

A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Work, Love and Family in South Korean Dramas

By

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South Korean dramas entered the American media market in 2011 and have become increasingly popular around the world (Ju 2020). In 2021, Netflix pledged \$500 million for the development of South Korean content (Choudhury 2021), which has resulted in large and diverse global audiences for South Korean media. Currently, four of Netflix's ten most-watched ever non-English shows are from South Korea (Stoll 2023).

Unlike U.S. television dramas that tend to run for multiple seasons, one of the unique aspects of South Korean dramas (referred to as K-dramas hereafter) is that they have finite beginnings and endings with no more than 20 episodes, each an hour long. With relatively short but engaging stories, most viewers don't have the opportunity to get bored. Also, the many on-line fan communities such as Drama Milk encourage discussions about the themes, actors, and issues in each episode.

The authors of this analysis, ages 76 and 25, respectively, are enthusiastic viewers of K-dramas. With the global interest in these distinctly South Korean stories, it is likely that international perceptions of South Korea (referred to as Korea hereafter) may be heavily influenced by the content of this medium. Our analysis focuses on the portrayal of several aspects of Korean society in these dramas and the realism of these images.

There are many K-dramas, with hundreds of series and films in a variety of genres, including action, medical, legal, thriller, comedy, and horror. For this analysis, the authors analyzed four highly rated and popular series in the drama genre that focus on work, love, and family. Two of the K-dramas tell stories that are set in corporations, one takes place in both a secondary school and a private tutoring academy, and the fourth

show depicts life in a small town.

Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*) depicts Korean work culture by focusing on four interns (one female and three male) and their relationships with each other and their superiors in a Korean trading company. My Ajusshi (*My Mister*) is set at an engineering firm with work, marriage, family, and friendship as themes. Crash Course in Romance is about a shop owner, her family, and an instructor at a for-profit education coaching school as they navigate romance and academic pressures. Summer Strike is about a career woman who leaves Seoul to begin a new life in a small town after her mother's death, the end of her romantic relationship, and a very stressful job.¹

Using the 64 episodes of these K-dramas as data, this analysis addresses gender inequality, marriage, love, family, household responsibilities, alcohol consumption, educational pressures and corporate values and hierarchies. Research about Korea is used to evaluate the extent to which these media depictions are realistic.

Gender Inequality

Most of the characters in these dramas are men, almost all of whom work for pay, leading viewers to the accurate conclusion that Korean men are more likely to be employed than women. In 2022, the labor force participation rate of Korean men was 75%. For women it was 55%, far below the average rate for countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2023). Most of the female

¹Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes, Release year: 2014; My Ajusshi (*My Mister*), 16 episodes, Release year: 2018; *Crash Course in Romance*, 16 episodes, Release year: 2023; *Summer Strike*, 12 episodes, Release year: 2022.

characters in the dramas are homemakers, housekeepers, shop keepers, waitresses, cleaners and administrative assistants, with a few presented as teachers, lawyers, traders, managers, or actors. Most of the male characters are engineers, traders, teachers, managers or directors with a few cleaners and loan sharks. While no specific salaries are presented in any of the dramas, based on their occupations, the incomes of the male characters would be higher than those of the female characters. In fact, Korea is the *least equitable country* of the 46 countries that reported wages to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2023) with annual wages for full-time female workers at 31% *lower* than that of males. For ten years, Korean women held only 2% of all director level positions compared to a worldwide average of 11% (Rozon 2015). *The Economist* (2023) found South Korea to be the *worst* of 29 countries on their glass-ceiling index, which consists of 10 workplace indicators.

While some male managers in the dramas are shown as supportive of their juniors, including women, overall, the supervisors in the corporate settings treat their subordinates without respect or dignity, with women subjected to especially harsh treatment. In *Misaeng*, when, a newly hired female trader reports that she prioritized the many tasks she had to complete, her manager chides her, saying she should have stayed up all night to finish everything. In another scene in this series, a different female employee faints, and the manager is told she fainted from overwork and pregnancy. Two male managers discuss this worker, with one saying, “How many children is she going to have?” Noting that she already has two children, the other says “Why did she get pregnant again? She is so self-centered!” The first replies that women are a problem because “As soon as we train them, marriage, pregnancy, husbands, and kids are their usual excuses. If not, they’ll cry though any issues.” Two female employees overhear these comments but say nothing. In another scene in this series, male managers discuss the final presentation made by the only female intern and comment that the director will not like her presentation because “she’s just a girl.” In *Crash Course in Romance*, the male “star teacher” at a private academy can never remember the name of one female staff member although she has worked for him for years.

Several of these dramas show episodes of sexual harassment with some disapproval of this behavior. When one male supervisor in a corporation sexually harasses women verbally, some of his colleagues tell him that this is no longer acceptable, and he is later

reprimanded by his superior.² In another episode in this series, a male director in the company is rude to one of the few female deputy department heads. He says that he has been lenient with her because she is a woman and that she should be grateful to her husband “who can bear living with someone like her.” The woman department head does *not* back down, replying that the director should be careful since he is already facing two charges of sexual harassment. Also in this series, a male peer roughly pulls on the female intern’s arm to get her to go with him. When she pulls her arm back and resists, he says, “Aren’t you a bit sensitive? You make it seem like I’ve sexually harassed you or something.” Later, while working on a joint project, he tells her that she doesn’t have to do anything work related since “all you have to do is sit there and look pretty.”

In the drama primarily focused on romance, workplace harassment is also an issue. At the beginning of *Summer Strike*, the main female character leaves her well-established life in Seoul despite having a permanent contract at a company where she has worked for five years. After a series of demoralizing events in her personal life, she realizes that her life is too difficult. She no longer wants to suffer the pressures of work in the city or to endure the mistreatment and harassment from her male coworkers, especially her manager. After quitting, in a confrontation with her manager and a female co-worker, she reveals that the manager “asks all the female employees to come with him to bars, karaoke, and motels.” She also tells the female co-worker that she rejected the manager’s advances and is aware of his embezzlement of company funds. After leaving Seoul, she sends all her co-workers a copy of the manager’s text in which he tells her to come to a motel.³ Despite recent laws, workplace sexual harassment in Korea remains common. According to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, approximately 10% of female employees said they have experienced some type of sexual harassment (Lee & Oh 2020).

Masculinity And Femininity

Images of pretty, feminized males have become increasingly prevalent in Korean television, with some characters demonstrating caring and sensitive aspects of this new form of Asian masculinity in their fictional personal relationships (Lee 2018). These characters-- “pretty boys” with smooth skin, silky hair, and a feminine demeanor, have displaced previously common

²Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes, Release year: 2014.

³Summer Strike, 12 episodes, Release year: 2022.

macho and aggressive personas (Colby & Engstrom 2015). In three of the four dramas analyzed, at least one main male character is a “pretty boy.”⁴ One female character in *Crash Course in Romance* is attracted to the secondary lead and thinks “Goodness, he’s totally my type. Fragile and pale. “She notes his “fair skin” and his “long and slim” fingers.

However, the “tough guy” persona has not disappeared entirely as male characters are shown yelling loudly at others to intimidate them and sometimes shown being physically violent towards co-workers and others--pushing, shoving, and having fist fights. Characters are occasionally shown threatening to kill others if their behavior warrants it.⁵ In fact, in *Crash Course*, although the secondary male lead is first presented as a pretty boy, he is ultimately revealed as a tough guy in disguise. Not only is he violent, ill-tempered, and jealous in nature, he has also committed several murders, using stones and a slingshot with his calloused fingers³

Most of the actors, male and female, are very attractive, which is not unusual in film and television. However, some researchers have called South Korea the world’s plastic-surgery capital with between one-fifth and one-third of women and 15% of the men in Seoul having had cosmetic surgery (Marx 2015). According to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, Korea is first world-wide on a *per capita* basis, with 13.5 cosmetic procedures performed per 1000 individuals (Young & Kim 2020). In sum, Korea is a plastic surgery epicenter and an exporter of television shows showcasing attractive people which suggests that it has not escaped unrealistic standards of beauty.

In terms of personality, more of the male than female characters are assertive and strong-willed. There are exceptions to the pattern including the main female character in *Crash Course*. This character is a former national athlete who is presented as an independent woman with a cheerful personality and boundless energy. She exhibits non-traditional behavior by asking the man she loves to marry her. Rather than rebuffing her, he responds that he loves that she is unpredictable. He then proposes marriage as well. He also agrees to her demand that they not marry until she finishes her educational certificate to become a sports instructor. In *Misaeng*, a female team leader, supports her subordinates and confronts her manager when appropriate. In *My Ajusshi*, the female temporary,

⁴Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes; *Crash Course in Romance*, 16 episodes, Release year: 2023; *Summer Strike*, 12 episodes, Release year: 2022.

⁵Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes; *My Ajusshi (My Mister)*, 16 episodes, Release year: 2018.

clerical employee is unsmiling at work which is very unusual. Later she physically defends herself and tells her assailant that she’ll kill him if he doesn’t leave her and her grandmother alone.

Family and Household Responsibilities

In Korea, rigid workplace cultures and the persistence of the male-breadwinner model make it difficult for women to use the parental leave to which they are legally entitled and to stay employed when they become mothers (Oh & Mun 2022). Although parental leave for fathers is available, taking such leave is uncommon. Fathers are seen as last-resort caregivers within families and as primary workers in the workplace (Kim & Kim 2019). In *Misaeng*, one of the main characters says his wife had to quit her job because they have three children. In another episode of the series, he is shown acting loving towards his children while his wife does all the household work. The wife complains that he doesn’t even play with the children on Sundays, so she gets no day to rest. In this drama, only the female characters are shown doing housework.

Children in day care are shown being dropped off early and picked up late. The only female manager depicted in *Misaeng*, has one child by choice. She tells a female subordinate that even though things have gotten better, “It’s not easy to raise children and work at the same time. Working moms are always the bad people – at work, at home...If you are going to keep your career, don’t get married.” Later, when her husband is promoted, he asks her to quit her job. She refuses, saying she has worked for 15 years and likes her job. She says that, to love her family, she needs to love herself and so she will keep working.⁶

However, the main male character in *My Ajusshi*, a team leader at a structural engineering firm, is shown very involved in household work. He vacuums, does dishes, and calls his wife, a lawyer, on his way home to say he is in the supermarket to ask if she needs anything. From the responses of other characters, his behavior is seen as very unusual.

In two of the dramas, mothers are shown as very supportive of adult sons.⁷ In *Misaeng*, a major character who is 29 years old, lives at home. While he works several part-time jobs until he gets a full-time corporate job, his mother is his primary financial support. In *My Ajusshi*, two of the main characters, brothers who are college

⁶Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes.

⁷Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes; *My Ajusshi (My Mister)*, 16 episodes, Release year: 2018.

graduates, in their 30s and 40s, are unemployed and live with their mother. In one of these dramas, the mother takes in laundry and in the other she is a cleaner. In both cases the mothers pay for the household expenses.

Corporate Culture, Hierarchies, and Education

Hierarchy is important in Korean society. Age, position in the company, and education all determine one's rank in Korean corporations. The individual in the "superior" position is treated with respect while the "junior" may be treated rudely (Hough 2022). This hierarchy is well represented in the two corporate K-dramas. In both, seniors enter and exit elevators first; subordinates bow to superiors when they meet and stand and bow when a superior walks by their workspace. Higher-status employees yell at lower status ones at work, sometimes inflicting minor physical assaults, such as shoving them or throwing things at them.⁸

The workplace dramas also accurately represent the competitiveness of the Korean job market. When ranked by percentage of college graduates, young Koreans are among the most educated in the developed world (Jeong and Jun 2017). However, although education is important, only 67% of Korean college graduates are employed (Yoon 2023). In both workplace dramas, a major character does *not* have a college degree. Other characters wonder why they have been hired and treat them with a lack of respect.⁹

In *Misaeng*, an important story line is the struggle of the intern who is hired in a temporary job that terminates by law after two years. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 26% of all salaried jobs in Korea are held by temporary workers, a high percentage when compared to other countries (Kim 2021).

Some Korean families spend more on private education than they do for food or housing (Lee 2023). In *Crash Course in Romance*, the drama focuses on a high school and a private tutoring academy, the pressure on students is evident. Almost all the mothers and children are portrayed as obsessed with their children doing well academically. One mother berates her high school son for not doing better on tests. She says she has worked hard to buy him multiple prep courses and expects him to do well enough to become a doctor or lawyer. Another student's mother is so upset when her daughter fails to make a level 1 grade on one of her tests

⁸Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes; My Ajusshi (*My Mister*), 16 episodes, Release year: 2018.

⁹Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes; My Ajusshi (*My Mister*), 16 episodes, Release year: 2018.

that she says she feels like she will die.

In this drama, dozens of mothers are shown lining up outside a private tutoring academy to secure places for their children in the best tutors' classes. The effect of the pressure to succeed academically is highlighted in the drama as two teenage characters commit suicide and another attempts it.¹⁰ Since 2011, suicide has been the leading cause of death in Korea for people aged 10 to 24 years. Not only does Korea have the *highest suicide rate* in the OECD, but, in contrast to the global downward trend, its suicide rate has *nearly doubled* over the past two decades (Yoon 2022).

Climbing the corporate ladder is the major goal for most of the characters in the workplace dramas. Characters know companies value hard work and successful projects, but they are also aware of the risks involved in corporate hierarchies. In the stories, even when workers follow the rules, employees who don't succeed sometimes have disciplinary actions taken against them, including demotion or firing. Sometimes supervisors are punished for subordinates' actions. These practices and the pressure to succeed create significant stress.¹¹ The cutthroat nature of workplace competition is depicted in *Summer Strike* when a female team member manipulates things to give a presentation to the CEO that was actually created by the main female character. The main character's supervisor later says he hired her because she obeys superiors and works like a dog.

One character in a workplace story describes the culture of the office noting that "Paychecks and promotions are all that counts for the salaryman." Another feels the scorn of society for being a "salaryman" saying, "People think we are just working ants in neckties."¹²

While Korea is changing, Confucian values continue to be important. Individuals are seen as interdependent units within the family, community, and state with conduct determined by position and role in society (Kim & Kim 2019). Relational work ethics from Confucianism typically dictate the hierarchical order between elders and juniors. In one narrative, employees ask repeatedly why the CEO is ranked ahead of a managing director--although the former is younger and was two years behind the other in school.¹³ Confucian values also stress solidarity within groups (Kim & Kim 2019). An intern

¹⁰*Crash Course in Romance*, 16 episodes, Release year: 2023.

¹¹Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes, Release year: 2014; My Ajusshi (*My Mister*), 16 episodes, Release year: 2018; *Summer Strike*, 12 episodes, Release year: 2022.

¹²Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes, Release year: 2014.

¹³My Ajusshi (*My Mister*), 16 episodes, Release year: 2018.

in a drama is told to use general company standards in his projects rather than standards he creates because “You don’t work alone.”¹⁴ While Korea continues to exhibit many aspects of conservative and Confucian values, urbanization, westernization, nationalism, and feminism have made their way into the culture as well (Boman 2022). Contemporary Korean culture is best understood as a hybrid with elements that are Korean (language), East Asian (Confucianism, Buddhism), and western (capitalism, secularism, consumerism, and liberal democracy) (Boman 2022). While the dramas present many traditional aspects of the culture, in all of them some characters, including the women, actively resist male dominance and harassment, thereby demonstrating westernized modernity and feminism.

The K-dramas depict the strong culture of overworking in Korea. Among the world’s developed countries, Koreans work the longest hours due to individual attitudes, group cohesiveness, organizational behaviors, and national culture (Kim et al. 2018). Many characters are shown working all through the night, sometimes sleeping at their desks. Little concern is shown for family time, such as when one character must skip his father’s 50th birthday celebration because of a work commitment.¹⁵ In another series, a female manager collapses from overwork and stress. She is hospitalized for a few days but soon returns to the office.¹⁶ In discussing one manager who is concerned with the wellbeing of subordinates, another comments that idealism and social justice are old fashioned words that no longer fit in the corporate world.¹⁷

Although the difficulties and stresses of the corporate world are made very clear, there are cautionary tales about leaving the corporation. In *Misaeng*, a former trader who quit years before has drinks with a current manager and asks for his help in getting re-employed. He says, “Is the company still a battleground? Don’t quit until you are forced out. The outside world is hell.”

Alcohol Consumption

Alcohol consumption is ubiquitous in all four of the K-dramas. Almost every meal includes soju (a fermented rice drink that is 40% alcohol) and/or beer. The characters drink to celebrate, socialize with friends, or to relieve stress. In *Crash Course in Romance*, seven mothers gather for lunch, and all the women except one has beer with the meal. The one who drinks orange juice

¹⁴Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes, Release year: 2014.

¹⁵My Ajusshi (*My Mister*), 16 episodes, Release year: 2018.

¹⁶Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes, Release year: 2014.

¹⁷Misaeng (*An Incomplete Life*), 20 episodes, Release year: 2014.

explains that she needs to pick her daughter up from school soon. The main male character in this drama abstains, telling others that drinking is unhealthy, but he is ridiculed for his comments.

In many scenes, both male and female characters often drink until inebriated. This seems to be widely accepted by others as there are rarely any consequences for drunken behavior. Scenes in all four dramas show characters passing out or being helped to stand and walk by others. Frequently they are shown with hangovers the next day. This behavior appears to be based on reality. Alcohol consumption and binge drinking in Korea have increased in recent decades with annual alcohol consumption *per capita* in Korea *twice the global average* and the highest among Western Pacific countries (Lee & Chung 2020). One national study estimated that the average Korean drinks more than 10 liters of alcohol per year (Kim & Kim 2021).

Korean culture dictates that drinkers should *never* pour their own drinks or drink alone (Park, Sohn, & Choi 2020). Although Koreans think that drinking should be social, solitary drinking outside the norm is presented in all four K-dramas. In *Summer Strike* and *Crash Course in Romance*, female characters present degrees of socially *unacceptable* drinking. In *Summer Strike*, the main female character drinks alone to forget her troubles, then loses her money and wakes up hungover with no recollection of the night before. The next day, she is helped by the male lead and supporting characters to recover her money and memory. In *Crash Course in Romance*,¹⁷ the main female character drinks alone after difficulties with her autistic brother. Although her boyfriend later joins her, she is shown drinking to cope with her emotions. A secondary character in this drama is a high-powered lawyer with a troubled family life caused in part by her all-consuming ambitions for her children. In one episode, after drinking a great deal while alone, she tells her younger son on his return home that “You know you’re my only hope, right?”

More positive representations of communal drinking appear during periods of celebration or reconciliation between characters in many of the dramas. Drunkenness also appears in these situations, but the effects of excessive drinking are *not* as negative as after scenes of solitary drinking.

Soft and Distinctly Korean Romance

K-dramas take a more reserved approach to romance than American media since modesty, constraint, and politeness are key parts of K-dramas due to the influence

of Confucian values. This conservative portrayal of love can be a draw for international audiences looking for more gentle relationships.

Psychologist Robert Sternberg's triangular theory of love helps to describe the difference between fictional American and Korean romances by types of love with three scales: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Many relationships contain all three components of love although the balance is likely to change over the course of a relationship (Sternberg 1997). Most love stories in American media tend to focus on intimacy and passion. They depict closeness through care and physical attraction, often showcasing the progression of the relationship through sexual interaction. Korean dramas treat romances much more conservatively, leaning toward intimacy and commitment. The plot and relationships in romance-based K-dramas promote the "underlying values of [the] Asian audience – family melodrama with lots of emotions and innocent love" (Roll 2021). Rarely do K-dramas have any explicit sexual content. In *Crash Course in Romance*, the two main characters kiss but they are both fully dressed. In *Summer Strike*, the main characters in a romantic relationship never even kiss.

All the romances portrayed in K-dramas contain two heterosexual Korean individuals, which is representative of the culture. In March 2022, South Korea elected a president representing the main conservative bloc, now known as the People Power Party (PPP). The politics of the PPP are socially conservative, and the party does *not* recognize same-sex relationships or other LGBTQIA+ rights. The first time a South Korean court recognized any rights for same-sex couples was in February 2023 when it ruled that a resident could list a same sex partner as a dependent on a national insurance plan (Gallo & Lee 2023). However, the content of K-dramas is gradually changing with a recent increase in LGBTQ+ representations and greater acceptance of these storylines (Lim 2020).

The singular archetype of K-drama relationships extends to race as well as sexuality. The couples portrayed are both Korean. Koreans have a sense of nation based on shared blood and ancestry, believing that they all belong to a "unitary nation," one that is ethnically homogeneous and racially distinctive (Shin 2006). The homogeneity long valued in Korea is reflected in the relationships portrayed between characters. K-dramas convey monoethnic and heterosexual romantic relationships rather than showing diversity despite an aging population and a declining birth rate (Hur 2021).

Family Relationships

Family relationships and family building are important themes in each of the dramas as they depict characters' choices and development. Confucianism values respect for family, which usually means biological family members like parents, siblings, and grandparents. In *My Ajusshi*, the main male character has two unemployed brothers who still live at home with their mother. Despite having frequent arguments and tussles, the three brothers are shown to be very supportive of each other. The series also focuses on the intensely supportive relationship between the main female character and her deaf and paralyzed grandmother.

K-dramas also show units that have become chosen families through circumstances, rather than blood relationships. In *Crash Course in Romance*, the main female character informally adopts her niece after the child's mother abandons her. With her autistic brother, her best friend and her niece, this character creates a non-traditional and very supportive family unit.

The main character in *Misaeng* and *My Ajusshi* each takes a younger worker under his wing. They mentor and support the younger person throughout the series, sometimes to the detriment of their own careers. In each case, the older character acts as a surrogate father for the younger person who has no father.

Summer Strike begins with the death of the main character's mother, making her an orphan. An important part of the plot revolves around the chosen family she ultimately joins in her new community. In one episode, this character uses her life savings to pay for another's medical bills because she feels that he is like a member of her family. The chosen families depicted demonstrate that deep relationships can exist outside blood-related families. While stories of romance may take center stage in K-dramas, the portrayal of chosen families may be used to enhance the plot and interest a wider audience.

Resistance to the Culture

While the dramas show that life in Korea continues in many ways as it has in the past, they also contain critiques of traditional culture. In each of the series, some resistance to cultural expectations is presented. In *Summer Strike*, the main character walks away from her job in Seoul to find peace in the countryside despite the expectation to keep working in the city. In *My Ajusshi*, a character who was talented at everything, including academics, changed his life's direction despite

his family's objections to become a monk in a nearby temple. He is shown contented in his solitary, non-competitive life.

The two college-educated but unemployed brothers in *My Ajusshi* decide to start a cleaning company to make money. Although they are embarrassed by their menial work at first, as their business succeeds, they become more comfortable acknowledging their occupation. One brother decides he can have a relationship with a woman in a higher status job even though he is just a cleaner.

In both workplace dramas, the primary characters are managers who are different from their peers from the beginning. In *Misaeng*, the main character is offered the opportunity to socialize with the director but turns it down because he distrusts the unethical behavior of upper managers. He is seen by others as being foolish for not wanting to climb the corporate ladder by any means, including being ruthless. As a result of his behavior, this manager's team is the one *least favored* by the corporation in a variety of ways, including having the open office space next to the restrooms. In *My Ajusshi*, the main character is a manager who is often questioned about his decision to hire a temporary employee despite her lack of credentials or experience. He listens to the comments but refuses to fire her. At the end of both dramas, these managers leave their corporations - one fired and one voluntarily. Both take their most trusted employees (including the formerly temporary worker) and start their own small companies where they and their employees are much happier.

In *Crash Course in Romance*, the main character, a celebrity and wealthy math instructor at the private tutoring academy, falls in love with, and marries, a *banchan* (side dish) store owner-- despite her much lower social status and less glamorous looks. At the end of the series, the characters discuss problems with an education system that wrongly makes tests so crucial for young adults that they and their parents will do anything to gain an advantage.

CONCLUSION

K-dramas are remarkably appealing to audiences outside of Korea. Based on our analysis, we can speculate as to the source of the appeal. First, K-dramas have finite beginnings and endings so a whole series is watched in 16 to 20 one-hour episodes. Because each series airs for a relatively short period viewers don't get bored with the characters or plot.

Second, the acting is believable. Third, the actors

are attractive. The characters are usually appealing, relatable, and sometimes vulnerable. Fourth, the foreign language does *not* seem to be a hinderance because American viewers can watch these dramas using subtitles or dubbing. While some prefer dubbing, for others, it is a pleasant and new experience to hear the Korean language while learning about Korean culture. Finally, through K-dramas, viewers can appreciate Korean fashion, food, customs, city life, and country landscapes in a way they never could before streaming services made international media within reach.

The high-quality story-telling and interesting plots are important - but the inherent differences in cultures makes K-dramas something new and intriguing for international, especially American audiences. In contrast to a great deal of American media, in K-dramas, the romances are chaste with no violent sex as romantic relationships build slowly. Each of these dramas has a happy ending as the main characters ultimately overcome obstacles and find their place in society. Furthermore, the viewer sees one or more characters successfully defying societal expectations but remaining integrated into Korean culture.

The supportive nature of familial and community relationships in these shows reflects the communitarian nature of Korean society-- in contrast to the individualism built into the foundations of American culture and media. In some ways, these dramas offer the viewer the way the world *used to be*-- traditional family conduct and respect for elders and community. In our increasingly challenging world, seeing characters who have a supportive family or who successfully create a chosen family is significant. Perhaps communitarian and family-based customs are more attractive to audiences still reeling from feeling the remnants of isolation and stress in a "post-COVID" world.

Characters in these dramas often ponder the meaning of life and ultimately find it in their relationships with friends, family, and community. While these stories represent a culture that is different from their own, American audiences can enjoy the dramas and their happy endings.

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