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### **Citation**

Tilland, B. R. (2017). Save your K-drama for your mama: mother-daughter bonding in between nostalgia and futurism. *Acta Koreana*, 20(2), 377-393.  
doi:10.18399/acta.2017.20.2.000

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3563033>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## SAVE YOUR K-DRAMA FOR YOUR MAMA: MOTHER-DAUGHTER BONDING IN BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND FUTURISM

By BONNIE TILLAND

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As the South Korean government invests ever more heavily in its soft power, categories such as pop music, television dramas, and Korean cuisine—rebranded as K-pop, K-dramas, and K-food, respectively—become tools for furthering South Korean interests abroad, as well as for changing national identity at home. Although South Korea continues to be known as a land of excessive “education fever,” where children and teenagers go through a grueling school system in order to win acceptance at a handful of top universities, the growing pop industry gives hope to some children and parents that success may be found through other avenues. Elsewhere I have explored negotiations between parents and children over academics, artistic pursuits, and fandom activities; in this article I specifically examine discourse around the nostalgia-laden television dramas in the *Answer Me* franchise (which introduced South Korea’s first mass pop fandom era in *Answer Me*, 1997, and then reached back to 1994 and 1988 in subsequent series) and connections between the nostalgic pop fandom worlds presented on-screen and current K-pop desires and anxieties in South Korea. Drawing on interviews with mothers and daughters, analysis of media reports, and readings of the media texts in question, I argue that mothers and daughters utilize nostalgic media (K-dramas) and future-oriented media (K-pop) in the everyday to understand one another’s affective worlds, and to forge mother-daughter bonds. Evolving Korean screen cultures are shifting understandings of leisure, filial and maternal subjectivity, and productive citizenship in South Korea.

Keywords: nostalgia, fandom, generational conflict, K-pop, television

In his recent book (2014) on the K-pop industry, sociologist John Lie describes his disorientation upon returning to South Korea after many decades away: he writes about the forlorn melodies wafting out of teahouses in the Myōngdong neighborhood as having now been replaced by upbeat K-pop. In South Korea,

voice and music converge in soundscapes that have shifted dramatically each decade, and these shifts indicate more than simply changes in musical preferences or audio technology. I consider the identity of “the fan” in contemporary South Korean society as evidence of social investment in the sense of sound as pointing to a possible national future, as fans of pop idols both celebrate sound and add to the collective of sound with their own (“obsessed,” “manic”) voices. This article investigates K-pop as a pivot point between school-age children’s and mothers’ expectations and desires, highlighting creative fan pursuits as pointing to a re-casting of Korea as a soft culture superpower fueled by youthful passion and creativity. This imagining leads mothers of pre-teen and teenage daughters in particular to reflect not only on their children’s fan activities, but also on their own subjectivities and the shifting nature of leisure in South Korea. I argue that mothers and daughters utilize nostalgic media (K-dramas) and future-oriented media (K-pop) in the everyday to understand one another’s affective worlds, and to forge mother-daughter bonds. Most of the mothers I interviewed felt that building these bonds were part of their responsibility as mothers, and so they would coax daughters to watch TV shows with them, and try to remain engaged and enthusiastic when daughters opened up to them about favorite pop groups or showed them music videos. Connecting with daughters’ affective worlds also often involves watching teen-oriented television dramas that bridge K-pop and K-dramas by using young idols in leading roles. Said one mother about her teenage daughter’s preferred television drama *du jour*: “Its plot is so contrived, but she just wants me to *feel* with her, beside her.” An investigation of investment in K-pop and K-dramas at the affective level illuminates changing notions of filiality, leisure and productivity; more broadly speaking, it illuminates new directions in imagining national futures.

I focus in on the emergence of the young “K-pop fan” within Korea in this moment of K-pop as an international phenomenon, and the fan’s intersection with other social categories of belonging. In particular, I look at the anxiety and pleasure that is articulated in the space of negotiation between mothers and daughters over their K-pop (and sometimes international pop) obsessions. As the South Korean government makes heavy investments in K-pop as an industry, some parents turn their backs, at least halfway, on the competitive academic system and instead encourage children to pursue alternative dreams of music, dance, or other arts, investing in their children’s training as K-pop idols (Ho 2012, 475). However, these pursuits are also risky and a career in the entertainment industry is by no means guaranteed. “Fandom” and its possibility of “prosumption” (productive work as a consumer) emerge as a counter-balance to all-or-nothing investment in supplementary academic education (*sagyoyuk*) or in K-

pop academies (*bagwon*) or private classes. And yet, fandom creates unease in parents due to the distraction and obsession it produces, as well as the sexualization of young performers that then might negatively influence fan behavior or self-identity. Recent Korean dramas (sometimes now referred to as K-dramas) offer an arena to think and feel through the possibilities and limitations of K-pop fandom.

I foreground my discussions with mothers and teenage daughters before providing my own analysis of the fan culture commentary in the popular television drama *Answer Me 1997* and its prequels. Changes in fan culture and its overall framing in Korean society—both in mainstream media discourse and by individual citizens—illuminate broader changes in both ideologies of productive citizenship and cultural aesthetics. As South Korean media reports highlight the inroads Korean soft power has made into Chinese, Southeast Asian, and even Western markets, K-pop becomes more and more of a possible dream. K-pop entertainers, mainly highly trained young men and women in “boy bands” and “girl groups,” embody multiple signifiers of desirable global Korean citizenship: coordination and poise (for dancing), smooth and skilled voices (for singing), aesthetically pleasing bodies (for market cross-over in advertising and to inspire emulation among the masses), and foreign language ability (for garnering diverse fans and entering the Chinese market, or finally making it big in the US market). K-pop fans may not have the skills and resources to present the full package of global Korean citizenship, but can tap into some of these categories to chase their own fame—as cover singers, cover dancers, or translators—or simply show their passion in more raw terms, by screaming the names of their idols at concerts or holding up home-made signs of support at rallies. As employment stability continues its decline in South Korea, particularly for youth, the temporality of work and leisure also undergoes a shift. Whereas in previous generations “fangirling” was seen as purely a distraction from more worthwhile pursuits such as studying for the university entrance exam, South Korea’s *samp’o* generation (“the three give-ups”: housing, marriage, and children—now sometimes extended to *n-p’o*, or “giving up an indeterminate n-value number of life milestones”) is reframing work and leisure. If university, high scores on exams, and supplementary certificates cannot guarantee a halfway satisfying career, young people—and their parents—are increasingly “working hard at leisure” to find their niche in society.

## SOUTH KOREAN FANDOM: POPULAR MUSIC AND TELEVISION

This research is anchored theoretically along two planes: interdisciplinary fandom studies and the anthropological study of citizenship. Since Ien Ang's (1984) groundbreaking study on viewers' reactions to the American TV show *Dallas*, scholars in media studies, communications, and anthropology have pushed forward understanding of first fans of television, and later of pop music fans and online fan communities. As activities as fans and consumers comes to fill the moments between more formal work and school-related tasks for so many twenty-first-century citizens, fandom in its many forms has come into its own as an object of academic inquiry. Increasingly, citizenship is linked to consumption, with a sense of a broader public sphere being replaced by a focus on consumer rights. As citizenship is linked to consumption it is also linked to fandoms, as evidenced by sports fandom as a marker of good national or regional citizenship, or pop music fandom as a sort of national and patriotic duty. Maliangkay and Choi (2014) observe that fans are now interpellated as "adjunct producers," with a (albeit limited) say in idol activities. When the line between consumption and production (of fan art, cover versions, blogs or even Tweets) of teenage fans breaks down, and when we begin to take the resulting "prosumption" activities of fans seriously, the identity of the fan is opened to richer analysis. Pop music scholars have argued that it was really the appearance on the scene of the pop-rock group "Seo Taiji and the Boys" (*Sŏ T'aeji wa aidŭl*) in the 1990s, and then the subsequent era of manufactured idol groups that solidified the discrete category of "the teenage fan" in South Korea. Prior to Seo Taiji, high school students listened to pop music, but they were not marketed to as if they were consumers in their own right, with purchasing power (Maliangkay 2014, 304). As *seggyehwa* (globalization) became a keyword of the 1990s, young Korean fans of heavily-promoted idol groups also were exposed to media images of American teenagers screaming at Backstreet Boys concerts (for example). Despite the official ban on Japanese pop culture imports, images of Japanese fan culture also had a significant impact. The combination of homegrown fan culture and American/Japanese fan culture as a model created a previously unimaginable category for widespread youth citizenship, the teenage fan. In the 1990s, new codes for youth subjectivity led to an oft-referenced generation gap; Keehyeung Lee quotes a newspaper article of 1993 that stated, "It is not an overstatement that the popular songs of the 1990s can not create shared emotional structure between generations. Rather it reflects a gap between generations" (Lee 2002, 50). The soulful ballads and melancholy "trot" songs that had defined the previous generation had made way for the first generation of boy and girl groups, along

with such rebellious pop-rock figures as Seo Taiji.

How have the anxieties of parents and children changed now that K-pop is a global phenomenon? How do shifting soundscapes in K-pop and dramascapes on television reconfigure familial relationships and national identity? The “established generation” (*keijon sedae*) expressed shock at the results of a recent survey, which showed that more and more Korean teenagers and pre-teens reported “entertainer” as their most desirable career choice, beating out the careers of prosecutor and doctor that had held steady as the most desired careers for half a century (Oh and Lee 2013, 115). As “K-pop” as a musical category became popular internationally in the 2010s, joyous media reports boasted about overtaking former colonizer Japan, of “Cool Japan” fame, in the soft culture power department. Japan still has Hello Kitty and other cute/cool characters, but “K-pop” has something that currently attracts international fans that neither Japan’s nor China’s cultural ministries can reproduce, and not for lack of trying. Now that K-pop and its accouterments has surpassed Korean television and film in terms of global popularity, K-pop fans also capitalize on K-pop’s newfound respectability. South Korea is no longer simply a nation of studious overachievers, a foil to Japan’s international image as a nation of weird, perverse *otaku* (obsessive fans): now South Korea is recasting itself on the world stage as a nation of overachieving, passionate idols and their creative, loyal fans.

Since the explosion of girl groups and boy bands in the late 2000s and early 2010s, new groups “debut” with the regularity of new smartphone models on the factory assembly line, and an idol who has debuted as a singer may later try his/her hand at acting in a drama. Adding to this intertextual complexity is the variety show category of South Korean television programming, on which idols appear as regular cast members or special guests. Here, actors and singers/dancers showcase their “true” personalities and build rapport with the general public and fans. At any music show or recorded concert, drama set filming or variety show filming, fans hold signs, display their emotions, and show their support for “their” idol(s). Although teenage and young adult fandom has been stigmatized in South Korea as obsessive, unhealthy, and unproductive, fandom is now taking on a new life as fuel in South Korea’s soft power ascendancy.

The mothers of pre-teens and teens I interviewed about their children’s pastimes and hobbies naturally had their own musical interests, typically but not exclusively corresponding with the music that was popular with their age cohort when they were in university. Women in their 30s tended to have a fondness for the ballads popular in the late 1990s, or sometimes the nascent indie rock groups of the time. Women in their 40s most often professed a passion for early 1990s folk singer Kim Kwangsök, or pop-rock icon Cho Yongp’il. And women in their

50s with children nearing university age were nostalgic about the folk singers of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Nevertheless, however much they might have been attached to a singer or group, they spoke about not understanding children's fandom activities, as it was not in the realm of their own experience. Oh and Lee discuss the changed social perception of pop stars since the 1990s as a key element in elementary school students' desire to become entertainers, which no doubt influences general youth K-pop fandom as well: whereas entertainers were often from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and viewed as rather pitiable prior to the 1990s, more recently they are viewed as positive and enterprising, trendsetters not only for the nation but around the globe. Another major shift is the temporality of K-pop acts and fans: whereas the popular musicians of the 1970s through 1990s—and even into the early 2000s—were expected to be active for years, many recent boy bands and girl groups are assumed from the start to have a short window before their expiration date draws near, and accordingly each new album or single they release is declared to be a “comeback,” as if they were never expected to “come back” at all. For the groups with relatively more staying power, the label of “comeback” attached to a new album is a reminder of all the risk involved in the endeavor, as even if individual group members make appearances on television variety programs and in advertising, after six to twelve months of not producing anything there is a general anxiety that the public will forget who you are. K-pop idols must hustle, and far from being exempt from the neoliberal conditions, are the perfect illustration of its raw economic logic and breakneck pace. K-pop, even when it references earlier songs in retro covers, is relentlessly future-oriented, always pushing its (successful) idols into their next big hit, next dance fad, and next viral video.

In contrast to K-pop, Korean television dramas—long the domain of women—are a nostalgic product, appealing to viewers because of resonances with events in their own lives and their own interpersonal relationships. Youna Kim (2013) notes the “therapeutic quality” of television dramas for women in Korea and Tilland (2016) discusses the ways that television dramas can help viewers think through complicated family relationships and situations. While K-pop videos and songs also make use of intertextuality—conscious references to other songs and videos, and extending to playful references to idols' personas or previous activities—Korean dramas engage in intertextuality much more thoroughly, as viewers not only develop a relationship with characters over the course of many episodes, but often compare the character to other characters the actor has played or to the actor's persona on variety television programs. Of course, the appearance of “remember when?” segments on entertainment programs highlighting both television dramas and music videos or recorded live

performances of yesteryear are evidence of both K-pop's and dramas' ability to transport back to another time. But while a K-pop video or recorded performance transports viewers back to the mood of another era in their lives, the replaying of a pivotal scene in an old drama brings viewers back to another world of relationships and presents a new opportunity to reflect on their own interpersonal relationships. Hearing old songs or seeing old music videos also tends to motivate the comparison of the old music with the music of today, whereas the less fragmentary nature of television dramas does not lend itself to easy comparison. K-pop is future-oriented and naturally correlates with the future-orientation of youth; Korean television dramas, despite viewership across generations, matches readily with the capacity for reflection of an older demographic. However, one significant overlap is the music used for the soundtrack of dramas, which are often sung by an idol group or solo idol singer. This technique melds "soundscapes" and "dramascapes," a strategy I will discuss in more detail in the final section. Now I briefly describe these "scapes" and their relevance to understanding popular culture's mediation of generational conflict in South Korea, before presenting ethnographic context for mother-daughter consumption and fandom.

The five "scapes" of a globalized world—ethnoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes—were theorized by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in 1996, to address "some basic links between the conditions of material life and the conditions of art and imagination" (Rantanen 2006, 14). While Appadurai cautioned against attaching "scapes" to any noun due to this important tension between material conditions and the possibilities of the realm of the imagination and the senses—resonating with the "structures of feeling" Raymond Williams identified in a pre-globalized context—here I use "soundscapes" and "dramascapes" to describe significant sociocultural shifts occurring in South Korea under the broader guise of "mediascapes." Appadurai took up the concept of "mediascapes" after having seen the influence of Bollywood on Mumbai, and the conceptualization of media as a scape recognized that people watch and use media, as well as think about media; people are both "see-ers" and "do-ers" (Rantanen 2006, 15). Although South Koreans both use and reflect on all kinds of media, television dramas and K-pop inspire particular kinds of practices and reflection due to their nostalgic and futuristic power. A shift in soundscape in the "age of K-pop" (Lee 2016) means that the entire aural landscape of South Korea has changed, and with it people's emotional connection to music, identification as fans, and imaginings of their own present and future subjectivities. "Dramascapes" likewise continue to be a driving force of domestic and international tourism in Korea, as fans position themselves as active

participants in the afterlives of dramas through visits to filming sites and documentation through selfie photography (Choe 2016, 80, 191, and 197). On a more everyday scale, drama viewers often use even exaggerated and unrealistic plot lines as an opportunity to consider their own positions and desires, in their families and immediate social circle as well as broader society. The dramascapes of television dramas (K-dramas) and soundscapes of K-pop motivate discussions of what it means to live as a Korean under new aural-visual conditions, and some of these discussions occur at home between mothers and daughters.

### **FANDOM AND THE ANXIOUS MOTHER-DAUGHTER DYAD**

In my fieldwork in a provincial Korean city from 2010 to 2012 I followed conversations with broadly middle-class mothers and their teenage and pre-teen daughters about pop music consumption and fandom, exploring the ways that their narratives do or do not construe fandom as a kind of cultural activity. My broader project focused on women's reflections on family life and their own maternal identities, homing in particularly on the ways sensory experiences were configured as resistance against societal pressures. This project broadly and minutely examined gender relations in South Korea, exploring the ways that women utilized their embodied experiences within the family to navigate relationships with sons, daughters, husbands, and extended family. These conversations occurred in the context of interviews with mothers over two years, with three women in particular (out of twelve core interviewees and more than twenty total) reflecting on their daughters' pop culture pursuits. (These women and others also reflected on their relationships with sons, but expressions of anxiety over sons' online game addictions did not turn into deep reflections on the current state of Korean cultural and social life in the way that discussions of daughters' pop culture consumption did). In exchange for interviews I spent time with the children in informal English conversation lessons, meeting with two girls in one of their rooms, and meeting a third girl in the café/bakery her mother managed. Though the focus of our sessions was English conversation, doing lessons in this way allowed me to get a better sense of parent-child interactions as well. As a white American female researcher in my early thirties at the time, English lessons were the most natural choice in terms of giving something valuable back to my research participants; I was continually aware, however, that becoming the "English teacher" in addition to the graduate researcher shifted the power dynamic between the women I interviewed and myself. I tried to mitigate this by being very flexible about English lessons as compensation for interviews,

and continuing to ask “student-like” questions about what I was observing when I was in my interviewees’ homes giving lessons.

Yeji and Sena were both in junior high school, and their mothers embraced their fandom in context of the fact that “they are not that motivated to study, but aren’t so creative either,” in the words of Sena’s mother. Yeji was taking group guitar lessons so that she could play and sing along with her favorite Korean and international pop songs. Sena painstakingly looked up the meaning of English lyrics in international pop songs she liked. Hyeri, in contrast, was an elementary school student (third grade) with a penchant for K-pop dance, and her fandom was less problematic in the eyes of her mother both because she was younger—and thus not yet at the dangerous stage of teenage fan desire—and because she was genuinely kinesthetically gifted. In the case of the middle school girls, Sena and Yeji’s mothers expressed simultaneous pride and exasperation over their daughters’ fan activities—pride because the obsessive nature of fandom meant that Sena and Yeji were diving into work with dictionaries, limited music study, and sometimes virtual crafts projects for fan websites, all without complaints; exasperation because such pursuits further limited the already minimal time the girls spent studying their academic subjects. “Fandom” as a category is increasingly associated with Korean pop culture, as Korean fans have become known in international media as organized, enterprising, and devoted. And yet, for the mothers I interviewed, the value of fandom is ambivalent. Sena and Yeji seem unlikely to become academic all-stars in the Korean school system, and their mothers are realistic about their abilities, even if sometimes exasperated by their lack of diligence in studying. At the same time, the girls are not interested in becoming pop stars, only in the active consumption of popular culture products that fall under the category of “fandom.” The girls, with their mothers’ help, are still searching for their areas of talent; as anthropologist So Jin Park notes, this guided exploration is less “fun” and more stressful, as “it is more difficult for mothers to find their children’s talent than it is to make them study” (Park 2012, 129). The girls’ enthusiastic participation in fan culture is at times troubling to their mothers, but because of their mothers’ dedication not to proscribe behavior too much, is generally accepted as an activity that enriches teenagers’ emotional lives.

Despite Sena and Yeji’s mothers’ worries about the over-sexualization of girl groups or time wasted on fandom, the positives they drew out were 1) the positive psychic energy of fandom and 2) the potential, however remote, for fandom to become both satisfying and productive in the girls’ young adult lives. The discussion often then turned to reflections on the nature of work and leisure in South Korea today, as well as their own subjectivities in relation to their daughters’.

As my interviewees were part of broader “education mothers networks,” they frequently heard stories from friends about children who had studied desperately and gotten into top universities, only to eventually graduate from these universities and strike out in getting a job. If there is no eventual reward for working hard, then why bother? And yet, *not* working hard produces unease. The current youth unemployment situation leads to a frantic, fundamentally neoliberal, existence in which there is no true leisure: even leisure activities must be productive, lead to something, and garner someone’s interest. The current overseas interest in K-pop is another part of this equation, as now even K-pop should be leveraged by individual producers and consumers for not only national but also international success. The mothers I talked to are sometimes caught up in the excitement of Korea as a rising star on the global stage, but also wax nostalgic over the true leisure time they enjoyed as children and the days when pop music was something to simply enjoy. In the era of YouTube and social media, teens amass knowledge about new boy bands and girl groups, dance moves, and transmedia crossovers, cataloguing information as much as purely enjoying it. Mothers felt that they needed to have a handle on this information to a certain degree as well, given the widespread perception that children’s success in life was dependent upon “father’s wealth, mother’s information, [and] child’s stamina” (Economist). “Mother’s information” has generally referred to information about study programs, the best cram schools, admission criteria for specialized high schools and universities, etc., but mothers also feel a need to find out information about their children’s emotional worlds in a rapidly changing society—and this extends to children’s fan activity, pop culture consumption, and dreams of successful futures outside of a traditional academic framework. Increased intertextuality between the television and popular music industries starting in the early 2010s helped ease the incompatible subjectivities of mothers and daughters, as mothers of preteens and teenagers became familiar with popular idols of the time through television dramas.

During my research between 2010 and 2012, a number of television dramas targeted at a younger demographic unexpectedly became popular across a wide section of society: among these were *God of Study* (2010), *Dream High* (2010), and *Answer Me 1997* (2012). Michelle Cho has written about the latter two dramas listed here that “[t]hrough their efforts to address the media’s role in the rapid transformations of publicity and identity... [they] exceeded their demographic targets to become part of a national discourse about the implications of K-pop’s success and the growing mediatization of everyday life” (Cho 2017, 2324). I would add that the earlier *God of Study* paved the way for the success of these later two youth-focused dramas across the generational divide, as it was explicitly

marketed as a drama that parents could watch with their children to learn “study tips.” Each episode of the drama was centered around a particular study tip that junior high school and high school students could utilize to ace the university entrance exam more efficiently. Several of my interviewees reported watching *God of Study* with daughters as well as sons, and noted the pop idol plotline, in which one of the characters decides to follow his dream of pop stardom rather than go on to university. Although the actor who played the “aspiring pop idol” character was not an idol himself, his portrayal made interests ripe for *Dream High*, a show centered on a pop idol training school and featuring actual pop idols as actors. This trend continued with *Answer Me 1997*, in which the majority of roles are played by idols. The sixteen episodes of *God of Study* aired from early January to late February of 2010 on Mondays and Tuesdays at 10 p.m. on KBS, and *Dream High* aired almost exactly a year later in early 2011, on KBS in the same timeslot of Mondays and Tuesdays. Since *Dream High* was a straightforward teen drama and not marketed as a show for parents to watch with their children, its widespread success was a surprise, but mothers said that curling up with teens to watch *Dream High* in the cold winter months during the break before the start of the new school year in March felt like a cozy tradition set in motion by *God of Study* a year earlier. In a sense, *Dream High*’s focus on pop idol aspirations felt like a follow-up on the kids of *God of Study*: most of the misfits of *God of Study* rallied to enter top universities, but the stray figure of the stubborn pop idol lingered, begging to be resolved in a K-pop-focused drama. After a year of attempting to harness the energetic tips of *God of Study* to encourage their own children to apply themselves academically, the mothers I interviewed were ready to psychologically explore another possible future for their children, from the comfort of their own living room television screens—the realm of K-pop. Then in summer 2012—again during a school break—*Answer Me 1997* came along on cable network tvN, and attained cult status with its depiction of 1990s Korean pop fandom. While the earlier dramas featured academic-elite hopefuls and aspiring pop stars, *Answer Me 1997* provided viewers across generations with fodder for reflection on fandom as a legitimate activity in the age of global K-pop.

### ANSWER ME, 1968?

In this final section I draw connections between the aforementioned complex soundscapes and the popular drama franchise, the *Answer Me* (1997, 1994, and 1988) series, which played with the figure of the fan and its meaning in millennial South Korean society. The first show in the series garnered unprecedented ratings

for a cable program, and while it was popular across generations, found its most passionate viewers among Koreans in their early thirties, who would have been in high school in 1997, the year in which the events of the drama take place. While the social instability and anxiety following the 1997 financial crisis is referenced in passing, the show revolves around high school friends who are largely unaware of broader social forces, spending their days obsessing over stars, developing crushes on one another, and imagining their futures. The two girls in the group are active members of fan groups for boy bands, and their friendship almost comes to an end when they end up in fan clubs for rival groups. The lead character, when asked what she will do with her life in light of her poor grades, only talks of marrying Tony, a singer in the real-life 1990s boy band H.O.T.—much to her father’s dismay. However, she is able to secure a spot in university through winning a writing contest—she is persuaded to enter by her teacher, who happens across her over-the-top fan fiction and recognizes greater talent under the surface. Certain scenes in the drama portray the lead character as what has come to be known as a *sasaeng* fan, a fan who is obsessively concerned with her idol-of-affection’s private life (*sasaenghwal*) and whose fan activities extend to stalking and other extreme behaviors. After hanging around Tony’s house on several occasions, she finally writes a placard declaring her love in her own blood. She is proud of her display of commitment, and only realizes later that she has shocked even the most ardent of her fellow fans, and the school hallways buzz with rumors about her crazy fan behavior. As there were frequent media accounts throughout 2012 of even more extreme *sasaeng* fan behavior in real life, the drama’s portrayal of an otherwise likeable high school girl engaging in disturbing fan activities drew online criticism from some viewers. However, the heroine’s realization that her own fan behavior is excessive is presented as an important turning point, after which she tones down her fan activity and finds an outlet for her emotions through writing. Later episodes of the show, set in the then-present 2012, playfully engage the idea of the “forever fan,” as several women live productive lives as workers and/or mothers while still going to boy band concerts, buying merchandise, and acting as fan club organizers or moderators of online fan sites. As grown women now free of stormy adolescence, *Answer Me 1997*’s characters have learned to both moderate their passion for pop culture, and use their passion productively.

*Answer Me, 1997* reflects with nostalgia on the birth of mass teenage fan culture in Korea, following the ardent teenage fans of the nineties to the now-thirtysomethings for whom pop music continues to serve as inspiration. However, the question must be asked: in a twenty-first-century Korea deeply linked to the transnational flow of capital and concomitant economic insecurity, does the current iteration of fandom represent new possibilities between the academic

track and pop star track, and between production and consumption? Or does it simply remove the possibility of true leisure? Must even fandom be monetized, its depths plumbed for the possibility of profit? In the character arc of the heroine of *Answer Me, 1997*, and in my interviews with mothers and their teenage daughters, a great deal of anxiety is associated with the unproductive teenager—if she is not excelling academically or riding the Korean Wave as some variety of cultural producer, fandom must at least be an avenue for finding oneself. Fandom can only safely be pursued outside of the frame of neoliberal productivity once one has become an adult who is productive in regular employment and/or has socially reproduced through having children and contributes economically as a fan with increased buying power. In the final scenes of *Answer Me, 1997* the now thirtysomething fans comfortably sit around a restaurant table and talk about their continued fan activities, now within the realm of respectable consumption and social networking. While following now-“global” K-pop is more approved of than previous generations running after *ttanddara* (derogatory term for “low-class” entertainers), the space of fandom—as opposed to studying or pursuing creative arts, including K-pop—is still an anxiety-producing one.

Though I had left Korea and ended fieldwork when *Answer Me 1997* came out in 2012, in follow-up meetings my interviewees also reported watching the series with their children just as they had with *God of Study* in 2010, as the show’s multigenerational sitcom format led to a diverse fan base. Offering a comforting parallel, in all iterations of the show (1997, 1994, 1988) there are multiple scenes involving the whole family watching TV in the living room together—or sometimes just mother and daughter characters, or sometimes fathers and daughters. (The mothers I interviewed said that it was difficult to even imagine their own husbands spending a relaxed evening watching TV with their families, as all were sustaining the family’s middle-class status by working long hours nearly all year round). During discussions of their teenage daughter’s fandom, my interviewees had echoed injunctions found in mothering magazines of the importance of taking an interest in their children’s pop consumption, and many of them actually listened to the music their daughters listened to and watched the music videos, to ensure that their daughters’ pursuits did not stray too far from their control. *Answer Me 1997* with its depiction of boy band fandom, and *Answer Me 1994* with its more minimal depiction of Seo Taiji fandom perfectly illustrate the folding of K-pop into nostalgic family drama in a safe family space. Unlike many Korean dramas that feature discordant families in a “*Makchang* code”—meaning a convention of pushing everything to its limits, in the style of an American soap opera—the *Answer Me* series shows parents working hard to understand their children’s pop culture worlds. And yet, there is already a

difference with *Answer Me 1988*—the teenagers are consuming the first true youth pop acts such as *Sobangch'a*, but the generational divide along pop culture lines is not nearly so complete. I would suggest that we can read the *Answer Me* series as a trip back in time from the pop culture fragmentation of Korea in the late 1990s to a time when Korea was more united in song and dance. But a major focus of each show in the series is parental understanding and acceptance of teenage girl pop culture desires, and I am suggesting that the popularity of the *Answer Me* series embodies the current grappling with leisure, productivity, and affect within the family in Korea's current neoliberal moment, with K-pop operating as a site of ambivalence. While all of the *Answer Me* series depict a "purer time" in South Korea, *Answer Me 1997* references the IMF financial crisis, however fleetingly, as a way of linking the early days of teenage pop culture fandom to the fandom of today. During the crisis anything solid seemed to vanish into thin air, but the rise of the cultural industries and Korea's soft power through the Korean Wave happened in large part because of the crisis, rather than despite it. As the limited social stability and prosperity gained throughout the 1990s collapsed, social values shifted as well. The nascent fan culture shown in *Answer Me 1997* had become a core element of Korean national identity and national branding by the 2010s. In contrast, the cast of *Answer Me 1988* are one big happy family in a "simpler time," watching the same television programs and listening to the same music together, and preparing for Korea's national coming out via the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics. *Answer Me 1994* represents an intermediate step, with the "all in this together" message encapsulated by the family boarding house (*hasukchip*) mixing with references to an emerging youth culture led by Seo Taiji. Despite its popularity, given the franchise's popular culture focus, it is unlikely that an *Answer Me 1978* or *Answer Me 1964* would work in remotely the same way. As my interviewees in their forties and fifties frequently noted as they reflected on parenting their teenage fans, the 1960s and 1970s just do not answer back across the divide of democratization and its subsequent effects on Korean society. And indeed, a popular recent film dealing with high school friends in early 1980s Korea, *Sunny* (dir. Kang Hyeong-cheol [Kang Hyŏng-ch'ŏl], 2011) is loaded with an almost exclusively American 1980s pop soundtrack; at that time the Korean music that dominated the airwaves was folk, and rock music was heavily censored. When you "call" earlier than the late 1980s, Korean pop does not answer back. The future-minded K-pop of South Korea in the 2010s is inextricably linked with Korea's post-democratic development, neoliberal turn, and the feeding back of Korea's now-global "soft power" to influence South Korean notions of "productive" cultural citizenship and South Korea's new national identity as a pop culture trendsetter in the Asia region.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that future-oriented K-pop and nostalgia-inducing K-dramas (television dramas) meet in dramas of the 2010s about K-pop idols, trainees, and fans. Following the success of 2010's *God of Study*—which was not about K-pop idols but featured an aspiring K-pop idol subplot—youth-oriented television dramas in the Monday and Tuesday primetime slot became widely viewed by mothers and daughters together, with each trying to understand each other's emotional worlds. While several of my interviewees bought the supplementary “study guides” accompanying *God of Study*, they confessed that they did not only embark on watching this show with children to absorb information about studying, but rather to offer emotional support to children soon facing off against the university entrance exam by “quietly watching alongside them” and then discussing, rather than falling into a nagging kind of care that only produced anxiety for both mother and child. Mothers gained material with which to discuss hopes, dreams, and emotional states with daughters, and daughters gained familiarity with their mothers' generation preferred medium: television dramas. (Many teenage South Koreans I have talked to since 2010 do not watch traditional television, preferring short animations based on webtoons, or the music videos of their favorite K-pop songs). To return to “dramascapes” and “soundscapes,” drama viewers watch dramas but also reflect on the world through them; K-pop fans likewise listen to the songs and watch the music videos, but also structure their emotional worlds through lyrics, harmonic textures, and beats. In the *Answer Me* franchise, dramascapes and soundscapes converge to inspire reflection on personal and national directions, bridging the generation gap, and navigating shared and separate emotional landscapes.

Submitted: September 4, 2017  
 Sent for revision: October 17, 2017  
 Accepted:

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