

**Uncles' Generation: Adult Male Fans and Alternative Masculinities in South Korean
Popular Music**

Jarryn Ha (Case Western Reserve University)

Abstract

This article discusses the recent emergence of adult male fans of Korean pop (K-pop) music who openly engage themselves in fan activities typically associated with teenagers (particularly teenage girls) and the significance of their adoration of young female celebrities. The recent appearance of the “*samchon* (uncle) fans” in the Korean pop culture discourse marks the first instance since the early 1990s, when teenagers became the primary target audience of South Korea’s entertainment industry, in which male adults reclaimed a significant position as a demographic group of fans. The *samchon* fans differ from the traditional *ajossi* (middle-aged, patriarchal men) listeners of adult contemporary music in numerous ways, not only in what singers and musical genres they listen to, but also in their self-identification as fans, participation in fan activities and mass media portrayals.

In this article, I investigate the implications of the men’s consumption pattern and their representation in South Korean mass media within the contexts of the history of the construction of hegemonic masculinity in South Korea and of recent developments in East Asian popular culture; explore possible ways to apply, complicate and question existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks to explain the phenomenon; and argue for the possibility of politically potent, alternative masculinities constructed and manifested through the men’s conspicuous consumption of cultural commodities.

Introduction

During most of the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, the consumer-fan base for South Korean popular music consisted largely of teenagers. Upbeat teen pop music produced by large record labels replaced adult contemporary music as the dominating genre in the nation's popular culture, and teenagers, with an increased purchasing power, more or less pushed the previous generation to the fringe in a curiously pronounced case of generational divide in cultural consumption. In the last few years, however, South Korea's mainstream mass media have reported an increasing number of adult males, mostly in their 30s, openly following young female pop idols and actively engaging in fan groups and activities, seemingly transcending the aforementioned chasm between generations. Referred to as *samchon* ('uncle') fans, these men seem to construct a distinct identity-habitus and possibly even a new brand of masculinity, defying the widespread *ajossi* (middle-aged men) stereotype long associated with the 'proper' Korean masculinity of the patriarchal salary-man. This is worth a close look because it suggests the existence (or at least the possibility) of alternative masculinities not only in the celebrities in spotlights but also among the laypeople. If one were to accept the premise of the possibility and legitimacy of identity construction through conspicuous consumption of commodities, it becomes clear that the men who obsess over the kind of commodified pop stars associated with a different demographic, and play on the assumptions about how the difference is to be perpetuated, are up to something warranting an investigation. The implications are twofold. First, it constitutes the consumership of Korean pop music, across the spectrum of styles and subgenres, coming around full circle, disrupting the existing dynamic between legitimate and illegitimate, middlebrow and lowbrow (to borrow from the problematic yet frequently invoked cultural-historical framework), adult and adolescent, and masculine and feminine, which seemed

stable for quite some time, as evidenced by the diverse subgenres of Korean popular music and the audiences that each of them attracted. Second, the rise of the *samchon* fans also offers a collective commentary on the prevalent South Korean masculinity and the expectations the society places on men. The commentary primarily takes the form of the men's conspicuous consumption of commodities readily deemed 'unmanly' or otherwise improper for their consumption, defying existing notions about proper gender roles and consumption patterns. Ultimately, this article aims to address the significance of the *samchon* fans, and explore the ways in which they may represent an alternate kind of South Korean masculinity rather than reinforcing the hegemony by merely revising the external appearance of the *ajossi* masculinity.

During post-war decades, the South Korean popular music scene was largely dominated by a subgenre of adult contemporary music called 'trot', whose common features include duple rhythm, minor mode, orchestra (real or synthesized) accompaniment and intense vocal inflections and ornamentations. Sometime in the late 1980s and early 1990s, trot music gradually but unmistakably retreated to being a localized and traditionalized genre, and love ballads and teen pop took over its dominance of the nation's mainstream popular music (Pak 2006: 64-66; Son 2006: 51). On the economic level, this shift in the dominant musical style was parallel to the more or less simultaneous shift in the dominant business model in Korean popular music. During the financial crisis that stroke Korea and the surrounding regions in the late 1990s, many record labels that were prominent in the domestic market yet hardly organized as a large-scale economic force faced financial hardship that forced them to downsize drastically or, worse yet, to go out of business entirely. Filling their empty places in the industry were management companies that would choose a much more heavily integrated approach to producing cultural commodities, marketing the resulting total products (as opposed to simply records) primarily to the

demographic group they deemed most potent and relatively untapped: teenagers. The increasingly systemized and spectacularized entertainment industry brought younger performers playing a 'younger' style of music to fame. Their music, more precisely crafted and heavily commodified to sell than that of most adult contemporary singers, soon overshadowed the latter in the market, and teenagers with an increased purchasing power (owing to the nation's booming economy by the early 1990s) rose to the top demographic group in Korean popular music consumption. To clarify, the adult-oriented musical styles such as the trot did not disappear from the Korean popular music scene, nor did their devoted fans stop listening to them; rather, they largely remained on the fringe of the market while music directed at younger consumers took the main stage. This allowed for systematic management and marketing of performers and performative commodities in such forms as visually stimulating productions of televised performances, spectacular music videos starring big-name actors, large-scale live concert productions, 'variety show'-type television programmes in which numerous musicians are encouraged and often pressured to appear, and merchandise featuring the performers' images. This strand of Korean popular music, largely crafted and marketed by entertainment industry conglomerates, would eventually become the brand of K-pop known to many outside of the Korean peninsula for the first time. The drastic expansion of K-pop's market is now commonly known as the Korean Wave (or *Hallyu*).

Methodology

Since this article concerns a current development in the dynamic of South Korean popular culture, my approach is primarily theoretical in nature: I establish a pattern (that is, adult men's rather consistent engagement in Korean pop music fandoms, largely associated with

teenage girls in the past) by applying existing ideas and conceptual frameworks to explain and make sense of the phenomenon. The theoretical apparatuses are followed and complemented by empirical observations of music programmes on South Korean television and fan activities on web forums, as well as interactions with fans attending live events. Furthermore, as a native of Korea, I rely on my knowledge of the nation's history and culture as well as my understanding of ideals and expectations that I have seen accepted, shared and questioned by its people to situate my analysis in the appropriate cultural context. My cultural insight as an insider is immensely valuable as a basis for my judgments as to what aspects of the phenomenon at hand are significant (and why). Yet there are a few points that I discuss only briefly or withhold entirely in this article, not necessarily because they are of less significance than those I do discuss here but rather because more data from content analyses, interviews and ethnographic studies would be crucial in order for those points to be well articulated and supported. Lastly, all uncredited translations of Korean texts and alphabetizations of proper nouns are mine.

Being a fan

Who are fans, and what do they do? Most obviously, they may listen to music by the artist to whom they are devoted, collect their albums, singles, posters and other merchandise, watch television programmes on which the object of fascination appears, create works of art and literature inspired by the latter, follow the artist's public activities as advertised and attend live performances (and other public events). Of these fan activities, the open and collective following of the idol's promotional appearances and public live performances must be most visible to the general public; it has long been common for large groups of (mostly teenage) fans to camp outside the management companies' corporate offices, television studios and the performers'

shared condos (especially with younger idol groups, for whom the management label often provides group housing), in the hopes of catching a glimpse of their idols. Curiously, the shift of the primary medium of distribution of music to television in fact pushed the primary site of fan activities from fans' homes to public spaces (i.e., television studios and concert venues rather than in front of television screens). While it may have been part of the entertainment companies' marketing strategy to produce large-scale spectacles involving crowds of audience, at which they surely have been successful, this new, highly visible (and time-consuming) mode of consumption is certainly a more viable option for young fans to pursue rather than for adults with regular, nine-to-five job responsibilities.

The advent of this kind of active, dedicated mode of being a fan in South Korea's popular entertainment scene marks an expansion of the nation's long-underground (and often pathologized) fandom culture onto the capitalized, mainstream realm. Even so, the mostly teenage demographic of the newly arising fandoms and their typical activities, which require great amounts of time and dedication, may have contributed to the fans at large being considered to be abnormal, immature or Other. As Joli Jenson (1992) writes, comparing aficionados and fans:

What if we describe the loyalties that scholars feel to academic disciplines rather than to team sports, and attendance at scholarly conferences, rather than Who concerts and soccer matches? [...] Do the assumptions about inadequacy, deviance and danger still apply? I think not. [...] Fandom, it seems, is not readily conceptualized as a general or shared trait, as a form of loyalty or attachment, as a mode of 'enacted affinity'. Fandom, instead, is what 'they' do; 'we', on the other hand, have tastes and preferences, and select

worthy people, beliefs and activities for our admiration and esteem. Furthermore, what 'they' do is deviant, and therefore dangerous, while what 'we' do is normal, and therefore safe. (Jenson 1992: 19)

The fan of Korean popular music in this context thus is doubly abnormal, by virtue of his or her age and of the pathological status of fandom and its activities. The largely teenage demographic of K-pop fandom renders its Othering easier and more natural, as linked to the immaturity, instability and fundamental defect (hence defined in negative terms, i.e., as failure to be a proper adult) associated with the age group.

Of course, the phenomenon of teenage fans of mainstream popular culture hardly marks the first instance of a youth culture and its functions being deemed abnormal. A well-known example of this type of pronouncement can be found in Dick Hebdige's 1979 text on youth subcultures. The British subcultures that he observes construct and articulate coherent and multidimensional systems through 'violations of the authorized codes through which the social world is organized and experienced' and 'express[ions of] forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial and behavioural codes, law breaking, etc.)', which are from the perspective of the dominant culture 'unnatural' (Hebdige 1979: 91-92). These subcultures, too, conspicuously consume existing material codes as building blocks for their cultural expression, in the process of constructing meaning through the use of concrete symbols; Hebdige (1979) calls this process 'bricolage' (Hebdige 1979: 102-04). Fans of post-1990s South Korean popular music differ, however, in that their conspicuous consumption seems to embody little, if any, ideological opposition to hegemony. The pathologization of this culture, in other words, is grounded on the 'excessive'

attention and dedication shown to the objects of affection and the resulting inability of the fans to involve themselves in activities to which ‘normal’ citizens of a capitalist economy are expected to devote themselves. They show an obsession rather than a mere taste or preference; something about them and what they do is, it is implied, *wrong*.

Being a man

Enter adult men. Men’s involvement in Korean pop music fandoms complicates the distinction, or political separation, between two distinct cultural classes, so to speak; the existing dynamic between the normal and the abnormal is altered in largely two ways. First, the activities and manifest identities commonly associated with the powerless (in a patriarchal society) are now adopted by the powerful. In this context, the men’s take on fan identity through conspicuous consumption of musical commodities does not seem to considerably negate either the men’s status as the dominant or the fan culture’s place in the fringe of cultural politics, but rather results in what appears to be an alternative masculinity that warrants further attention. Second, in doing so, they attempt to reject and depart from the traditional model of masculinity that they are expected to adopt. This functional, stylistic and teleological mould for South Korean men is embodied in the *ajossi*, a word that in its narrowest sense means ‘an uncle’ but has evolved to refer to any older male, as the Korean language often extends the use of kinship terms to referring to strangers. The *ajossi* type influences not only the outward appearance expected of men but also their behaviour, their consumption pattern, and the ideology that constructs and perpetuates a particular kind of masculinity long prevalent in the Korean society. Both the persistent Confucian patriarchal values and the ideal of hard-working men, which became the norm following the rapid modernization and industrialization of the nation in the latter half of the

twentieth century, contributed to the conventional *ajossi* masculinity; a similar case is found in the Japanese salary-man ideal, which also reflects ‘the corporate masculine ideals and expectations imposed upon them’ (Iida 2005: 63). In a country in which forty-hour work weeks did not begin to become the norm until the mid-2000s and in which workers spend more time at their job than any other member state of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the responsibility to provide for the family through hard work often largely falls on men, despite the increase in women’s full-time employment rate in the recent years (Ministry of Strategy and Finance 2012: 9). As a result, men spending time and money on leisurely or cultural activities are often linked to extravagance and negligence of responsibilities as a proper, productive citizen (and to failure to live up to the ideal of the latter), as evident in mass media portrayal of the so-called *doenjangnam* (‘soybean paste men’), the male counterpart of the *doenjangnyeo*, a derogatory stereotype for women who spend large sums of money on overpriced food and accessories (Pearson and Rashid 2012). The prevalent gender norm for Korean men expects little to no investment of money or time in leisurely activities, hobbies, or cultural indulgences such as attending concerts and beautifying themselves.

The recent years have seen diversions and departures from this norm. On one hand, South Korean actors and singers have increasingly adopted metrosexual styles, a move possibly representative of a larger tendency among Korean men to expend increasing amounts of money and time cultivating and maintaining a ‘sharp’, well groomed and dressed appearance. While such tendency is often labelled as a ‘feminized masculinity’ (Iida 2005: 56), to posit aesthetic awareness *per se* as feminine would be somewhat misleading (and misled). Such sensitivity and attention to appearance and self-presentation have often been associated with femininity in numerous cultures, including contemporary South Korea, but there is little in aesthetic awareness

that is inherently feminine; however, the tendency certainly does depart from the conventionally held and shared model of modern Korean masculinity, embodied in the middle-aged *ajossi*. While such difference in approaches to expressing masculinity between generations rarely makes for a major topic in television dramas and other mass media products dealing with generational gaps and conflicts, men of different ages clearly and visibly vary in their ways of dressing and presenting themselves in public and on camera. On the other hand, such generational divide in masculinity ideals also pervades South Korean men at large; conspicuous consumption once more is the key. The cosmetic and the fashion industries, which traditionally catered primarily to female customers, have responded promptly to the emergence of the new, aesthetically aware male ideal with numerous product lines and brands geared exclusively towards male buyers who prioritize such ‘male beauty works’ (Miller 2006: 125). Young South Korean men are increasingly leaving barbershops in favor of hair salons, which were typically considered female territory. Giving a new look to masculinity and constructing a new set of generational ideals through consumption of commodities, through adoption of a consumption pattern that differs drastically from that of the typical male of the previous generation, these men defy the existing social order. Though typical discussions about changing and diversifying faces of masculinity in modern Korea seldom focus explicitly on power, the core issue is far more fundamental and complex than mere individual tastes.

What is at stake?

What is at play here is not merely consumption habits of individuals or groups of people, but rather what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) calls ‘habitus’, objective homogenization of practices ‘without any intentional calculation or conscious reference to a

norm [...] mutually adjusted *in the absence of any direct interaction* or, *a fortiori*, explicit coordination' (Bourdieu 1977: 80). In other words, the concept of habitus refers to a subconscious ideological construction that links the social structure and the society's constituents without conscious synchronization; the construction ultimately determines individuals' cultural preferences and tastes in lieu of the underlying (and pre-existing) social factors that gave rise to the tendencies in the first place. In this regard, the rest of this article will describe how the concept of habitus could help explain the rise of *samchon* fans and how the implications of the latter may complicate our understanding of the former.

The men's choice of consumption pattern and priorities (i.e., in their devotion to an interest outside of the traditionally masculine spheres of work and family) is hence a politically charged act. And it is precisely in the context of Korean men's departure from the normative, patriarchal mould of masculinity long accepted in the nation's culture that I interpret the *samchon*'s involvement in pop music fandoms. The men's identification as fans has been rather 'closeted', presumably because of their primary responsibilities as family heads, sons, employees and so on. Three kinds of sources, however, are relatively free from the cultural pressure, though they still leave plenty of room for educated guesswork and inference: the men's presence on websites and online discussion boards, mass media portrayal (particularly televised) of the men's fan activities and those male celebrities who openly admit and discuss their fascination and interest in younger female idol stars. Following online discussions by and about the *samchon* fans would prove to be exhausting long before exhaustive, but a casual glance at a number of posts and comments on websites such as DC Inside, Daum and Twitter is sufficient for one to gather that the label *samchon* itself is used by both the adult male fans and outside observers. They also seem to participate mainly in activities that interfere little with their regular daytime

job responsibilities, including following their favourite performers on social networking websites, posting and distributing online materials about the singers and attending their live performances when possible; camping outside a management company's corporate office or an idol group's condominium is usually out of the question. Attending concerts and television tapings of music programmes (commonly involving a live studio audience), however, are far more manageable for those with a day job, and it is increasingly common to see adult male fans at those events, as well as on the final, aired version of the programmes (which suggests a host of conscious decisions during the production process), visibly excited and enthused to attend the events and see their favourite idol stars. My aforementioned suspicion that the men's behaviour is more than a *mere* act of indulgence but rather a politically charged statement is confirmed (and in part informed) by a remark by one such fan, the 32-year-old Yongil from Incheon, whom I met at a television taping at a Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) studio. He says, while waiting in line to enter the studio: "[his and other *samchon* fans'] increasingly open and visible participation in the fandom ... makes a statement about the culture that exclusively values the hard-working, selfless patriarchal figure who remains wilfully ignorant to supposedly petty and trivial things like music and other forms of art and culture" (Personal communication). The patriarchal gender expectation makes it difficult for men to feel comfortable being themselves, his 29-year-old fiancée Narae adds, by rendering "something so natural as saying you like a musician and their music as something abnormal and pathological, something to be ashamed of" (Personal communication). Challenging the *status quo* here seems to begin not with a structured social movement with lofty aims, but rather with making the alternative increasingly visible by pursuing their passions. Defying those cultural assumptions and stereotypes certainly appears to be more common in South Korea today than in the past, in part because the adult males at the

centre of the current phenomenon possess the social position (demographically speaking) to initiate the momentum needed for a visible social motion and change, and in part because, as briefly visited earlier, the culture industry and those involved in mass media production do provide more room for the ‘unorthodox’ audience, amplifying the already-existing voice even further. Part of this involves male celebrities who are open about their interest as fans, whose voices can offer a much clearer and more multifaceted perspective, since most of their remarks are mass distributed via television, radio and online social media. Yet those remarks by celebrities cannot be understood in the same way as laypeople’s comments because they carry another layer of contextualization: the male celebrities’ onscreen personas, mannerisms and, perhaps most importantly, publicity manoeuvres to avoid potential celebrity scandal of any kind.

Late night television programmes are popular in many countries, and though their formats and genres may vary, many incorporate musical performances to varying extents; examples from the United States include *Saturday Night Live* or *The Late Show with David Letterman*. Commercial programmes that emphasize live musical performances with minimal interruptions are much less common. However, late night live music programmes are not only common but also seemingly rather popular in South Korea, and its television stations have nationally broadcast a number of them for decades. An early example of this format is *Noh Young Shim-eui Jageun Eumakhoe/Noh Young Shim’s Little Concert*, aired on the Korean Broadcasting System’s national channel from 1992 to 1994. All three of the over-the-air television networks that broadcast nationally in South Korea, Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), have produced and aired a number of such late night music programmes. Currently, *Concert 7080* and *Yu Huiyeol’s Sketchbook* are in production. The former is broadcast on KBS-1TV nationally on

Sunday nights, hosted by Bae Chul-Soo, a long-time radio personality and DJ in his sixties. As the title implies, the programme mostly features singers who enjoyed commercial success during the 1970s and 1980s, thus attracting studio audiences (and, supposedly, television viewers) in their forties and older. On the other hand, *Yu Huiyeol's Sketchbook*, first aired in 2009 on KBS-2TV, seems to appeal mostly to younger viewers, based on the approximate age range of studio audiences shown in the show's episodes. Each episode lasts 80 minutes without commercial breaks, and consists of performances by three to five performers, each of whom plays for fifteen to twenty minutes on the stage set up in a television studio, made to resemble a concert venue. Songwriter and producer Yu Huiyeol hosts the show, introducing and briefly interviewing each act, while still prioritizing the performances over the talk segments. Yu's programme, like many of its kind from the past, reflects the host's personality and taste in music. For example, *The Sketchbook* features a vast number of independent musicians for a nationally broadcast television programme, especially those who specialize in electronica and *Shibuya-kei* genres, continuing the trend that the host had established in his past radio programmes such as *All That Music* (aired from 2002 to 2004 on MBC-FM4U) and *Radio Cheonguk/Radio Heaven* (aired from 2008 to 2011 on KBS Cool FM). It also features as recurring guests a number of musicians who are close friends with the host or have had close musical associations with the latter. Of its first 215 episodes, aired from April 2009 to December 2012, Lucid Fall appeared in eighteen, Sung Si-Kyung in sixteen, Kim Yeon-Woo in twelve, and Yoon Jong-Shin, Kim Jang-Hoon and Lee Juck in nine each. Most of these performers have collaborated with Yu in past musical projects, appeared in radio programmes with the latter or signed to Yu's label, Antenna Music, and have publicly disclosed close personal ties with him. Such bias contributes to the show's distinctly personal atmosphere, and adds to the perceived 'breaking of the character' by Yu.

I find *The Sketchbook* relevant because it features, with an unusual frequency, idol girl groups and other young female musicians whom one may not expect to appear on the programme based on their chief musical styles or, as discussed above, their prior ties with its host. Often, the only clue for their appearance is provided in the form of Yu's excited proclamation about his admiration for the musicians during the show's interview portions, made more compelling by the personal undertone that penetrates the programme and by Yu's openness about his particular fondness of a number of female musicians expressed in interviews and personal conversations on television, radio and online. In particular, singer IU (born Lee Ji-Eun) first appeared in the 3 July 2009 episode of *The Sketchbook* (Kim, 2009), which immortalized in close-up Yu's clearly satisfied grin in response to the sixteen-year-old singer's impromptu performance during the interview segment. Television viewers and the musicians' fans began circulating still images and video snippets of Yu's reaction on the Internet shortly after the broadcast, coining such terms as '*Mae-eui nun* (hawk's eye)' and 'Heergasm', the latter being a portmanteau of Yu's given name and the word 'orgasm' (Park 2011). Likewise, on the 15 September 2012 episode of *The Sketchbook* (Cho, 2012), Yu introduced girl group KARA as 'the [women] who made possible the best moment in [his] life', a sentiment that he would confirm numerous times on other occasions. Moreover, men in the studio audience have also received the female performers with enthusiasm, many of whose responses were captured on camera and broadcast. In most episodes of music programmes, including *The Sketchbook*, in which girl groups and other young female performers appear, adult male fans are shown as they cheer in wild excitement, and television cameras frequently capture their reaction. All but two instances of young female performers' entrances on *The Sketchbook* aired between June and November of 2013 included close-ups of cheering men in the audience, whereas other artists' entrances were

rarely edited in the same manner. It seems to be an aim of the programme's producers to represent male fans admiring the young women, thereby catering to that demographic. It is also important to note that these choices made during the production process serve to legitimize both the music of the idol boy- and girl groups and their adult fans' obsession, from the world of teen-oriented primetime programmes to that of the slightly more proper (or 'middlebrow'), late-night music programmes.

Samchon fans' activities go well beyond participating in television studios as audience. Commonly referred to '*opeu*' events (the term originating from a contracted form of the word 'offline'), in-person gatherings of fans range from fan meetings sponsored by management companies to informal 'mixer' parties organized by fan groups. Based on the turnouts of these offline events, numerous idol girl groups appear to attract large numbers of adult male fans. Five-piece girl group Crayon Pop is one example. *Samchon* fans of the group are informally referred to as 'Popjossis', a portmanteau of 'Pop' (from the group's name) and '*ajossi*'. Many Popjossis are also members of Sketchbook, the group's official fan club organized by its label, but their activities reach well beyond the latter's scope. Numerous adult male fans of Crayon Pop organize mass purchases of customized sweatshirts, sweatpants and blond wigs designed to resemble the girl group's stage costumes, and they attend *opeu* events in the attire. Moreover, some groups of male fans even film their renditions of the girl group's dance routine for its single 'Bar Bar Bar', and post the videos on online video sharing websites like YouTube; examples appear on YouTube channels of users Kim701006 and dunungbaba, among others. In a *Time* article, a male fan of Crayon Pop states that a *samchon* fan would think of the performer 'the way an uncle might look at a niece, interested in what she's doing and a supporter [*sic*]' (Rothman, 2013), aiming to frame the discourse on *samchon* fans in an entirely different context

from that on younger fans who are implied to look at the performer in a more romantic and sexual way. However, while the aforementioned fan supports his claim by the girl group's less sexualized, more light-hearted presentation, not all female performers with *samchon* fans present themselves in a similar fashion.

What does it tell us?

One possible way to interpret the adult male fans' obsession with young female celebrities is to posit it as a barely new incarnation of the traditional male desire to conquer, dominate and possess women as objects. The emergence of *samchon* fans, from this point of view, represents the male reclamation of the dominant position that has long been theirs, made far more potent than the teenage obsession that has been more commonplace in South Korean popular culture because of the men's advantage in age and, in many cases, socioeconomic status. The men still belong to the social group that controls rather than being controlled, by virtue of their sex, gender and age; such a gesture of admiration takes on a drastically different meaning from that of a teenage fan's. In other words, a man who identifies himself as a fan simply plays the role without having to *be* all that it represents, in an act of consumerist cosplay and, essentially, subcultural incorporation (Hebdige 1979: 94-95). These men can afford to 'adopt only the behaviours without suffering the consequences' (Miller 2006: 154). They can pursue the 'fannish things' as a pastime, without being subject to the aforementioned implications of *being* pathological fans; being a fan is simply an activity, a mode of consumption and a hobby. In fact, the stigmatization attached to *samchon* fans seems far less severe than that associated with typical fandom at large. Their experience with the social structure, in other words, differs fundamentally from that of women or adolescents, for instance, and thus their acquired cultural

preferences and tastes must differ significantly from those of the latter. In fact, a *Time* online article on Crayon Pop (Rothman, 2013) addresses the concern that the male fans are simply being ‘creepy’ and the *samchon* fan model serves to justify the perverted, quasi-pedophilic desire. Similarly, it could have been the cultural predisposition that regards older men’s sexual desire for younger women as a taboo that led to the Crayon Pop fan interviewed in the *Time* article to deny a romantic aspect of the men’s desire. Moreover, the use of the kinship term *samchon* to describe the men only adds to the uneasiness of the situation. Given the interpretation of the desire of the fans as a male desire longing for control and subjugation, one would understandably associate the use of the familial label with an undertone of incest. It would seem that the use of the descriptor by the men themselves suggests their shameless sense of entitlement to possess the women, whereas its use by the public at large only reveals how fundamentally misogynistic the culture is, and how oblivious its people are of the ramifications of the patriarchal way of thinking that permeates the society. Though it is clear that there is increasing awareness of the male-dominant social order that allows this reconfigured male desire to surface so easily, the justification and tolerance of such systemized and internalized misogyny is nonetheless still persistent and strong in the way the popular entertainment industry works.

It is nevertheless important to note that the men’s privileged socio-political position in a persistent patriarchal value system should not pre-emptively render the emergence of the *samchon* fans as disingenuous, vain or insignificant. Rather, an argument can be made for another interpretation of this version of adult male fan culture and its appearance on various forms of mass media: as a political and cultural commentary on the deeply male-centred and misogynistic social atmosphere. As discussed earlier, the male fans’ choice of consumption patterns represents the younger generation’s intentional departure from the way of life

established by the previous generations. The financial crisis that affected numerous Asian countries including South Korea in the late 1990s, as well as the disillusioning recession that soon followed, may have contributed to the notion among post-Baby Boom generations that the model of masculinity they inherited (in which men were expected to centre their life primarily around work and family, and in which their success as a providing father and family head was the basis of their authority) as well as the economic and social world that depended on it might not be sustainable. The urgency of the situation must have felt by the young and the old alike; during the financial crisis, a vast number of Korean senior patriarchs who were unemployed, bankrupt or otherwise unable to provide for their families chose to end their lives rather than to accept their failure and face the resulting humiliation. Dehumanized and reduced to impersonal machines earning a living, men may have also been desexualized in the society-wide turmoil. To explain the Crayon Pop fan's sentiment, one may argue that those men who accepted the booming economy's devaluation of them and their sexuality might in fact view their desire as strictly nonsexual, aside from the inherent possessiveness of male desire. At any rate, it is certain that several social, economic and political factors contributed to the defeat, disillusionment and disappointment felt across the South Korean society in the late 1990s. Korea and the surrounding regions saw a number of developments and social movements that I see as in line with this sentiment; in South Korea alone, for instance, college graduates in their twenties and thirties have shown a revived interest in the humanities and social sciences, which seemed to be on the fringe of the nation's economic and industrial boom during the post-war decades (Harvie and Lee 2003). It has become an increasingly commonplace society-wide trend to seek 'something more' than money and *spek* (from the word 'spec', short for 'specification', comparing human credentials to the technical specifications of electronic products). The number and variety of

public lectures and seminars on history, philosophy and other humanities-related topics have rapidly increased in recent years, hosted by numerous entities such as private companies, non-profit organizations, universities, public libraries and local governments.

One such entity is Seoul-based Ddanzi Group, a progressive-leaning company that produces a news webzine titled *Ddanzi Ilbo/Daily Ddanzi* (the latter word meaning ‘tackle’ in vernacular, representing its self-proclaimed ‘twisted view’ on current political events), in addition to a number of podcasts. The company in recent years has provided a centre for public debate and education, in addition to a centrifugal point for progressive voices. The webzine began in 1998 as founder Kim Oujoon’s personal blog that consisted of satirical commentaries on mainstream news media, and the company still maintains a visibly progressive stance, hosting interviews, lectures and other events during the months leading to the December 2012 presidential election. The events featured prominent politicians and politically vocal figures from the progressive camp (centred around the oppositional Minjoodang, or Democratic Party) including lawmakers Seo Kiho, Jeong Dong-Young and Noh Huechan, along with prospective presidential candidates Kim Dookwan, Moon Jaein, Son Haggyu and Jeong Sekyun. Its podcast series *Naneun Ggomsuda/I Am a Trickster*, satirizing and criticizing then-President Lee Myung-Bak, brought stories about the corruption and scandals surrounding the incumbent president and the dominating conservative party to casual listeners (Choe 2013: A6). However, the company has also hosted public lectures by journalists, authors and scholars as well as biweekly book club meetings discussing various classics and contemporary works in philosophy, political science, history and religion in the portion of its office that has been converted into a coffee shop. This is where the larger social movement of young Koreans (which I suspect fuels and manifests itself in the emergence of adult male fans of Korean pop music, among other things) turns out to be

multifaceted yet distinctly political. Several lectures and seminars I attended in the summer of 2012 completely filled the basement coffee shop, which holds about 300 people, and online streams of the events attract additional listeners. To be politically vocal and widely knowledgeable outside one's vocation is, at least among a considerable group of South Koreans in their twenties and thirties, becoming 'cool'. Rather than a diversion and distraction from being a one-track mind devoted solely to the work- and family life, pursuing well-rounded knowledge in the humanities, political activism and other interests stands for overcoming the closed, uncommunicative and authoritarian world-view that the previous generations of Korean men have established.

In this sense, the emerging *samchon* fans and what they embody resembles the *sôshokukei danshi* ('herbivore' masculinities), which appears to have first arisen in Japan. The term 'herbivore', as coined by Maki Fukasawa, is used to describe 'slim heterosexual men who are professionally unambitious, consumerists, and passive or uninterested in heterosexual romantic relationships' (Charlebois 2013: 89). The conventional western ideal of masculinity is closely tied to meat-eating on many levels; red meat, in particular, is not only widely associated with healthy male bodies but also symbolic of 'masculine domination over nature' (Potts and Parry 2010: 58), as the meat itself is often prepared to display signs of blood, which is understood to be the essence of life and a symbol of strength in many human cultures (Levi-Strauss, 1970). In contrast, herbivore men, estimated to be up to sixty per cent of Japanese men in their early twenties, choose to spend their free time engaging in activities rarely associated with traditional masculine roles and interests such as gardening and knitting (Garcia 2008: xviii). Scholars have linked the rise of these alternative masculinities to the economic recession that the country has undergone since the 1990s, which led to an uneasy social climate and

disillusionment with existing ideals, particularly among young adults (Garcia 2008: xviii). The young adult men ‘no longer comfort themselves by simply following hegemonic masculine ideals, but actively seek and employ aesthetic styles and characteristics conventionally associated with women for their own purposes’ (Iida 2005: 59). While the apparent ‘feminization’ of the men’s styles and aesthetic choices may be the most noticeable feature of the movement, it is not, strictly speaking, about effeminacy or gender egalitarianism. Charlebois (2013) writes:

Rather, situated within Japan’s shifting social geography, herbivore masculinities mark a context where long-cherished and hegemonic masculine gender practices are currently unavailable. In response to this sociocultural vista, herbivore masculinity entails a pastiche of alternative gender practices that might but do not *per se* equalize the relationship between men and women, between masculinity and femininity. (Charlebois 2013: 90)

Herbivore masculinities, in other words, marks a departure from the traditional façade of masculinity and what it signifies, but does not seem to specify or restrain the direction or the destination of the alternative. Rather, their ‘deconstruction or breakdown of rigid [...] gender categories and images’ (Miller 2006: 151) ultimately ‘unsettles the stability of the hegemonic order and the patriarchal masculine self’ (Iida 2005: 69). The men’s seemingly aesthetic choice, at its core, has not only to do with gendered styles or modes of self-presentation *per se*, but also (and perhaps more importantly) far-reaching ramifications pertaining to socio-political issues as well as gender and generational politics.

Being a man... Who buys

One noteworthy feature of this movement's manifestation in the emergence of *samchon* fans is that it nonetheless assumes as a prerequisite the consumerist, capitalist social order in which it operates. In other words, the voicing of the alternate world-view and value system presupposes conspicuous consumption of commodities. This is different from pointing out the obvious fact that every social commentary in response to the *status quo* is bound to depend on the latter to make sense, or perhaps even to exist. The young Korean men's politically charged message is embodied in an essentially consumerist, middle-class activity, since the ability to pursue such secondary interests as concert-going, philosophical discussions and political lectures is a luxury that presupposes a primary job that pays a sufficient wage. Furthermore, in the realm of the popular culture industry, the men's role as consumers in the market appears to have far more concrete consequences than their hegemonic societal position as adult males. Their role as consumers of cultural artefacts that circulate in mass media, as opposed to administrators of television stations, executives of management companies or celebrities featured on television programmes and musical recordings, differentiates the former from the rest most clearly. Therefore, male audience members sitting in a television studio could gaze at the adored object of desire in a drastically different way from how the television host does while interviewing her onstage. The goal here is hardly to condemn one (or both) of these manifestations as a blatantly predatory male desire to possess the object of desire and obsession. Rather, the stark difference in the amount of cultural capital (and, in fact, capital in general) associated with the fan and the celebrity, combined with the male fans' unwillingness or inability to defy the consumerist, capitalist order of the popular culture industry that commodifies the object of desire as well as

the desire itself, resulting in the aforementioned inequality, makes it implausible to interpret the fan's desire merely as the cheaply disguised male craving to dominate.

In this context, the mass media portrayal of the *samchon* fan phenomenon has complicated implications for the men. In one sense, it is a triumphant achievement for men who display and perform alternative masculinities that may challenge the hegemonic masculine gender image and ideals to have gained prominent media coverage and attention. It is uncommon for such a potent message to be diffused via mass-produced media outlets, where sameness usually prevails; it is particularly surprising if one considers that men who conform to (and benefiting from) the hegemonic social order largely control South Korea's popular entertainment industry. But is it too good to be true? Mass media portrayal of alternative masculinities may, indeed, serve to contain and defuse the potent political message. At first glance, it appears strange that the entertainment industry would reach out to this particular demographic. One may justify the curious expansion of target audience by pointing out that the industry today has a greater supply of singers and songs than ever before while the demand remains limited, but it seems a risky decision because the men, on one hand, visibly go against the widely accepted and shared social ideals in their willingness to consume popular culture commodities and to make their consumption pattern part of their constructed identities, while on the other hand they resemble previous generations too closely, thus potentially contributing to the public's perception of their commodities of choice as 'uncool'. However, the increasing weight and frequency of media attention that the men receive on South Korean television suggest that the risky decision may have proven a worthwhile investment, and the once-threatening political message behind their conspicuous consumption may have lost its power to question gender ideals in the existing social norm. The fact that more and more of the *samchon* men distance

themselves aesthetically from the traditional *ajossi* masculinity has contributed to the presentation of the men as untraditional and ultimately harmless.

Conclusion

It is nonetheless of immense significance that the adult male fans construct self-images and modes of self-presentation and commodity consumption contingently upon a societally formed type, pattern or habitus. Their taste and preference were influenced and shaped by historical and political factors as discussed earlier, and their effects in turn manifest in social, economic and political tendencies. Provided that mass mediation and remediation of any (reasonably diffused and circulated) political message is inevitable if not necessary for its further dissemination, the potency of what such aforementioned examples as male beauty works and the *samchon* fans (and their conspicuous consumption of musical commodities) embody may not be defeated and destroyed entirely by their incorporation and re-contextualization. Rather, their emergence put alternative masculinities and their very possibility on the South Korean socio-political landscape for further discussion and propagation. Furthermore, this also led to the wide dissemination of what alternative masculinities look like, not only on young male celebrities who are unquestionably aesthetically aware yet may feel distant and somewhat impersonal, but also on laymen, for whom non-traditional masculinities may have been inaccessible due to societal pressure of various forms to conform to the norm whose emphasis on the authority and legitimacy of serious, patriarchal male figures devoted to work and family lives has defined not only normative masculinity but also normative maturity and adulthood. In particular, in the case of *samchon* fans of various Korean pop acts, adult male fans' active and highly visible participation in fandom constitutes not only an alternative mode of consumption for the

demographic but also points to the possibility of a much larger, complex movement defying the pre-existing notions about masculinity and what it should entail. The entrance of alternative masculinities and modes of construction of alternative subjectivities into South Korea's social dynamic is to be welcomed, as they will contribute to the enrichment of cultural discourses taking place in and around the nation, whose rapid economic and social growth in the second half of the twentieth century were accompanied by distinct lack of cultural diversity and the thriving of authoritarian, patriarchal powers.

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre (1977), *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. R. Nice), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1984), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, New York: Routledge.
- Charlebois, Justin (2013), ‘Herbivore Masculinity as an Oppositional Form of Masculinity’, *Culture, Society & Masculinities*, 5: 1, pp. 89-104.
- Cho, Hyun-Ah (2012), *Yu Huiyeol’s Sketchbook*, KBS-2TV, 15 September, 00.20.
- Choe, Sang-Hun (2013), ‘South Korea Seeks Journalist’s Arrest in Defamation Case’, *New York Times*, 13 May, p. A6.
- Garcia, Guy (2008), *The Decline of Men: How the American Male Is Getting Axed, Giving Up, and Flipping Off His Future*, New York: Harper Perennial.
- Harvie, Charles and Lee, Hyun-Hoon (2003), ‘Export-led Industrialisation and Growth: Korea’s Economic Miracle, 1962-1989’, *Australian Economic History Review*, 43: 3, pp. 256-86.
- Hebdige, Dick (1979), *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, New York: Methuen.
- Iida, Yumiko (2005), ‘Beyond the “Feminization of Masculinity”: Transforming Patriarchy with the “Feminine” in Contemporary Japanese Youth Culture’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 6: 1, pp. 56-74.
- Kim, Kwangsu (2009), *Yu Huiyeol’s Sketchbook*, KBS-2TV, 3 July, 00.20.
- Jenson, Joli (1992), ‘Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization’, in Lisa Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 9-29.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1970), *The Raw and the Cooked* (trans. J. & D. Weightman), New York: Harper & Row.
- Ministry of Strategy and Finance (2012), ‘Current State of Employment in Korea: Comparison of Key Indices to OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Member States’,

- <http://www.mosf.go.kr/news/news02.jsp?actionType=view&runno=4014784>. Accessed 30 December 2013.
- Miller, Laura (2006), *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics*, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.
- Pak, Gloria Lee (2006), 'On the Mimetic Faculty: A Critical Study of the 1984 *Ppongchak* Debate and Post-Colonial Mimesis', in Keith Howard (ed.), *Korean Pop Music: Riding the Wave*, Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, pp. 62-71.
- Park, Sojeong (2011), 'Yoo Hee-Yeol's Sketch Book [sic]: Four Keywords from Show's First Hundred Episodes', *Ten Asia*, <http://tenasia.hankyung.com/archives/7345>. Accessed 31 December 2013.
- Pearson, James and Rashid, Raphael (2012), 'What's with All These "Ladygates?"', *The Korea Times*, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinon/2012/05/137_111949.html. Accessed 28 December 2013.
- Potts, Annie and Parry, Jovian (2010), 'Vegan Sexuality: Challenging Heteronormative Masculinity through Meat-free Sex', *Feminism & Psychology*, 20: 1, pp. 53-72.
- Rothman, Lily (2013), 'K-Pop's Unlikeliest Fans: Middle-Age Males', *Time Entertainment*, <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/09/02/k-pops-unlikeliest-fans-middle-age-males>. Accessed 2 January 2014.
- Son, Min-Jung (2006), 'Regulating and Negotiating in *T'ûrot'û*, a Korean Popular Song Style', *Asian Music*, 37: 1, pp. 51-74.