passage is notable since she rarely used it with the exception of the occasional “damn” in her letters to Mills. Read in their context, her vows and outbursts come off as naive and impulsive, caught up in the righteousness of a cause that she, at this point, could only vaguely articulate.

Equally notable is her condemnation of the Chinese officials who sided with the Japanese.<sup>17</sup> Here, she views patriotism as a virtue that should be upheld “by all laws of decency and humanity.”<sup>18</sup> Finally, it is worth noting that her wish to see China avenged did turn out to be somewhat prophetic. At the end of World War II, her country sat at the victors’ table in a capacity that it had been denied in Versailles. In her published texts and speeches, discussed in the following sections, she frequently makes references to the Treaty of Versailles.

*Madame Chiang's Messages in War and Peace (1938) and China in Peace and War (1940)*

*Madame Chiang's Messages in War and Peace* was published in 1938. It is the largest work that carries her name, spanning more than 400 pages. What makes the book a particularly interesting text is that Madame Chiang was not satisfied

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16 Mayling Soong Chiang, “Letter from May-Ling Soong Chiang, 1919-06-05, Shanghai, China, to Emma Mills,” June 5, 1919, MSS.2, Wellesley College Archives.

17 The reality of negotiations at Versailles was more complex than Soong Mayling (or the Chinese public) appreciated at the time, but the important point here that she *perceived* that her country had been “sold out.” For a detailed account of the Chinese negotiators at Versailles, see: Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford University Press on Demand, 2007).

18 Mayling Soong Chiang, “Letter from May-Ling Soong Chiang, 1919-06-05, Shanghai, China, to Emma Mills,” June 5, 1919.

with the first version and ordered a reprint in 1940, retitled *China in Peace and War*.<sup>19</sup> This means that it is possible to compare the works with one another and trace the editorial changes. Comparing the contents of these books, which contains speeches, essays, correspondence, and even short stories, is beyond the scope of this paper, so this section will focus on the parts that are relevant to Madame's internationalist vision.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout both books, she expresses great frustration with the international community for its lack of response to the "undeclared war" that the Japanese had been waging on China. She declares that "all these [international] treaties appear to have crumbled to dust in way that has not hitherto been equaled in history."<sup>21</sup> Overall, she lacked confidence in any international action that supported China, but there were some indications that a more hopeful internationalist vision was taking shape. For example, in a message to a women's conference in Sydney in 1938, Madame asks the audience to "devote a period every day for international thought" and wishes for a "vacuum around any aggressor state that dares endanger the peace of the world."<sup>22</sup>

In the 1938 version of a message sent to Illinois Free State Church titled "Plea to a Young People's Conference," Madame spends considerable time admonishing the young audience, pointing out that "believe [it] or not," adults know better.<sup>23</sup> In the 1940 version, the same speech was heavily edited for length and received a new title, "Youth and World Peace." The epigraph of the chapter which previously read that "There is a compelling call to youth now to try to grow up to save their *families and countries* from the blood and flame so easily invoked by undeclared warfare [emphasis added]" has been changed to "There is a call to youth to help save *mankind* from unprovoked, undeclared warfare [emphasis added]." The differences between the two texts show that Madame reframed her vision from a nationalist focus, "families and countries," to an internationalist focus, "mankind." Furthermore, her "kids-these-days" admonitions have been almost entirely removed. The closing of the letter, by contrast, reads the same:

*Unless the aggressive peoples are taught, beyond doubt, that a high sense of justice prevails in the democratic world; that humane sentiments are paramount; that respect for treaties and international agreements is unshakably and unalterably part and parcel of the foundations of*

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19 Thomas A. DeLong, *Madame Chiang Kai-Shek and Miss Emma Mills: China's First Lady and Her American Friend* (McFarland, 2007), 121.

20 From this point I will refer to her as Madame Chiang, as this was a title that she herself preferred to use and drew political clout from. This is noticeable, as women do not normally take their husband's surname in Chinese culture.

21 Mayling Soong Chiang, *Madame Chiang's Messages in War and Peace* (Hankow [Hangzhou]: China Information Committee, 1938), 4.

22 *Ibid.*, 14.

23 *Ibid.*, 161.

*Democracies, and that countries violating those principles will be instantly barred from the family of decent nations, it is easy to foresee now what use the products of advanced science may be put to in the Americas when the time is judged to be propitious.*<sup>24</sup>

Through the briefer version, Madame takes the original message and appropriates it for a different purpose, showing a broader vision of an internationalist world where countries would not suffer the kind of injustice that China had suffered. It was also a direct warning to America that it may also suffer the same agony that China was currently undergoing. In a long letter to an unnamed Chinese friend, sent in May 1938, she writes:

*As soon as the voice of the cannons die down we must hurriedly face the task of completely reconstructing cities, towns, and villages... we must seize it [the task of rebuilding the nation] to follow plans that will produce a national edifice that will ultimately make us a proud member of a peaceful family of progressive democratic nations. To my mind our destiny is with the democracies, because our people are inherently democratic in nature and spirit.*<sup>25</sup>

In the 1940 edition, that section of the letter is edited out, but then reinserted as a part of the book's final half-page chapter titled, "Our Destiny is with the Democracies."<sup>26</sup> The connection between a nation's prosperity and its inclusion into an internationalist Wilsonian world order is clearly articulated.<sup>27</sup> This is an idea so important to Madame Chiang that not only did it receive its own chapter, but it also marks the conclusion of the entire book. She would return to this idea of internationalism in subsequent publications.

*We Chinese Women (1943) – "World society"*

*We Chinese Women: Speeches and Writings during the First United Nations Year* contains a collection of Madame Chiang's speeches and writings in 1942, mostly related to her extensive work with women's organizations. The timing and location

24 Ibid., 162-163; compare: Mayling Soong Chiang, *China in Peace and War* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1940), 182.

25 Mayling Soong Chiang, *Madame Chiang's Messages in War and Peace*, 44.

26 Mayling Soong Chiang, *China in Peace and War*, 256. Somewhat confusingly, the section is quoted as an "extract from an article in the San Francisco Chronicle Magazine, July 1938," but the two paragraphs of the chapter are identical to those in the letter, dated to May 14, two months earlier.

27 By Wilsonian world order, I refer to the type of world order envisioned by American President Woodrow Wilson and institutionalized by the League of Nations, and later (and more successfully) by the United Nations.

of its publication – New York, 1943 – suggests that it should primarily be read as a part of Madame Chiang’s propaganda effort in obtaining more financial and material aid from the United States for the war effort against Japan. But that is not to say that the ideas that she expresses within it are insincere. In fact, they are intimately connected to her internationalist vision, and unlike her previous publications, she now appears considerably more confident in it.

The contrast between the title (nationalist) and the subtitle (internationalist) is indicative of how she attempts to contextualize the work of Chinese women as a part of a greater international movement. In this publication she begins to sprinkle her speeches with references to a “world society” in a manner that seems more hopeful than before.<sup>28</sup> She calls women of other nations “sisters,” and in a message to British women war workers, she praises the contribution of British women to the war effort, comparing it to how Chinese women contribute to the war effort in China. She also publishes the reply from the directors of three British women’s war organizations, displaying the international appeal of her movement.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in a speech to American volunteer airmen in Chungking, she calls the United States and China “sister nations facing each other across the Pacific.”<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, although she is championing the cause of women, she hesitates to use the term “feminist”<sup>31</sup> to describe herself. In an article published in *The New York Times Magazine*, dated two days later she uses a similar metaphor of brotherhood instead:

*In this new world society we must all be indeed our brother’s keeper and act accordingly. Then stronger nations will help the weaker, not patronizingly as before but as elder brothers in whom trust can be felt, guiding the younger ones until they are able to stand on their own feet.*<sup>32</sup>

She echoes this sentiment again in one of many references to racial inequality: “We must create a world society to fit the need and requirements of all races instead of adopting the procrustean method of lopping off a nation’s territories...” and “war can only be prevented if world society is so constituted that all races are given equal opportunity to develop their native genius not hampered but aided by the stronger and more advanced races.”<sup>33</sup> The implication here is that the Chinese race has been done grave injustice by the West; the reference to Versailles could hardly be more candid, which shows that Madame Chiang has not forgotten young Mayling’s wish that China would one day be avenged.

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28 Mayling Soong Chiang, *We Chinese Women: Speeches and Writings during the First United Nations Year* (New York: Alliance-Pacific Press, 1943), 26, 33, 40, 42, 43, 51, 53.

29 *Ibid.*, 47-48.

30 *Ibid.*, 11.

31 *Ibid.*, 55.

32 *Ibid.*, 42.

33 *Ibid.*, 41-42.



Another new theme emerges here. In a *New York Times Magazine* article, she suggests that the West can also learn from China by attempting to portray the fundamental principles underlying her “world society” as Chinese in origin, saying: “Obligations of nations toward one another have been one of the central themes of philosophic thought in China for thousands of years.”<sup>34</sup> This clumsy attempt to connect Chinese history to Western internationalism is quite bizarre as the historical Chinese concept of nations’ obligations towards one another entailed a tributary system of states with China at the center, and it bore little resemblance to the egalitarian “world society” she is otherwise attempting to portray.<sup>35</sup> In another article, published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, she makes a similarly convoluted argument about Chinese history and democracy, saying that “China, long before the West, embraced democratic ideals.”<sup>36</sup> Ironically, these attempts to frame China as a country that shares common intellectual ground with the West presents her as ignorant about both China and the West at best and intellectually dishonest at worst. Perhaps it is no wonder that General Joe Stilwell remarked that she was “weak on her history.”<sup>37</sup> It seems that to Madame Chiang, using history accurately is secondary to using it as a framing device for her political vision.

Anchoring the “world society” further in China, she claims that the Chinese people believe that “after victory was won the world system could be entirely altered,” and “[I]f our people and army had not been induced to believe this the war, as far as China is concerned, would have been over long ago.”<sup>38</sup> Whether such a belief was widespread in China, and if it really constituted a vital part of Chinese resilience is doubtful. At most, this statement, along with her amateur history exercise should be viewed as Madame applying her own personal convictions on to the Chinese people that she represents and as an attempt to portray China as an eager member of the “world society.”

Madame’s more overt appeal to internationalist sentiments shows an increasing confidence in them, and this is not a coincidence. Much of the language in *We Chinese Women: Speeches and Writings during the First United Nations Year*, and even the title itself, echoes that of the Atlantic Charter which UK Prime

34 Mayling Soong Chiang, *We Chinese Women: Speeches and Writings during the First United Nations Year* (New York: Alliance-Pacific Press, 1943), 26.

35 For a critical analysis of the history and historiography of the tributary system, see: Peter C. Perdue, “The Tenacious Tributary System,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (November 2, 2015): 1002–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1030949>.

36 Mayling Soong Chiang, *We Chinese Women: Speeches and Writings during the First United Nations Year*, 31.

37 Joseph W. Stilwell, “The Stilwell Papers, Ed,” *TH White, New York: Sloane*, 1949, 76–83 quoted in: Pakula, *The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-Shek and the Birth of Modern China*, 387.

38 Mayling Soong Chiang, *We Chinese Women: Speeches and Writings during the First United Nations Year*, 40.

Minister Churchill and US President Roosevelt drafted together in August 1941.<sup>39</sup> The document became the basis for the Declaration of the United Nations, which the Republic of China was among the first countries to sign.<sup>40</sup> It was with this newfound confidence that Madame Chiang set off for the United States.

*Speech before the United States Congress (1943)*

Madame Chiang presented her vision through her speech to the House of Representatives of the United States Congress. In the final part of this speech, having already dealt with a number of more immediate topics, she begins to look forward, detailing her vision of a post-war “world society.”<sup>41</sup> For the first time, she emphasizes the importance of American leadership after the war, asking: “May I not hope that it is the resolve of Congress to devote itself to the creation of the post-war world?”<sup>42</sup> She then makes an indirect reference to the Treaty of Versailles and its shortcomings: “Peace should not be punitive in spirit and should not be provincial or nationalistic or even continental in concept.”<sup>43</sup> The calm eloquence of this statement contrasts the anger and frustration she expressed as a young woman in her letters to Emma DeLong Mills. Still, even without any direct reference to China, her statement reflects the same underlying conviction that China must not be short-changed by Western powers again and that she has no intention of “selling out” her country to anyone. She returns to this idea in the second to last sentence of her speech, urging the United States and its allies that when they sit down to draft a peace treaty, they must not “be obtunded by the mirage of contingent reasons of expediency.”<sup>44</sup> This direct appeal for powerful nations to exercise restraint and consider the consequences of their actions with regards to China was perhaps not as effective as she intended; many journalists in the audience had to reach for their dictionaries in order to look up the meaning of the word “obtunded.”<sup>45</sup>

Just like she did in *We Chinese Women*, she portrays Chinese ideas as compatible with internationalism, in a clear reference to the not yet fully formed United Nations:

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39 “The Atlantic Charter,” August 14, 1941, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190924174941/https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/atlantic.asp>.

40 “Declaration of the United Nations,” January 1, 1942, <https://web.archive.org/web/20191029161847/http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1942/420101a.html>.

41 Mayling Soong Chiang, “Speech to the U.S. House of Representatives.” This final part is included in the Appendix.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Hannah Pakula, *The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-Shek and the Birth of Modern China*, 423.

*The term “hands and feet” is often used in China to signify the relationship between brothers. Since international interdependence is now so universally recognized, can we not also say that all nations should become members of one corporate body?*<sup>46</sup>

She then stretches truth when attempting to find a common ground between the United States and China by claiming that the relationship between the two countries “has never been marred by misunderstandings.”<sup>47</sup> She assures the audience that this “one hundred and sixty years of traditional friendship” means China will be “eager and ready to cooperate with [the United States] ... to lay a true and lasting foundation for a sane and progressive world society which would make it impossible for any arrogant or predatory neighbor to plunge future generations into another orgy of blood.”<sup>48</sup> The American politicians in the audience responded to this with thunderous applause. The phrase “arrogant and predatory neighbor” could be applied equally well to both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.<sup>49</sup> However, Madame Chiang’s choice of the word “neighbor” suggests that she was thinking of China’s neighbor, Japan.

In another bid to display China’s eagerness to contribute to the post-world order she goes on to say that “We in China, like you, want a better world, not for ourselves alone, but for all mankind.”<sup>50</sup> Recalling the editorial changes between the 1938 and 1940 versions of *China in Peace and War*, where the word “mankind” was used to replace “families and countries,” this idea – internationalist on its face – can be traced back to nationalist roots.

## Conclusion

Madame Chiang’s internationalism was informed by her American experience, but it was not motivated by it. The motivation behind her vision was fundamentally nationalist; it originated in the desire to see China restored to its former position of wealth and power.

Soong Mayling’s conviction can be seen in her writings at a young age. As she grew into the role of a powerful politician, she began to apply herself to the improvement of China as a nation, but for a long time, she remained disillusioned with the idea that a world society could provide any benefit to her tortured country, and her writings reflected a nationalist outlook, rather than an internationalist one. Her confidence seems to have increased only after the United States joined the war against Japan and the signing of the United Nations Declaration. As her trip to America drew closer, she spoke with increasing enthusiasm, using expressions of kinship like “sisters” and “brotherhood” and began to paint the picture of a “world

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46 Mayling Soong Chiang, “Speech to the U.S. House of Representatives.”

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

society,” of which China would soon become an eager member.

It is at this point that she starts making tenuous arguments that China shares common democratic values with the United States. Many have questioned Madame’s actual commitment to democracy; a quote often attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt, says of Madame Chiang that “She can talk beautifully about democracy, but does not know how to live democracy.”<sup>51</sup> There is truth to this. In *We Chinese Women*, Madame Chiang claims that “I am opposed to any system which permanently gives absolute power to a single party,” which is a quite curious statement since she belonged to the leadership of a single party that was in fact striving for absolute power.<sup>52</sup> Then again, she did not intend for her definition of democracy to be a “colorless imitation of ... American democracy.”<sup>53</sup> Despite this, with regards to her internationalist vision, whether or not she was a true democrat is beside the point. By aspiring to bring China into “the peaceful family of democratic nations,” Madame Chiang is not so much making the case for democracy, as she is making the case that China is a worthy member of the “world society.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, framing China as a democracy allowed her to articulate a vision of China as an equal to Western countries, mostly the United States, within the emerging world order. This was not just a tactic with the purpose of endearing her to Americans – the discrepancy between her praise for democracy on the one hand and her party’s lack of commitment to it on the other, shows that she was personally convinced that there was no contradiction between a strong nationalist China and an internationalist China. In other words, for Madame Chiang, democracy was a means of reconciling two inherently contradictory ideologies.

Why is it necessary to understand Madame Chiang Kai-shek in this way? The common understanding of her tour of the United States in 1943 is, as Palm and Chiang writes, that “her twofold objectives were to boost morale at home and improve the chances for aid in the form of arms and money.”<sup>55</sup> The purpose of this paper is not to deny this obvious fact, but to show that Madame Chiang also had much more long-term goals for China in mind. The paper has shown how her internationalist vision evolved from anger to frustration, from frustration to hopefulness, and from hopefulness to determination, as she seized the opportunity before the United States Congress to champion her own vision of how China would be restored to its former glory. As such, she can be considered a part of the nationalist movements across the colonized world that strove for self-determination, and which, as historian Erez Manela has argued “appropriated Wilsonian language to articulate their goals and

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51 Sterling Seagrave, *The Soong Dynasty* (Harper & Row, 1985), 415.

52 Mayling Soong Chiang, *We Chinese Women: Speeches and Writings during the First United Nations Year*, 33.

53 *Ibid.*, 33-34.

54 Mayling Soong Chiang, *Madame Chiang’s Messages in War and Peace*, 44.

55 Daniel Palm and Linda Chiang, “The Only Thing Oriental About Me Is My Face,” 60.

mobilize support for them both at home and abroad.”<sup>56</sup> What is remarkable about Madame Chiang is the skill with which she spoke this language, how doggedly she pursued an international audience for it, and how her efforts eventually brought about China’s inclusion in the United Nations. That later events would conspire to give the seat of Republic of China in the United Nations to the People’s Republic of China some decades later, does not mitigate the fact that despite what she herself claimed in her speech to the United States Congress, Soong Mayling was a visionary.

#### **Appendix – Madame’s Speech to U.S. Congress [abbreviated]**

[...]

It now remains for you, the present representatives of the American people, to point the way to win the war, to help construct a world in which all peoples may henceforth live in harmony and peace.

May I not hope that it is the resolve of Congress to devote itself to the creation of the post-war world? To dedicate itself to the preparation for the brighter future that a stricken world so eagerly awaits?

We of this generation who are privileged to help make a better world for ourselves and for posterity should remember that, while we must not be visionary, we must have vision so that peace should not be punitive in spirit and should not be provincial or nationalistic or even continental in concept, but universal in scope and -- and humanitarian in action, for modern science has so annihilated distance that what affects one people must of necessity affect all other peoples.

The term “hands and feet” is often used in China to signify the relationship between brothers. Since international interdependence is now so universally recognized, can we not also say that all nations should become members of one corporate body?

The one hundred and sixty years of traditional friendship between our two great peoples, China and America, which has never been marred by misunderstandings, is unsurpassed in the annals of the world. I can also assure you that China is eager and ready to cooperate with you and other peoples to lay a true and lasting foundation for a sane and progressive world society which would make it impossible for any arrogant or predatory neighbor to plunge future generations into another orgy of blood.

In the past China has not computed the cost to her manpower in her fight against aggression, although she well realized that manpower is [the] real wealth of a nation;

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56 Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, 221. Manela argues that similar movements also played out in Egypt, India, and Korea.

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and it takes generations to grow it. She -- She has been soberly conscious of her responsibilities and has not concerned herself with privileges and gains which she might have obtained through compromise of principles; nor will she demean herself and all she holds dear to the practice of the market place.

We in China, like you, want a better world, not for ourselves alone, but for all mankind, and we must have it. It is not enough, however, to proclaim our idea[l]s or even to be convinced that we have them. In order to preserve, uphold, and maintain them, there are times when we should throw all we cherish into our effort to fulfill these ideals even at the risk of failure.

The teachings drawn from our late leader, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, have given our people the fortitude to carry on. From five and a half years of experience, we in China are convinced that it is the better part of wisdom not to accept failure ignominiously, but to risk it gloriously.

We shall have faith, that, at the writing of peace, America and our other gallant Allies will not be obtunded by the mirage of contingent reasons of expediency.

Man's mettle is tested both in adversity and in success. Twice is this true of the soul of a nation.<sup>57</sup>

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57 Mayling Soong Chiang, "Address to the U.S. House of Representatives" (Speech, Washington, DC, February 18, 1943), American Rhetoric, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/soongmaylingspeecho to congress.htm>.