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Hispanic Hallyu: Comparing Boys Over Flowers Directed By Jeon Ki-Sang With Latino Telenovelas

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Hispanic Hallyu: Comparing *Boys Over Flowers*
Directed by Jeon Ki-Sang with Latino "Telenovelas"

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Abstract

The term Hallyu, meaning Korean wave, was originally coined in the 1990s to describe the proliferation of South Korean popular culture throughout the world. This project focuses specifically on Hispanic populations within North and South America where—despite lack of geographical or cultural proximity to South Korea—Korean movies, dramas, and music have obtained widespread popularity. With respect to K-dramas, this project juxtaposes thematic elements between the K-drama *Boys over Flowers* directed by Jeon Ki-Sang and Latino “telenovelas” to determine if K-drama popularity can be ascribed to similarities in motifs between K-dramas and “telenovelas”.

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Introduction

In April of 2016, Park Geun-hye, the South Korean president at the time, visited Mexico and its National Museum of Anthropology, which holds Aztec and Mayan artifacts dated before the Spanish conquest, and attended a Korean culture festival in Mexico City to promote the exchange of Mexican and Korean culture. This cultural festival featured taekwondo demonstrations, a small concert by the Korean boy band Infinite, and even a fusion performance by two of the nations' orchestras of the Korean Arirang and Mexican Besame Mucho folk songs. These events took place a few days before the Korean and Mexican presidents met to discuss future economic ventures between their two countries (Kang, 2016). This particular event demonstrates the important role that Korean popular culture has begun to play in Korea's economic and political interactions with the rest of the world. As other countries experience and adopt Korean popular culture, Korea obtains novel means of connection with countries whose markets may have been inaccessible to South Korea in the past. These connections along with the Korean products featured in Korean movies and television dramas have contributed to the massive increase in South Korea's influence and power within the modern world.

With regards to Korean brands such as Samsung, LG, and Hyundai, Korean products have gained worldwide popularity which is attributable to the rapid growth of consumption of Korean cultural exports such as movies, music, dramas, and video games which scholars have labelled as Hallyu (Kim, 2015). The term Hallyu literally translates to "Korean wave" and was originally coined in the 1990s to describe the proliferation of South Korean popular culture throughout East and Southeast Asia. Chinese and Taiwanese middle-aged women showed particular interest in K-dramas (Korean soap operas) and greatly contributed to the first wave of

Korean popular culture as did audiences in Singapore, Japan, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Regarding the largely female audiences, studies argue that women were attracted to the masculine, yet compassionate and tender male characters portrayed in K-dramas who largely contrasted the authoritarian male gender roles prevalent within Asian patriarchal society. Moreover, similar cultural values and ideas among South Korea and nearby Asian countries largely contributed to the rapid reception of K-dramas. While Korean TV dramas gained the most popularity during this early period, other aspects of Korean culture such as movies, music, food, and language received attention as well (Chung, 2011).

Scholars continue to use the term Hallyu to describe the more recent spread of Korean culture within North America, South America, Europe, and the Middle East. While the first wave of Hallyu could generally be explained by the geographic and cultural proximity between South Korea and neighboring Asian countries, explaining how and why Korean culture has permeated the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas—regions with cultures largely distinct from Korea's—proves to be a complex task. There must be characteristics of K-dramas that appeal to Hispanic audiences, and this project argues that one of those characteristics is their thematic resemblance to traditional Latino telenovelas. If K-dramas and telenovelas engage similar subjects and storylines, then the familiarity of the narratives could alleviate the potential “culture shock” induced from watching a television program from another country. In other words, the widespread reception of K-dramas within Latin America and the Hispanic U.S. could be explained by a similar fulfillment Latino audiences enjoy from watching K-dramas as they do when watching traditional telenovelas. So, the purpose of this research is to investigate the growing popularity of K-dramas within Latin America and the Hispanic U.S. by identifying

similarities, differences, and corresponding themes between the K-drama *Boys over Flowers* directed by Jeon Ki-sang and Latino telenovelas.

Having stated the purpose of this research, it should be noted that this project does not assert that thematic similarities are the only reason for K-drama popularity in North American Hispanic populations or that thematic similarities are the most important reason for K-drama popularity. This project also does not argue whether K-dramas are the most popular foreign entertainment consumed in Hispanic populations compared to entertainment coming from other countries. Instead, this project highlights thematic similarities between Jeon Ki-sang's *Boys over Flowers* and "telenovelas" in order to provide an explanation for the growing popularity of K-dramas within Latino cultures.

Methods

The first significant part of the research process included obtaining, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant secondary sources related to Hallyu, Korean dramas, and telenovelas. With respect to Hallyu, particular attention was paid to its origins and its worldwide significance. These topics were explored in order to clarify what exactly Hallyu is and why its research is relevant. Research on Korean dramas highlighted origins as well as the rise in popularity and fame in order to contextualize the K-drama popularity in Latin America within a historical and global perspective. Lastly, telenovela research emphasized the origins and audience motivations for watching telenovelas in order to create a framework in which to juxtapose the thematic characteristics of *Boys over Flowers* with the thematic characteristics of the telenovela genre. This project identifies and assesses seven distinct characteristics of telenovelas to which *Boys over Flowers* is directly compared: series structure and length, Spanish language and Latino heritage, melodrama and justice, romance, social mobility and class conflict, gender portrayals and female empowerment, and centrality of the family.

The next part of the research process entailed watching and evaluating *Boys over Flowers* with respect to the seven thematic characteristics of telenovelas just listed. Overall, this project employs generic or genre criticism in order to evaluate and understand telenovelas as a genre. By using the generic critical approach, *Boys over Flowers* is understood as an artifact being analyzed and evaluated according to the telenovela genre. The existence or non-existence of each particular telenovela quality is identified and evaluated as it may or may not appear in *Boys over Flowers*. Specific examples from the series are provided when possible in order to substantiate whether or not *Boys over Flowers* adheres to a certain telenovela characteristic. Once *Boys over*

Flowers is evaluated according to each of the seven telenovela characteristics, conclusions are drawn regarding the overall correspondence of *Boys over Flowers* to the telenovela genre. The significance of correlations between *Boys over Flowers* and telenovelas is then briefly considered in the context of K-drama popularity in Latin America.

Boys over Flowers was chosen as the representative Korean drama in this study because the year it was released, 2009, marks the time period when K-drama viewership had become firmly established in Latin America. Many fans also consider *Boys over Flowers* as the quintessential romantic-comedy of post-millennial Korean dramas. *Boys over Flowers* is also frequently listed as one of the best Korean dramas of all time by Latin America fan websites. Therefore, *Boys over Flowers* exemplifies an effective model of popular K-dramas in Latin America.

Popularity of Korean Dramas

Dramas were first broadcasted in Korea during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) as radio dramas in either Japanese or Korean (Do, 2012). These radio dramas remained popular for many decades even as television broadcasting was first introduced in 1956 and the first television series aired in 1962. However, once television sets began to become more popular and accessible for Korean families in the 1970s, television dramas also started to grow in popularity and focused on presenting the stories of historical figures and national heroes (Chung, 2011). Still, many dramas, both radio and television, were immensely popular for their relatable stories and by addressing similar struggles and issues that the audience faced in their everyday lives. As an example, the drama “Cheongsilhongsil”, which came out in 1954, imagines the story of a woman who lost her husband during the Korean War (1950-1953). The story of this woman, while fictional, represented the stories of many Korean people who had just experienced similar tragedy and hardship. Not only could these audiences identify with the conflicts that the characters of the dramas faced, but, “the drama provided people a chance to cry and laugh, while giving viewers a glimpse of dreams and romance that could not be found in reality at the time” (Do, 2012). In other words, watching or listening to these dramas became a major source of stress relief for their audiences as the dramas provided an empathetic connection to the daily struggles of their audiences as well as an opportunity to imagine alternate realities where dreams could come true.

Experiencing and imagining worlds different from one’s own is actually a phenomenon present in all different types of entertainment and is termed escapism. Whether it be movies, television, music, video games, books, sports, social media, drugs, or even religion, the

consumer often seeks entertainment in order to forget about his own problems by imagining a reality where these problems don't exist. Each individual is different in the problems that she wishes to avoid or distract herself from, but the majority fall under relationship issues among family, friends, and coworkers; personal feelings of anxiety, depression, disappointment, and loneliness; or struggles to obtain sufficient money and resources. Since the introduction of the color television and later cable and satellite connections, billions of people around the world watch television programs to escape from these problems, at least momentarily (Henning and Vorderer, 2001). As stated earlier, K-dramas are one television genre specifically targeted to these escapist audiences. By creating stories within familiar cultural or historical contexts while also employing melodrama, humor, and romance, K-dramas engage millions of Koreans viewers who wish to forget about their day to day problems.

But what about the large masses of non-Korean populations around the world that seem to be just as engaged in K-dramas? Chung (2011) traces the beginnings of Hallyu as Korean culture spread throughout the rest of the world. In China, the first of many neighboring Asian countries to enter the initial K-drama craze, the drama *What is Love?* was particularly popular when it was first broadcasted in June 1997 for its inclusion of Confucian values as well as highlighting the importance of family and tradition. The drama reached an audience share of 15 percent which is the second highest rating of all time for an imported program in China. Japan was next when the drama *Winter Sonata* aired in Japan in 2003. The program reached an audience share of over 20 percent. It is quite astonishing when considering that Japanese prime time shows rarely reach 10 percent within the country. Still, it was not until the airing of the drama *Jewel in the Palace* that K-dramas started to gain worldwide popularity. While *Winter Sonata* was extremely popular especially in Japan, it had been exported to only 20 countries

while *Jewel in the Palace* was exported to 87 countries as of May 2011. Within Asian countries, *Jewel in the Palace* was popular in almost every significant television market including Japan, China, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei. It was also popular in Europe, North America, and countries such as Russia, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Chung explains the overwhelming worldwide popularity of *Jewel in the Palace*:

The story of a humble but dedicated woman overcoming all odds and neo-Confucianist values to become a royal physician touched the hearts of viewers from diverse cultures, many of them sharing the pre-modern experience of oppression against women and their social roles. And the drama's dazzling depictions of traditional architecture, music, attire, food, and medicine gave foreign fans a distinctive taste of Korea's culture and heritage (22).

The popularity of *Jewel in the Palace* initiated the globalization of Korean dramas with newer dramas benefitting from the good first impression made by their successful predecessor. These include *Coffee Prince*, *Autumn in My Heart*, and *Boys over Flowers* among several others.

Coffee Prince and *Secret Garden* have been particularly popular in North America. In Mexico, the country has aired several dramas on its Mexiquense network, and the drama *My Lovely Samsoun* was particularly popular. Nearby countries Costa Rica, Venezuela, Peru, Argentina, and Puerto Rico have also demonstrated increasing drama viewership.

Characteristics and Themes of Telenovelas

With around two billion people in the world watching telenovelas, telenovelas are a global sensation. Telenovelas are not only popular in Latin America, but have been exported to countries all over the world. As a genre, telenovelas are also commonly divided into subgenres, such as romantic comedies, teen dramas, historical romances, or mysteries. Despite these subgenres, many telenovelas share basic plot elements and themes. Newer telenovelas are often reimaginations of older telenovelas or traditional stories. Described ahead are common characteristics and themes that telenovelas include.

Series Structure and Length

Originating from the tradition of 19th century English “feuilleton” serial stories and later 20th century Latin American radionovelas, telenovelas feature storylines with definitive endings (La Pastilla, n.d). As opposed to American soap operas which may continue for years without any ending to the story, telenovelas rarely last for longer than a year and always provide narrative closure at the end of the series (Martínez, 2005). Estill (2000) explains that in contrast to U.S. soap operas, “telenovelas are thus “tidy”: they present complete narrative closure, they tie the loose ends, they “clean up” any doubts or desires that the viewer might have about the characters.” (76). While the audience can always expect these endings to be happy where the good are rewarded and the evil are punished, telenovelas maintain interest by including plot twists to keep the audience guessing as to how the happy ending will be reached.

Earlier telenovelas produced in the 1950s lasted between 15 to 20 episodes and television stations broadcasted them a few times a week. As their popularity grew, telenovelas came to dominate primetime broadcasts, and telenovelas now premiere new episodes every day and may

last from 120 to 200 episodes to even more for extremely popular series (La Pastilla, n.d.). Due to the relatively short length and the need for definitive story resolution, telenovelas often have quick plot developments and keep the amount of characters consistent and relatively small (Estill, 2000).

Spanish Language and Latino Heritage

Being produced in Spanish-speaking countries for Spanish-speaking markets, telenovelas are in Spanish. While telenovelas have been exported to countries all over the world where translators add subtitles and voice actors dub the telenovela in the appropriate language, telenovelas uniquely resonate with Spanish-speaking audiences. Examining Barrera and Bielby's (2001) study, Latina telenovela viewers living in the United States were interviewed and surveyed to understand their motivations for watching telenovelas. Though the interviewed women were fluent in English and used English daily at work and school and with friends, professors, and family members, "most reported watching Spanish-language television more frequently than English programming" (10). According to the study, "the most common reason given for viewing novelas was the desire to maintain Spanish-language fluency or even re-learning the language after it had been forgotten" (10). For these women telenovelas represent avenues to remember and reconnect with the language they had otherwise left behind while living in an English-centered world.

These women explained that they watched telenovelas not only to practice their Spanish, but also to maintain connections with their heritage. Included in telenovelas are famous cultural sites as well as traditional music and celebrations from the women's country of origin. Living in a place where their culture is in the minority, "the visual representation of Latin American styles... allowed them to visualize locations for enactment of familiar traditions, diminishing the

sense that practicing their culture was ‘different’ than the mainstream” (9). Thus, telenovelas alleviate anxieties of being “othered” as a minority by serving as a source of cultural identification for Latino populations in the U.S.

Melodrama and Justice

Another significant characteristic contributing to the popularity of telenovelas, melodrama appeals to the common audience by focusing on romance and emotions. Melodrama distinguishes itself as a particular subgenre of drama in its emphasis and exaggeration of emotions in the actions and words of characters. Estill (2000) explains that “it is a narrative style that can be understood as a ‘tear jerker’... the need to suggest grand emotions continues in the rather simply-drawn stock characters and the focus on morality and appeals to the emotions” (77). Melodrama seeks to elicit strong emotions and responses from the audience in order to maintain interest and establish personal relationships between the characters and the viewers. It is these emotional connections which telenovelas induce that has markedly contributed to their popularity.

Regarding the “simply-drawn stock characters”, characterization is often simple and direct; even main characters in telenovelas are often stereotyped and one-dimensional. By creating predictable characters, telenovelas emphasize what happens rather than why it happens. For example, the audience learns that the jealous boyfriend will always become upset at his girlfriend when she talks to other men because that is his stereotyped character, a jealous boyfriend. So, the next time the girlfriend talks to another man, the audience does not wonder why the boyfriend becomes upset, but instead wonders how severely he will react this time and if this will be the time when things get explosive. Telenovela characters see the world as black and white and are generally unconcerned with intentions. What concerns them is how outward

actions and their consequences relate to their own reality. A character sees himself as good and his goals noble, while anyone opposing him is necessarily evil and must be stopped. Though telenovelas often include plot twists that turn a good character evil or an evil character good, the shift is very obvious and apparent. Telenovelas have little room for characters of ambiguous integrity or morality.

Beyond the morality of individual characters, telenovela characters are held to an objective morality, some transcendent system of justice. From the beginning of the series, many telenovelas clearly distinguish between good characters and bad characters (Estill, 2000). Each telenovela independently defines what good and evil are; nevertheless, good characters are often those who embody traditional Latino values such as hard work, loyalty, selflessness, and integrity, while evil characters the opposite. Though good characters will undoubtedly face obstacles and hardships, and bad characters may be rewarded because of their selfish actions, telenovela audiences can expect that by the end of the series the good will be rewarded, and the evil will be punished. Rewards often come in the form of weddings, reconciliation, and prosperity, while punishments often involve humiliation, tragedy, and death (Estill, 2000). Telenovela audiences can always expect a fairytale, “happily ever after” ending (Martínez, 2005).

Romance

Telenovelas are first and foremost dramatic romances. Instead of focusing on families as U.S. soap operas do, telenovelas focus on the romantic relationship between a main couple and the opposition they face towards their relationship (Stavans, 2010). This opposition takes many forms, but some themes appear in nearly every telenovela. Telenovelas frequently include love triangles (or squares, pentagons, etc.). Typically, the main female character will have multiple

male suitors that she must choose from; still, many series focus on a man who is pursued by multiple women (Verheijen, 2006). Also extremely common, the theme of forbidden love deals with characters whose consummated relationship would incite consternation in close friends and family due to the couple's different social standings, families, heritage, etc. Sometimes the relationship is one-sided, and one character must learn to deal with their unrequited love. The beneficiary of her affection is often in love with another character (love triangle) or has been deeply wounded by a past relationship. In the latter case, the hurt individual struggles throughout the series to learn how to trust and establish intimate relationships again. Couples often struggle with cheating or betrayal which typically catalyzes the character's emotional and romantic disengagement mentioned earlier. Despite these obstacles that couples will almost inevitably face, audiences can always expect that the main characters will overcome these struggles and succeed in marrying the person that they truly love (Stavans, 2010).

Social Mobility and Class Conflict

Many telenovelas feature characters that come from poverty or working-class families who come into contact with characters of high status or wealth. By interacting, usually romantically, with the upper-class characters, the lower-class characters leave behind their struggles by becoming themselves part of the upper-class (Christoupolou, 2010). Sometimes, characters achieve social mobility not by marriage, but by obtaining large unexpected inheritances. In either case, telenovelas often feature rags to riches, Cinderella-like stories where characters experience reversals of fortune. Martínez (2005) explains that audiences particularly resonate with Cinderella stories in countries and cultures which are accustomed to economic instability such as is the case in Latin America. Latino audiences not only identify with

characters who struggle financially, but the rags to riches stories fulfill fantasies that the audiences may hold.

While the poor protagonist almost always ends up wealthy and successful, she never achieves it without first overcoming several obstacles. Frequently, these obstacles take the form of family members or friends of the main couple who disapprove of the couple's relationship. Many telenovelas include some iteration of this "Evil Stepmother" character who believes that their son or daughter is far too superior to be in a relationship with someone of a lower class. They may view the lower-class character as lazy, irresponsible, ignorant, dirty, or untrustworthy. On the other hand, the upper-class character may be illustrated as spoiled, arrogant, posh, or greedy. Overall, the conflict between characters and their families reflects upon the actual conflict between social classes which exists in Latin American cultures.

Gender Portrayals and Female Empowerment

Initially sponsored by the same companies that created U.S. soap operas, telenovelas originally targeted female audiences just as U.S. soap operas do (La Pastina, n.d.). While many studies on telenovelas have focused on the female perspective, today, men and women of all ages and social classes enjoy telenovelas. Men may be less likely to admit that they watch telenovelas, but the immense popularity of telenovelas would be impossible if men were not also watching them. Still, many women prefer telenovelas to other primetime shows and dramas because of the relatable female characters and their struggles (Barrera and Bielby, 2001). Martínez (2005) provides the example of *Simplemente María*, a popular telenovela about a poor girl from the countryside who goes to the city and struggles to survive while working as a seamstress. Because almost half of all female-headed households in Latin America live in poverty, Martínez argues that female Latin American viewers are more likely to identify and feel more comfortable with

characters who struggle financially, such as María. And considering that many telenovelas reiterate Cinderella-like plots, women in Latin America can expect that many protagonists frequently will be struggling women.

However, it is important to note that while women may prefer female characters who face economic struggles, these characters must also represent strength and integrity. Referring to the women they interviewed, Barrera and Bielby (2001) explain, “they identified more with the women characters who challenge the traditional female roles of dependency, long suffering, and submission...many indicated a liking for dramas that portrayed female protagonists in non-traditional roles” (12). Traditional Latino culture views women as inferior and subservient to men. These ideas still appear in varying degrees in many telenovelas, which is why Latin American women prefer series that counter these traditional cultural notions by presenting female characters who display actual personality and emotions beyond being simply sweet and innocent.

If a woman is not sweet and innocent, then, according to traditional views, the woman must be promiscuous and deceitful. Within Mexican culture and telenovelas, Estill (2000) names this attitude the Malinche/Virgen dichotomy, referring to La Malinche, the interpreter for Hernán Cortés, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, the Virgin Mary who appeared Juan Diego, two women who contributed to the foundation of Mexico. González (2010) refers to it as a virgin-whore dichotomy: a Latina woman is either pure, innocent, caring, and maternal, or she is sexy, licentious, disloyal, and disgraced. Though modern telenovelas are moving away from these simplistic and unjust categorizations of women due to female audiences preferring characters who counter these stereotypes, as noted earlier, many telenovelas continue to incorporate and propagate this dichotomy just as classic telenovelas did in the past.

Centrality of the Family

For many Latin Americans, family is the top priority. Family members are expected to help each other out and serve as support systems. According to García (2016), “the family has been considered as the basis of welfare providing support for elders, young people when leaving home and adolescent mothers” (113). Latin Americans families are more likely to live with extended family members as grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandchildren may live together or in the same vicinity. Telenovelas incorporate this fundamental cultural aspect as dedication and loyalty to family are paramount for telenovela characters. Barrera and Bielby (2001) describe the results of their interviews with regards to the importance of family:

Several of our respondents mentioned the representation of the family as one of the main reasons they watched telenovelas. They particularly enjoyed seeing how the extended family was integral to the nuclear family of the main characters. As one respondent observed, “it is o.k. if the older son is still living at home; he is not expected to move out and be on his own like in the singles’ top sitcom *Friends*.” ... Most respondents offered recollections of watching novelas as children, along with their parents and siblings. One participant recounted how visits by extended family always culminated with everyone sitting in front of the television to watch that evening’s episode of whatever novela was on at the time. (13)

These family gatherings were so significant for the respondents that several explained their desire to continue the tradition with their own families and children. Telenovelas not only reinforce the importance of family through their characters and narratives, but also through the family gatherings that result from watching them.

Analysis of *Boys over Flowers*

Series Structure and Length

Boys over Flowers has 25 hour-long episodes. It first aired on KBS2 in South Korea two days a week from January 5 to March 31, 2009, a little over three months (Han, 2013). Though *Boys over Flowers* does not boast 100 to 200 episodes that premiere daily as many popular telenovelas do, its relatively short length and definitive conclusion distinguish it from U.S. soap operas while also paralleling the structure of telenovelas. The final episode ends with a summary of what the main characters are doing four years later. Gu Jun-pyo has achieved much success with his company and is being interviewed on T.V. His mother watches him on T.V. with her husband who has woken up from a coma he was in throughout the series. Jun-hee has become the new chair of the Shinhwa company. Yi-jung visits Ga-eul at the school she is teaching at, keeping his promise. Jan-di and Ji-hoo have entered medical school, and Jun-pyo proposes to Jan-di on a beach just as the sun is setting. All of the main characters—even Gu Jun-pyo's mother who is the main antagonist—have more or less realized their dreams and all conflicts have been resolved. By tying up all loose ends, *Boys over Flowers* concludes with the same expected happy ending that telenovelas do.

Spanish Language and Latino Heritage

Boys over Flowers is, of course, in Korean. Non-Korean speakers must depend on translations and subtitles, and the author of this paper watched *Boys over Flowers* with Spanish subtitles on DramaFever, a website that has its own dedicated team of translators and voice actors for subtitles and dubbing. Latin Americans who watch and appreciate telenovelas for the

opportunity to practice and retain their Spanish clearly do not obtain the same benefit from watching a Korean drama like *Boys over Flowers*.

In a similar manner, *Boys over Flowers* features Korean clothing, Korean food, and Korean music along with many other aspects of Korean culture, which Latino audiences cannot identify with culturally as they do with telenovelas. For example, Jan-di and Ga-eul work at a restaurant that serves traditional Korean porridges and stews. Though Korean people see this as comfort food that can be associated with their home and family, non-Korean audiences who identify with different ethnic and cultural foods will not make the same association. They may even wonder how a restaurant that only serves different kinds of porridge is possible. Examining a slightly different example, Gu Jun-pyo learns how to make kimchi from scratch when he stays with Jan-di's family. Kimchi might be one of Korea's most well-known foods, and making it with one's family is very traditional of Korean culture. Though Hispanic viewers may not know what kimchi exactly is or what it tastes like, the kimchi-making scene represents a very strong family bonding experience which could remind the viewers of similar practices within their own culture such as making tamales in Mexican culture. While Latino audiences cannot culturally identify with *Boys over Flowers* to the extent that they do with telenovelas, these audiences may relate certain aspects of Korean culture to equivalents of their own culture.

Melodrama and Justice

Like telenovelas, *Boys over Flowers* emphasizes the emotions of the characters in order to elicit emotions from the viewer. The plot often depends on great displays of emotion for forward movement as well as tension, conflict, and resolution. Gu Jun-pyo, though horrible at orally expressing his feelings, very clearly shows his emotions through his attitude and reactions to certain situations. When angry or frustrated, Gu Jun-pyo almost always starts yelling

something incomprehensible and may hit, kick, or throw something as an indication of his anger. These very raw, physical displays of emotion coincide with those typically present in telenovelas. Furthermore, both include these strong displays of emotions with the similar objective of allowing the audience to relate emotionally with the character.

Within *Boys over Flowers* many characters become more aware of their insecurities and gain insight into what their true aspirations are, but their personality more or less remains consistent. Jan-di is always hardworking and driven by her personal sense of justice, but is also naïve. The audience can depend on Jun-pyo to be arrogant and overprotective of his pride, but also loyal to his friends and family. In other words, *Boys over Flowers* characters mirror the simply characterized, often one-dimensional characters of telenovelas: their personalities are consistent, and their actions are predictable.

However, *Boys over Flowers* does not distinguish between good and bad characters as clearly or objectively as telenovelas. Friends can become enemies then become friends again within the same episode. A character may be both a friend and an enemy at the same time for another character. Even President Kang, the main antagonist of the series, is at least partially justified in her persecution of Jan-di and Jun-pyo's relationship because of her desire to honor her husband's memory. Conflict in *Boys over Flowers* does not depend significantly on characters who behave immorally, but rather on understanding and maintaining romantic relationships, which is described in the next section. Thus, *Boys over Flowers* differs from telenovelas in its portrayal of main characters as neither objectively good nor objectively bad.

Because *Boys over Flowers* does not designate characters as objectively good or bad, *Boys over Flowers* also lacks the underlying force of justice that definitively punishes the evil. Instead, the show provides all of the main characters a "happily ever after" ending where

aspirations are achieved and relationships are reconciled. Then, of course, the proposal represents the definitive resolution to the series.

Romance

While *Boys over Flowers* does not only focus on the romantic relationship between Gu Jun-pyo and Geum Jan-di, romance is the main driving force of the series. Though Jun-pyo and Jan-di end up together by the end of the series, significant attention is also placed on the relationships between Ga-eul and Yi-jung as well as the relationships between Ji-hoo and Seo-hyun and Ji-hoo and Jan-di. The series maintains suspense and interest by not revealing who ends up with whom until the very end. As a device to maintain this suspense, love triangles appear the most frequently throughout the series. In the beginning of the series, Jan-di has feelings for Ji-hoo who she views as talented, handsome, and most importantly caring as opposed to Jun-pyo who she views as narcissistic and spoiled. However, during this time Ji-hoo is in love with his childhood role model and caretaker Seo-hyun. Jun-pyo finds himself liking Jan-di, but fails to win her affections because of her crush on Ji-hoo. As the series continues, Seo-hyun marries another man which causes Ji-hoo to realize his feelings for Jan-di. Ji-hoo and Jun-pyo then both start competing for Jan-di, but by this point Jan-di has started to develop feelings for Jun-pyo. Later in the series, Jun-pyo's mother arranges an engagement between him and Ha Jae-kyung, the daughter of a wealthy family. Another love triangle occurs between Ga-eul, Yi-jung, and Yi-jung's childhood friend Cha Eun-jae. The themes of unrequited love as well as cheating and betrayal do frequently appear in *Boy over Flowers*, but they occur in relation to the underlying love triangles. For example, Jae-kyung's feelings for Jun-pyo which he does not correspond are understood under the context of the love that Jun-pyo has for Jan-di. The idea of forbidden love is readily apparent in the opposition Jan-di and Jun-pyo face in their relationship

due to Jun-pyo's mother, and it is discussed in more detail in the next section. Overall, the importance of romance as the most significant plot-driving force of *Boys over Flowers* corresponds to the centrality of romance to the telenovela genre.

Social Mobility and Class Conflict

Jan-di comes from a working-class family: the largest asset they own is the dry-cleaning shop located in a poor neighborhood that Jan-di's father runs. Unfortunately, Jan-di's father worsens the situation by allowing friends to borrow money from loan sharks under his name. Moreover, Jan-di's family has essentially no safety net. When the dry-cleaning shop is closed down, the family resorts to selling snacks and drinks to drivers stuck in traffic. When Jan-di's parents receive a call providing them a full time job as nightshift janitors, it is seen as a major breakthrough and opportunity. Jan-di herself adds a morning milk and newspaper delivery route on top of her part time job at the restaurant and her studies in order to help provide for the family. Consequently, Jan-di represents the quintessential hardworking and self-sacrificing lower-class character who comes from a humble background.

On the other hand, the F4 boys come from the richest and most famous families in South Korea. Their tailor-made designer clothing shopping sprees, sports cars, and mansions demonstrate that money is never an issue for them. They have their own private island that they go to when they get tired of travelling around the world. At school they are the most popular and are idolized by the other students. When Jan-di and Ga-eul were trying to fundraise by selling restaurant promotionals, their efforts were in vain as nobody stopped at their stand. However, the F4 boys needed to only show their faces at the stand and their fame attracted an entire crowd which allowed them to sell the restaurant promotionals almost instantly. The F4 boys, then, are representative of the spoiled upper-class elite.

Since the series focuses on Jan-di and her relationship with the F4 boys, *Boys over Flowers* reiterates the Cinderella theme. Jan-di, the poor working-class girl, meets her prospective princes in the F4 boys. Though Jan-di is often uncomfortable with the gifts and money spent on her, she obtains very real social benefits by being friends with the F4 boys. Once Gu Jun-pyo announces that Jan-di is his girlfriend, the other students immediately stop bullying her and even start asking her for advice. Though initially an outcast, Jan-di gains social standing at the prestigious school because of her relationship with Gu Jun-pyo. Due to the trips that the F4 boys constantly make, Jan-di visits places around the world which she couldn't even have dreamed of before she met the F4 boys. After moving to the countryside to sell fish, Jan-di's mother gains rapport among her peers when they find out that Gu Jun-pyo and Jan-di are dating and that Gu Jun-pyo might be her future son-in-law. In other words, Jan-di does not only benefit from the expensive clothes that the F4 boys buy for her, but she also obtains social standing for not only herself, but the rest of her family as well. Furthermore, with Gu Jun-pyo proposing to Jan-di at the end of the series, it can be reasonably assumed that Jan-di will become part of Gu Jun-pyo's family and benefit from the family's wealth and status. Therefore, *Boys over Flowers* features a rags-to-riches story that involves a lower-class character interacting with and eventually marrying an upper-class character, thus solidifying her social advancement. This very closely parallels the themes of social mobility as they are found in telenovelas.

Boys over Flowers even includes the opposition to Jan-di's social mobility which represents the class conflict that many telenovelas deal with. From the beginning of the series, president Kang represents the "Evil Stepmother" character who persecutes Jan-di for being in a relationship with Gu Jun-pyo. She attempts to split the pair up several times throughout the series. Among her initial attempts, she offers Jan-di and her family hundreds of thousands of

dollars for Jan-di's promise to stay away from Gu Jun-pyo. President Kang assumes that, being the lower-class, Jan-di and her family will do anything for money, even if they must surrender their pride to receive it. Jan-di realizes that she cannot accept the money without taking the blame for something that is not her fault as Gu Jun-pyo is the one who forced her to be his girlfriend. Upon hearing Jan-di's response, President Kang resorts to more severe, ruthless methods. She orders the shutdown of the dry-cleaning shop that Jan-di's family owns, forcing them to scramble to find any kind of work in order to survive. Citing the death of her husband, Gu Jun-pyo's father, she greatly increases Gu Jun-pyo's responsibility as the future heir of the Shinhwa company. President Kang guilt trips Gu Jun-pyo, stating that everything that his father and grandfather worked for would be in vain if Gu Jun-pyo does not put away his childish relationships with the other F4 boys and especially Jan-di. President Kang creates a false dichotomy for Gu Jun-pyo: he can choose to live up to the expectations forced onto him in honor of his father's memory; otherwise, he will be betraying his family and everything they have worked for. Actively opposing the relationship by attacking both Jan-di and Gu Jun-pyo, President Kang refuses to consider allowing her son to date or even be seen with a girl who has relatively nothing. Because her hatred toward Jan-di is mostly fueled by her classist prejudices, President Kang and her opposition to Jan-di and Gu Jun-pyo's relationship correlates with the class conflict themes that telenovelas also frequently address.

Gender Portrayals and Female Empowerment

Noting that female telenovela viewers preferred relatable female characters who experience the same struggles that they do, *Boys over Flowers* corresponds to this theme in Jan-di's character. Latin American women can identify with Jan-di since she comes from a working-class family that consistently struggles with money. With regards to Jan-di's financial situation,

Boys over Flowers provides a character that female Latin American telenovela viewers would be familiar with and be able to relate to.

The Latin American telenovela viewers also explained that they preferred telenovelas that include women who embody strength and independence: Jan-di ambiguously fulfills this role. On one end, Jan-di is highly independent and acts on her own volition. She works three jobs on top of her schooling because she refuses to accept hand-outs from the F4 boys. When she first attends the Shinhwa high school, she is the only student to stand up to the bullying from F4. Essential to Jan-di's character are her pride, integrity, and commitment to doing what she considers right, all similar characteristics to those that female telenovela viewers tend to appreciate. On the other end, the series almost always places Jan-di in the position of the damsel in distress. When Gu Jun-pyo's lackeys ambush Jan-di inside the bathroom, it is Ji-hoo's sudden appearance that saves her. When Jan-di wanders onto the mountain during a blizzard searching for the necklace that Gu Jun-pyo gave her, it is Gu Jun-pyo that makes the heroic decision to escape his mother's company men in order to run into the blizzard himself to save Jan-di who he finds unconscious in the snow. When Jan-di finds herself surrounded by a group of potential muggers in Macao, the unexpected arrival of F4 comes just in time to beat off the villains. The fact that there are several more examples that could be mentioned attests to fact that while Jan-di may be strong-willed and independent, she is ultimately incapable of fending for herself and requires rich, famous, good-looking men to come to her rescue. Consequently, female telenovela viewers would probably view regard this dual portrayal of Jan-di, and women in general, with mixed reactions.

With respect to the virgin/whore dichotomy apparent in many telenovelas, *Boy's over Flowers* includes very few sexual themes as Korean television programs very rarely deal with

sexuality. Nevertheless, the virgin/whore dichotomy is apparent within the series at particular moments such as when Jan-di was drugged at kidnapped at a club. The next morning, she wakes up and finds herself in an unfamiliar room with “Thanks for last night” written on the bedroom mirror with lipstick. Jan-di learns the meaning of the message when she goes to school where a picture of her in bed with an unknown man is plastered on a television screen for the whole school to see. Fortunately, it is unlikely that Jan-di was actually raped, but this point is irrelevant to the other students who take the opportunity to socially condemn Jan-di. Furious upon seeing the picture, Gu Jun-pyo breaks up with Jan-di, and Jan-di is the target of bullying and mockery at the school until Jan-di and F4 end up finding out the truth and confirm Jan-di’s innocence. Despite Jan-di’s reputation as a girl of honesty and integrity, the moment a photo surfaces of her supposed promiscuity she loses all credibility. Jan-di’s friends do trust her innocence, but even this response implies that women must be innocent to be good; otherwise, they deserve to be mocked for their indecent behavior. As there is no possible option that falls between these two extremes, therein lies the dichotomy that exists in both *Boys over Flowers* and telenovelas.

Centrality of the Family

Just as how telenovelas emphasize the importance of family, *Boys over Flowers* also emphasizes the importance of family. Central to the conflicts of many characters in the series is the struggle to reconcile family loyalties with individual desires and principles. When offered money by President Kang to stop seeing Gu Jun-Pyo, Jan-di is immediately repulsed by such a notion, but ends up greatly deliberating on her decision when she considers the impact that that amount of money could have for her family. Jun-pyo’s main conflict stems from his desire to spend time with his friends and the woman he loves while at the same time being expected to lead his family’s international business. These dilemmas become so problematic for the

characters because they cannot betray their families without betraying their own identity. This idea that one's family becomes essential to one's identity resonates with the fundamental priority that telenovelas place on family.

Boys over Flowers does not, however, feature many extended family members while within telenovelas extended family members often play significant roles. The series does not reveal any information about Jan-di's grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins and instead focuses directly on her nuclear family. The most significant appearances of an extended family member occur when Jun-pyo's grandmother returns to the family estate and when Ji-hoo finds out that the doctor that Jan-di has been volunteering for is his grandfather. The latter occurrence also functions as a long-lost relative theme, further adding to the significance of the familial relationship between Ji-hoo and his grandfather. Besides these two significant extended family members, *Boys over Flowers* does not really emphasize or include family beyond the nuclear family. Therefore, Latin Americans who enjoy telenovelas for the importance they place on the extended family would be unable to enjoy the same aspect in watching *Boys over Flowers*.

Conclusions

Having evaluated *Boys over Flowers* with respect to the various common characteristics and themes of telenovelas, it is apparent that *Boys over Flowers* significantly corresponds to the telenovela genre. The structure of the series, though not as long as a contemporary telenovela, parallels the relatively short duration and definitive narrative ending of telenovelas. For *Boys over Flowers*, this expected conclusion includes the fairytale ending which is frequently included in telenovelas. The story of *Boys over Flowers* focuses more on romantic relationships and emotions and less on characterization, corresponding to the romance and melodrama present in telenovelas. Considering the characters of *Boys over Flowers*, Jan-di, as a working-class girl, becomes friends with the super-rich F4, retelling the Cinderella story which commonly appears in telenovelas. Furthermore, characters in *Boys over Flowers* hold strongly to family loyalties, emphasizing the importance of family just as how telenovelas adhere to the importance of family.

While there are a few significant differences between *Boys over Flowers* and the themes of telenovelas—the general lack of objectively good or bad characters and the absence of extended family members, for example—the large quantity of correspondences between the two suggests that both *Boys over Flowers* and telenovelas create similar meanings for their audiences. As an example, a person watching a telenovela and another person watching *Boys over Flowers* would both experience a story driven by romance and melodrama that ends conclusively with an expected happy ending because themes in both series function in similar ways. Assuming then that the number of corresponding themes for *Boys over Flowers* and telenovelas is consistent with other K-dramas, Latin American telenovela viewers would see K-

dramas as thematically more similar than different when compared to telenovelas. This thematic similarity establishes a sense of familiarity in K-dramas for Latin American audiences in spite of the fact that these K-dramas are being exported from a country that is almost completely unconnected with the geography and history of Latin America. Therefore, the thematic correspondences between *Boys over Flowers* and K-dramas helps explain the popularity of K-dramas in Latin America despite the absence of cultural and geographic proximity between Korea and Latin America.

Limitations of this project include the fact that only one K-drama was analyzed which was used to make a statement about the entire genre of K-dramas as they are viewed in Latin America. Furthermore, the term Latin America itself is very broad and encompasses 2 continents, 19 countries, and hundreds of millions of people. A large limitation of this project was grouping together this extremely large, diverse group of people under a single label as “Latin American”. As diverse as the people that create them, telenovelas themselves differ from country to country and region to region which is another limitation of this study of telenovelas as an overarching genre.

Future work and studies related to this topic should address these limitations by focusing on analyzing more Korean dramas, paying particular attention to dramas of a subgenre other than romantic-comedy. These kinds of investigations would confirm if *Boys over Flowers* is representative of all Korean dramas in its correspondences to telenovelas or if it is only representative of romantic-comedy K-dramas. It is also possible that the large number of corresponding themes in *Boys over Flowers* is simply coincidental. Other studies that can be performed could directly compare a specific K-drama with a specific telenovela in order to obtain more detailed and specific correspondences between the two series. Additionally, studies

that relate K-dramas to region-specific or country-specific telenovelas would illuminate how K-dramas compare to telenovelas of various cultures.

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