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When beginning work on this paper in February 2020, Delhi was on fire following days of Hindutva riots in what has since been described as a pogrom. The Hindu nationalist violence that incited the riots relies on convenient, ideological scripts of Hinduism that reify Sanskrit linguistic and Brahmanical caste hierarchies. Nonetheless, resistance is not lost as Tamil counter-memories on language and caste reinterpret Hindutva histories of India to provide an alternative, oppositional possibility for a progressive future. Tamil Nadu, the southeastern-most state in India, has a legacy of being a stronghold for anti-casteist and pro-Dravidian politics. In this paper, I trace how Tamil Nadu's separatist politics engage with Dravidian counter-memory that challenges conservative Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) narratives of Hindu Nationalism. This paper aims to explore two particular tensions emergent between the BJP and Tamil counter-memory: Sanskritization versus Tamil purism and BJP casteism in opposition to Dravidian anti-caste resistances. Furthermore, these counter-memories transcend elections and demonstrate a material and discursive resistance to fascism. As the Indian state descends further into the clutches of Hindu nationalism and casteist bias, Tamil counter-memory work establishes the utopic possibility in uncovering the unique, transgressive history of Tamil Nadu and Tamil linguistic sovereignty. Moreover, the ubiquity of the Tamil language beyond India provides the opportunity for solidarity among upper-caste Tamils, non-Indian Tamils, and anti-fascist memory activists in India. Much of the power of Hindutva is its affective appeal; indeed, the best way to counter its hegemony is through compelling, information-based memory practices such as the work done through Tamil counter-memory.

Introduction

As one of the two major political parties, the Bhartiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, hereinafter referred to as BJP) has garnered overwhelming support throughout India with it becoming the ruling party in 2014, despite the facing criticism of endorsing Hindutva, or Hindu Nationalism. However, the southeastern Indian state





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of Tamil Nadu remains an obstacle to the BJP's nationwide success. Tamil Nadu, the southeastern-most state in India, has a legacy of being a stronghold for anti-casteist and pro-Dravidian politics. This paper traces how Tamil Nadu's separatist politics engage with Dravidian counter-memory in a way that challenges BJP narratives of Hindu Nationalism. Stemming from the field of memory studies, counter-memory constitutes memory narratives that contradict dominant and hegemonic 'official' histories. Counter-memory work can serve to resist and disrupt oppressive social and political systems. This paper surveys the legacy of Hindu Nationalist narratives of language and caste and counters it with the history of Tamil linguistic separatism and political inclusion. This paper explores two particular tensions emergent between popular BJP scripts and Tamil counter-memory: Sanskritization versus Tamil purism; and, BJP casteism in opposition to Dravidian anti-caste resistances, as these tensions complicate the BJP's attempts to establish hegemony through ethnonationalism and casteism. Finally, this paper considers how Tamil memory practices persist and how they can be invoked to resist Hindutva hegemony.

Historical Background

Ingrid Therwath, who investigates Hindu nationalism on online forums, situates "Hindutva," which "literally means 'Hinduness', as "the ideology of Hindu nationalists that equates 'Indian identity' with 'Hindu identity' and, according to which, blood attachments prevail over loyalties to a particular location or one's native soil."¹ Hindu nationalism can be understood as a form of ethnonationalism that relies on social hierarchies including casteism, patriarchy, and religious discrimination to produce an idealized version of India that is explicitly Hindu. Therwath also stresses that "Hindu nationalism has a modernist streak which foregrounds science and technology as pillars of Hindu civilization."² As a result, India as imagined within Hindu Nationalism is presented as modern, progressive, secular – while paradoxically remaining rooted in ancient tradition, conservative politics, and, notably, the Hindu caste system. Rangetta Dutta notes how caste in particular has retained its continued social impact.³ While the caste system predates the British colonization of India, it took on a particular political meaning during the colonial period during which Hinduism was articulated as an institution; Dutta notes that British authority "facilitated the development of a homogeneous institutionalized Hinduism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."⁴ By the post-colonial period, the caste system as it had evolved under the British took on new significance in the creation of the Indian nation.

1 Ingrid Therwath, "Cyber-hindutva: Hindu nationalism, the diaspora and the Web" in *Social Science Information* 5, no. 4 (2012): 552.

2 Ibid.

3 Ranjeeta Dutta, "Locating the Self, Community, and the Nation: Writing the History of the Śrīvaiśnavas of South India" in *Religion and Modernity in India*, eds. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Aloka Parasher Sen (Oxford Scholarship Online: January 2017): 86.

4 Ibid.



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Brahmins, who hold the superior position in the Hindu caste system, were “under stress to establish their modern identity by associating with the colonial state and the new concept of the Indian nation.”⁵ Thus, in the advent of the post-colonial Indian state, caste retained its significance with Brahmins transitioning their social and cultural power from privileged colonial subjects to idealized national citizens. In contemporary India, Brahmins and other *savarna* (upper caste) peoples continue to maintain privileged status, as exemplified by the ubiquity of *savarna* last names within Indian and diasporic institutions.⁶

Moreover, Hindu nationalism is not only reliant on caste-based hierarchies but also the politics of alterity and affective appeals to the dominant class. The BJP rose to prominence in the 1980s as the party for Hindus. In an attempt to win over Hindus in Utter Pradesh (UP) during the 1989 election, BJP candidate Rajiv Gandhi relied on Hindu nationalist mythologies of Rama and his supposed birthplace of Ayodhya, UP: “It was there, said Hindu nationalists, that the first Mughal emperor, Babur, had centuries earlier razed the temple marking the birth site to erect a large mosque on the spot . . . [t]heir demand was that this temple be rebuilt.”⁷ While Gandhi lost the election, his strategy of playing on anti-Muslim and niche scripts of Hinduism became a strategy of the BJP more broadly. By the late 1990s, the BJP held more prominent positions in Lok Sabha. The infamous 2002 Gujarat riots, which claimed the lives of over one thousand people (about 800 of whom were Muslim), were kindled by reports of Hindu pilgrims to Ayodhya being attacked. Then-Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi was accused of inciting rioters to commit acts of violence against Muslims. We can see through the history of the BJP the history of Hindu Nationalism as well, what Dibyesh Anand has called “a chauvinist and majoritarian nationalism” reliant on “the image of a peaceful Hindu Self vis-à-vis the threatening minority Other.”⁸ Hindu Nationalism’s Hindu majority logic suggests that minorities, particularly Muslims, present a danger to the imagined Hindu citizen. As is the logic of Othering, Anand observes an increased “political anxiety about the presence of minorities in the body politic”⁹ in India since the rise of the BJP. Furthermore, the BJPs has rapidly gained support throughout India, becoming the ruling party of the Indian state in 2014. While India is home to diverse religions and languages, the ever-present Hindutva narrative of who *should* call India home: according to Hindu nationalists, only Hindus. It must be noted that since its inception, Hindu Nationalism has relied on simplified scripts of Hinduism; due to this legacy, the idealized “Hindu” citizen is thus presumed to be upper caste and Hindi-speaking. As a result, non-Hindi speaking Hindus and lower-caste Hindus have begun to be presented as

5 Dutta, “Locating the Self,” 86.

6 One such institution, notably, is the Academy, as illustrated by the reference page of this paper.

7 Jaffrelot, 53.

8 Anand Dibyesh, *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2011): 1.

9 Ibid., 9-10.



Other in addition to non-Hindus.

The History of Tamil Linguistic Separatism

Notably, a division between North Indian BJP support and South Indian dissent seems to fall along the linguistic divide between Sanskrit-derived languages (Hindi) and Dravidian-derived languages (the oldest of which is Tamil). In a 2012 article for *Economic and Political Weekly*, M.S. Pandian comments that despite the Hindu rights' far-reaching influence throughout North India, they still failed to "find any meaningful political space in Tamil Nadu."¹⁰ In keeping with the fact that the BJP idealizes Hindi speakers, it is unsurprising that support for the BJP is widespread among North Indian Hindus, who predominantly speak Hindi and other Sanskrit-derived languages, but wanes in South India, where Dravidian-derived languages like Tamil and Telugu are spoken. Moreover, we can trace the unique history of the Tamil language as the origin point of separatist pride for the over 70 million native Tamil speakers throughout South India, Sri Lanka, and other southeastern Asia nations. Although Dravidian languages emerged independently of an Indo-European language, the prevalence of Hindi as the primary Indian language traces back to the period of the British Raj during which British colonizers favored Sanskrit-based languages due to their links to Greek and Latin as opposed to Dravidian-based language, which constitutes a language family separate from Indo-European languages.¹¹ British linguists of the time, including John Gilchrist, espoused that Hindustani languages (such as Hindi), emerged from Sanskrit and influenced all other languages in the subcontinent.¹² As a result, Hindustani languages were privileged by the British as languages of command. However, during this period, some missionaries took an interest in Dravidian languages, noting the linguistic complexity and history of languages such as Tamil. In uncovering Dravidian linguistic history, these historians espoused that Sanskrit-speaking Brahmins were historically "hostile to Tamil and constantly conspiring to elevate Sanskrit at the expense of Tamil — through a process of 'Aryanization' or 'Sanskritization.'"¹³ Nineteenth-century British missionary Robert Caldwell observed the inordinate influence of Sanskrit words in Tamil despite there being "equivalent Dravidian words which are equally appropriate and, in some instances, more so [yet] such words [had] gradually become obsolete and . . . confined to the poetic dialect."¹⁴ The writings of missionaries such as Caldwell proved to be a catalyst for Tamil linguistic purists, invoking a counter-memory of the effects of Sanskritization that were otherwise

10 Pandian, 61.

11 Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1996): 54.

12 Ibid., 37.

13 K. Kailasapathy, "The Tamil Purist Movement: A Re-Evaluation," in *Social Scientist* 7, no. 10 (1979): 24.

14 Ibid., 25.



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erased. Kailasapathy posits that a number of Dravidian movements stemmed from this linguistic counter-history including “the non-Brahmin movement, the self-respect movement, the pure-Tamil movement, the quest for the ancient Tamil, the Tamil (icai) music movement, the anti-Hindi agitation, [and] the movement for an independent Tamil state.”¹⁵ Consequently, Tamil language plays a significant role in Dravidian social movements and Tamil memory.

However, the anti-colonial independence movement leaders also privileged Sanskrit; R. Thirunavukkarasu notes that “relentless campaigning by many Congress leaders that the true nature of Indian civilization rests upon the timeless Sanskrit tradition beginning from the four Vedas further made Tamil language inferior and the speech community.”¹⁶ Following independence, efforts in 1965 by the Indian national government “to impose Hindi over non-Hindi-speaking states”¹⁷ led in major protests in Tamil Nadu and resulted in the [Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Dravidian Progressive Federation), or] DMK taking control over state politics. Thirunavukkarasu contends that “Tamil language pride [has become] an ideology to which all major political parties [in Tamil Nadu] began to show their uncompromising allegiance,”¹⁸ and the “BJP [is] depicted as well as perceived by the people of Tamil Nadu as a party antagonistic to the spirit of Tamil/Dravidian cultural nationalisms,”¹⁹ which are rooted in linguistic history and religious traditions that emerged separately from those of North Indian-focused Hindu Nationalism. The author cites an interview with a Tamil BJP supporter who makes the apt observation that “[t]he Hindi name of the party should be translated into Tamil and the party’s name must be “Indhiya Makkal Katchi” (meaning Indian People’s Party)”²⁰ should the BJP hope to find success in Tamil Nadu. Thirunavukkarasu observes the tendency for Tamils to view the BJP as “a party of/for Hindi-speaking areas,” further supported by the reality that “none of the BJP’s prominent leaders at the all-India level are from Tamil Nadu.”²¹ These comments expose how deeply entrenched Tamil linguistic purism is in Tamil politics, both relying on a narrative that the Hindi language and the BJP are inherently exclusive to Tamils.

In contemporary India, the BJP espouses a sacred memory of Sanskrit, claiming it is “a storage of India’s glorious past and it is the only vehicle for India’s promising future.”²² From this view, the promotion of Sanskrit and its linguistic derivatives like Hindi is an essential component of Hindu Nationalism. In opposition

15 Kailasapathy, “The Tamil Purist Movement,” 25-6.

16 R. Thirunavukkarasu, “Caste and Cultural Icons: BJP’s Politics of Appropriation in Tamil Nadu,” in *The Algebra of Welfare-Warfare: A Long View of India’s 2014 Election* (eds. Irfan Ahmad and Pralay Kanungo), (Oxford Scholarship Online: 2019): 226.

17 Ibid., 223.

18 Ibid., 225.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 227.



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to Hindu nationalism, the Tamil purist movement set its objective as the “elimination of foreign elements like Sanskrit (and English) words that had found and were finding their way into Tamil”²³ and to replace them with Tamil words. In Section III, we will explore the Tamil Purist movement as counter-memory work challenging Sanskritization and North Indian influence.

Historical Tamil Resistances to Casteism

Another significant point of contention regarding North Indian influence involves casteism and Brahmin supremacy. Clark, et. al., traces the emergence of the contemporary caste system, noting that Hindus were “traditionally divided into four castes... Brahmins, priests; Kshatriya, rulers, administrators, and soldiers; Vaishya, farmers, bankers, and traders; and Shudra, laborers, and servants [and hierarchically ranked subcastes].”²⁴ Moreover, the authors trace how under British colonialism, the traditional system of social roles (*jati*) became codified as a system of social standing (*varna*) through which the lowest social groups became further socially ostracized. These groups, now collectively referred to by terms such as Dalits²⁵, Bahujans, Adivasis, or Scheduled Castes and Tribes, “included the untouchables²⁶, who were believed to confer defilement on higher-caste groups through mere contact, as well as indigenous tribal communities not incorporated into Hindu or Muslim society.”²⁷ However, despite nominal efforts since Independence in 1947 to further incorporate marginalized peoples into society, including the outlawing of untouchability through Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, “caste affiliations determined centuries ago still strongly predict current [economic and] educational outcomes.”²⁸ As a result, an individual’s assigned caste often determines one’s livelihood. Still, as recently as May 2019, BJP politician and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi denounced the influence of caste in Indian society, claiming that only “two castes” remain in India:

23 Kailasapathy, “The Tamil Purist Movement,” 31.

24 Gregory Clark, Neil Cummins, Yu Hao, Daniel Diaz Vidal, Tatsuya Ishii, Zach Landes, Daniel Marcin, et al. “India: Caste, Endogamy, and Mobility,” in *The Son Also Rises: Surnames and the History of Social Mobility* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014): 144.

25 The Indian National Commission for Scheduled Castes has deemed the term “dalit” is imprecise at best and unconstitutional at worst (see: “Dalit word unconstitutional, says SC Commission” from *India Express*, published 31 Jan 2008: <https://web.archive.org/web/20090922060507/http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/Dalit-word-unconstitutional-says-SC-Commission/262903/>). The Commission instead favors the term “Scheduled Caste”; however, I have been advised by Dalit scholars and colleagues that the term Dalit is more inclusive of oppressed groups and is preferable to the term SC.

26 I have made the choice to censor this term given the history of violent, hateful use of the word against Dalit peoples.

27 Clark, et. al., “India,” 144.

28 Ibid., 145.



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those in poverty and those who help to free individuals from poverty²⁹, effectively erasing the dominant role that casteism plays in creating poverty. Contemporary Dalit activists remain critical of the BJP for reinforcing caste-based hierarchies through the denial of caste-based structures of oppression, the overrepresentation of upper caste individuals in politics, the rewriting of public history (a process known as Saffronization), and the continued exclusion of Muslims and other religious minorities in civic space.³⁰

On the other hand, since the independence era, most popular grassroots campaigns in Tamil Nadu have built off of the existing anti-caste and anti-Brahmin movements, one of the most well-known of which is the Self-Respect Movement. Launched in the 1920s by E.V. Ramaswamy (otherwise known as Periyar), the Self-Respect Movement “argued for social inclusion of Adi-Dravidas, encouraged intercaste marriages, and denounced the practice of untouchability.”³¹ While Periyar was himself from an upper caste family, Dalits, Bahujans, members of Scheduled Tribes, and lower caste individuals were drawn to his message of inclusion. Caste oppressed people make up over 25 percent of the population of Tamil Nadu³²; as noted by Edward Luce, Brahmins constitute only “3 percent of [Tamil Nadu’s] population, compared to between 15 and 20 percent in the northern states.”³³ The momentum of the Self-Respect Movement and other anti-Brahmin movements was only further amplified by the relatively large population of lower caste Tamils compared to Brahmin Tamils. This legacy of inclusion and tolerance has played a significant role in Tamil politics: M.S. Pandian argues that “long-standing propaganda against the caste-based discrimination within Hinduism”³⁴ in Tamil Nadu, “which led to a positive representation of Islam and Muslims.”³⁵ Having been held accountable by this ethos, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the major Tamil political party, has prioritized a more nuanced form of “rationalism and atheism.”³⁶ These political choices have allowed for more critical discussions of religion in Tamil Nadu and “have given rise to a form of Hindu religiosity among the non-Brahmin Hindus in the state

29 Sagar, “Narendra Modi’s “two-caste society” is a facade to hide the BJP’s casteist politics” in *The Caravan* (21 June 2019): <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/narendra-modi-two-caste-society-casteist-bjp>.

30 Ibid.

31 Amit Ahuja, *Mobilizing the Marginalized: Ethnic Parties without Ethnic Movements* (Oxford Scholarship Online: 2019): 52.

32 “It’s now Dalits versus non-Dalits in Tamil Nadu” in *The Hindu* (05 July 2015): <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/its-now-dalits-vs-nondalits/article7386959.ece>.

33 Edward Luce, *In Spite of the Gods: The Rise of Modern India* (London: Anchor Books, 2007): 274-5.

34 Ibid., 62.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.





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that is self-critical and tolerant.”³⁷ Likewise, these political movements have evolved to incorporate Muslims into the anti-Brahmin fold. Pandian points to “a slogan which Tamil Muslims continue to use till today *Islam engal vazhi, iriba Tamil engal mozhi* (Islam is our path, sweet Tamil is our language).”³⁸ The solidarity of caste oppressed peoples and religious minorities in Tamil Nadu has produced a political climate in the state that is inhospitable to BJP aims.

Pandian points to continued yet failing BJP efforts to rally support among Tamil citizens, observing a Tamil solidarity “wherein the [BJP] othering of Muslim against the non-brahmin Hindu is relatively a difficult possibility.”³⁹ In fact, in R. Thirunavukkarasu’s view, “the ideology of caste, Brahmanical values, and Sanskrit supremacy thus effectively became the ‘cultural other’ in contemporary Tamil society.”⁴⁰ The following section explores how the history of Tamil political movements rejecting caste and creating a religiously tolerant society produces a counter-memory that ruptures BJP narratives of Brahmin supremacy and Hindutva.

Conceptualizing Tamil Counter-Memory Practices

Tamil resistances to Hindu nationalism are conceived of through distinct counter-memory practices, including the survival of a Dravidian linguistic history and anti-Brahmanical social legacy. In Maurice Halbwachs’ article “Collective Memory and Historical Memory,” the author expands on types of memory, paying close attention to collective memory and historical memory. Collective memory speaks to an individual’s memory that has been filled in by members of the society while historical memory refers to the historical record maintained by professional historians. While Halbwachs does not see these accounts necessarily at odds with one another, we can observe the tension between memories of the community versus the official record when it comes to Tamil history. We can begin to make sense of collective memories as alternative and resistant histories through Walter Benjamin’s conception of historicity and historical materialism. Benjamin is highly distrustful of the concept of ‘history’; instead, he recommends a historical materialist approach. Benjamin distinguishes that “history” as a concept is not explicitly grounded in the material conditions of individuals, whereas historical materialism is, by definition reliant on understanding events through the material realities of the individuals who experienced them. Benjamin’s claim is well illustrated by the differing approaches to historical memory between the BJP ‘official’ history and Tamil counter-memories. The BJP’s history of India is one that relies on a process of Sanskritization, or the privileging of Hindi, North Indian, and upper caste histories. Inherently, Sanskritization skims over the legacy of colonialism, caste, and linguistic suppression, producing a sanitized script of a monolithic Hindu citizen. Instead, Tamil counter-memories invoke a historical

37 Luce, *In Spite of the Gods*, 62.

38 Pandian, 63.

39 Ibid., 67.

40 Thirunavukkarasu, “Caste,” 229.



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materialist approach, uncovering histories of Dravidian language and resistances to caste structure; in doing so, Tamil counter-memory work serves a progressive political purpose of undermining fascist narratives.

Shared Resistance to Tamil Erasure

A facet of Tamil memory is the continual emergence of narratives that speak to the Sanskritization of Tamil identity and history; Sanskritization has taken place through processes such as Saffronization; initiatives that rewrite Indian history through a Hindu Nationalist lens and attempt to erase Dravidian legacies from official history. Collective memory that resists Sanskritization reaches back throughout the history of Tamil Nadu and persists through the present day. The mechanism by which such memories persist can partially be explained through Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory. In her view, prosthetic memories are "memories that circulate publicly, are not organically based . . . [and] become part of one's archive of experience, informing not only one's subjectivity but one's relationship to the present and future tenses."⁴¹ For Tamils, these memories circulate through the ubiquity of the Tamil language itself. Continued efforts to revitalize the Tamil language not only in Tamil Nadu, but also in the Tamil diaspora carry with them the anti-casteist and anti-Sanskrit resistance politics that regularly crop up in South India. Examples of transnational Tamil memory work in the diaspora can be observed on media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, with activists seeking to build solidarity among Tamil people of different national origins (Indian, Sri Lankan, Malaysian) and caste backgrounds. Instagram accounts like @tamilgirlstar, @tamilculture, and @tamilarchive aim to bolster a shared Tamil identity through the proliferation of Tamil-language content on social media and the rejection of fascism (including Hindutva and the Sinhalese occupation of Tamil Eelam). As Landsberg posits in the introduction to *Prosthetic Memory*, prosthetic memories "challenge more traditional forms of memory that are premised on claims of authenticity, "heritage," and ownership"⁴²; indeed, Tamil linguistic heritage is charged with an anti-Brahmanical legacy that undermines Hindutva notions of who counts in the eyes of the state. As a result, Tamil language practices become memory practices, serving an affective link to the past and radical promise for the future.

Tamil Separatism as Memory Activism

Tamil collective memories and counter-histories do more than produce an affective connection to a legacy of resistance; we can also observe how this legacy of resistance is invoked to produce oppositional consciousness. In Yifat Gutman's

41 Alison Landsberg, "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy" in *New German Critique* 71 (1997): 67.

42 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004): 3.



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Memory Activism, the author embarks on this project to determine “how memory work can be a part of progressive politics.” Gutman defines “memory activism” as “the strategic commemoration of a contested past outside state channels to influence public debate and policy,”⁴³ noting that “[m]emory activists use memory practices and cultural repertoires as means for political ends, often (but not always) in the service of reconciliation and democratic politics.”⁴⁴ In her text, she outlines a few different initiatives within memory activism, including links to truth and reconciliation efforts and social movements. In her view, memory activism relies on the reconciliation of past events and “brings in different temporal relations as the foundation of its model for political change: first the past, then the present and future.”⁴⁵ Gutman observes how studies of social movements particularly lack “a historical dimension” and fail “to acknowledge the significance of the past for social and political intervention,”⁴⁶ which is where memory activism plays a role. Tamil resistances to Hindu Nationalism rely on not only an opposition linguistic history but also a rejection of caste-based and religious discrimination. As a result, Tamil’s political activism centered on inclusion and a rejection of Hindu Nationalism primarily operates in the realm of memory activism, as it is rooted in democratic political participation and alternative history to Hindutva claims on history. Speaking to Halbwachs’s concept of collective memory, Gutman observes that collective memory is often perversely invoked by those in power to legitimize their positions⁴⁷, such as is done by Hindutva politicians presenting the idealized Hindu citizen as under attack throughout history. Nonetheless, Gutman reminds us that “collective memory can also serve as a ‘weapon of the weak’ . . . and a tool for social and political change.”⁴⁸ We can observe collective memory being used to counter power and leverage inequities through Tamil political activism.

Gutman focuses her text on memory work surrounding *Al-Nakba* (Arabic for ‘the catastrophe’), the 1948 displacement of Palestinians; she suggests that “[a]s a counter-hegemonic force in society, Nakba memory activism in Israel assisted a marginalized group of citizens to intervene, albeit obliquely, on the level of culture, in state practices and public discourse.”⁴⁹ Central to the argument of Gutman’s text is that memory activism serves to catalyze knowledge-based political change through the preservation of cultural memory. While the text is focused on the dynamics of Palestinian memory work in Israel, we can learn from her conception of memory activism when considering Tamil counter-memory work and its efforts to undermine Hindu nationalist discourses, including Sanskritization and casteism.

43 Yifat Gutman, *Memory Activism: Reimagining the Past for the Future in Israel-Palestine* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2017): 2.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 15.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 16.

48 Ibid., quoting Scott 1985.

49 Ibid.



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Throughout her text, Gutman explores how Palestinians develop a national identity through practices similar to those used by Zionists. She highlights Baladna, a Palestinian youth organization, who facilitate tours and testimonies similar to those facilitated by Israeli groups; however, the outcome between the two groups is very different. Gutman explains how “[t]he tour and testimony Baladna facilitates for Palestinian youth in Israel illuminate how, for those on the marginalized side of the conflict, the use of hegemonic cultural practices (tours and testimonies) carries different meanings, goals, and stakes than Jewish Israeli memory activism.”⁵⁰ In Gutman’s view, “all Palestinian memory activism in Israel [constitutes] . . . a cultural liberation effort that is part of a general claim for cultural autonomy.”⁵¹ Such memory practices thus seek to define the contours of Palestinian national culture, history, and identity to show how it has been suppressed by the dominant Israeli system. Similarly, the continued prevalence of Tamil language in Tamil Nadu and the diaspora comes to define a distinct Tamil identity separate from that of Hindutva. As observed previously, the privileging of Hindi and Sanskrit-derived languages by the BJP constructs a dialectic in which Tamil-ness is socially positioned in opposition to Hindutva. While Hindu nationalists push for an all-Hindi language schooling and propagandized history through Saffronization initiatives, Tamil Nadu has pushed back through continued public-school initiatives to maintain Tamil as the state language. Moreover, the history of the Tamil language heavily overlaps the history of anti-casteism in India. To learn Tamil is to learn of the Sanskritization of the continent, including the Brahmanical system of caste and oppression. For many Tamils, to continue to speak Tamil is to reject Sanskritization.

Challenges for Tamil Counter-Memory

Nevertheless, knowledge of Tamil history and proliferation of Tamil memory is not without challenges. Gutman surveys Zionist efforts to rewrite the erasure of Al-Nakba instead with a mythologized tradition of reconciliation, what Gutman terms “reconciliation without truth.”⁵² She contends that missing from the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 was the “addressing [of] 1948 and the right of return for Palestinian refugees.”⁵³ The author observes that despite Palestinian efforts to spread information about the “contested past,” for the most part “[m]ore knowledge did not lead to more power for the silenced group of Palestinian citizens.”⁵⁴ Along the same vein, despite the prevalence of Tamil counter-memories, Hindutva persists and appears to be growing more influential throughout India. Gutman emphasizes that truth and reconciliation efforts are not always made more equitable with the spread of more information; instead, it is essential for those with the power to acknowledge existing

50 Gutman, *Memory Activism*, 64.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., 129.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid, 140.





systems of power and publicly recognize those who were disadvantaged by past and present actions.⁵⁵ While Tamil political activism generally leans into this work, political activism in the rest of India does not, as illustrated horrifically by the February 2020 Hindutva riots in Delhi that have since been described as a “pogrom.”⁵⁶ In India and in the diaspora, informed citizens – Tamil or not – holding the BJP-led government accountable for their actions is essential for alleviating systemic inequalities and producing. The memory work of Tamils and other marginalized populations plays a critical role in catalyzing oppositional consciousness, but Landsberg and Gutman’s studies demonstrate the key role of privileged individuals being moved by such memories and speaking truth to power. It remains integral to the success of counter-memory work that those who aim to resist the BJP also understand that Brahmanical supremacy, Sanskritization, and religious intolerance predates and will likely succeed the party. The praxis of memory activism is to change material realities; this process is ongoing and fundamentally relies on privileged individuals reconciling convenient scripts propagated by Hindu nationalists with resistant histories like Tamil counter-memories.

Conclusion: Towards a Progressive Politics

The BJP heavily relies on Hindutva narratives that call for an ethnosestate established for an idealized Hindu citizen; while these insidious narratives have gained traction in the contemporary moment, the privileging of the Sanskrit language and Brahmanical supremacy have deep roots that predate the founding of modern Indian nation. Still, we find resistance to these totalizing narratives in Tamil counter-memory. The legacy of Tamil counter-memory begins first and foremost with the uniqueness of the Tamil language, the oldest spoken Dravidian-derived language. Unlike Hindi and other Hindustani languages, Tamil is entirely separate from Sanskrit and the Indo-European language family, despite Sanskritization and Saffronization attempts throughout history to erase its distinctiveness. The Tamil language serves as a starting point for Tamil separatism, which rapidly slides into other forms of resistant histories including anti-casteism and religious tolerance. While caste has persisted in the Indian subcontinent for the last 4000, caste oppressed peoples and minorities face new forms of violence under the BJP’s tacit advocacy of Hindu Nationalism. With that being said, concerted efforts in Tamil Nadu to deconstruct the caste system and alleviate systemic inequality have been codified in Tamil politics; as a result, the BJP has been unable to establish dominance in Tamil Nadu.

We can conceive of Tamil resistances through frameworks presented in memory studies. Halbwachs’ notion of collective memory helps us articulate the

55 Gutman, *Memory Activism*, 141.

56 Mira Kandar, “What Happened in Delhi Was a Pogrom” in *The Atlantic* (28 Feb 2020): https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/what-happened-delhi-was-pogrom/607198/?fbclid=IwAR148Kh4BrUN_TES8oXxuB24LU6DqFVcoZD8tUuAeiGul7b_VIp-6s6IVf28.



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memory work that Tamil community members do to maintain an alternative history of their people; furthermore, that collective memory can be seen as historically materialist, as it relies on an understanding of the material reality of the people involved. Tamil memory practices are deeply entrenched in language, which can be understood through Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory. Additionally, Tamil counter-memory work generates oppositional consciousness along the lines of Gutman's notion of memory activism. Still, the challenge of memory activism is the essential need for privileged individuals — both within Tamil Nadu and beyond — to acknowledge Tamil counter-memory and the material realities of linguistic suppression and caste oppression that it exposes. While the task of challenging Hindutva hegemony and the BJP's affective appeals is daunting, Tamil counter-memory work and activism is compelling because it directly contradicts dominant, totalizing narratives and provides undeniable nuance to an oversimplified history. With India facing the threat of descending further into fascism, Tamil counter-memory pushes us towards progressive politics.





THE POLITICAL VIA THE CINEMATIC: TRACING CHINA'S TRANSFORMATION TOWARD A GLOBALLY AMBITIOUS STATE

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*Starting with a brief critical history of the Chinese film industry since the beginning of this century, this essay reviews the emergence of the cultural industries in China alongside globalizing forces as well as Chinese state policies, particularly Deng Xiaoping's far-reaching market-opening reforms. While interpreting Chinese global ambitions as represented through the prism of its national cinema, this paper asks: How are institutions and aesthetics interacting in ways that exhibit resonances and tensions between the cinematic and the political? It pays particular attention to the transformations in institutional conditions of cultural production and circulation. First, it shows how these changes were animated by globalizing forces, and how they were influenced by the Chinese state policy. Next, it tackles three Chinese films, *Hero* (2002), *The Great Wall* (2016), and *Wolf Warrior II* (2017), as distinct instances of Chinese cinematic production that represent a steady trajectory toward a more globalized posture of the Chinese state. This paper unveils how selected themes and aesthetics represent varying levels of the state's globalized posture and signal a transformation from a relatively national stance toward a more globally ambitious one that attempts to project national capability and power globally. This transformation mirrors the steady trajectory of China's increasing incorporation into the global capitalist economy.*

Introduction

Prior to the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, Chinese cinema has sometimes been described as both "pre-revolutionary" and "post-colonial,"¹ — that is, occupying a space defined by both creative experimentation and political tension. This paradox points to the constraints of the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter referred to as CCP) as well as to the orthodoxy of Kuomintang or the

¹ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 409.





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Chinese Nationalist Party. However, it also signals a unique set of characteristics that enlivened the canon of resistant films of the 1930s and 1940s to a celebratory status, which enriched Chinese cultural heritage and its national cinematic culture.

Following the first film screening in China in 1896, the development of the Chinese cinematic industry, which was then located in cosmopolitan Shanghai, was influenced by China's "reluctant encounter with the West and the 'modern'."² In the 1900s, Shanghai became an entrepôt, where filmmakers distributed foreign film to other major cities, including Beijing. As Chinese national cinema flourished, influenced by Japanese and German cultural products and, from the 1930s, by America, China's cinematic landscape would further reflect the tensions between state power, propaganda, creative energies and, eventually, the national project of marketization. All of these factors shaped the modern Chinese film industry.

This essay briefly describes the Chinese film industry since the beginning of the 1950s until the late 2000s, paying particular attention to transformations in institutional conditions of cultural production and circulation. In doing so, it reviews the emergence of Chinese cultural industries alongside globalizing forces and Chinese state policies, particularly Deng Xiaoping's far-reaching market-opening reforms. It then compares three Chinese films — *Hero* (2002), *The Great Wall* (2016), and *Wolf Warrior II* (2017) — each chosen based on the combination of high box office ranking, worldwide appeal, and international collaboration, to unveil how their themes and aesthetics signal a transition towards the more globalized posture of contemporary China.

Post-Socialist Film Industry

Modern Chinese film production has deep political and ideological undertones.³ While this may be a well-known fact, it is necessary to consider how these ideological and political factors have been embedded in the state policies that shaped the cinematic landscape and the structure of the Chinese market. Film production is now considered to be one of the core "cultural markets" of the country. However, for a long time, film was considered a product of "the political, economic, military and cultural invasion of the West."⁴ This reluctance toward the West stemmed from Chinese experience in the 19th century, when after a long period of isolationism, China faced colonial encroachment as well as political pressures from Western countries to allow foreign trade. Unable to stand up to Western nations, the period of 1839 and 1949 has been referred to as "the century of humiliation" for China.⁵

2 Nowell-Smith, *The Oxford History*, 409.

3 Mary Lynne Calkins, "Censorship in Chinese Cinema," *Hastings Comm. & Ent. LJ* 21 (1998): 239.

4 Shujen Wang, *Framing Piracy: Globalization and Film Distribution in Greater China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 61.

5 David Scott, *China and the International System, 1840-1949: Power, Presence, and Perceptions in a Century of Humiliation* (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 2008).



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Undeniably, the political climate as well as the experience of national humiliation influenced the Chinese film industry. In fact, the CCP sought to nationalize it and utilize cinematic images as tools of propaganda. Beginning with the Communist takeover in 1949, the production, distribution, exhibition, and censorship of cinematic images were closely monitored and controlled by the Ministry of Propaganda and, later, by the Film Bureau of the Ministry of Culture. In 1951, all of the independent Shanghai films produced before 1949 were banned with the Motion Picture Act, which censored productions that hurt national interests and racial pride, violated official policy, disrupted official order, or disobeyed the government or law in any form. The act promoted moving pictures consistent with a national rhetoric that supported the socialist reconstruction of China through a particular representation of the lives of soldiers, workers, and peasants.⁶

With support from the Soviets, the Chinese film industry achieved technological self-sufficiency by establishing large feature film studios as well as smaller provincial facilities that produced newsreels and educational shorts, which signaled the growing ambition of the Chinese state as well as its commitment to furthering propaganda and the development of the Chinese creative industries. The 1960s brought difficult times to the Chinese film landscape, with widespread famine and the Cultural Revolution prompting further reforms in the industry. These transformations included banning movies which allegedly promoted bourgeois ideology, were not aligned with “revolutionary” ideals, or were labeled as “poisonous weeds” that were either withdrawn or displayed to the public for condemnation.⁷ The Chinese film industry suffered a major blow since directors, writers, and actors had difficulties practicing their creative craft. Many of them were imprisoned or placed in labor camps.⁸

The production and dissemination of state propaganda had a negative impact on the development of Chinese cinema.⁹ State-oriented productions tended to target large-scale events rather than actual audiences; a movie of that time, *Bridge* (1949), portrayed the Chinese Civil War. This tendency curtailed the people’s enthusiasm for Chinese movies. Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, a period of dramatic social transformations, directors such as Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou (*Hero*, *The Great Wall*), and Chen Kaige have generally been seen as the representatives of the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers. Having attended the Beijing Film Academy, they were the first ones to veer away from national film constraints and policies as

6 Nowell-Smith, *The Oxford History*, 694.

7 Ibid.

8 Daniel Robert Edwards, “Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics: Contemporary Independent Chinese Documentary as a Public Sphere” (Melbourne, Monash University, 2014), 92; Zhiwei Xiao and Yingjin Zhang, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film* (Routledge, 2002), 27.

9 Jeremy Brown et al., *Visualizing Modern China: Image, History, and Memory, 1750–Present* (Washington DC: Lexington Books, 2014), 219.





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they did not comply with an “unsteady diet of politicized and ritualized movies.”¹⁰ Instead, the new creative spirits of the Fifth Generation filmmakers of the mid-1980s “turned Chinese cinema on its head.”¹¹ These productions were praised for their artistic achievements since their experimental form and aesthetics offered a radical break from the pedagogic traditions of the past. Unfortunately, many of the movies produced at the tie were intricate and geared towards a more educated audience. They performed quite poorly in the market, although they were creatively profitable some filmmakers who, thanks to their movies, progressed in the industry.¹²

The relatively poor performance of Fifth Generation films put increasing economic pressures on the Chinese cinema industry. During the 1980s, policies began to transition from a paradigm of planned economy to a more market-oriented one, which led to investments, by local media entrepreneurs, into the creative and cultural sectors. Chinese films would change yet again. These changes in the Chinese cultural production and circulation occurred at the same time as the country’s economic take-off. Following the establishment of modern industries and world-class coal and textile production facilities in the mid-1980s, industrial reforms achieved success in many areas.¹³ Deng Xiaoping’s market reforms, along with his transformations of the agricultural sector, led to the “opening up” of the economy to foreign direct investment. The greater opening spurred an increase in selective privatization and entrepreneurship. In 1992, during the establishment of the socialist market economy announced at the Fourteenth National Congress of the CCP, it was proposed that China would develop its economic sectors. This rationale led to the substantial growth of private enterprises at a constant rate of more than 30 percent each year since the 1990s,¹⁴ while private ownership grew three-fold.¹⁵

Deng Xiaoping’s historic “Southern Turn” as well as the creation of special economic zones transformed Chinese society and, for the first time, placed culture “on the front lines of economic restructuring.”¹⁶ In *Postsocialist Modernity*, Jason McGrath compares this transformation to one in line with Theodor Adorno and Max

10 Paul Clark, “Reinventing China: The Fifth-Generation Filmmakers,” *Modern Chinese Literature*, 1989, 121.

11 Ibid.

12 Ying Zhu, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003).

13 Barry J. Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 2006).

14 Hongliang Zheng and Yang Yang, “Chinese Private Sector Development in the Past 30 Years: Retrospect and Prospect,” *International House University of Nottingham, China Policy Institute*, 2009.

15 Yingyi Qian and Jinglian Wu, “China’s Transition to a Market Economy,” *How Far across the River*, 2003, 31–63.

16 Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 3.



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Horkheimer's concept of "culture industry."¹⁷ In their opinion, popular culture became reminiscent of factory production because of its reliance on the standardization of cultural products, such as film, print media, and radio. McGrath further suggests that works of art and cultural expression, along with high culture ideals, which were abandoned by intellectuals and artists following the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, have now become relatively autonomous. This implies that, under neoliberal logic and capitalist conditions, both high and popular culture became determined by the culture industry itself. This "relative autonomy," McGrath suggests, "can be simultaneously read as but an aspect of or appearance within an underlying transition from a state heteronomy to a market heteronomy."¹⁸

McGrath's commentary points to a shift from predominantly traditional filmmaking grounded in Chinese cultural logic to filmmaking with a more global stance that began to incorporate the logic of capital accumulation, free market economy, and the private sector. To him, the Chinese film industry resembles a case of complex negotiations between the "public" (referring to the control on behalf of the Chinese state) and the "private" (implying the ambitions within Chinese cultural industry) without complete privatization, as it occurred in much of the "Second World" following the post-Cold War logic. Interestingly, the notion of "post-socialist China" (or the post-socialist condition which China finds itself in) proves to be a useful analytical tool to further conceptualize modern Chinese society as suspended between the communist utopia promised by Maoism and the capitalist rhetoric of progress it is still driven by.¹⁹ According to Michael Keane, a professor of Chinese Media and Communications, this very condition is illustrative of "the tension between public and private models of cultural management,"²⁰ which is fundamental to further understand the transformations in China's media industries. McGrath refers to these tensions as "rhetoric of transition," which he observes in the discursive production and the hegemonic position of the CCP. Without arguing for China's presumed Westernization, McGrath allows us to recognize the "transition to a market economy and consumer paradise."²¹ Following his logic, this conditioned and, to some extent,

17 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Psychology Press, 2001); Deborah Cook, *The Culture Industry Revisited: Theodor W. Adorno on Mass Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996); Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, 2006, 41–72.

18 McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*, 12.

19 Ibid., 205.

20 Michael Keane, "The Geographical Clustering of Chinese Media Production," in *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Media* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 341.

21 McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 205.





forced Chinese culture to “adjust to market conditions of one sort or another.”²²

Economic Unleashing

The post-socialist condition of the Chinese film industry, or rather the effects of socialist policies on cultures, society, and individuals in the wake of the economic opening, has become interwoven with the complex process of marketization that Chinese cultural industries have undergone with the increases in investment, production, and consumption of cultural products. Discussing the process of marketization, Darrell Davis, a professor of Visual Arts, suggested that the Chinese government strategically encouraged and promoted homemade media and cultural products with an incentive to align the national industry with “world standards.”²³ In this context, based on relative increases in media production as well as the box office rates in China, marketization could be seen as a “balancing act between an open market and a planned economy.”²⁴ In other words, the process itself became a strategic tool which aspired to “match Hollywood internationally while continuing to serve the Party at the national level,” and “boost the quality and quantity of Chinese films, moving the People’s Republic of China [hereafter referred to as PRC] steadily toward a major soft-power role in the international arena.”²⁵

This development exposes certain contradictions in the Chinese media industry. The generalized national aspiration to meet international markets and standards, for example, starkly contrasts the state’s preoccupation with projecting national values, ideologies, and sentiments of national glory or national humiliation. This further demonstrates the complexity of contemporary Chinese film industry. Despite the fact that the Chinese state embraced market reforms in the 1970s, these reforms did not fully impact the cultural arena until the early 2000s. It was between 2002-2003 – one year after China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and just after the release of *Hero* (2002) – that the Chinese government implemented a wide range of reforms in its national film industry.

Split between the commercial potential that was heralded by China joining the WTO in 2001, the greater autonomy of some media outlets, and the remainders of state control,²⁶ the Chinese state decided to end the fifty-year monopoly of the national China Film Group (later transformed into China Film Corporation). Roughly during the same time, the reforms allowed for foreign film productions to establish partnerships with China. This was the beginning of an increasingly global film landscape. These developments, framed as the “going out” policy, encouraged Chinese film to “go global” due to large investments flooding the industry. The so-

22 McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 131.

23 Darrell William Davis, “Market and Marketization in the China Film Business,” *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 3 (2010): 122.

24 Ibid., 123–24.

25 Ibid.

26 Keane, “The Geographical Clustering,” 341.





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called Twelve-Year Plan established a new model of Chinese economic development. It was followed by the “Plan to Boost the Culture Industry,” which made culture an important component of China’s strategy for long-term economic growth. This shift prioritized the film sector along with other cultural sectors, such as publishing, animation, advertising, and entertainment. It aspired for the culture industry to grow at a double-digit rate and contribute to the country’s GDP.²⁷

Michael Keane claims that “China needed to adopt a global market perspective if it was to hold back the forces of globalization.”²⁸ He suggests that the Chinese state attempted to create a more attractive global image “under the auspices of ‘cultural soft power.’”²⁹ The Chinese state began to promote national culture and its industries by equating them with economic development and prosperity as well as a necessary component of the well-being of the socialist market economy. Furthermore, some have remarked that cultural industries became “an important channel for the satisfaction of people’s diverse spiritual needs under the conditions of the social market economy,”³⁰ which prompted the state to render cultural industries and cultural products as important vehicles of national and economic transformation.

The “economic unleashing” or opening-up of China’s creative and cultural industries, along with the Chinese state’s strategic incentives to utilize cultural sectors in the larger project of China’s national renewal, renders the image of Chinese cinema industry as fragmented and conflictual – torn between the strong presence of the state but also driven by the increasingly neoliberal logics of global capital. McGrath describes it as “a world in fragments,” which successfully captures “the differentiated, pluralized state of Chinese culture since the early 1990s,” and the “impossibility of representing or narrating it in any way that can approach a tidy whole.”³¹ Furthermore, McGrath emphasizes that as a result of the advanced reform era, China lost a “master ideological signifier or overarching cultural fever,” and instead, embraced the central cultural logic of the market. This does not necessarily point to a lack of direction of the industry. Rather, it could signal an alignment with the complex and disjunctive nature of modern neoliberal globalization. McGrath also suggests that the “marketization of culture emerges not just as a condition of production but as a historical horizon that is imagined and negotiated in diverse ways through individual works of art, new genres of entertainment cinema and popular literature.”³²

27 Yu Hong, “Reading the Twelfth Five-Year Plan: China’s Communication-Driven Mode of Economic Restructuring,” *International Journal of Communication*, 2014.

28 Michael Keane, *Handbook of Cultural and Creative Industries in China* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016), 4.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 7.

31 McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 23.

32 Ibid., 24.





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All of this points to a larger process of national imagining, which has recently begun to define the increasingly ambitious global stance of China. This stance has involved both international collaborations as well as the production of content, driven by capital logic, that captivated wider audiences. McGrath's remarks suggest that while some elements of state propaganda were replaced by marketization strategies that opened the Chinese film industry, what defined China's economic transformation was an assemblage of processes. Considering China's cinematic industries, these involved state policies directed at media sectors and less-controllable shifts enabled by increasing waves of globalization, including China's economic take-off following its key role in the global supply chains as well as its rapid urban revolution. Yomi Braester framed urbanism as integral to China's globalizing processes and cinema. To him, increased urbanization led to the formation of subjective experiences, which generated a new breed of filmmakers who began to confront "the same obstacles that architects know as planning in the face of power." This conditioned them to "think professionally and act politically at the same time."³³

The unprecedented scale of the Chinese urban revolution should not be left unnoticed. Ranging from wide-spread socio-economic transformations to more subtle changes in people's experiences, the modern Chinese city became a site of cultural production,³⁴ which shaped a distinctively urban, and in some ways, global culture that included both state interventionism and increasingly transnational sentiments. This is best exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious China-backed initiative which attempts to revive the ancient Silk Routes through a series of massive infrastructure projects spanning much of Central Asia, Middle East, and Europe.

Although one may attribute this project to a more globalized posture of the Chinese state, the BRI offers an interesting comparison to the recent developments of Chinese cinematic industries. The infrastructural and progress-oriented preoccupation of the BRI and the Silk Routes revival parallels the complexity of the Chinese modern film landscape, which is caught in the deep cultural heritage of distinct film aesthetics, but simultaneously striving to re-align itself with international trends. Problematizing this dichotomy, Michael Curtin reminds us that the aesthetics of Chinese cinema "did not develop within the boundaries of a single state," but rather "operated transnationally for much of its history, gathering financing, talent, and audiences from such diverse locales as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taipei and Singapore."³⁵ He employs the concept of media capital, which highlights the historical as well as contemporary "spatial dynamics of the transnational Chinese

33 Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

34 Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*; Thomas J. Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon: China's Urban Revolution and What It Means for the World* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2012).

35 Yingjin Zhang, *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 179.



cultural economy.”³⁶

By looking at Chinese media industries and tracing the geographical deployment of resources, talent, and products, Curtin suggests that shifts in creative activity have been conditioned (1) historically (due to the clustered nature of Chinese film) and (2) through their adaptation “to the pressures and opportunities posed by the latest wave of globalization.”³⁷

This condition is reflective of the current state of the Chinese film industry. Curtin’s concept of media capital, therefore, proves to be a useful heuristic tool to invoke the spatial or geographical centers as well as the concentrations of resources, reputation, and talent. Media capitals have become the “sites of mediation where complex forces and flows interact,” inclusive of capital accumulation, creative migration and sociocultural variation.³⁸ Given this, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether globalizing forces or Chinese state policies should be seen as the predominant factor in the transformation of China’s cultural production and circulation. However, one cannot disregard China’s WTO accession in 2001, which marked the end of a predominantly national era and progressively equipped China with a more globalized posture, inclusive of its cultural and cinematic industries.

From *Hero* to *Wolf Warrior II*

These transitions, along with the inherent contradictions that accompany them, have not merely been reflected by economic indicators, but have also made their way into the aesthetics of many films representative of a transition toward a more globalized state posture. In other words, institutions and aesthetics began interacting in ways that exhibit resonances and tensions between the cinematic and the political. *Hero* (2002) by Zhang Yimou offers a starting point for this discussion. Released before the reform of China’s cultural and creative industries, the film seems to herald the forthcoming shift to a more global posture of China while preserving some of the original and “authentic” flair of what was traditionally associated with Chinese cinema. Even though the paradigmatic approach of Chinese national cinema has thoroughly been problematized,³⁹ one can suggest that *Hero*’s genre of *wuxia*, an aesthetic centered around fantastic stories, martial arts themes, and refined cinematography, renders the movie “typically” Chinese, perhaps in Edward Said’s “oriental” sense. This has to do more with its surface-level and thematic presentation rather than what the movie actually represents.

In fact, many have claimed that as a record-breaking Chinese movie, *Hero* managed to successfully capture the attention of global audiences simply because of its “oriental” aesthetics associated with *wuxia* films. However, it should also be noted that *Hero*’s success and incredible international box-office takings have

36 Zhang, *A Companion*, 179.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 9.

39 Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* (Routledge, 2004).



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often been attributed to its popularity in the local market. Precisely for that reason, Miramax did not screen *Hero* until two years after its release in Asia to estimate the success and performance of the picture locally.⁴⁰ In this context, *Hero*, as a cultural production, managed to hijack the state propaganda to launch a large-scale commercial success. This has been caused by the fact that earlier productions of Zhang Yimou were frequently criticized by local critics for their strong reminiscence of Fifth Generation films. In their critiques, Chinese experts often claimed that Zhang's films catered to the "eyes of foreigners" because of their representation of China as a backward and anachronistic country.⁴¹ While such criticism targeted certain aspects of Chinese society instead of praising China's national glory, *Hero* attempts to accomplish both. Disguised with sophisticated camera technique, philosophical richness, interlocking plot narratives, and accomplished cinematography, the movie reproduces the well-known theme of conflict and contradiction. Throughout the story, which follows Nameless' arrival at the Qin court, the tale touches upon a number of issues that represent Chinese traditional ideology and national identity.

Interestingly, the movie was recognized as a national success and a cultural symbol of national pride only once it received high praise internationally. This form of international acceptance seemed to solidify the ambitious trajectory of the Chinese movie industry. Fung and Chan suggest that this "second-level nationalism" demonstrates that the practices of forestalling dissent via enforced propaganda are no longer effective. This prompts Fung and Chan to suggest that the Chinese state's partnership with "private corporations to reinvent and reproduce the nationalistic ideology in cultural products" could be considered a viable solution for the Chinese film industry going forward.⁴² While interpretations of *Hero* are extensive and vary significantly, the most pronounced representations of Chinese culture in the movie lie in the number of shifting perspectives and narratives, which constitute the main frame of the storyline as well as the theme of *Tianxia*, literally meaning "all under heaven," or "our land." In Zhang's film, the audience is exposed to multiple layers of the same story, which interlock elements of conspiracies, betrayal, and misinformation. These multiple narratives suggest analogies to the Chinese state, selective reading of history, surveillance, and thought management, as seen in the Chinese state propaganda apparatus. These multiple narratives become even more visible in the depiction of the First Emperor who, according to Patricia Buckley Ebrey, is credited for China's first Cultural Revolution. His portrayal in *Hero* recognizes conflicting narratives – narratives of his accomplishments and narratives of his brutality.⁴³

40 Gary D. Rawnsley and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley, *Global Chinese Cinema: The Culture and Politics of 'Hero'* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2011), 203.

41 Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 155.

42 Rawnsley and Rawnsley, *Global Chinese Cinema: The Culture and Politics of 'Hero'*, 209.

43 Ibid., 14.





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Nationalism in *Hero* serves as a backdrop in the theme of *Tianxia*. The phrase itself appears numerously in the film. It implies a dual-ended logic: one being that violence must be dismissed if peace is to be restored and the other being that unification by force is necessary and should be supported in the name of universal peace. Although contradictory, this logic seems to unite, in *Hero*, the assassins and the King of Qin, who believe peace is the ultimate justification for their actions. Resonating with the Chinese view of world order, the motif of *Tianxia*, found in Chinese traditional cultural texts, implies a particular form of global aspirations. The importance of Chinese culture is displayed in multiple moments throughout the movie. However, the most pronounced instance is the scene in which the headmaster insists that his students practice the art of calligraphy when the school is under attack: "Their arrows might destroy our town and topple our kingdom, but they can never obliterate our culture." By referring to the cultivation of the ancient art of calligraphy, the headmaster's comment becomes a powerful signal of Chinese cultural nationalism that testifies to a strong sense of national identity and a more pronounced global posture of modern-day China.

Several years later, in 2016, Zhang Yimou directed a movie quite different from *Hero: The Great Wall*. Although the movie's box office ratings did not match the success of *Hero*, it is interesting to take it as an example of China's more "global" or "globalizing" posture. The movie itself tells the epic story of a quest for gunpowder during which a group of European mercenaries (Matt Damon plays one of the main protagonists) travels to China and battles alien monsters (Taotie) on the ethnic border created by the Great Wall. While *The Great Wall* has been criticized for putting form over substance, the movie visibly represents a transformation in the Chinese state's attitudes toward its own cultural industries. A collaboration with Western producers, cinematographers and screenwriters, *The Great Wall* does not only utilize American movie stars but also goes one step further in exoticizing and Orientalizing its own culture through the use of colorful uniforms and fantastic costumes.

The use of the Great Wall as the movie's central point of departure – as a civilizational structure and icon symbolizing protectionism and inward-looking politics – may, to some, signify an attempt to breach national barriers and employ a more global posture. Additionally, one can suggest that the use of the legend of Taotie could portray certain reservations with regard to the increasingly global attitudes of modern China. Taotie, as a motif recurring in ancient Chinese mythology, is often characterized as a mythical creature that enjoys drinking and eating. Therefore, it is associated with gluttony, greed, and desire for wealth. In this context, since the entire plot of *The Great Wall* is centered around battling Taotie, one may suggest that it symbolizes national reservations towards the increasing forces of capitalist consumerism, neoliberalism, and marketization, all of which China has been subject to.

However, a Chinese production which is an epitome of a strongly globalized posture with even stronger nationalistic sentiments is Wu Jing's picture *Wolf Warrior II* (2017). The movie, the highest-grossing Chinese film ever released, tells the story of a Chinese soldier, Leng Feng (played by the director himself) who leaves to an African country on a special mission to protect medical aid workers from local rebels and vicious arms dealers. At first, the movie can strike as a hyper-inflated copy of





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a typical American war-hero drama, where a white North American intervenes in a typically Middle Eastern country to bring peace and save the locals in the classical display of the proverbial “white man’s burden.” In the case of *Wolf Warrior II*, Chinese protagonists resemble the so-called “American war heroes” whose presence on the African continent is portrayed as supposedly mighty.

In fact, multiple scenes that involve announcements made by the soldiers or the locals along the lines of “it’s okay, it’s the Chinese,” confirm that the Chinese are being portrayed as saviors. Some spectators might find these images rather surprising or intriguing, as would the entire plot, which projects an image of cutting-edge medical advancements made by a person named Dr. Chen; whose creations carry the promise of eradicating a deadly African virus that eerily resembles Ebola. *Wolf Warrior II* offers many representations, which many may find equally troubling. The uniformed representations of Africa (the country in which the plot takes place remains unnamed) as a site rife with incurable diseases, intolerable gang violence, civil war, and hungry savages is, for instance, highly problematic. However, what some might find even more shocking or horrifying is the frequent depiction of racial segregation between the Africans and the Chinese, which evokes images of colonial domination and imperial desires.

Yet, *Wolf Warrior II* also offers invaluable representations of the Chinese nationhood and its national power. The depictions of masculinity are countless and range from examples of excessive drinking, skillful fighting, and literal muscle flexing, which all project the power of the protagonist, who can be seen as a representation of Chinese domestic and international state power. In other words, such scenes correspond with a more figurative “muscle flexing,” of which the Chinese state has been accused because of the Chinese BRI, the South China Sea issue, and the vast Chinese territorial footprint. China’s global ambitions are clearly present throughout Wu Jing’s movie, which incorporates elements of *Tianxia* as well as “win-win development” scenarios in the context of the neo-imperial presence of China in Africa. This aligns with Daniel Vukovich’s concept of “Sinological Orientalism.” In Vukovich’s mind, China’s “dysfunctional, neo-colonial relationship” with Western discourse prompted modern-day China, as the “Other,” to reimagine and westernize itself.⁴⁴ Understanding that this complex set of developments achieves “neoliberal sameness” through greater inclusion and incorporation into the global capitalist economy, one can see explicit elements of this theme in *Wolf Warrior II*. This is particularly apparent in the context of the play on the theme of an “American war hero” movie and in certain representations of non-Western cultures that many Western movies and cultural practices have been employing quite frequently. By embracing the aesthetics of typified Western movie genres to project Chinese culture, the movie’s aesthetics appear to speak of China’s political transition toward a more globalized state.

44 Daniel Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the PRC*, vol. 5 (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2013), 2.



Conclusion

This essay briefly outlined the landscape of the Chinese film industry of the last century by concentrating on the transformations in institutional conditions of cultural production and circulation during the era. In doing so, it reviewed the emergence of the cultural industries side by side with globalizing forces and some of the Chinese state policy, particularly the economic and market-opening reforms. Through the analysis of the themes and aesthetics of three distinct Chinese films, namely *Hero* (2002), *The Great Wall* (2016), and *Wolf Warrior II* (2017), this essay argued for a linear transition to an increasingly global posture and attitude of the modern-day Chinese state. While examining the tensions and inherent contradictions between the national and global in both China's economic opening and in the complex processes of marketization and internationalization of cultural and creative industries, it is necessary to also consider the dichotomy of the political and the cinematic. That is, not focusing simply on how the former is capable of prompting the latter, but also on how the latter is capable of representing and signaling the former. Undoubtedly, Wu's highly successful production, *Wolf Warrior II*, testifies to a strong posture of the Chinese state globally, inclusive of its ambitious foreign policy. To a lesser extent, *The Great Wall* also embodies globalist sentiments, while *Hero*, despite its national and global success, has exhibited a less globalized posture overshadowed by critical representations of nationalism and nationhood.





LEAVING WOMEN BEHIND: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS OF HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, AND SOCIAL FACTORS ON THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA'S PERSISTING GENDER INEQUALITY

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From bearing the title of “third-world country” to becoming part of the economically developed Global North in a short period of 40 years, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has achieved significant development in all aspects of society. Yet, nearly 40 years after it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and implemented gender equality laws, realistic progress in gender equality continues to fall behind. This article employs a postcolonial and intersectional feminist framework to examine the roles of historical, political, and social factors on the persistence of gender inequality. It examines the connection between Japanese colonial legacies of legally sanctioned gender inequality, the Cold War’s empty gender politics, the ROK government’s lack of commitment to women’s rights, and lastly, the socialization agents reinforcing gender normative roles and silencing women who resist. The author highlights the importance of the government’s effective implementation of gender parity legislation to overcome the discrepancy created between de jure and de facto due to historical and political factors, which are perpetuated by socialization agents.

Keywords: *feminist praxis, colonial legacy, US constitutionalism, Republic of Korea, socialization agents, gender equality, intersectionality, gender politics*

Introduction

According to the United Nation’s Human Development Index (HDI), which takes into account the health, education, and economic power of a country, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has achieved tremendous growth in all criteria. In a short period of 40 years, the ROK came from bearing the title of “third-world country” to becoming part





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of an economically developed Global North. In 1990, the ROK held an HDI value of 0.7 out of 1.0, ranking around 100th worldwide. Today, with an HDI value of 0.906, it ranks 22nd.¹ However, despite overall national growth, one element continues to fall behind. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF)'s "Global Gender Gap Report," the ROK ranked 108th out of 153 countries in the overall gender inequality ranking, 127th in economic gender inequality, 101th in educational gender inequality, and 79th in political gender inequality.² Although the ROK's overall HDI indicated progress, gender-equality rankings are showing retrogression, dropping 13 ranks since 2006.

While international indices provide a comprehensive look at Korean society, they also represent standardized calculations with somewhat limited cross-cultural contextualization and sensitivity. However, a national study conducted by the Korean Institute of Criminology (KIC) on persisting gender-based violence (GBV) presented an even graver depth of gender discrimination. According to KIC's survey (2017) of 2,000 Korean men, 79 percent of participants reported having physically or psychologically abused a girlfriend. Of that 79 percent, 71 percent said they had controlled their girlfriends' behaviors and activities by excessively checking-in, prohibiting certain clothing, and restricting their interactions with friends or family members.³ Because violence against women, understood here as "the manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women," enforces women's subordinate position in personal relationships and society as a whole,⁴ it is imperative not to merely question why an individual may be abusing or discriminating against women, but to question what systemic factors allow for such behavior to prevail.

Evidently, the issues that relate to development and the lived praxis of feminism in Korea are deeply institutionalized and socialized, and, therefore, cannot be explained within a singular discipline. Rooted in intersectional postcolonial theory, this paper will tackle such issues using a multidisciplinary analysis of three major factors. Firstly, the historical factors of Japanese colonialism and American occupation will be considered to examine how gender-related laws and an equality-based constitution have been used as political tools of control and alignment. Secondly, factors relating to the politicization of gender equality agendas, as well as the Korean government's lack of implementational commitment will be assessed to argue that meaningful and substantial effort in institutionalizing gender equality is

1 "Human Development Reports," UNDP, 2020. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/KOR>.

2 "Global Gender Gap Report 2020," World Economic Forum, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>.

3 Nicola Smith, "Almost 80% of South Korean Men Have Abused Girlfriend, Study Claims," *The Telegraph*, August 24, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/24/almost-80-south-korean-men-have-abused-girlfriend-study-claims/amp/>.

4 "Republic of Korea: Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women for the adoption of the List of Issues." CEDAW, 2017.



needed to translate laws into practice. Lastly, the social factor of peers as socialization agents will be examined to understand why the Korean public often perceives feminist movements as “extreme,” which further ostracizes feminist practice. Using a postcolonial and intersectional framework, the paper comprehensively considers the elements that have legitimized gender inequality and the structures that allowed for it to persist. By understanding such contributing limitations in actualizing gender equality, the need for the government’s effective and committed implementation of gender parity legislation will be emphasized.

Literature Review

When considering gender inequality in Korea, many existing works focus on either the progressive legal reforms of the patriarchal legislation throughout history, or the current feminist movements against gender-based violence and discrimination.⁵ Scholars also debate the effectiveness of gender equality-based legislation. In 2020, the WEF’s annual report attributed to Korea one of the lowest positions in terms of gender equality, while CEDAW’s periodic report congratulated the government for its effort to implement the clauses.⁶ The government-based publications emphasized the efforts to implement legislation and pointed to the logistical difficulties that constrain immediate enforcement.⁷

In the past decades, with the changes of leadership in the Korean government, the discourse on women’s position in society shifted from pro-patriarchy and family values to pro-choice and women’s political participation.⁸ While there are minor fluctuations in culture and politics in Korea that affect the gender agenda, the overarching problem of gender inequality is best explained by systemic factors, such as the country’s colonial legacy, political will, and socialization agents. My analysis draws on the existing work of Jung Kyungja, *Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Women’s Movement against Sexual Violence*, as well as on a multitude of international institution’s publications. Jung interviewed local women’s rights activists to gain an insider perspective into feminist praxis and considers the emergence and achievements of the movement from a chronological perspective.⁹ Her work demonstrates how, because of governmental inaction, women had to take it upon themselves to call for action. Drawing on Jung’s work will allow this paper to holistically evaluate criticisms towards the feminist movement in South Korea.

5 Kyungja Jung, “Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Women’s Movement against Sexual Violence,” *GARLAND Science*, 2017.

6 Hyun-Back Chung, “Consideration of Report Submitted by State Parties under Article 18 of the Convention: Eighth periodic report of State Parties”, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, 2015

7 Ibid.

8 Archie Resos, “The Empowerment of Women in South Korea”, *Journal of International Affairs* (2014).

9 Jung, “Practicing Feminism.”



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This paper will intervene in the existing debate by answering how historical, political, and social factors, when taken together, help us understand not only today's discrepancy between policy and practice of feminism, but also the delegitimization of feminist movements in South Korea.

Historical Factors

The Japanese Colonial Legacy of Legally Sanctioned Gender Inequality

Korea's history of socio-political struggle and transformation traces back approximately 4,000 years. From a relatively historically gender-equal society, the 17th century adoption of Confucianism shifted the politics of gender, as it positioned people according to dichotomous and innate hierarchies. When the Japanese colonized Korea in 1910, they considered such a gendered hierarchy to be an "authentic culture" worthy of being preserved. Thus, they used the colonial Civil Ordinance codes that "followed the Korean customs" to solidify systems of oppression.¹⁰ This legal sanctioning of gender inequality included the patriarchal Family Headship Law, which allowed only for the male adult family member to establish his own family as the representative, and the "Wise Mother and a Good Wife" ideology; the official teaching of normative femininity where womanhood was defined by domestic realms and maternal roles.¹¹ While different legal theories debate the impact of the codification of the gender inequality agenda, the interplay between customs and power is clear. As customary law theory and Japanese colonial legislators would argue, these laws were developed from authentic Korean customs. Thus, for the colonized population, the patriarchal laws may have become a part of the national identity as it appeared significant to Confucian history. On the other hand, positive law theory shows the role of political power. For the colonial legislators, the creation of systemic oppression through group-based hierarchies (which in this case was gendered) may have allowed for the effective maintenance of power structures.¹² Altogether, the codification of patriarchal laws allowed and justified discrimination against women on both the personal and national level.

The American Constitutionalism and Building Gender Equality on a Shaky Foundation

After the Japanese colonial era ended, Korea, like any other nation with generational traumas of colonial legacy, needed time to decolonize and heal. Unfortunately, the

10 Hyunnah Yang, "A Journal of Family Law Reform in Korea: Tradition, Equality, and Social Change," *Journal of Korean Law* 8, no. 1 (2008): 77-94.

11 Ibid.

12 Jim Sidanius, T.J. Sa-Kiera, George Davis Hudson, and Robin Bergh. "A Social Dominance and Intersectionalist Perspective." *The Oxford Handbook of Behavioral Political Science* (2018).





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transitional period for Korea was rapid and muddled. Instead of being granted the time to process and decolonize from experiences of oppression and legally sanctioned gender inequality, the divided Korean peninsula endured three years of proxy civil war between the Cold War powers. This left a huge impact on the ROK government's commitment to gender equality, as the constitutional, international, and legal commitments to it were built on dubious foundations.

During the Cold War, the divided Koreas had to make their decisions in a bipolar world order led by the US and the Soviet rivalry for hegemonic power. Accordingly, the democratic South declared its ideological solidarity to the West, while the communist North aligned itself with China and the Soviets. Naturally, the promulgation of the Constitution of South Korea in 1948 was heavily influenced by the Cold War rhetoric and the US Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK)'s presence in the region.¹³ Consequently, the newly adopted constitution carried strong overtones of American laws and democratic values.¹⁴ As Ahn states in *The Influence of American Constitutionalism in Korea*, one of the USAMGIK's explicit goals was to "de-Japanize" the Korean legal system by replacing colonial influences with American laws. This included addressing the codified laws of legalized gender inequality. The US occupation pushed for women's suffrage in South Korea and eventually led to equal civil and political rights as promised under the imported constitution.¹⁵

Yet, the US was promoting democracy and gender equality while also supporting Rhee Syngman's presidency, which was known for its repressiveness and political corruption. While the political actions taken may have been influenced by the red scare, the Rhee regime employed the National Security Law to restrict political activity and press freedom. Therefore, in the era of US constitutionalism and USAMGIK occupation, constitutional equality became a political tool of ideological alignment, rather than a sincere commitment. Furthermore, the import of foreign ideology constituted a challenge to "post-colonial" discourse as it disregarded new forms of resistance arising from foreign exploitation and assumed that colonialism had ended.¹⁶ In a sense, Korean women were "spoken for" for political gains, and their chance to contextualize their needs was taken away.¹⁷ The gender equality agenda following Japanese colonialism was built around Cold War power relations more so than gender equality itself. As it was built on shaky foundations that did not need to be substantiated, the ROK government continued to fail to make future

13 Jiyoung Suh. "The 'New Woman' and the Topography of Modernity in Colonial Korea." *Korean Studies* 37 (2013): 11-43.

14 Kyong Whan Ahn. "The Influence of American Constitutionalism on South Korea," *Southern Illinois University Law Journal* 22 (1997): 71-116.

15 Ibid.

16 Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2002), 1-18.

17 Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* (1991-1992): 5-32.



implementational commitments.

Political Factors

The ROK Government's Use of Gender Equality for Political Alignment

Similarly, the ROK government's ratification of CEDAW in 1984 as well as legal reforms to ensure gender equality have been part of a process of decolonization and alignment with the Global North. According to Frances Raday, a member of the UN Human Rights Council Working Group on Discrimination against Women, "CEDAW's tools for addressing cultural, social, and economic intersectional differences between women are offshoots of the core right to equality." Yet, this conceptual clarity has not been met in the state parties' implementation.¹⁸ In other words, while CEDAW functions to provide theoretical and normative tools for nations to overcome their gendered discrimination, there exists a gap between *de jure* and *de facto* in application.

Article 28 of CEDAW is a reservation clause, which allows for "a state to ratify an international treaty without obligating itself to provisions it does not wish to undertake."¹⁹ The nature of the international convention allowed for the ROK government to express solidarity with the international community on women's human rights without committing to the decisions included in the convention. When the ROK ratified CEDAW in 1984, they entered reservations to Article 9 and Article 16(1)(c), (d), (f), and (g) without explanation.²⁰ Article 9 states that "State Parties shall grant women equal rights with men to acquire, change or retain their nationality" and to "grant women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children. Article 16 states that "State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations," including (c) "the same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution," (d) "the same rights and responsibilities as parents, irrespective of their marital status, in matters relating to their children," (f) "the same rights and responsibilities with regard to guardianship, wardship, trusteeship and adoption of children," and (g) "the same personal rights as husbands and wife, including the right to choose a family name, a profession and an occupation."²¹ While the other

18 Frances Raday, "Gender and democratic citizenship: the impact of CEDAW," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* (2012): 512-530.

19 Jennifer Riddle, "Making CEDAW Universal: A Critique of CEDAW's Reservation Regime under Article 28 and the Effectiveness of the Reporting Process," *The George Washington International Law Review* (2002).

20 Marsha Freeman, "Reservations to CEDAW: An Analysis for UNICEF," *UNICEF*, 2009.

21 "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women," *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, December 1979, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>.



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reservations were withdrawn in the 1990s, ROK's reservation to Article 16(1)(g) remains today. In fact, the State Party's Sixth Periodic Report to CEDAW in 2008 stated that the ROK shows no intention to withdraw from its existing reservations, and noted that such persisting patriarchal attitudes and normative gender roles are reflected in women's career opportunities, limited participation in public life, and continuing gender-based violence.²² This suggests that despite the ratification of CEDAW, the Korean government continues to hold on to the patriarchal structures that allow for gender inequality to persist.

On a national level, while there are still limitations to implementation, the ROK government undertook numerous legal reforms to reverse the discriminatory gender laws with an equality-based constitution and an international commitment to gender equality. Some notable reforms include The Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1987 and the Decriminalization of Abortion in 2019. There were also a series of Family Law Reforms that took place in 1990 and between 2005-2008. The Family Law Reforms are comprehensive reforms of the Confucian Patriarchal structures, including family structures and property rights.²³ These series of reforms focused on redefining "family", the abolition of the ban on women's remarriage period, separate property systems, and permitting marriage between parties with same surnames. Most importantly, the Head of the Family system, which positioned men as the head of the family and the rest as "members", was abolished in 2005.²⁴ However, despite legal efforts, progress is stagnating: the "Global Gender Gap Report" shows a 13-rank drop since 2006. Although laws, as a socialization agent, align people's behaviors with national written expectations, the failure to actualize gender equality suggests that there may be larger systematic factors that allow gender inequality to prevail.

The Lack of Commitment and Implementation

While the lack of political commitment to gender equality was exemplified by Korean presidents throughout the 20th century, contemporary politicians have publicized their commitments and efforts. However, the ways in which gender-equality laws are being enforced show otherwise: gender equality laws have ineffective or no monitoring mechanisms, and there is a lack of private sector intervention. Effective implementation mechanisms are key to turning women's rights from a principle into a reality; and if the gender equality framework does not contain meaningful implementation or enforcement mechanisms, it will once again be a façade only

22 "Consideration of State Party Reports, Sixth Periodic Report of the Republic of Korea," CEDAW, March 2007, <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N07/262/87/PDF/N0726287.pdf?OpenElement>

23 Whasook Lee, "Transformation of Korean Family Law," *International Survey of Family Law* (2008): 237-252.

24 Ibid.





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useful in upholding the perceived progressive status of the country.²⁵

In the ROK, gender equality and family fall under The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF). This categorization not only reinforces the gender normativity around familyhood, but also raises the concern that gender equality might be overlooked in order to uphold family structures and values.²⁶ Furthermore, according to the Ministry, “gender” exclusively refers to heterosexual and cis, a biological dichotomy-based binary use which disregards the LGBTQ+’s legal rights and protection. This problematic definition fails to embrace the equality clause of both the Constitution and CEDAW. Hence, by hiding behind gender equality, the very ministry in charge of women’s human rights is implicitly perpetuating heteronormativity, gender norms, and patriarchal family values.

Furthermore, MOGEF has one of the lowest budgets among the Ministries, accounting for only 0.18 percent of the entire government budget. Only 43.3 percent of its funds are used for main projects and programs, while 56.7 percent are dedicated to labor and “logistics.” Of the 43.3 percent, only 9.2 percent are devoted to “gender equality and women’s economic participation,” while the rest is used for children and family, national development, or comprehensive development.²⁷ This means that only 0.00016 percent of the entire government budget contributes to gender equality efforts. Budgeting is the most evident way of prioritizing government agendas. That the Ministry of Gender Equality is not only grouped together with Family but also receives one of the lowest budgets testifies to the government’s lack of sincere commitment to the effective realization of gender equality laws.

Monitoring, reporting, and implementation difficulties are natural consequences of the lack of budget available to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. Gender Equality Policy encompasses six major projects and 22 implementation strategies, including cultural, economic, representational, social, safety, and implementation.²⁸ Yet, none of the implementation strategies involve direct intervention in private sectors, nor does it include any reporting and monitoring mechanisms. The Gender Equality Framework Acts forces all sectors to provide mandatory training on the prevention of sexual harassment and violence towards women. However, as there is no monitoring and evaluation mechanism, the participation of senior managerial officials was low and most training sessions

25 “In Larger Freedom: Toward Development, Security, And Human Rights for All.” *General Assembly Report of the Secretary-General A/59*, United Nations, 2005.

26 Chung, “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,” 2015.

27 Sojung Huh, “Status of Budget.” Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, “Department for Planning and Finance, 2019.

28 “Gender Equality Policy,” Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2015. http://www.mogef.go.kr/eng/pc/eng_pc_f001.do.





were done in collective settings through handout materials.²⁹ Since most workplace sexual harassment is characterized by the abuse of hierarchical power structures, the lack of senior officials' participation makes training ineffective and reinforces the idea that their status exempts them from such accountability.³⁰ Furthermore, even in school systems, the training and awareness-raising policies listed in CEDAW and national laws are not integrated into curricula. After more than three decades of CEDAW, an "in-process" status should no longer justify the lack of government effort to structurally translate gender-equality policies into common lived praxis.

The lack of governmental efforts to implement and monitor gender equality practices indicates that the goals of progressive reforms and the ratification of CEDAW were not to reach gender equality itself, but rather to "modernize" Korean society and align the country with other Global North nations. The lack of awareness, integration, and implementation encourages societal compliance and allows for discrimination and GBV to prevail. Unless rights are effectively translated into realities through efficient implementation and enforcement efforts, the laws will remain tools of political leverage, and systematic gender inequality will persist.

Social Factors

"Peers" as Socialization Agents that Silences Women Who Resist

Living a Feminist Life considers feminism as experiential, subjective, and intersectional.³¹ In other words, the author argues that women who are discriminated against and hold "theory in flesh" must speak for themselves to effectively change the status quo in gender inequality.³² If women are silenced, there is no way to theorize or realize gender equality in society. Korean women did not remain silent despite governmental inaction or media reinforcement of gender inequality. Their efforts contributed to numerous legal reforms. However, "peers," as socialization agents, largely othered the feminist movement in Korea, which harmed the gender equality agenda both politically and socially. "Peers" here should be understood as people within proximity to an individual, who provide direct negative or positive feedback to actions taken. To study the silencing of women through the socialization agents of "peers" and understand how the societal rhetoric around feminism was established,

29 Korean Women's Association United, "Republic of Korea: Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) for the Adoption of the List of Issues," *CEDAW*, 2017, 1-8.

30 Steven H. Lopez, Randy Hodson, and Vincent J. Roscigno, "Power, Status, and Abuse at Work: General and Sexual Harassment Compared," *The Sociological Quarterly* 50 (2009): 3-27.

31 Sara Ahmed, "Bringing Feminist Theory Home," in *Living A Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke UP, 2017).

32 Cherrie Moraga, "Theory in the Flesh" in *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2015), 23.



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the comment sections of the top eight South Korean newspapers were analyzed.

Analyzing the comment sections of articles related to large feminist protests that held place from August 2018 to March 2019 in South Korea showed how people silenced women who spoke out by framing them as “irrational,” “angry,” “unfair,” “men-haters,” and “extreme.” There were also frequent patterns of victim-blaming and references to “reverse sexism.” In studying news articles on the protests that received the most attention from the eighth major newspapers – whether those were conservative, central, liberal, government-produced, or independent – there were only two comments that stood in solidarity with the women who took part in the demonstrations.

One striking and common characteristic in the comment sections was the generalized association of feminist movements with “Megal.” *Megalian* was a website shut down by the government in 2017 because of its misandry and crime towards men. *Megalian* contained homophobia, criticism of conscription and soldiers, child molestation, and the spread of illegal videos. It is considered to be a dark chapter in the history of “bad feminism” in South Korea.³³ “Peers” logic, however, is that all feminism equates to *Megalia*. Through that association, they are depicting anyone who speaks out for women’s rights as extreme and misandric. According to Kimberly Norwood, the particularized stereotype of women as angry often “deflect[s] attention from the aggressor and project[s] blame onto the target.”³⁴ While *Aggressive Encounters and White Fragility* focuses on the intersectional experience of Black women, it successfully argues that the worst negative stereotypes, including “disagreeable, overly aggressive, and physically threatening,” shift the attention from underlying injustices to deflecting the blame on women. The process of “othering” women who resist by associating them with the most extreme stereotypes dismisses and ostracizes the overarching feminist movement, and consequently promotes existing patriarchal social behaviors.

Another common trait was justifying GBV through victim-blaming. Feminist protests were also a reaction to Spy Cam and drugging incidents that happened at Burning Sun, a major nightclub run by a Korean celebrity. In these incidents, some female women were intoxicated. Peers commented: “If there are 10 bad men, there are 100 women who fall for him. They know that nightclubs are filled with them, but still insist on going. And when they become ‘victims’, they don’t blame themselves.”³⁵ Another wrote: “The protestors are all feminist pigs. Do they think all women get filmed? All the women who are worthy of being filmed are on a date because

33 Sooyeon Lim, “‘Megalia, Warmad’ Comments, Clearly Slander,” *Media Today*, July 28, 2018. <http://www.mediatoday.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=143783>.

34 Trina Jones and Kimberly Jade Norwood, “Aggressive Encounters and White Fragility: Deconstructing the Trope of Angry Black Woman,” *Iowa Law Review* 102 (2017): 2017-2069.

35 JTBC, “Gender Discriminatory Spy Cam Investigation: The 4th Protest at Gwanghwamoon Gathers 10,000 Women.” *JTBC News*. Aug 4. 2018.



it's a Sunday. It's not you, don't worry."³⁶ These types of narrations contradicted themselves by shaming women who were victims of GBV, while arguing that no man would desire feminists. They are depicting feminists as sexually undesirable, aggressive, unwanted, and deserving of the violations. This rhetoric also contributes to "othering" and silencing women who speak out by shaming and invalidating their claims.

While understanding that real-life "peers" may be different in their expression of thoughts towards feminism and that online discourse may be more exaggerated, these types of framing of feminist movements leave detrimental impacts on feminist praxis. Describing all feminist movements as man-hating "Megals", victim-blaming, and depicting the women who speak out against societal injustice as "crazy" and undesirable polarizes the conversation. This may lead to women siding with normalized sexism to feel accepted in workplaces where men hold positions of power, and within friendships so as not to be ostracized. This leads to the isolation and silencing of feminist movements as a whole. The most important aspect of feminist praxis, the experiential, is removed from legal and social conversations through the silencing of women. This, together with the lack of the government's effort to implement the laws more effectively and the media's reinforcing of gender stereotypes and promotion of toxic masculinity, essentially disempowers the realization of feminism in Korean society.

Conclusion

The quick switch from the codification of gender equality during Japanese colonialism to the import of equality-based constitutional principles during the American occupation shows how gender-equality has been used as a political tool of control or alignment. While the discrepancy between *de jure* and *de facto* may have begun here, the current Korean government's lack of implementational commitment and the socialization agents that promote conformity allow for the persistence of discrepancy within gender inequality. The failures of the gender equality agenda in the rapidly developed ROK persists due to these elements that create a society where gender inequality can prevail without consequences, and perhaps, even be rewarded. Thus, the ROK government must bridge the gap between legal and constitutional promise of gender equality and praxis by effectively implementing monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Further, both the laws and peers' roles as socialization agents in perpetuating and reinforcing gender normativity and patriarchy must be examined. Lastly, the experiential theory of women's experiences needs to be heard, rather than silenced. By understanding the historical, political, and social causes behind unachieved women's human rights, future study in how to effectively change the dialogue around gender equality and how to successfully implement the legal promises is required to finally fulfill the long-overdue promises of an equality-based

36 Sangji Hong, "The Era of New Feminism: Why Did 60,000 Women Shout "Jai-Ting" At Hyehwa Station?" *Jung Ang News*, July 8, 2018.





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constitution, women's rights laws, and feminist praxis in the ROK.





BLURRING DISTANCE AND DIGITAL LINES: THE ROLES OF REAL PERSON FANFICTION IN PARTICIPATIVE K-POP FANDOMS

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The growth of the online community as a space for various types of content creators has ultimately led to an influx of fanfiction — written works published by fans for fans — which is, in part, composed of real person fanfiction (RPF). While RPF has always maintained some sort of following throughout the years, especially with regards to musical acts such as One Direction, arguably one of the largest contributors to its growth in the last decade is the K-Pop community. Based on the statistics on the currently leading repository for multi-fandom and multi-genre fanfiction, Archive of Our Own (commonly known as AO3), ‘K-Pop’ as a whole is the leading category under Music and Bands, with a total of almost 360,000 works to date, rivaling the entire ‘Real Person Fiction’ section with less than 350,000 works. However, while scholarly research on fanfiction has also accumulated and diversified over time, the topic of RPF still presents gaps when surveying current literature — K-Pop RPF, for how much it has contributed to the growth of digitally published fanfiction as a whole, still has facets and aspects yet to be explored. Thus, the goal of this paper is to examine and analyze the role of RPF in participative K-Pop fandom culture. It draws information and insight from a survey that collected opinions and answers from over 500 respondents that identify themselves as an active part of the K-Pop community that has had experience in consuming, if not creating, K-Pop RPF. In doing so, this work presents the argument that fanfiction in K-Pop does not only fulfill fantasy and bridge gaps in one’s experience in the fandom but is also an avenue towards identity building as well as further participation with and influence on an idol, their company, or even the collective fandom in itself.

Introduction

Fanfiction in and of itself is no new phenomenon; as a general literary practice, it has been in existence as early as the 20th Century, when a distinction between a character’s original author and another author who had used the same character in





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a different work or context needed to be made.¹ Over time, the concept of fanfiction needed constant revision and delineation to set itself apart from original fiction, and much has needed to be established, adjusted, and reconsidered to give way to the constant transformation that it has gone through. Now, with the digital space (which acts as the main medium for modern day fanwork) larger than ever, the practice of creating and consuming fanfiction in general becomes more evident and widespread. Fanfiction, at its core, is derivative; it is created as a kind of juxtaposition that both (a) strikes a delicate balance between its source work and the ideas that make it “unique” or transform it and, at the same time, (b) blurs the line that is meant to visibly separate what is “original” by the first author and what is “original” by the fanfiction writer in order to make sure that the elements the latter adds or changes can still exist in harmony with the basis of the initial text. The complexity of the issue and the arbitrariness of what is acceptable and what is not in fanfiction has led to multiple issues that are no closer to creating a unanimous perspective on the craft.

The lines become blurrier and the boundaries and ethics of the craft become much more difficult to dissect when considering works that take inspiration from or build foundation off of reality. Real person fanfiction (RPF) brings up unique points of what is acceptable and what should be condemned not in terms of a work’s premise but a person’s identity. It consistently and ceaselessly begs questions about the extent to which a real person without a fictional identity can be manipulated within a work of fiction and the manner in which one can derive from their personal, real-life context, if at all. For the most part, RPF has been limited to certain niche fandoms with a particularly strong following — this much will be seen later in the discussion — but RPF has since become a larger phenomenon following the rise of K-Pop and the strength of K-Pop fans as a community of proactive and participative consumers that not only seek to mitigate gaps or counter truths but also aim, in some ways, to influence reality to a certain degree. The agency of K-Pop fans within their fandom and with regards to communication with the idols and their companies is unprecedented, and this much is true in how they participate — fanfiction creation and consumption included.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and analyze the diversity of RPF in the K-Pop fandom. In doing so, it argues that fanfiction in K-Pop does not only fulfill fantasy and bridge gaps in one’s experience in the fandom but is also an avenue towards identity building as well as further participation with and influence on an idol, their company, or even the collective fandom in itself.

Literature Review

By its transformative nature, fanfiction is considered a hypertext. Any work that falls under this category is the later “text B” that calls back to the earlier hypotext

¹ Bailey Gribben, “Fanfiction: A Legal Battle of Creativity,” *Reporter*, Feb 5, 2016, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://reporter.rit.edu/views/fanfiction-legal-battle-creativity>.





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"text A" in a manner that is not just commentary but, in many ways, transformative.² Fanfiction is also highly archontic, which means that it is literature that refers to and builds on already existing literature as reference.³ In other words, fanfiction cannot just be derivative of a work or a body of work; it must also be expansive and offer new information, integrate new elements, and propose itself as something of a supplement (or, to some extreme degree, an alternative) to the original work.⁴ When understanding fanfiction as separate, simply as a type of literature, it is fairly straightforward in its approach and role. It appears to act simply as a means for fans to further explore a fictional work through a specific lens that suits them and to push the limits of their own creativity and understanding of the hypertext/text A. However, fanfiction as both malleable text and a tool for reshaping existing information makes its nature, purpose, and consequent role much more complicated and open to interpretation.

Experts in fan studies have since debated the place and role of fanfiction as a part of the dynamics of society and through a more anthropological lens; this lens is meant to treat fanfiction — as a part of the larger umbrella of fan work — as discourse, education, and negotiation. While it is not the main goal of this paper to elaborate on fanfiction as a resource for learning, much research has delved into the value of online-specific literature to engage English as a Second Language (ESL) students and sharpen their linguistic skills.⁵ Some studies would actually see it as a form of resistance; the first wave of fanfiction studies theory was almost always linked to a heavily Marxist perspective,⁶ where the art of writing was seen as a means to overcome oppression. In this case, the fans are the literary proletariat that struggles to find a space of empowerment against corporations that claim ownership to characters and their contexts.⁷ In this kind of perspective, we see fans as those that fight for agency, employing fanfiction as a tool or a weapon of revolution specifically created for carving out a more even playing field rather than transformation for artistic transformation's sake. To a less aggressive degree, fanfiction was one of the main tools that fans of musical TV series *Glee* used to express their dissatisfaction:

2 Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5.

3 Abigail Derecho, "Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 2006), 61.

4 Sara K. Day, "Pure Passion: The Twilight Saga, "Abstinence Porn," and Adolescent Women's Fan Fiction," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 39, no. 1, (2019): 29.

5 Amy C. Hutchinson, Lindsay Woodward, and Jamie Colwell, "What Are Preadolescent Readers Doing Online? An Examination of Upper Elementary Students' Reading, Writing, and Communication in Digital Spaces," *Reading Research Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2016).

6 Bronwen Thomas, "What Is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things about It?," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 3 (2011): 3.

7 Ibid.





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"In the case of Glee, some works of fan fiction take care to explicitly call out Glee's inadequacies, especially as a moral or progressive text, and/or to punish characters for their homophobic bullying, or to educate and rehabilitate characters whose ignorance remains intact in *Glee*."⁸ However, this perception of fanfiction as a tool for battle or, at the very least, for rectification, suggests that all transformative works are inherently oppressed by the original text. While this may be true in some cases, it is not for all. With the exponential growth fanfiction has undergone, it has not only been able to thrive in harmony with the original text but has expanded to become a diverse genre (and not just a subgenre) of its own.

More recent and developed studies on fan culture and fanfiction paint such derivative works as no longer just a secondary creation but an essential part of pop culture engagement. Fans are no longer slaves to the grind that have to kowtow to franchise and corporation will nor are they using their works as retaliatory or resistant. Rather, they write fanfiction to broaden their own interaction not just with the text but also with the fandom itself. Thomas points out that the act of writing becomes more personal, intimate, and reflective in this case:

... [It] is distinguished by a greater self-reflexivity about the theorist's own motives and positions and by a shift in emphasis toward exploring the contributions of fans to contemporary culture. Theorists reflect in a much more personal way about their own engagement with fandoms and with fan texts, and instead of fans being seen as isolated or marginal, their activities are treated as a fundamental aspect of everyday life.⁹

The takeaway from this perspective is that fanfiction is (a) in-depth textual engagement, (b) fandom participation and contribution, and (c) self-reflection all in one. In looking at it as something with multiple purposes it can also be seen as something with multiple effects and different kinds of significance. Fanfiction becomes empowerment in a different way; rather than fighting against those who have the upper hand in a more traditional sense (that is, one of power), it is a way to introduce and explore things like queer discourse and feminism which may not be tackled adequately — or in some cases, at all — in the context of the original text.¹⁰ Stark, somewhat extreme examples of this would be the characterization of the Babadook (the demonic antagonist in the horror movie of the same name) as an "LGBTQ+ icon by Tumblr and other fanfiction websites" as well as the romanticization

8 Louisa Stein, "Dissatisfaction and Glee: On Emotional Range in Fandom and Feels Culture," in *Anti Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*, ed. Melissa A. Click, (NY: NYU Press, 2019), 90.

9 Thomas, "What is Fanfiction," 4.

10 Diana Koehm, "Revision as Resistance: Fanfiction as an Empowering Community for Female and Queer Fans," *Honors Scholar Theses*, 604, (2018).





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of the antagonist of Stephen King's *It*, Pennywise.¹¹ Though odd as an approach and as parodic as it may seem, the widespread acceptance of such traits attributed to these antagonists in either an attempt to humanize them or, to some degree, even create space for personal relatability or representation in texts that do not offer such space to its fans is indicative of the diversity of fanfiction's role in the fandom.

In the context of a different fandom, we can look at the television series *Supernatural*, which has an immensely large following. Despite having a highly complex and diverse plotline, *Supernatural* is still subject to fan remixes that are often built on canon divergence — that is, an intentional departure from the key points of the source text's original and, thus, 'canonically accepted' plot — and audience-perceived subtext. In fact, it is interesting to note that despite the much longer story *Supernatural* offers, with fifteen seasons under its belt, fans still generate more fan work, most especially fanfiction. In other words, an original text need not be necessarily lacking for it to have supplementary works. Hypertexts multiply in proportion to the growth of the hypotext; there is more to be explored and more desire to explore if there is more original content. Thus, it can be said that fanfiction is not just inevitable but infinite; fans create it not specifically with the *need* to transform the text in mind but the desire to do so, and desire, in this case, grows more rapidly and exists more visibly than necessity. Thomas states that:

Fanfiction thus poses an important challenge to conceptualizations of storyworlds that focus on their universality and familiarity, demonstrating that, in fact, readers' and audiences' relations with those worlds are diverse and sometimes conflicting. These fan-produced narratives also underscore that work focusing on how storyworlds are triggered by textual cues must be supplemented with research addressing the whole question of what readers and audiences do with those worlds—how they inhabit them, transform them, make them their own. ¹²

Finally, if one looks at the case of *Supernatural*, it is clear that fanfiction is also an essential avenue for indirect contact and interaction with those who control the franchise at its core. Granted, the producers and writers of the show are seemingly more aware of the discourse about the show that fanfiction creates, but their knowledge is also interestingly translated into the original text itself. Time and time again, the show's writers insert subliminal (or even explicit, at times) references to fan culture known as "easter eggs" into the actual dialogue or plot, introducing fandom-specific knowledge, jokes, and theories as canon. This is what Reijnders et al. call ascended fanon — "a case where a media producer uses fannish ideas,

11 Sherin John Francis and Kavya Purushothaman, "Fanfiction: A Study as An Uprising Genre in Literature," *UGC Care Journal* 31, no. 30 (May 2020): 30.

12 Thomas, "What is Fanfiction," 7.



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jokes, or other contributions in canonic texts.”¹³ Supernatural injects fanon into the plotline, as a crucial element in an episode, or even just as comedic dialogue. For instance, in one episode, there is a “super-fan” named Becky who had an unhealthy obsession with the story, and it is through her that the main characters find that their entire lives up until that point (that is, the show’s entire history so far) is published as a series of books. While the encounter in itself appears to be only a lighthearted representation of the show’s strong and highly visible fandom, like in how Becky makes them aware of the “Wincest ship,”¹⁴ possibly the most popular romantic pairing in the fandom’s vast body of fanfiction works, it also becomes a springboard for the show’s many turning points, as seen in the fact that the writer of these meta-books is later revealed to be “God,” hiding on earth. The inclusion of the show’s history into the plot itself also allows writers to tackle or expose certain critiques and theories the fans have made.¹⁵ In doing so, Supernatural proves that being a part of a fandom also usually means being highly participative in shaping and negotiating the content and impact of a work, making it polymediated media (in essence, media formed with ideas from different sources); “Supernatural fans have gained a measure of power that will help them feel more included in the general fanbase, communicate better with the creators, and, possibly, force the creators to address critical and difficult problems in the show — all through transformative fan works.”¹⁶ Through this, it becomes clear that fandom and fanfiction now have a level of agency on what they consume and how they can consume it that is given to them through the expansion of the digital space and the fan made content they create through it. The relationship between the fan and the franchise or the “big machine,” then, is no longer simply passive on the former’s end.

Much of the framework of this discussion is taken from theories and analysis of fanfiction of fictional works because the derivative relationship between them is much more clean-cut. However, this link becomes muddled when considering the specific subgenre of RPF, which is considerably less explored in academia and, thus, has more gaps and raised questions. Real person fiction (RPF) is most associated with music acts, and the phenomenon in itself is strange in that music acts do not really have stories that are comprehensively published and can thus be interacted with or analyzed in the traditional sense.¹⁷ However, the roles of RPF in music act-based fanfiction, in some ways, intersect with the aforementioned roles of fanfiction

13 Stijn Reijnders Abby Waysdorf, Koos Zwaan, and Linda Duits, “Fandom and Fanfiction,” *ResearchGate*, March 2017, 6.

14 Art Herbig and Andrew F. Hermann, “Polymediated Narrative: The Case of the *Supernatural* Episode ‘Fan Fiction,’” *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 758.

15 Ibid., 757.

16 Deepa Sivarajan, “Tlon, fandom, and source text: The effect of fan works on the narrative of *Supernatural*,” in *Saving People, Hunting Things*, ed. Catherine Tosenberger, *Transformative Works and Cultures Special Issue*, no. 4, (2010).

17 Ross Hagen, “‘Bandom Ate My Face’: The Collapse of the Fourth Wall in Online Fanfiction,” *Popular Music and Society* 38, no. 1 (2015).





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in fiction fandoms, with some nuances. It is still a means to express dissatisfaction or, at the very least, bridge gaps in what one knows or understands and what one wants. One difference, however, is that there is a much heavier reliance on other fanfiction or, at least, other works created through different mediums (such as fan art and social media content) or ideas by other fans to build such bridges from fiction over to reality. This is what is called “intertextuality to the second degree,” wherein interaction is not just limited between the hypertext and the hypotext as isolated cases but extends between hypertexts themselves.¹⁸ These collectively agreed-upon “headcanons” are trickier and more subject to discourse and, thus, contention. Since there is no actual hypotext that serves as the origin for such ideas, fanfiction writers have to come to some kind of agreement on what is “true” and what “original elements” must be maintained to perpetuate the work as one of fanfiction and not just original fiction.

The concerns regarding RPF magnify and expand the deeper one delves into this subgenre. When looking at fanfiction as hypertext, the question of the original text is underscored. Fans consistently underscore their unanimous understanding and protection of the humanity and subsequent privacy of these celebrities but still see no issue with fictionalizing them. Crude as it may sound, the act of integrating these people into fiction suggests that the “reality” of the person and their “fictionality” as a celebrity are not always mutually exclusive. This much is seen in how fans of popular punk rock/emo bands My Chemical Romance, Panic! At The Disco, and Fall Out Boy would create ship/slash fanfiction of the members despite claiming their loyalty to the bands’ desires for privacy. Hagen points out that “The boundaries between fiction and reality are relevant because RPF is built around the assumption that a celebrity’s public identity is in some sense fabricated,”¹⁹ which means that, in many ways, despite arguing the need to maintain the humanity of these celebrities, fans also simultaneously view their images, personalities, and experiences (to the extent that these things are publicized) as aspects of the overall hypotext that is the human, which challenges and expands the concept’s traditional definition.

However, there are more issues and points for consideration when it comes to viewing a human as text that one can “derive” from. Stardom often seems to justify the liquefaction of lines and boundaries that delineate the celebrity as a fan object, the celebrity as a character, and the celebrity as a real person.²⁰ The ethics of RPF are also often put into inquiry. As fanfiction is meant to be a further exploration of a text, RPF begs the question: if one is exploring the private life of a celebrity, then is it, in some way, a violation of it? The argument continues, and there is no clear answer, but it is evident that RPF is a more sensitive genre to cross over into. This much is seen in the case of One Direction, arguably the most popular boy band of the century to date. Much of the fanfiction that is published about them is slashfic —

18 Milena Popova, “When the RP gets in the way of the F”: Star Image and Intertextuality in Real Person(a) Fiction,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 25, (2017).

19 Hagen, “Bandom Ate My Face,” 48.

20 Popova, “When the RP gets in the way of the F.”





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the romantic pairing of two members, Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson, categorized under the shipping portmanteau “Larry Stylinson.” This pairing continues on as one of the most popular RPF ships to date, even after the group’s disbandment and both Styles’s and Tomlinson’s explicit denial of the truth behind this pairing and their consequent discomfort and distancing from one another.²¹ Fandom not only created but perpetuated this act of shipping, and despite there not being any more interaction between these members, the steadiness of fan content for it only showcases the transgressive nature of fandom power and agency: that it not only has the ability to ignore what is true but to transcend it, even affect reality to some degree.

However, the purpose of this paper is not to argue the ethics of RPF nor to condemn the perspectives or possibilities in its creation. Rather, this literature review is meant to provide a framework for this work’s analysis of the multi-faceted role of fanfiction in the context of K-Pop. Not much seems to have been delved into with regards to this, in large part because K-Pop, in itself, is a relatively newer phenomenon than Western music/Western fan studies and also operates in a different manner. Thus, this literature review is meant to be a springboard for a better understanding of how K-Pop-based RPF is adherent to the same purposes and pitfalls mentioned above as well as how the intricate workings of K-Pop fandoms make its role unique.

Methodology

The researcher conducted a qualitative survey that collected answers on the experiences, thoughts, and knowledge of K-Pop RPF from 578 respondents across the internet, through two major channels: Twitter, where the researcher’s followers are mostly K-Pop fans from various countries that subscribe to the fandom workings of multiple groups, and Tumblr, through the researcher’s writing blog. To generate results as close to true randomness as possible, the survey link was disseminated to an open audience and through word of mouth (reblogging/retweeting).

The ages of the respondents varied between 18-32 on average, and the nationalities were highly diverse. 487 respondents (84%) classified themselves as “beginners” in Korean or not having any literacy or fluency in it at all, which limits this analysis to a collectively international experience (that is, it only takes into account fanfiction writers, readers, and works available in English or any other language that is not Korean, if any). Most fans were those dedicated to boy groups like EXO (48%), BTS (31%), and NCT (50%), although Red Velvet as a girl group was the most mentioned (34%). The experiences of fans in relation to becoming interested in K-Pop is fairly homogenous (67.6% from YouTube surfing, 51.9% from recommendation from other fans, and 28% from accidental exposure), and they have varying lengths of stay in K-Pop fandoms as a whole (30.4% of respondents have been fans of any kind of K-Pop for 4-6 years; 30% for more than 10 years, and 22.7% for 2-3 years). It is clear that, in this amount of time, most if not all respondents

21 Francis and Purushothaman, “Fanfiction,” 28.





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would have been exposed to some kind of fan work, especially fanfiction.

Out of these participants, 67.6% (391 respondents) identify themselves as both fan work creators and consumers while 31.5% are passive fan consumers. The 0.7% of respondents that stated they did not consume nor create fan content were automatically led to a page that thanked them for their response to avoid gathering inaccurate information from them. More than 300 fan creator respondents (61.7%) answered that they had created fanfiction at one point, and 99.1% (569 respondents) of fan consumers say that they have consumed fanfiction at one point in time. The latter part of the survey used a five-point Likert scale ([1] strongly disagree, [2] disagree, [3] neutral, [4] agree, and [5] strongly agree) that posed K-Pop fandom and fanfiction specific statements to gauge each respondent's agreement or disagreement with them. After this, the respondents were encouraged (but not required) to elaborate on some of their answers from the Likert scale, and these results were carefully perused and compiled to create generalizations based on repeated themes that highlight the key perspectives on and roles of RPF in the fanfiction community. The researcher acknowledges that there is always a margin for error in drawing conclusions from highly diverse answers, and while they attempted to maintain a professional objectivity in distilling answers, they acknowledge the possibility of researcher bias (although curtailed to be as minimal as possible) as a limitation to the way in which such generalizations were developed.

Data Analysis

Fanfiction as Space for Negotiation

Possibly the most diverse answers within this survey had to do with idol image — its creation and negotiation within the fandom and, to a larger scale, between the fans and the idols themselves. Fanfiction, to a certain extent, requires the creation and perpetuation of an image that essentially and inevitably flattens their dimensions to re-envision them as a *character* that can fit certain plots or tropes. For instance, according to Haasch, the character of “Min Yoongi” within fanfiction is very often aligned with the typical ‘bad boy’ persona that is a staple in teen fiction.²² Despite this, most fans know him to be “staunch in his opinions but respectful and well-spoken in interviews.”²³ The discrepancy between who he is portrayed as in fanfiction and who he appears to be “in real life” (at least, to the extent of fans’ knowledge) indicates that fans use fanfiction — whether by choice or subconsciously — to re-envision their idols and, thus, re-negotiate their image collectively. In this, fanfiction writers take advantage of the celebrity image as *text* to diversify analysis of them and present an alternative that better suits their needs or expectations.

22 Palmer Haasch, “Community, Soul-Searching and Pleasure: The Significance of Real Person Fanfiction in BTS Fandom,” *Undergraduate Thesis*, University Honors Program, University of Minnesota, 28.

23 Ibid, 29.



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This malleability of image and celebrity persona, though, is subject to much juxtaposition. When presented with the statement “fanfiction is meant to be an extension of the idols’ lives and must be as accurate to their personas as possible,” 46% of respondents strongly disagreed (almost 30% somewhat disagreed). This indicates that many fanfiction readers and writers see the celebrity image as almost entirely flexible — that is, the ownership of the hypotext (in this case, the idol), is almost completely transferred to the fan creator²⁴ and can be reshaped. This calls back to what Hagen says about the celebrity image as fabricated and the fans’ knowledge of this as fiction that is *offered* and sold to them, thus becoming, to some degree, fandom possession. However, a contradiction arises when it comes to responses to the statement “Alternate universe fanfiction strips idols of their identity as real persons”; 41% responded with “strongly disagree” and 27% with “somewhat disagree.” Thus, in the context of completely different settings or timelines, the “core essence,” to most writers and readers, must remain; in other words, despite using them as fictional characters by displacing them from their current reality, fans have a strong awareness of the *truth* of them as real people. Some people who elaborated on their answers mentioned that authors should and do take care to have their characters stay as *accurate* to their real-life counterparts as possible, and this is what distinguishes AU RPF from original fiction.

What this juxtaposition proves is that fandoms are in a constant state of negotiation about idol images and that these negotiations have yet to find the ultimate balance between respecting what is real and expanding what is fictional. While many answered that it is not a priority to maintain real-life accuracy in fanfiction (as the celebrity acts as text), many of the same respondents stated that there is a need to keep these characters informed by the real idol’s personality. Constantly having to navigate the tricky line between what is “real” and what is “mine to transform” becomes more complicated when considering the discussion of privacy. Because of the existence of *sasaeng* fans (a term coined from the Korean word ‘*sasaenghwal*’ meaning ‘private life’ that refers to fans who infringe a celebrity’s private life to the point of physically stalking them), K-Pop fandoms have a stronger sense of protectiveness over their idols’ private lives, which is likely the reason why seeing fanfiction as speculative of their “real persona” seemed wrong to most respondents. However, it is also clear, even just through the massive archiving of K-Pop fanfiction across the internet, that these written fan works are a means for fans to perpetuate internal analysis and deeper negotiation about what these idols might be like in the private sphere and how these assumed personality traits and skills would play out if they were open to the public. Thus, it is clear that fanfiction is essential to the act of participating in fandom negotiation, where one can not only accept or negate prominent perceptions of an idol within the community but also elaborate upon these perspectives in detail to arrive at a more fine-tuned view of the idol image that serves as the fandom hypotext.

24 Gino Canella, “Fan Fiction and the Transformation of Ownership,” presented at the International Communication Association annual conference, 2015.



*Fanfiction as Idol and Concept Blueprinting*

Not only is an idol's image constantly in negotiation between fans through fanfiction, but fan writing also has its effects on idol images even within the companies and for the idols themselves. When asked to respond to the statement "It is evident that fanfiction influences the way idols act," 40% responded with "strongly disagree." This appears to be truer for newer idol groups like NCT as well as girl groups, but many fans of older boy groups (TVXQ, Super Junior, EXO, to a degree) recount instances in which certain actions appear to *at least* be aligned with very popular fanfiction representations of the idols. Many respondents mention Super Junior's queerbaiting, most especially instances that involved member Choi Siwon. Choi is known for his highly Christian approach to homosexuality and is vocal and explicit about his disregard for it; however, his image in fanfiction is often at least secretly homosexual or even overtly so. For many idols, fan service is a surefire way to generate interest or maintain fandom loyalty, and many ideas that these acts of service are borne of come from fanfiction, especially in the realm of shipping (whether platonic or romantic) and even sometimes individual personality.

Catering to what fans want despite it being misaligned with one's personal perception or actual personality not only generates interest in one's work/persona but also indirectly communicates to fans that what they *desire* from the "canon" that they diverge from through fanfiction can also come true (at least, to a certain degree); "As celebrities become more and more involved in sort of curating their lives on Instagram and understand that people telling stories about them is one of the things they're selling...it will become a part of a media strategy,' Jamison says."²⁵ In actively attending to fans' whims and using common fanfiction elements or stereotypes as foundations for their actions, idols can enhance the strong feelings of love and want that is usually the basis for fan loyalty. It is an expansion of the emotional economy that creates something of a two-way relationship between idols and fans.²⁶ While it cannot be ascertained that Choi or any other Super Junior member has read fanfiction for themselves, it is clear that popular ships, portrayals, and especially the tropes of "stage gay"²⁷ in fanfiction are disseminated within the industry and to the people involved in creating and maintaining idols' images — inclusive of the idols themselves. Despite there being discrepancy between private persona and public image, the fact remains that the celebrity image, being performative in nature, is in a constant state of metamorphosis that is highly influenced by fan creations and the discourse that it is based on as well as creates.

25 Tonya Riley, "The Dubious Ethics of Real-Person Fiction," *Dark(Ish) Web*, Jan 13, 2018, accessed June 24, 2020, <https://medium.com/s/darkish-web/the-dubious-ethics-of-real-person-fiction-5cd6bd498c16>

26 Q. Zhang and A.Y.H. Fung, "Fan economy and consumption: Fandom of Korean music bands in China," in *The Korean wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*, eds. Yoon Tae-Jin and Dal Yong-Jin (NY: Lexington Books, 2017).

27 Hagen, "Bandom Ate My Face."



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Furthermore, it is not just in terms of the individual idol that fan works, especially fanfiction, become blueprints; for agencies, fan-driven information and the shared narrative they create for the idols and the groups are springboards for the expansion of popularity or profit. Many respondents to the survey mention the likelihood of companies using fanfiction as key points of market research to gain a better understanding of what fandoms are collectively invested in. The prime example of this is the BTS Universe (what fans call BU), which was specifically shaped by fan theories and consequent fanfiction that exploded in 2015. The *I Need U* and *Run* music videos featured elements of those fan-created theories that not only sparked interest in the fan works but also helped the group itself gain traction not just as performers but as “artistic storytellers.” To a lesser degree, fanfiction — especially in terms of shipping — also sets the tone for merchandise pitches and concepts; a clear example of this is the recent inclusion of “couple photocards” in albums in tandem with single ones. One notable group to have done this is NU’EST, who have admitted to reading fanfiction of themselves; fans noticed an increase in “shipping subtleties” in merchandise as well as member-to-member interaction. These examples illustrate not just the more potent relationship between the machine and the fans but also the heightened level of agency that K-Pop fans have with regards to how what they do can both directly and indirectly influence marketing and performance decisions.²⁸ While the takeaway is not that specific works of fanfiction directly influence idol or company action, it is clear that the popularity of fanfiction and the tropes or concepts it presents is often integrated into K-Pop — perhaps even more so than in any other music industry around the world.

Fanfiction as Fandom Identity, Participation, and Networking

The act of writing is greatly individualistic in its process. However, literature, especially in fanfiction, is formative in many ways, not just in terms of the idol or their image but also in terms of the fandom and the individual fans themselves. In the context of K-Pop, identity and camaraderie seeking are essential to international fans, in large part because they are already geographically disconnected not just from the idols themselves but from the frontline fanbase: the Korean fans. Furthermore, K-Pop, especially outside of Asia, is still a highly niched interest; it does not have the same public acknowledgment as interest in Western music does. As such, fans need not only to connect with their fandom but also find their places in it. SNS set the stage for such interaction to begin,²⁹ but in communities as large as K-Pop ones are and on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr where it is much too difficult to filter

28 Jungbong Choi and Roald Maliangkay, “Introduction: Why fandom matters to the international rise of K-pop,” in *K-Pop: The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry*, eds. Jungbong Choi and Roald Maliangkay, (Oxon: Routledge, 2015).

29 L. Leung, “#Unrequited love in cottage industry? Managing K-pop (transnational) fandom in the social media age,” in *The Korean wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*, eds. Yoon Tae-Jin and Dal Yong-Jin (NY: Lexington Books, 2017).



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users based solely on their proclaimed interest in a group, there has to be a way to create a network that is more specific to one's own preferences and allows them a safe stage on which they can participate. Swan mentions the phenomenon of reaction videos and YouTube, as the receptacle, as one of the means by which fans participate. Through this "user-generated text," fans feel like they are more visible and have created an intimate place on a highly-visited platform where they can be heard and reached out to by other fans.³⁰

Fanfiction, in the same vein, acts as one other hub for fans with more particular interests to gather, and this much is clear from the results of the survey. Almost 50% answered that the "inner circle" of their social media networks was built on similar interests in fanfiction, either partially or completely. Some respondents even admitted that fanfiction has become their primary avenue of interaction with other fans and their most important source of entertainment and contribution in the fandom when idols are not promoting. Leung states that fans are cultural intermediaries, consumers, and creators,³¹ and fanfiction is one of the primary means by which their involvement and participation are elevated. The act of simultaneously adding to the content that the fandom creates and consuming others' works with a similar level of enthusiasm as one would with an idol's releases ostensibly creates a new, more specific sense of unity and belonging with other fans, wherein all participate in perpetuating a core activity within the fandom.

Interestingly, 54% of respondents also said that they have since created some level of distinction between the "fellow fan" and the "fellow writer-reader," which also brings up a different side of community existence—the creation of personally adhered-to hierarchies and the act of distinguishing the "other" from the "self." This is also seen in how fans perceive other consumers of fanfiction; when asked if they believe that fanfiction has affected their image of an idol, 40.5% of respondents strongly disagreed; only 3% agreed. However, when asked if they believe that *others* have been somehow affected by the fiction they read, 65% of respondents agreed to some extent. Many of the answers that elaborated on these responses carried similar if not identical messages that boiled down to "*I personally am unaffected by fanfiction given that I know they are real people, but I am also certain that others are affected.*" Who the "others" are is not clear, but fanfiction also appears to be a trigger that delineates "music-focused fans" that only read for entertainment from the supposed, much larger fans that take it too far — who the former would brand as "delulu," a colloquial collective term for those who are unable to separate fanfiction from reality. Lamerichs talks about how even in the context of a shared and agreed-upon narrative, hierarchies can be created: "Media fans have a shared lingua franca and social protocols. However, they also have hierarchies that result in part from

30 A.L. Swan, "Transnational identities and feeling in fandom: Place and embodiment in K-pop fan reaction videos", *Communication, Culture and Critique* 11, no. 4(2018): 548-565.

31 Leung, "Unrequited Love."



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their interpretive and creative competences.”³² In creating this distinction through othering, specific fans reinforce their identities to themselves and to their peers in their journey of participation within the fandom.

Conclusion

By no means is this discussion meant to be a comprehensive run-down of all the many roles that fanfiction plays within the K-Pop fandom; if anything, it only serves to highlight the complexity of its role in making fans more participative as they engage in content about and *with* the idols. While fanfiction of fiction serves some similar purposes as that of RPF in K-Pop like in fantasy fulfillment and in bridging gaps in knowledge or addressing criticism or dissent, K-Pop RPF offers specific opportunities that make the experience of engaging in it fairly unique. It serves as a wide space for negotiation in terms of how idols are perceived (as celebrity texts or as real people), and it offers certain image blueprints for the idol and the company that further underscore the involvement of the fandom in creating the idol inasmuch as the idol and the company create the fandom. Finally, it is an avenue for networking and identity formation; through participating in and contributing to the culture of creation in K-Pop, fans find a place within the community that speaks to their more specific interests and tastes. All of this is proof that fanfiction is key to the fandom experience, most especially if one is a K-Pop fan; it is not just essential but inevitable, and it acts as a bridge that connects proactive, participating fans to the idols, the industry, and to each other.

32 Nicolle Lamerichs, “Shared Narratives: Intermediality in Fandom,” in *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

