KOREA VS. K-DRAMALAND: THE CULTURALIZATION OF K-DRAMAS BY INTERNATIONAL FANS

By Marion Schulze

South Korean television dramas, K-Dramas, initiated the Korean Wave, *Hallyu*, in the late 1990s. Nowadays, a global viewership gathers online to stream K-Dramas live, watch them with subtitles, and discuss them on specialized blogs and message boards. However, most research still concentrates on East Asia as the main realm of K-Dramas' diffusion, and online communities that watch K-Dramas on the Internet have rarely been considered. Furthermore, most researchers analyze K-Dramas as products inscribed by "Korean culture" or "society," an approach that relies on an understanding of "cultures" and "societies" as discrete, homogenous, locally bounded entities.

  Expanding upon the nascent online audience research on K-Dramas, I propose in this article a shift of perspective by focusing on how international fans themselves account for K-Dramas (or elements thereof) as socially and culturally "Korean" or operate a rupture with such a culturalist viewpoint.

Keywords: Korean television dramas, international fandom, culture making, virtual ethnography

INTRODUCTION

I am watching a South Korean[1] television drama with a friend. She asked me about my research and wondered how I could find these dramas interesting enough to study them, let alone like them.[2] We start with *Nice Guy*, also known as *The Innocent Man*, a series highly rated on online message boards and described by

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[1] In the following, "Korea" refers to South Korea.
[2] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers at *Acta Koreana* for their valuable comments.

"international fans"[3] as especially engaging. From the first second, my friend is pulled into the series. She becomes nervous and starts giving directions to Maru, the protagonist: "Don't do this! Don't be stupid!" "Oh my gosh!" she turns to me. "He will do it; he's stupid! I can't watch this." Even though she is absorbed by the storyline and is sitting on the edge of her chair, she decides that she prefers something lighter. We watch a couple of minutes of a few different dramas and finally decide on *Boys Over Flowers*: "I like this one," my friend affirms. She is happy with the protagonist but soon asks me why the girl stuffs everything into her mouth so quickly when she's eating and doesn't even notice that she has rice grains glued to her upper lip. She also says how much she hates the slurping sounds the character makes while drinking: "Do all Koreans slurp like this while drinking? I can't stand that sound." My friend concludes that these eating and drinking habits must be a signifier for poverty in Korea. She also observes that the female protagonist with a low educational background walks in a clumsy, heavy way, while the other characters walk with much more refinement and sophistication. Nevertheless, she likes the protagonist's clothes: "That's nice," she points out an outfit. "That's the one [guy] she'll end up with, right?" she asks, guessing correctly five minutes into the series.

This way of watching, sitting on the edge of one's chair, anticipating what comes next, and at the same time accounting for ways of behaving, interacting, eating, talking, or walking—in short, ways of doing things—is common to all international fans of Korean television dramas (K-Dramas) as discussions on their blogs and message boards attest. During this process of accounting, some things are referred to as Korean ways of doing things, just as my friend did. But when and how exactly are interactions, behaviors, objects, or social institutions accounted for as being "Korean?" This is what I want to explore in this article.

Researchers can adopt a number of possible stances when setting out to analyze the (global) reception of K-Dramas—especially in regard to culture. The dominant stance consists of analyzing K-Dramas as products that are clearly rooted in "Korean culture" or "society," which is inscribed in these moving images and their narrative tropes. However, this approach relies on an understanding of "cultures" and "societies" as distinct, tangible, homogenous, locally bounded entities. It also takes for granted that viewers worldwide actually account for K-Dramas as being "Korean." I propose a shift of perspective by focusing on how international fans themselves either account for K-Dramas (or elements

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[3] I use the English titles of the K-Dramas I discuss to reflect the way they are known and named by the international fans I am interested in here. The same goes for the names of the protagonists of the K-Dramas. I also use the term "international fans" in the emic sense, i.e. how these fans call themselves and not in an analytical sense.

thereof) as socially and culturally "Korean" or operate a rupture with such a culturalist reading. In doing this, I would like to draw attention to the daily processes of what Baumann (1996, 6) referred to as "making culture." I thus highlight how international fans of K-Dramas continuously construct (national) culture(s) through collective activity.[4] To do so, I describe in detail the logics on the basis of which international fans use categories that refer to (national, regional) cultures and societies in their sense-making processes. These can be references to "Korean culture" or "Korea" or their own social, and (national, regional) cultural belongings. K-Dramas are therefore not understood in this article as "Korean products" that transmit "Korean culture" or "society" to "different" or "similar cultures/societies," but as a (possible) projection screen for "culture making."

The results presented in this article are based on ongoing research on K-Dramas' international fans through content analysis of blogs and message boards. I address the overall question of international fans' culturalization of K-Dramas in three steps. I first show how international fans rarely culturalize what they see in K-Dramas in their discussions, but mainly interpret what happens in K-Dramas according to the conventions of K-Dramaland, a fictive world that represents a self-contained universe. Afterwards, I retrace how exactly international fans culturalize "Korean" dramas or elements and themes thereof in making reference in their understandings to "Korea" or "Korean culture." I demonstrate how this culturalization usually includes not only a cultural labeling of the other, the "Korean," but also a cultural (in the sense of national, regional cultures), social, or political (here feminist) self-positioning by viewers themselves. As I show, these culturalist understandings are highly negotiated among international fans. And finally, I demonstrate to what extent this process of cultural labeling and the negotiations that accompany them engender a "hierarchy of credibility" (Becker 1998, 90), i.e. a singling out of experts of "Korea" amidst K-Dramas' international viewers.

HALLYU AND RESEARCHING K-DRAMAS

All scholars who study *Hallyu*, the Korean Wave of worldwide exports of "cultural" objects, agree that it was initiated by K-Dramas, with their romantic storylines, in the late 1990s.[5] Nowadays, a global viewership of K-Dramas gathers

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[4] The term "culturalization" is thus employed throughout this paper in the sense of continuous, on-going processes of "making culture" (see for example Grillo 2003).

[5] Interestingly, a study by Lie indicates that this uniform historical account might be too simplistic. Lie shows that the music of Korean pop singer Cho Yong-p'il became very popular in Japan in the

online to stream them live, watch them with subtitles, and discuss them on specialized message boards and blogs. Since K-Dramas were classified under the umbrella term *Hallyu*, research didn't wait to follow suit. A main aim of this research has been to understand why these Korean products have become so successful with audiences abroad. According to these analyses, the reasons are closely linked to the particularities of the region in which *Hallyu* played out first: East Asia (cf. Shim 2006). After economic factors (Kim 2005; Shim 2006) or South Korean government measures (see, e.g., Shim 2008), cultural factors are highlighted by researchers: "cultural proximity" has thus become the major explanation for K-Dramas' successful expansion (see, e.g., Jung 2008; Lee and Ju 2010; Shim 2006, 168; and Yang 2012).

The notion of "cultural proximity" was introduced by Straubhaar (1991, 286) at the beginning of the 1990s to counter the media-imperialism thesis, which predicted unidirectional cultural flows mainly from the United States to the rest of the world and thus the "American domination of the global information sphere" (Ferguson 1992, 72). Straubhaar counter-argued that cultural dissemination follows "distinct regional patterns" characterized by shared language (or linguistic heritage) that create cultural commonalities. These cultural commonalities are the reason, according to Straubhaar's research, that viewers—if given the choice—actively choose to watch national or regional programs. To understand the expansion of K-Dramas in East Asia, researchers have adopted Straubhaar's perspective and explain K-Dramas' success as resulting from East Asian cultural commonalities such as a "shared sense of Asianness" or "Asian sentiments" affected by the Confucian emphasis on family values, filial piety, and respect for elders. Following the cultural proximity thesis, East Asia is conceived of as a relatively homogeneous cultural region in previous research, and for research a country or city in this region is singled out. Researchers have thus primarily studied K-Dramas' reception in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, or Taiwan, receiving cultural foyers whose "culture," much like that of the entire region, is treated as being relatively homogeneous.[6]

Two trends in scholarship have dominated this research on K-Dramas' reception in East Asia until now. One trend has focused on how K-Dramas have

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1970s and refers to his songs as "something of a harbinger of the Korean Wave" (Lie 2012, 344).

[6] As a corollary of the cultural proximity thesis, viewership of K-Dramas has been conceptualized in previous research as restricted to East Asia and the Korean diaspora in the United States (see, e.g., Jung 2009; Kwon 2006, 258; Lin and Tong 2008; Kim 2005; and Shim 2006). Audiences from other geographical regions are only mentioned in passing, if at all. In passing, Jung (2009), for example, mentions Mexico, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, Asian Americans, and other Americans, as well as subtitles in English, Spanish, and Turkish. Kwon (2006, 258) also mentions Mongolia and the Filipino diaspora.

affected the perception of Korea and/or Koreans in other countries (see, e.g., Creighton 2009; Hanaki et al. 2007; Hayashi and Lee 2007; Iwabuchi 2008; Kim 2005; Kwon 2006; and Lee and Ju 2010). The second trend has concentrated on how watching them helps people to cope with everyday life in their own countries (see, e.g., Chan and Wang 2011; Creighton 2009; Hanaki et al. 2007; Lee and Ju 2010; Matsuda and Higashi 2006, 19; Shim 2006; and Yang 2008).[7]

When broadening the research to other regions or studying the worldwide diffusion of K-Dramas, it is a logical deduction that the cultural proximity thesis has difficulty accounting for the international viewership of K-Dramas outside of East Asia. First, Straubhaar's argument regarding regional linguistic and thus cultural commonalities does not apply in such a research setting. In addition, the consumption patterns of international K-Drama fans contradict Straubhaar's argument (1991, 51), which emphasizes the importance of linguistic commonalities and only takes into account programs that are broadcast by "preexisting international production and distributing systems" (Ferguson 1992, 71). International fans of K-Dramas, on the contrary, repeatedly stress that they prefer to watch K-Dramas online (often on streaming sites that are illegal or operate in a legal grey zone) with subtitles instead of their national or regional television series.[8]

But more fundamentally, the cultural proximity thesis relies on a specific conceptualization of culture that has been put into question since the 1970s. According to this conceptualization, (national) cultures/societies are understood as discrete, tangible, bounded, stable, and enduring entities (for a critical discussion, see, e.g., Barth 1998 [1969]; Beck 2003 [2000]; Gupta and Ferguson 1999; Latour 2005; Rabinow and Marcus 2008; and Wimmer 2005). Furthermore, it forwards the idea that cultures are bound to certain territories (Gupta and Ferguson 1999). This research thus conceptualizes cultures as, to borrow Beck's (2003 [2000]) expression, "containers" and essentializes and reifies their bound-

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[7] A few scholars who study K-Dramas have questioned the cultural-proximity thesis' ability to explain the success of K-Dramas in East Asia on its own. According to them, too much emphasis has been placed on the cultural similitudes of the different national cultures in East Asia, at the expense of intercultural disparities. To remedy this shortcoming, Chua (2010, 21) adopts a two-scale approach that focuses on two reasons for viewers' attraction to K-Dramas—not only the cultural similitudes of a region, but also the differences between national cultures. Shim (2006, 167f) proposes a multifactorial approach that takes into account not only the reception side of K-Dramas, but also the production side, and thus addresses micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis.

[8] Some of them also learn Korean to be able to watch K-Dramas without subtitles and/or watch these television series before subtitles are released in order to have a sense of what is happening next.

aries as well as their content. Cultures are presented as already existing entities without examining how they are actually constructed. The cultural proximity thesis builds from this understanding of culture and adds the dimension of regional cultural similarities that are "naturally recognized by audiences" (Iwabuchi 2002, 131). Intra-regional differences, especially historical contexts and power relations, are overlooked (Iwabuchi 2002, 131). Furthermore, because the cultural proximity thesis assumes that audiences readily detect their own and similar cultures, it cannot account for how audiences actively make culture come into being and constantly constitute it while interpreting what they watch. In sum, K-Dramas are understood within this theoretical framework as products from one "culture" that then traverse national boundaries and diffuse into another (similar) "culture" and/or "society."[9] Consequently, K-Dramas are analyzed as products of a specific culture, in this case Korean culture, that are consumed in another culture/society similar to Korean culture/society. Research that adopts the cultural proximity thesis thus runs the risk of (implicitly) culturalizing K-Dramas through its theoretical and methodological research set up.

In regard to the media through which K-Dramas are consumed, previous research refers to television broadcasting, VHS cassettes, and DVDs, and it seldom mentions the Internet. It is thus a logical corollary that these researchers have assumed the *loci* of exchanges on K-Dramas to be family and friends, and not blogs or message boards. Only since 2012 (Correra 2012, Hong-Mercier 2012, Lee 2014), and only rarely, is the Internet focused on seriously in research as the main medium through which K-Dramas are accessed. In this research, the Internet is seen as a platform through which K-Dramas are watched but also actively discussed and built upon through interpretations. The viewership is conceptualized as a small community of fans with its own cultural repertoire that fulfills the characteristics of a "counterculture" (Hong-Mercier 2012) or "subculture" (Lee 2014). However, this research also (indirectly) understands K-Dramas as the products of a specific culture (i.e. Korean culture) that itself is transmitted through these products. Hong-Mercier (2012, 205), for example, discusses *objets culturels mystérieux* ("mysterious cultural objects"), and Correra (2012) sees K-Dramas as products "from a foreign culture" that have an impact on "Philippine culture."

This article is intended to contribute to this nascent online research on the "interactive audience" (Livingstone 2003, 355) of K-Dramas. However, I adopt a perspective that departs from previous research. Instead of starting with the *a*

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[9] For an exception to this tendency to conceptualize K-Dramas as cultural transmitters, see Lin and Tong (2007, 231), who discuss K-Dramas as a "fantasyland." Lin and Tong do, however, take the "cultural specificities" and gender order of the society under study as their starting point.

priori that K-Dramas are products of and (partially) mirror "Korean culture," I am interested in how actors themselves account for K-Dramas (or elements thereof) as socially and/or culturally Korean. Avid K-Drama fans, as I will show, are in general very cautious in labeling something as *being* Korean and frequently engage in negotiations on this issue. In addition, they often explain the happenings in K-Dramas by making reference to K-Dramaland—an emic term that refers to an imagined world created through the collective activity of the writers, directors, actors, and viewers of K-Dramas—and not to "Korean culture" or "society."

This analysis thus feeds into a much larger reflection on the nationalization or culturalization of behaviors, interactions, institutions, or objects. On a methodological level, this article therefore contributes to the deconstruction of methodological nationalism (Glick-Schiller and Wimmer 2002), regionalism, and continentalism. In addition, it follows Boltanski and Thévenot's (1991) proposed shift from a critical sociology to a sociology of critics. That is, it takes as its starting point an interest in the ethno-sociology of the persons under study and foregrounds their logics rather than scientific explanations.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on ongoing online research that started in July 2012, since which time forty blogs and one message board have been followed on a daily basis. For this paper, I have concentrated on the data collected until August 2013. This data was hand coded and analyzed by following the three-step system of analysis of tagging, systematizing, and thematizing, as discussed by Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor (2012, 164ff).

The sample of blogs was selected according to five criteria that were established after following K-Dramas' international fans during three years of blog "trawling" and "solicitation" (Hookway 2008, 100). First of all, the blogs—with a small number of exceptions—had to focus exclusively on K-Dramas. The exceptions were blogs that, according to international fans, discussed primarily K-Dramas.[10] The second criterion was that blogs had to be referred to by and mentioned on other blogs or in discussions among fans on the message board. The sample thus was not determined by the bloggers' countries of residence, for example (which is impossible to verify in this context), but rather according to the credibility given to the blogs by international fans. Third, the blogs had to be updated regularly and generate comments by international fans. Fourth, the language of the blog had to be English, as it is the common language of these

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[10] That international fans understood these blogs in these terms was evident from the fact that the blogs were linked to by other blogs that concentrate only on K-Dramas in their "link listings."

fans (see also Lee 2014, 91). The last criterion was that the blogs had to be publicly accessible.

Because I concentrated my sample on blogs, I did not single out one or several K-Dramas for my research, but instead followed the K-Dramas that were discussed on the blogs during the time aforementioned—some of which are named in this article. Thus the television series discussed by international fans at any given time were those that were then being broadcast, as international fans usually discuss the latest episode of the K-Dramas being aired at the time. However, because of their archival character, the blogs and message board also allowed easy access to earlier discussions of K-Dramas. Some blogs that were analyzed cover nearly all K-Dramas that are being broadcast at a given time; others specialize in selected dramas for "recaps," short summaries; and yet others discuss the specific dramas the bloggers follow. This is why older K-Dramas from the early 2000s that are accessible online were sometimes also discussed and were part of this research. Most blogs concentrate on shorter weekday dramas (sixteen to thirty episodes), and the longer weekend dramas (fifty or more episodes) were more frequently discussed on the message board. When time permitted, I also watched the K-Dramas to be able to better follow the discussions.

As might already be obvious, I also did not constitute my sample by trying to determine the ethnicity of the international fans. Thus I could avoid stereotyping informants as "belonging to" or "speaking for" a specific group of people because they "come from" a specific "ethnicity" or "culture" (see Baumann 1996, 8). Doing otherwise would have run counter to my interest in understanding when international fans *themselves* deem it necessary to position themselves as coming from a specific cultural or social background to explain or interpret something they see in a K-Drama. Also, what was more important for this research was that the people who discuss K-Dramas perceive themselves as taking part in a specific "community" of international fans whose main interest is to exchange ideas about K-Dramas.

I therefore conceived of these international fans as a world in the Beckerian sense (Becker 2008 [1982]) with its own conventions and sense- and boundary-making practices, which are ensured through collective activity. This world of international fans is very difficult to pin down geographically or demographically, as is generally the case for audiences (Blumer 1969, 183ff). It is a network whose origins date to the early 2000s and that saw its rise in the mid-2000s, especially in North America, South America, Hawaii, and France, but also in Spain, Romania, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, the Middle East, most

Southeast Asian and East Asian countries, and India.[11] A significant increase in personal blogs, and hence a solidification and standardization of this world, could be observed in 2010, especially with the broadcasting of the two K-Dramas *Secret Garden* and *Sunkyungwan Scandal*. There are no official data available on the international fans that gather online. But from blogs' visitor maps, it is clear that K-Dramas are watched online on all continents. Many of the bloggers whose blogs I have analyzed do not mention social demographic characteristics on their webpage. From the fifty-four persons involved in the forty blogs I follow, nearly half of them (42.6%) do not disclose information on their country of residence, their ethnicity, or their gender. 40.7% say that they reside in the United States and 16.7 % that they reside outside the United States. Of the 40.7%, 14.8% mention that they are white or "non-Korean." Of the 16.7%, three say they live in Korea, another blogger describes herself as a Canadian-Korean, two other non-Asian bloggers reside in France and Switzerland respectively, and two other bloggers say they are from Malaysia. 16.6% of these bloggers describe themselves as Korean-Americans or Korean-Canadians who reside in either North America or South Korea.

Furthermore, the majority of international fans use a "screen name" to identify themselves on blogs or message boards (often because of possible copyright infringements resulting from their subtitling activities or because an acquaintance may recognize them and make their "passion" or "addiction" for K-Dramas public, which, they fear, might lead to social sanctions or incompre-hension[12]).[13] It is thus also difficult to identify their gender, although international fans agree with researchers that most viewers of K-Dramas are women. However, some men are known as avid, active, and regular contributors to this world. From my observations since 2009, I estimate the ratio between women and men[14] viewers to be four to one. It is equally difficult to know the professions of these international fans, as they rarely discuss them to make sense of what they see or compare it to their personal experience. High-school or university students, university lecturers, housewives, senior citizens, freelance workers, lawyers, legal

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[11] See http://www.dramabeans.com/meetups/.

[12] See, for example, http://crazyforkdrama.blogspot.ch/2013/04/blue-hat-of-ranty-ness-or-stephanies.html.

[13] This is why I decided against a total anonymization by changing user names or citations: international fans who want to remain unknown do so. In addition, these blogs are publicly accessible, and the topics discussed in this article are not sensitive (Wilkinson and Thelwall 2011, 387).

[14] The binary description of gender I employ here is not an analytical *a priori* that therefore reifies a binary gender system (Hirschauer 2001), but instead reflects the gender categorizations used by international K-Drama fans.

assistants, schoolteachers, and office workers are the occupations most frequently mentioned.

This imprecise information on the social and demographic background of the sample, which is rather common when doing research online, is often seen as a disadvantage of online research: since the body (the basis on which we usually perceive and label a person) is absent in online exchanges, it is often believed that anyone can impersonate anyone (cf. Markham 2008, 255). This concern touches on the question of the validity of the research. First, however, the problem of potential identity play and deception is encountered in all research, on- or offline (see Hookway 2008, 97; and Walther 2002, 213). Second, there is no evidence so far that information gathered online is less trustworthy than that collected in offline research settings (Hookway 2008, 97; Walther 2002, 211; see also Markham 2008, 267ff).[15] Third, more and more K-Drama bloggers upload photos and videos of themselves, and a tremendous increase in international fan meetings can be observed since mid-2013, which were preceded by informal meetings between blogging and (non-)blogging international fans. As such, international fans do compare and make sense of off- and online statements. In addition, a strong "self-policing" (Schloss 2009, 12) can be observed among international fans who believe they have been "betrayed" by an imposter. These observations are not, however, meant to imply that all the information given and standpoints defended online are "true." I consider them rather to be "real" in the sense proposed by Thomas: if people believe this information to be true, it is real in its consequences (Merton 1968; see also Hookway 2008 for a discussion of this issue in the specific context of the Internet). This is why I also take the accounts of international fans as seriously as I do in this article.

K-DRAMAS ONLINE AND K-DRAMALAND: HOW INTERNATIONAL FANS CULTURALIZE "KOREAN" DRAMAS

From international K-Drama viewers' discussions, a very specific way of perceiving K-Dramas can be outlined. Avid K-Drama viewers will discuss the storyline of a drama, its development, its possible endings, the motivations of certain protagonists, characters' (in)consistencies (cf. Young Lee 2014), and the way the story is conveyed by the writers or actors in a very detailed way. Although rather rarely, these discussions do sometimes include a comparison with personal experiences or information about the author or the actors, or other "background

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[15] Hookway (2008, 96) argues that bloggers are often even more honest because they can "hide" behind an "online mask."

information."[16] They thus come close to what could be called an "ethno-hermeneutic" reading consisting in reading and "thinking-along-with" (Davey 2002, 438) the drama as a text in and of itself. By referring to what international fans do as ethno-hermeneutic reading, I want to point to the depth in which K-Dramas are discussed among international fans. More than this, ethno-hermeneutics also points to the several different perspectives and layers of interpretation added to the K-Dramas by international fans through their collective reading. This way of reading is enforced by the "laws," "conventions," "rules," and "tropes" that, according to the majority of these fans, govern all K-Dramas. "I mean K-dramas rely on tropes and conventions so much that one drama is almost the same as any other one,"[17] comments tokyojesusfist,[18] for example. Donnapie writes similarly: "These are the formulaic staple that's sure to be present in any Kdrama no matter what the year, story, the circumstances it was written in or whoever the characters might be."[19] These "laws" range from special places, specific food, or traffic rules to (non)verbal communication rules, weather, and maladies. Some of the most common norms are taking out the battery to switch off a cellphone; making random U-turns without being fined; piggy-backing somebody to the hospital instead of calling the ambulance; getting sick after standing in the rain for ten minutes; possessing a magic 24-hour healing power; using IV drips as a cure-all for maladies including cancer; excessive drinking and violence; having a high chance of getting amnesia or cancer; and being very poor but still being able to sport designer goods and the latest cellphone. Also, specific locations like airports, hospitals, showers, elevators, (plastic) tents,[20] rooftop houses, public bathhouses, or the Han River belong to these laws of representation. Regularly, posts or message-board entries will be dedicated to enumerating and highlighting the most common patterns. Most often, these patterns are treated as clichés without which a K-Drama would lose its distinctiveness vis-à-vis other media genres. This sum of "narrative tropes" is often referred to as "K-Dramaland." K-Dramaland is a commonly used term

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[16] Most typically, these discussions take place in separate threads or blog posts.

[17] In all citations, I have left spelling, punctuation, and grammar as they are in the original (see Markham 2008, 260ff).

[18] http://www.dramabeans.com/2010/07/pop-culture-piggyback-rides/comment-page-3/

[19] http://donnapie.tumblr.com/post/9991282484

[20] Most international fans refer to the settings of K-Dramas with a *de facto* vocabulary, without searching for possible Korean denominations. They refer, for example, to "plastic tents," "outdoor restaurants," or "tent bars," where people go to drink after work, instead of calling them *pojangmach'a*. The same goes for other recurring local settings in K-Dramas such as "public bath houses" (rather rarely called *tchimjilbang*) or "Karaoke places" (also rather rarely referred to as *noraebang*).

among international fans to describe an imagined world created through the collective activity of writers, directors, actors, and viewers of K-Dramas. Happenings in K-Dramaland are then often explained exactly with these clichés or laws. A character's behavior is understood according to the way K-Dramaland rules require her/him to behave, or her/his reactions are questioned in the realm of K-Dramaland. "Things go from bad to worse for Kang-chi [main lead of the drama *Gu Family Book*] today, which I guess in dramaland is just another day," is how Girlfriday summarizes Episode 6 of *Gu Family Book*.[21] "Has no one heard of lawyers or, yunno, googling people, in K Dramaland?" asks TS regarding the K-Drama *You're the Best Lee Soon Shin*.[22]

It is this interpretation according to the rules of K-Dramaland that highlights how much international fans understand the story that develops before them as taking place in a self-contained universe. This understanding of K-Dramaland also explains international fans' ethno-hermeneutic interpretations, which aim to understand and follow the actions and motivations of the characters in their context, i.e. the world the drama itself presents through the (re)use of a collection of standardized clichés. Plotlines that differ from the "norm in K-Dramaland" are thus also highlighted. As TS comments on the drama *You're the Best Lee Soon Shin*, "I love this mother-daughter relationship, and that's not something we often get in K-Dramaland."

In sum, international fans do not systematically *culturalize* what they see in K-Dramas—in the sense of adopting a culturalist point of view and clearly identifying "Korean" and their own "cultures." This is why in order to understand the culturalization of K-Dramas by international fans, K-Dramaland has to be taken seriously as the main frame of reference in discussions among international fans. This dominant and therefore standard way of receiving K-Dramas, can thus also be read as a non-culturalist interpretation of K-Dramas. But international fans' reference to K-Dramaland also hints at one reason that most of them only rarely and hesitantly culturalize what they see in K-Dramas: most international fans don't want to risk defining what "Korean culture" *is*. But what they know very well are the narrative tropes that constitute the K-Drama genre.

However, some international fans will occasionally also consider explanations based on a culturalist perspective. These culturalist interpretations will usually be negotiated among international fans with the intervention of some of them that take on an expert position. K-Dramaland can thus be understood as a fictional world that occasionally becomes a screen onto which "cultures"—understood in

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21 http://www.dramabeans.com/2013/04/gu-family-book-episode-6/
22 http://www.dramabeans.com/2013/03/youre-the-best-lee-soon-shin-episodes-1-2/comment-page-2/#comments

their association with "place" (Gupta and Ferguson 1999)—are projected, and on which basis these "cultures" are negotiated and collectively constructed by international fans, as becomes clear when examining exactly how the culturalization of K-Dramas occurs.

THE (UN)CERTAINTY OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE: FOUR DIFFERENT WAYS OF READING

If discussions among international fans occasionally shift from K-Dramaland into "cultural territory," they usually do so in two ways. First, it can happen on the introductory page of a blog or when writing about K-Dramas in general. Second —and this is what interests me here, as it occurs predominantly on the Internet— it can happen when discussing one particular K-Drama. A specific element in a K-Drama, whether a gesture, an object, a traffic rule, a way of communicating, or a special drink or food, will be connoted as being "Korean." Or a theme that a K-Drama revolves around, like school, kinship, or marriage, can be discussed in terms of culture.[23] Two main tendencies of culturalization are prevalent here. Some international fans hesitate to "do culture"[24] and are reluctant to explain things via "Korean culture." This "reluctant culturalization" is due to the hesitation of some international fans to make sense of what they see through either a K-Dramaland or a culturalist explanation. Furthermore, their reluctance can be engendered or fortified by the feeling that it is their own cultural belonging that hinders understanding. Other international fans, in contrast, directly connote elements or themes of K-Dramaland as part of Korean culture. This "direct culturalization" is often linked to a clear cultural, social, and/or political self-positioning by these fans, as becomes clear when examining exactly how these different modes of culturalization occur.

Most typically, a culturalist explanation is not made right off the bat. It will most likely start with an interrogation that is spurred by curiosity, astonishment, or a felt lack of understanding that arises about how situations are handled in K-Dramas or how things are displayed. Some viewers, to make sense of their reactions, question whether these can be explained by, on the one hand,

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[23] In this article, I exclude *Sageuks*, historical K-Dramas, for which international fans sometimes consider knowledge of "Korean history" to be important in order to understand the plot and its development.

[24] With the term "doing culture," I refer to a constructivist understanding of culture—to culture as something that is continuously done through interactional work. This understanding can be read as a theoretical translation of the concept "doing gender" (Zimmerman and West 1987). I also use "doing culture" synonymously with "making culture" in this article, while being aware of the slight differences one might find in their connotations.

K-Dramaland conventions or, on the other, their limited cultural understanding or knowledge of the other, the "Korean." This questioning thus very rarely starts with an explicit statement that something *is* Korean. Many viewers hesitate to do culture and thus to define the trigger of their reactions as culturally based. This hesitation is also visible in the frequent use of formulations that question or pose probabilities or speculations. Phrasings like "seems to be," "maybe," "may be," "makes it look like," "I wonder," and "must be" are recurrent in these statements.

A common way for international fans to follow up this interrogation is to address co-viewers on blogs or message boards. "But that's just a cultural thing, right?" "Is there really a significance to relationship hair clips or is it purely a kdrama thing?" "Is it really that important for Korean women having lots of expensive 'designer bags'?" "do they have that much coffee shop in korea?" These are just a few examples of these interrogations.

Even if, as shown above, most avid international K-Drama viewers refer to recurrent themes and ways of doings things as K-Dramaland laws, it can be exactly this repetition of certain laws or narrative tropes that makes some of these viewers believe that there could be a "cultural truth" behind them, as the following statement shows:

> We are aware that k-drama is entertaining and at most times is fictional & beyond realistic/logical but with this constant abuse of both physical and emotional nature of the victim/heroine it brings the question as to is this how they (the country) see and really treat their women.[25]

However, these attempts at a culturalist explanation are also very often eschewed in favor of a "K-Dramaland" perspective. "I first suspected it might be a cultural thing," states Kakeshi regarding the drama *Cheongdam-dong Alice*, "but I fear that's wishful thinking. I guess very bad writing started to rear its ugly head early on when Han Se-kyung [the main female lead] has her little break-down [...]."[26] Jeaniessi, another international fan, formulates her sentiments similarly: "I'm not sure it is a cultural thing. I think its a drama thing. I mean...What person in their right mind would claim ownership on a person they deserted with no explanation for years?"[27] In these cases, viewers explicitly refer back to K-Dramaland (and not to "Korean culture") to make sense of what they see.

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[25] http://koalasplayground.com/2013/03/27/weekend-k-dramas-preparing-to-unleash-a-double-dose-of-makjang/

[26] http://dr-myri-blog.blogspot.ch/2013/01/farewell-to-cheongdamdong-alice.html

[27] http://mydramalist.com/forum/showthread.php?871-Korean-concept-of-time

A fan's interpretational doubt about the possible "Koreanness" of ways of doing things in K-Dramas is thus usually first stated as a probability and shared with other viewers on blogs and message boards. This "reluctance to culturalize" is the main tendency in international fans' interpretation of K-Dramas. Other viewers are thus offered the role of cultural judges who either confirm the Koreanness of elements and/or themes or relegate them back to K-Dramaland. Often, these questions are not directed to a specific person, but to whomever may wish to reply. The questions are not always answered, or somebody might respond with a culturalist explanation that in turn may be questioned, supported, or refuted by subsequent commentators. Other times, a specific person—the author of a blog or a member of a message board—will be addressed directly, as that person is esteemed as being knowledgeable about "Korean" culture and society. These questions, however, are not always answered, and the next comment may just pass on to a new topic, which also underlines the fact that international K-Drama fans usually relegate culturalist interpretations to the periphery of the discussion.

In a similar modus of culturalization that is also characterized by reluctance, the astonishment about how things play out in K-Dramas or the felt lack of understanding are addressed by some international fans by linking them not only to a (possible) other culture, but also to their own cultural situatedness and belonging—an approach that is based on taking into account one's own potential ethnocentrism that remains latent in the first modus. For these viewers, who position themselves as "not native," having "not a drop of Asian blood," or being "not Korean," "Westerners," "Western European," "from a different culture," or from "the U.S," K-Dramas initiate a form of institutional reflexivity (Goffman 1977) that seems to force them to take on a culturalized or nationalized position, i.e. to culturalize or nationalize their belonging.

This tendency often goes hand in hand with these fans' construction of K-Dramas as a mirror, or at least a partial mirror, of "Korean culture." Simultaneously, their own cultural or social belonging is constructed as different from the culture that is transmitted to them through K-Dramas. It is this cultural difference that is sometimes foregrounded by international fans as a probable explanation for their astonishment or felt lack of understanding and thus their possible misinterpretations in their reading of the K-Drama text. This lack of understanding is thus made into a possible lack of *cultural* understanding that is explained through their own cultural belonging, which is in their view different from "Korean culture." Signifiers are thus made into possible *cultural* signifiers that can only be decoded by knowing this culture. It is therefore the fans' cultural belonging that, according to this logic, possibly prevents them from being able to

understand certain elements or themes. For these fans, to speak with Iwabuchi's terms (2002, 24), some elements or narrative tropes of K-Dramas *could* have a Korean "cultural odor" that hinders them from fully understanding what plays out in front of their eyes. In regards to the K-Drama *School 2013*, for example, Acciovino states:

> But maybe having grown up in the US, I don't quite understand some of the characters. [...] I am sure there is a cultural element I am missing [...] and somehow it befuddles me as to why Ha Kyung [one of the students of Seungri High School—where the drama mainly takes place] is getting so shit upon for trying so hard.[28]

In their interpretational doubt, it is, in the eyes of these fans, their own cultural situatedness and perceived cultural differences that may be able to explain why they cannot fully decode the signs mediated through the screens of their computers, laptops, or smart phones. To verify which interpretation—the one referring to "Korean culture" or the one making reference to K-Dramaland—is correct, they also address their co-viewers. In these cases, the reluctance to interpret what they see is not based on a hesitation between a K-Dramaland explanation and a "Korean culture" explanation, but on how they perceive their own cultural belonging.

Some viewers—and this is a third modus of interpreting some K-Drama elements or themes—are more direct and don't hesitate to attribute the label "Korean" to something they watch. Here, in contrast to the two other modi of interpretation, a specific element or way of doing things will clearly and directly be accounted for as Korean. Most of the time, this labeling will also be done with elements viewers who position themselves outside "Korean culture" have difficulties interpreting. These difficulties are often linked to a personal disagreement and/or dislike of how situations are played out. It is this personal distantiation from the happenings in K-Dramas that will be explained by a geographical and cultural distance and difference, as these international fans often believe that "Korean culture" is (partially) transmitted via K-Dramas. "I know things are differently socially in Korea so I might be totally misinterpreting her reactions," says of when discussing the K-Drama *Gentlemen's Dignity*.[29] Consequently, being from "another culture" constitutes for these viewers a "cultural gap" that explains things with which they are not content. It is also through these sorts of direct

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[28] http://www.dramabeans.com/2012/12/school-2013-episode-4/
[29] http://www.dramabeans.com/2012/07/a-gentlemans-dignity-episode-13/

culturalist statements that international fans may position themselves as experts on Korea, as I discuss below.

These culturalist statements, however, are not always taken for granted by other viewers and can be questioned, relativized, or put into a larger context, as is revealed by the following succession of comments by different international fans on dramabeans.com regarding the K-Drama *Alice in Cheongdam-dong*:[30]

> — ck1Oz: You know what? Somehow not seeing the screaming mother in laws. But knowing how class and education and family plays a huge part in Korean society- that is seriously scary.
> — Windsun33: While class and education—especially "class" are more important in Korea and many other Asian countries than in the US, I would hardly take this or any other drama as a true reflection of Korean culture. [...]
> — luvs: i think its more of poor vs rich instead of 'class' or education snobbery.
> — Lilly: Class is iron clad in the USA. The USA ties with the UK as having the worst chance to ever move up from the class you are born into in the Western world. [...]

Here ck1Oz's statement about the importance of family and education in Korean society is first relativized and criticized as *over*doing Korean culture and society and taking K-Dramas as a direct mirror of Korean society/culture. The exchange afterwards relativizes the cultural difference made up by ck1Oz in comparing it to, and highlighting the similitudes with, the USA and the UK.

This discussion is quite representative of the exchanges between international fans once a culturalist probability or statement is posted on a message board or blog. Rarely is a culturalist statement directly and univocally accepted. Instead (if taken seriously enough to respond to), these statements are questioned, contradicted, and supported. In short, their cultural signifier is negotiated among international fans.

One other example of these negotiations over the cultural reality/verity of elements and/or themes exposed in K-Dramas and the different ways of approaching them is the recurrent discussion of the wrist-grab. I'd like to focus on this example for a bit. The majority of K-Drama viewers will agree that the wrist-grab constitutes a "staple of K-Dramas." Among international fans, the term "wrist-grab" is usually intended to denote a man dragging a woman away from a place by grabbing her wrist. This gesture is recurrently approached with

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[30] http://www.dramabeans.com/2013/01/alice-in-cheongdam-dong-episode-13/

"reluctant culturalization." Viewers are often not sure if this gesture can be explained by K-Dramaland on the one hand or Korean culture and/or society on the other. "I'm just getting into Kdramas and I'm not really sure on the culture," states, for example, a viewer in a discussion about the drama *Missing You*, "but grabbing a women in a forceful way when they don't like it is not something I would personally do. I do not condone it."[31] A similar questioning, but this time based on the viewer's own social and/or cultural belonging, can be read on a discussion board thread on which the drama *7th Grade Civil Servant* is discussed: "Do Koreans or any one do this in real life?" is asked here by Mrdimples, followed by: "If a man does this to me, I'll kick his b***. But this is the strange thing about k-dramas, they make things like this into something desirable or romantic. There's that unmistakable man's dominance over woman and it's supposed to get the female viewer excited."[32] Here, this gesture's probable cultural origin is questioned because these viewers cannot relate to it based on their social or cultural experiences, but also because it is a gesture they don't consider appropriate in social interactions. But other explanations as to why this gesture is used (attracting women viewers) are also given, and therefore no clear culturalist interpretation is made.

Another recurrent reaction to the wrist-grab is a strong dislike that is made sense of through a culturalist reading. This dislike is thus often explained by defining the wrist-grab as a product of a different culture and, simultaneously, through one's own different cultural belonging. "I hate them, hate them, hate them!!" writes Kakeshi, who goes on: "Not that I try to be a feminist when watching KDrama, since I've noticed early that the two things don't go together well, but the forceful, even abusive wrist-grabbing and wrist-dragging are really too much for my Western European taste buds. KDramas are products of a different culture, produced not only but probably mainly for that specific culture."[33] A similar comment is made by ravens nest in regards to the drama *Missing You*: "While I have always hated the KDrama Wrist-Grab, I just chalk the entire experience as cultural differences and move on. [...] I think the thing that bothered me most was that the whole scene smacked of the 'No means Yes' mentality that pervades Rape culture. While I know South Korean culture is different from mine, I can't help but view that entire Forced Dinner moment [situation in the K-Drama] through this lens."[34] Thus, to explain a gesture of

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[31] http://koalasplayground.com/2012/11/29/missing-you-episode-8-recap/

[32] http://forums.soompi.com/discussion/2007172/drama-2013-7th-grade-civil-servant-level-7-civil-servant-7급-공무원-recap-updated/p103

[33] http://dr-myri-blog.blogspot.ch/2012/11/random-thoughts-on-wrist-grabbing.html

[34] http://koalasplayground.com/2012/11/29/missing-you-episode-8-recap/

which they disapprove, these viewers emphasize difference based on culture. The construction of cultural difference allows these viewers to distance themselves from the wrist-grab gesture.

As already shown above, these statements might be either confirmed or challenged by other viewers in a follow-up discussion. The counter-arguments also often adopt a culturalist perspective, as an anonymous comment on Kakeshi's statement, cited above, demonstrates: "Wow I didn't know wrist grabbing was something that could be seen as offensive especially to women because in Korea, it can happen to either side as an expression of intimacy or anger. I personally experienced a forceful wristgrab from my ex-boyfriend in the past and I just thought 'What's all this about? Why is he angry?' It was irritating, but I didn't take it seriously."

In particular, topics around heterosexual relationships and the portrayal of heroes and heroines are, as has already been seen to some extent in the comments on the wrist-grab, often discussed in ways that combine a culturalist positioning with a feminist one. Here, things seen in K-Dramas are made sense of through intersecting viewpoints—the last way of understanding elements or themes of K-Dramas that I want to discuss here. On her blog *Outside Seoul*, for example, Amanda states:

> I've always considered myself to be a feminist, which can be a difficult thing to reconcile with a love of Korean drama. As much as fun as I have watching these shows, I often find myself cringing when it comes to their depictions of relationships between men and women.[35]

This self-positioning as a feminist when discussing K-Dramas occurs mainly among international fans when topics or elements of K-Dramas are mentioned with which viewers cannot agree or feel offended by, as seen earlier in Kakeshi's comment on the wrist-grab. This feminist stance is clearly linked by these international fans to an upbringing in a "Western culture" that collides with "patriarchal Korean culture/society." In this double differentiation and distantiation, Korean society/culture is often described not only as culturally different but also as "patriarchal," and "predominantly male chauvinistic," and therefore as having "gender-equality issues." Again, K-Dramas, in the eyes of these fans, (partially) reflect this. "Don't think that fiction in a patriarchal society doesn't reflect the values that are deemed to be right in that culture,"[36] states girlfriday on dramabeans.com when writing about another highly discussed staple of

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[35] http://outsideseoul.blogspot.ch/2012/08/the-other-f-word-feminism-versus-korean.html
[36] http://www.dramabeans.com/2010/07/pop-culture-piggyback-rides/

K-Dramas, the piggyback ride. These statements are often tied argumentatively to claims that Korea is (still) governed by Confucianism. Confucianism, constituted as a different belief system from the ones familiar to or accepted by these fans, therefore serves as an explanation for this double differentiation, which becomes visible in the following excerpt from a blog entry on the roles of heroines in K-Dramas:

> Among the East Asian countries, Korea is at present the one with the strictest adherence to the Confucian ethical tradition; this fact has a direct relationship with gender roles in Korean society and therefore influences the image of women in media.[37]

However, this double differentiation and distantiation is also contested as being too simple a construct and a miscomprehension of social reality in Korea – and, in this context, Korea's gender order. This contestation can take different forms. Some insist that certain elements like the wrist-grab must be understood in their social and cultural context, in which they have different connotations. Others criticize an overly simplified view of Korean society and culture, which are described as actually being much more layered and diversified. Still others relativize claims about Korean culture by highlighting the similitudes (instead of the differences) between it and others "cultures" and pointing out that K-Dramas do not realistically mirror Korean culture. The two following comments are examples of these types of contestations:

> [...] the whole wrist-grabbing thing is a long overused and familiar trope that's been in countless other K-dramas (Nice Guy for one) and really is more of a cultural thing than a sign that this particular character is a sexist, dominating "jackass." It's almost become predictable now to expect a backlash from viewers against the male characters that exhibit this behaviour every time the trope is used in a drama. You'd think by now, k-drama watchers would find it a non-issue [...].[38]

> K-drama's do not equal K-culture necessarily. Sexism is defiantly a global problem, and Im sure k-dramas is not a good representation of what the average Korean is okay with just like the US media is not a representation of how everyone feels and acts, and we still have are problems with sexism here as well.[39]

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[37] http://seoulbeats.com/2012/06/confucianism-and-the-female-roles-in-k-dramas/
[38] http://koalasplayground.com/2012/11/29/missing-you-episode-8-recap/
[39] http://seoulbeats.com/2012/06/confucianism-and-the-female-roles-in-k-dramas/

THE USE OF SINGLED-OUT SIGNIFIERS IN THE COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTION OF "KOREAN CULTURE"

What connects all these ways of culturalizing—whether it is done reluctantly, directly, or in intersection with other self-positionings—is that one rather minor, rather arbitrary element or theme in K-Dramaland can be made by international fans to stand for a whole, specific social group, "Koreans," or a whole culture/society, "Korean culture/society." Even though direct comparison is difficult, Collette Guillaumin (2002 [1972]) reveals something similar when demonstrating how one physical trait (skin color or genitals) is constituted and stands in as signifier for a social group (in her case ethnicities and genders). Similarly, backed up by a search for "cultural proof" on the Internet and/or through "lived experience"—as I will discuss below—minor elements become, in the exchange among international fans, the starting point from which to generalize about and construct a Korean culture. These elements then stand in as signifiers for "Korean culture" *as a whole*. The wrist-grab is, for example, sometimes connoted not only as a *Korean gesture*, but also as a gesture specifically used in gender interactions that become synonymous with a patriarchal society of Confucian origin. Korean culture, then, is not constructed through elements or themes displayed by moving images on screens, but through the collective activity and effort of international fans—and the diverse negotiation processes that are linked to this activity. This construction of Korean culture based on singled-out signifiers that become culturalized through a process of negotiation among international fans takes its origin in elements and/or themes of K-Dramaland that cannot be decoded or accounted for by these international fans in other ways. "Korean culture" as a whole is thus constructed piece by piece on the basis of the *possibility* of difference, and in the process of this construction international fans convert this difference from a non-intelligible one into a cultural one. This conversion is often fortified by the international fans' perception of their own cultural belonging, but it can also be reinforced by other self-positionings, as I have shown in my discussion concerning feminist readings of K-Dramas.

This *pars pro toto* process of constructing "culture" can, in turn, also become the reason that an element and/or theme becomes connoted as *Korean*. International fans, of whom the majority does not fulfill commonly accepted criteria of being acquainted with "real Korean culture"—they are not Korean, have never been to Korea, and are not familiar with the country in any other way—will build up a knowledge of "Korean culture" by following these processes of negotiation in which some international fans who are accepted as experts on

Korea distribute information on the country's culture and society. These international fans thus pick up ideas of how and what Korean culture *is* and construct on this basis an imagined Korean culture—similarly to an imagined museum (Malraux 1965)—that in turn makes them interpret certain other elements as also being Korean. Becoming convinced about the importance of a patriarchal family system and education in Korean society by participating in and following blogs and message boards on K-Dramas can then facilitate the interpretation of a gesture or behavior as *being* Korean. This imagined Korean culture can then be used to produce a culturalist interpretation of other elements and/or themes.

"HIERARCHY OF CREDIBILITY": SINGLING OUT "EXPERTS OF KOREA"

What I have demonstrated so far is that when international fans cannot make sense of something they see in a K-Drama, they seek explanations primarily in K-Dramaland and its clichés and much less frequently in their understanding of what "Korean culture/society" *is*. When international fans base their interpretations on the latter, their (latent) logic is often that their cultural belonging and situatedness might not allow them to decode certain elements or themes displayed in K-Dramas. This self-positioning as being from another, different culture leads these fans to seek out experts on Korea, the "culture" to which they lack access, to verify whether their culturalist interpretations are correct, or whether K-Dramaland and its laws serve as a better explanation. In this regard, international fans make recurrent reference to Wikipedia and other pages that distribute information on Korea, like mykoreanhusband.com, thegrandnarrative.com or askakorean.blogspot.com.[40] "According to this great source [link to mykorean husband.com], the wrist-grabbing actually happens in real life too," writes Kakeshi, who concludes as follows: "Therefore, KDrama that shows wrist-grabbing is simply showing us a part of real gender-interaction in Korea." It is important to note that these fans consider themselves to be unfamiliar with "Korean cultural codes" because of their own cultural belonging, and that they are therefore in the need of "cultural experts" who will teach them the meanings of these codes. Furthermore, knowing these codes may enhance their understanding of the K-Dramas and therefore their viewing pleasure.

Viewers thus seek out people they define as experts on "Korean culture." The resources to verify whether something is "Korean" or can be interpreted as part of K-Dramaland, i.e. is purely imagined, require in their view a person who is "as

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[40] See, for example, http://mejackson1.blogspot.ch/2013/03/where-my-korean-obsession-hangs-out.html or http://outsideseoul.blogspot.ch/2012/08/kdrama-linkapoloza.html

close to Korean culture as possible." Those who are addressed as experts on Korean culture or position themselves as such have a transversal characteristic, *lived* experience, or "offline cultural familiarity," as Lee (2014, 81) puts it. That is, these experts are people who are in direct contact with "Korean culture" through immersion. "With these dramas you just don't get some things because you don't deal with that culture everyday," states rebecca34.[41] The importance of lived experience is also visible, for example, in this statement by Kakeshi: "Am I an authority to publicly comment on Korean customs? Most certainly not. I have never been to Korea and don't even have any Korean friends (*sob*)."[42]

What is considered a legitimate lived experience, however, varies considerably among international fans. Some will ask a member of their extended family who lives in Korea, a "Korean friend," a "Korean Expat friend," or somebody who is married to a Korean. Others refer to a "non-Korean" who has visited, lives, or has lived in Korea, or to their own lived experience in Korea, be it on vacation or for a longer period of time. The important factor here is having first-hand experience of "Korean culture" through participation. Central to this understanding, therefore, is the belief that people are the most important vectors of "Korean culture." International fans thus conceptualize Korean culture in a very Herderian way (for a discussion, see Wimmer 2009), i.e. as a homogenous set of practices, rituals, and values that are tied to a very specific geographical place where Koreans are settled, Korea and the places of the Korean diaspora. People who grew up or were exposed to this "culture" thus become the product of this culture and can be considered its spokespersons.

International fans who possess this lived experience in any of these forms emphasize it in discussions to legitimate their interpretations of K-Dramas. Being "Korean" or being a second-generation Korean who is part of the Korean diaspora (mostly in North America) and thus having grown up in "Korean culture" are common and accepted legitimations and are often highlighted in comments in a rather detailed manner. "As a man raised in Korea myself [...]." "I'm a Korean and I went to school in Korea for 3 years." "I grew up in an orphanage in S Korea." "I'm half korean and half latina, and I've been living in Korea since I was 13 years old." "Grew up in the U.S. but my parents raised me with Korean popular culture." These are just some examples of how international fans legitimate their claims to authority.

It is this importance of "lived there, been there, seen it" among international fans that engenders a hierarchy of credibility between K-Drama viewers that is most often based on how well one knows "Korean culture." People who are close

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[41] http://www.dramabeans.com/2012/07/a-gentlemans-dignity-episode-15/
[42] http://dr-myri-blog.blogspot.ch/2012/11/random-thoughts-on-wrist-grabbing.html

to this "culture" through lived experience are thought to have "a more complete picture of what is going on than anyone else" and their interpretations are regarded as "the most credible account obtainable," as Becker shows for organizations (1998, 90). Lacking this lived experience will make viewers have "incomplete information, and their view of reality will be partial and distorted in consequence" (ibid.).[43] The importance of lived experience also establishes a ranking system among international fans. The more lived experience a viewer can advance, the more legitimation is given to her/his interpretation.[44] The remarks of international fans that are informed by claims of lived experience are thus placed highest in the hierarchy of interpretations by other international fans and will very rarely be contested—and this only by people with the same rank. Talking from an established and respected position also grants international fans more leeway in offering culturalist interpretations, and these fans culturalize in a somewhat more nonchalant and less detailed manner, as this comment by girlfriday[45] demonstrates:

> The existence of birth secrets in family dramas is one of those things I suspect may have people rolling their eyes, but funny enough, it's an element I have no trouble with. [...] Maybe it's because this is just a thing that happens in Korean families? I can only draw upon my own experiences so I don't speak for the society at large, but I have seen several (yup, plural) birth secret instances in my extended family, and it just seems like a normal part of the fabric of life.

Along these lines, three types of experts are accepted among K-Dramas' international fans. Most of the time, the most highly regarded experts among international fans are those who identify as "Korean-Americans" or "Korean-Canadians," as they come with two assets in the eyes of most international fans: they are perfectly bilingual—in a linguistic but also in a cultural sense. This "cultural hybridity" causes them to be seen as perfect cultural and linguistic mediators between the world of Anglophone international fans and "Korean culture."

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[43] For example, the success of the blog dramabeans.com is certainly due partly to this hierarchy of credibility between fans, since the two bloggers, girlfriday and javabeans, repeatedly position themselves as Korean Americans and therefore as legitimate commentators on "Korean culture."

[44] Knowledge of the language is another important factor that is usually linked to these lived experiences.

[45] http://www.dramabeans.com/2013/04/youre-the-best-lee-soon-shin-episode-9/

Some international fans can nevertheless circumvent this hierarchy of credibility based on lived experience. They can gain authority as legitimate commentators on K-Dramas that can extend to "Korean culture/society" in general through active participation in and a longtime commitment to this world. These fans, in their logic, thus cannot foreground any lived experience in Korea, as they have never been to Korea, don't speak Korean, and have no other relationship with Korea or Koreans. However, their remarks on "Korean culture" and society are taken more seriously and are less contested than those of other international fans.

The final type of expert accepted by international fans is not someone who has lived experience in Korea or its diaspora, but someone who has lived experience in "Asia" or *is* "Asian." According to this logic, Korea is subsumed under the continent of Asia in a world in which Western culture is clearly distinct from Eastern culture. Therefore an expert with knowledge of Asia might appear to be as good as an expert with knowledge of Korea, as becomes visible in following exchange:

> — dexter8010: There is something i want the ask from @hkana I read eralier you are an asian. I am from Hungary (central europe). I saw many dramas when the wife has become the husband's shadow. They are reffering the woman is not equal the men. This so strange for me. Is this standrad thing in asia?
> — sonny: [...] Asian families are like that unfortuneately. It's better to marry someone who is in your social rank. Life is just easier that way. My parents stress compatibility and equal footing and I can see where they're coming from.
> — kdramafan469: I agree with some but not all of what you said. I don't think that Asians have a strangle hold on not wanting mismatched relationships. To some extinct all cultures have that point of view. My parents would often say, "You can do bad on your own." [...]
> — hkana: As for your question regarding the females being the shadow of men in Asian [...] In the old days, mostly the male (father) was the sole bread winner of the family so they decided almost anything. Women's action were limited and mostly they stayed home. However it's not always the same for all families. [...][46]

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[46] http://forums.soompi.com/discussion/2007280/current-drama-201213-cheer-up-mr-kim-힘내요-미스터-김/p49

SOME FINAL REMARKS

When writing about their "passion" for or "addiction" to K-Dramas, quite a number of international fans state that before they encountered their first K-Drama, they were not even aware of the existence of South Korea, let alone able to situate it geographically. Some also state that these moving images were for them an encounter with an exotic, new, and different world. A superficial analysis could easily single out such descriptions and show that international fans perceive K-Dramas as products of a specific culture with clearly decodable cultural characteristics. But a detailed and thorough analysis of international fans' blogs and message boards reveals that such a view is untenable. When analyzing the comments on and interpretations of K-Dramas by international fans, it quickly becomes obvious that culturalist interpretations are extremely rare. Most interpretations center around an in-depth reading, which I have called an ethno-hermeneutic reading, of the discussed K-Drama by focusing on, among other things, the storyline of a drama, its development and possible endings, the motivations of certain protagonists, and character (in)consistencies. This way of reading K-Dramas is enforced by recurrent narrative patterns deployed by the writers, directors, and producers of K-Dramas that form, in the eyes of international fans, a world of its own, K-Dramaland.

Thus, my aim in this article has been to propose a different way of looking at culture. Following the constructivist research on culture pioneered by Barth (1998 [1969]), I have used K-Dramas as an example of how people "do culture" in their everyday lives when watching moving images on their screens. More specifically, I have shown that international fans do not systematically adopt a culturalist stance when accounting for and discussing K-Dramas. Second, I have described four different ways in which international fans sometimes culturalize elements and themes in K-Dramas. As I have shown, a common characteristic is that these culturalist interpretations are negotiated among international fans and not a taken-for-granted *a priori*. "Korean culture" is thus constantly being constructed through the collective activity of and processes of negotiation among these international fans. I also have demonstrated how culturalization usually includes not only a cultural labeling of the "other," the "Korean," but also a cultural, and/or feminist self-positioning by the viewers themselves—and that these different self-positionings mutually reinforce each other. Finally, I have demonstrated that in these negotiations, not all international fans' interpretations are regarded as equally credible. The more an international fan can claim lived experience in "Korean culture," the more her/his interpretations are valued and the more weight these interpretations have in the collective construction of a shared understanding of Korean culture among these fans.

By foregrounding the logics of interpretation of the international fans themselves, I have demonstrated that K-Dramas do not transmit a set definition of "Korean culture" that is also received as such, but that, instead, Korean culture is an imagined and negotiated product constructed by an international audience through the mediations of interlocutors who are defined as cultural experts. This analysis has also demonstrated that the taken-for-granted hypotheses of most previous research—that K-Dramas necessarily transmit Korean culture, and that viewers can easily decode this culture—have to be treated with caution, especially because these moving images are messages that are decoded by international fans mainly in the realm of a fictive world, K-Dramaland, and not a specific "culture."

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