

The New (Korean) Wave: A Global Social Mobility Story – *Please Look After Mom**

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In this article we examine Shin Kyung-Sook's international bestseller *Please Look After Mom* as a South Korean "New Wave" cultural product. We appreciate the novel as a very particular kind of culture-

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drenched product — although *not* of the “traditional” variety. We take up both the Korean and English language discussions of the work’s enormous success, which focus on both the book’s particularistic and universalistic appeal. We argue instead for a cultural particularism and universalism of a different variety: not traditional Korean culture or the universal appeal of motherhood sentimentalism, but rather cosmopolitan striving. We examine the novel as an account of educational and maternal striving and consider its global popularity in that light.

Key Words: Korean Wave, Literature, Cosmopolitanism, Education, Motherhood, Cultural Proximity

I. Introduction

The Korean Wave has been the object of both considerable celebration and analysis. Some political economists of the media insist that culture or meaning have little to do with its success, and offer instead structural features of the various export industries at play. Many observers, however, are quite comfortable asserting that the culture and meanings of the Korean Wave can take credit. For those willing to trade in meanings, most coalesce around some variant of Koichi Iwabuchi’s (2004) notion of “cultural proximity,” which he coined originally to explain why it was that people across Asia were enjoying the Japanese Wave. For the Korean Wave, observers’ understandings of the nature of that proximity have changed over time, not surprisingly in parallel with the transforming character of the Wave itself: from the culturally-drenched sentimental products of its the early days, epitomized by TV drama *Winter Sonata*; to its recent, *seemingly* less culture-laden figures and products, most prominently K-pop and the boy-girl bands. Even these later products, however, can still warrant meaning-laden explanations — a position that we will support in this article.

Where sentimental products might speak to Asian particularities,

be they the dynamics of the Asian family, or the features of Asian struggles between tradition and modernity; the likes of trendy drama or K-pop can instead speak to an Asian variant of global cosmopolitanism, one that anthropologist Yoonhee Kang (2012) describes as “going global in comfort.” Proclaiming yet another development, some describe a “New Wave” (*shinhallyu*) that transcends this Asian cultural comfort zone: namely, products that are simultaneously launched at home and on the global market (Hong, 2012). Observers of this New Wave point, for example, to these South Korean products’ entirely Westernized music style; and argue, for example, that while Japanese idol groups have their own taste, South Korean groups are more Westernized, offering just what the new generation of the Asia market wants.

Ideas about a unique global edge — one that transcends Asian particularity — have been reassuring for South Koreans who have worried that their Asian cultural proximity edge could be easily overtaken, just as the Hong Kong Wave gave way to the Japanese Wave, which in turn gave way to the Korean Wave. Indeed, from its inception, the Wave has been equally an object of celebration and worry: no sooner did the Wave surprise and delight, than did South Koreans begin to fret about its sustainability. *In the light of this concern, the recent success of a perhaps old Korean Wave product has garnered considerable attention: namely a melodramatic novel that seems at first glance a quintessentially old-fangled cultural product.*

Indeed, *Please Look After Mom* (Omma rul Putakhae), Shin Kyung-Sook’s much celebrated 2010 “international best seller” which has been translated into 31 languages (as the English language jacket announces), at first glance seems quite out of synch with the latest developments of the Wave: first, it *seems* quite obviously a work of the culturally-drenched sentimental character of the early Wave because it tells the story of Korea’s rural to urban migration and patriarchal, patrilineal family structure; and second because, although its popularity has been particularly notable in the Western and English-speaking world, it hardly seems to be of the “beating the West at its own game” variety. In a word, *Please Look After Mom* is the story of an

elderly mother's disappearance upon her arrival in Seoul where she is visiting with her husband who somehow loses track of her. The desperate search for the mother occasions a torrent of soul searching for each child and the husband alike. It eventually becomes clear that it is likely that the mother will have spent her final days abandoned on the streets of Seoul.

Many South Korean commentators have thus been moved to think about and comment upon the perhaps surprising and exciting success of *Please Look After Mom*, impressed that this "traditional" genre (both the medium, a book! and the genre, a melodrama) have been able to ride the Wave. *Please Look After Mom* thus promises a whole new *Hallyu* field: literary translation. As South Korea transitions from hardware innovation to software or cultural contents, novels seem particularly promising — "content," if an old story, takes on new meaning as software. A recent Korean Development Bank television commercial (KDB Financial Group, 2012) shows beautifully the teleological way in which South Koreans think of industrial progress — for a series of export products it announces an English language adjective: "Good" for shoes in the 1970s; "Better" for cars in the 1990s; "Best" for K-pop today; and "Beyond Best" for finance into the future. While certainly not finance, novels are cultural creations, a value-added market.

Here, however, we appreciate *Please Look After Mom* not as new fangled cultural content, but instead as a very particular kind of culture-drenched product — although *not* of the "traditional" variety. We take up both the Korean and English language discussion *Please Look After Mom's* meteoric success. We will suggest, however, that most observers have missed the point. Instead of the work's cultural particularism of a traditional variety or universal appeal, we suggest that the work is steeped in cosmopolitan striving and as such is a very contemporary book in its own right. In this vein we concur with the arguments of Swee-Lin Ho (2012) about Korean boy and girl bands: namely that more than their apparent universalism, it is their culture of striving that has such broad appeal for many people in the world.

II. Korean Language Criticism

In parallel with the Korean Wave generally, there are first the industry-observers, interested only in the savvy industry that managed the translation, publicity, circulation of *Please Look After Mom*; although this is certainly a factor that cannot be ignored, it is not our focus here. In this vein is Yi Ku-yong's (2011) description of two strategies for globalizing Korean literature. He noted, "To succeed in fiercely commercial environments such as the U.S. and Europe, we must pick competitive masterpieces" and continued, "We must win the attention of book publishers or editors that hold marketing power." I elaborated, "We cannot forget the power of Knopf, one of the world's most respected publishing houses ... It was through the careful marketing strategy of Knopf that *Please Look After Mom* was picked as one of the 18 books for Oprah's book club in April."

Second, are those observers who find in *Please Look After Mom* a value that is distinctively Korean and that can thus contribute something unique to world culture. In the words of one critic: "We have something in our literature that you can't find in Western civilization: namely, [readers] find [in our literature] a 'communitarian sensibility, an empathy for humanity' and this is something that we can hang a great deal of hope on" (Chu, 2011).

The third stream is what we call the universalists, namely those who celebrate Korea's contribution to universal themes. In this vein, Kim Chu-yon, President of the Korean Literature Translation Institute, spoke at the Paju Bookcity Forum in 2011 on "The Global Publishing Market and the Potential of the Korean Wave in Literature," about the cultural optimism that *Please Look After Mom* ignited among literary and translation folks in South Korea. Kim (2011) proclaimed,

Ten years ago, thinking that it was something Korean or ethnic that could draw the attention of the world, we thought about Kim Tong-ri and So Chong-chu as the pride of Korean literature. Although, there are people who still think this way, this sort of particularism has died down today. If we take a look at Nobel Prize winners, it is clear that it is univer-

salism that is world literature's core value, rather than ethnic hue or national specialization. The 1994 Japanese winner, Oe Kenzaburo, was appreciated for awakening shared human pain through his portrayal of disabled people.

Kim (2011) continued, "In the age of the internet and post-modernism, and with the collapse of borders, it is no longer universality that we should pursue, but the transcendent." For Kim (2011), an appeal to the transcendent is the inevitable fate of a minor language: "As we all know, Korea is a minor language. A minor language cannot survive in the world linguistic market. If we were to stop protecting it, it would not sustain itself. The literature, the life blood of culture, is inevitably mediated by language and is thus fatally handicapped in the world cultural market." In parallel with the celebration of boy-bands whose success might simply be a fact of their merely being superior to the dancers of other countries, the suggestion in this vein is that *Please Look After Mom* develops universal human themes particularly well or even better than other cultures of note (foremost the West and Japan).

Shin herself combines these second and third streams in her own reflections on *Please Look After Mom* and its success. In one comment, she first pointed out something uniquely Korean — "Likely some foreign readers take something from [*Please Look After Mom*] that Korean readers cannot ... [such as] hidden societal circumstances, or divisions between the generations, or the contest between tradition and modernity." But, she then continued in the third universalistic vein, that "more than anything, what [foreigners] find in the book is a universally shared mother symbol, as something that the world's people all share" (S. Kim, 2012).

III. English Language Criticism

The English language criticism echoes the second and third stream of the Korean criticism: unique Korean cultural assets and a

superior Korean universalism. Maureen Corrigan's (2011) high-profile and nearly mocking review for NPR is of the particularistic variety: "But the weird fascination of *Please Look After Mom* is its message — *completely alien* to our own therapeutic culture — that if one's mother is miserable, it is indeed, the fault of her husband and her ungrateful children" (emphasis added). She further underscores the culture-drenched particulars by making clear that while the novel might be taken for something else, it is nothing but a soap opera: she describes her experience of being "stranded in a soap opera decked out as serious literary fiction" (Corrigan, 2011). By now infamous are Corrigan's (2011) closing words in which she urges American women in book clubs to steer clear of this "kimchee-scented Kleenex fiction." Insult added to injury would be fair to say. Comments on the jacket cover of the 2011 English translation proceed in a similar vein: Janice Y. K. Lee (2011) praises, "A direct and affecting account of a modern Korean family's tragedy that also provides an intimate window into the history and custom of the country"; Abraham Verghese (2011) bridges the two perspectives with, "Here is a deeply felt journey into a culture foreign to many, yet with a theme that is universal in its appeal."

The cultural particularists, epitomized by Corrigan, however, are not the only ones to make light of the novel. Universalists broadly speaking are of two varieties: celebratory or dismissive. Mythili G. Rao's (2011) typifies the celebratory universalist stream, proclaiming "this raw tribute to the mysteries of motherhood" for the *New York Times*. As does the jacket cover blurb by Gary Shteyngart (2011), "... [*Please Look After Mom*] speaks beautifully to an urgent issue of our time: how the movement of people from small towns and villages to big cities can cause heartbreak and even tragedy. This is a tapestry of family life that will be read all over the world. I loved this book." Perhaps it is most accurate to suggest that the celebratory readers appreciate the book's high culture contribution to sophisticated human themes.

An influential American critic Janet Maslin (2011), however, is of the critical universalistic variety as she nearly ridicules the book's melodrama with "South Korea, where there may not be a dry hankie

left in the land." In this latter vein, some critics complain that the book means to make children everywhere feel guilty, feeling that they must "call their mother immediately." This variety of universalistic response points to a low-brow culture: not the sublime of tragedy, but the banality of tear-jerkers.

English language criticism thus animates unique Korean cultural assets and a superior Korean universalism.

IV. Cosmopolitan Striving

Both South Korean and American ("foreign") criticism, in which the text is taken as either culture drenched or universalistic, belies what we consider the central characteristic of the book: its cosmopolitan striving, the desire to be at home in the world. With its saturated cosmopolitan striving, we suggest that *Please Look After Mom* joins other New-Wave products, such as K-pop and B-Boy dancing. We think that this is an underappreciated element of the New-Wave: the seemingly remarkable mastery of Western forms speaks not only to the transcendent but also to the drenched-in-effort-and-striving, characteristics that are in their own right particularly (although not uniquely) South Korean. We thus suggest that both the particularistic and universalistic evaluations of *Please Look After Mom* draw attention away from this South Korean variant of a prevalent global thematic, one that is not so obviously of the "cultural" variety. We offer then that this Korean variant of cosmopolitan striving can be read even in apparently Westernized (Korean) cultural forms (e.g. B-boy dancing) or in the case of *Please Look After Mom* in apparently (but not) timeless mother-child narratives. In this way, the successes of both K-pop and *Please Look After Mom* are best appreciated in terms of Iwabuchi's argument about cultural proximity — in terms of the a cosmopolitan striving that resonated across Asia.

We appreciate, however, that by now cosmopolitan striving is a universal global culture in its own right (indeed, in the U.S. some have dubbed the current youth generation the first globals (Loveland,

2010)). We consider that global economic fragility makes this striving ring true in many places in our world. As PEW surveys tell us, for example, (for the United States), social mobility has virtually become a thing of the past (The PEW Charitable Trusts, 2011). Perhaps the “South Korea” of *Please Look After Mom* is principally the story of a small country — a key trope in the novel itself, as we discuss below — from which people feel compelled to strive in ways that are increasingly legible all over the world.

Interestingly, however, we note that even as we appreciate the contemporaneity of *Please Look After Mom*, the work — which is indeed nearly ubiquitously known in South Korea (at least by title) — is easily dismissed for its clichéd nature: as a typical, tiring, tear-jerker tale of woe with nearly offensive old-fangled maternal devotion. In recent interviewing of 40- and 50- something South Korean couples, Abelmann twice encountered men who were steadfast that they would *never* read the book. The first, who himself grew up in a poor rural family, was convinced that there was nothing interesting about this could-be-anyone’s mother story. The second who grew up in a poor urban family and who thinks the world of his mother — whose sacrifice was enormous, and whose sons achieved beyond-belief educational success — was very dismissive of the novel, as if to say “Who knows better about a mother’s sacrifice than I do — I could have written the book.” Interestingly, though, his wife, sitting next to him at a German-imitation beer house, joked that he hadn’t in fact even read the novel.

We turn now to the novel itself to demonstrate its particular cosmopolitan striving. In a number of passages from the translation that appear below we have edited the translation not to suggest that the original is mistaken or flawed but to show that the original is in fact even more steeped in cosmopolitan striving than the translation reveals.

V. A Far-Away Tiny Country

The mother in *Please Look After Mom* once asked her eldest daughter, Chi-hon, about the “world’s smallest country” (the Vatican City) and requested that she buy her a rosary if she were to ever find herself there. Indeed, Chi-hon will end up purchasing a rosary from a recently migrated South Korean nun whom she meets at the Vatican City (“I came from Korea too,” says the nun). In one of the book’s final passages, the eldest daughter talks to herself (much of the book takes this format, with chapters devoted to the personal voices of Chi-hon, the eldest son, the second daughter, the father — and finally the mother herself), asking how it is that she has taken this unlikely trip to Vatican City and encountered the Pieta, in which this mother of all mothers “soothes him [her son] even in death.” She continues to herself “Perhaps you [i.e., herself] ~~wanted to~~ **had a desperate wish to stand here and** pray in this place, pray that you could see, **that you could find**, for one last time the **nameless** woman [i.e., her mother] who **had lived in and left [i.e., passed away] this far away** ~~in a small~~ *tiny country attached to the edge stuck on the end of the vast Asian continent*, to find her, and this is why you came here” (236, emphasis added). We are struck that *Please Look After Mom* is above all the story of a woman from a *tiny country*; it is precisely this sense of remoteness and smallness that is central to the book’s cosmopolitan striving, something that all Koreans can easily resonate with. This after-all-*quite-typically* South Korean story unfolds in *Please Look After Mom* through the most clichéd Korean mobility story: that of educational desire.

When quite early in the novel the mother brought up that “world’s smallest country” (i.e., the Vatican) she continued with “Because *you* [Chin-hon] *can* go anywhere” (43, emphasis added). At the heart of *Please Look After Mom* is the mother’s endless labor and desire for her children to be able to “go anywhere”— to that larger playing field, that bigger world that animates so much educational and cosmopolitan desire in South Korea where there is such a keen awareness that theirs is a small country, that South Koreans’ futures are

increasingly precarious, and that being able to move and travel literally and metaphorically, will somehow make all the difference (J. Kim, 2011). Abelman chanced upon a recent advertisement for a study abroad advice center that speaks to this sensibility: it features two young people bent over, boxed in a miniature room with the caption, "If you are feeling that the world is crowding in on you, think about study abroad." Indeed as the mother is reported to have said to Chi-hon early in the novel, "You have to ~~work~~ **study** hard ~~in school~~ so that you can ~~move into a better world~~ **get to another world.**" (18); and later, "You have to live free, saying whatever you feel" (32). Indeed, in these passages and in contemporary South Korean logic more generally, movement and freedom (in this case of expression) are often intimately tied (Epstein, 2003). The mother had once shouted this to her husband about Chi-hon, "We don't have anything, so how is that girl going to survive in this world if we don't send her to school?" (37).

A family member going to enormous lengths to get a relative educated is nearly ubiquitous in South Korea's recent history, and the particular case of an uneducated mother doing so on behalf of her daughter, is again inevitably clichéd, even as it can be profound. Indeed, the illiterate mother resented her own mother, "I'm sure she had to do everything herself as a widow, but *she should have sent me to school*" (55, emphasis added). Her own mother had, in typical colonial period and Korean War era, married her daughter young, to safeguard her from being taken away (by the Japanese, by the northern Koreans): "You were born deep in the mountains. I wasn't able to send you to school," her mother had said to her (131). "Deep in the mountains" in a "tiny country stuck on the end of the Asian continent."

In this way, South Koreans endlessly tie schooling, and more profoundly, its deprivation, to the ravages and tragedies of Korea's hard history, to its predicament as, yes, a "tiny country stuck on the end of the Asian continent." And thus the mother proclaims, as generations before her have, that she "can't have her [daughter] live like me" (89). The mother once described her own illiteracy deep in those mountains as "liv[ing] in darkness, ~~with no light~~, my entire life **in darkness**" (56).

VI. Family Takes

The chapter in the voice of the eldest son, Hyong-chol, rings similarly about the extremes of his mother's desires for his education, mobility, and freedom. Despite successes in high school that seemed to promise a bright future — having promised his mother as a young boy, "I'll become an important person ... a prosecutor" (84). Hyong-chol ended up not passing the college entrance exams and opting instead for the civil service examination. Speaking about at least having secured a job in Seoul, Hyong-chol had said to his mother, "A country hick has finally made it to Chongno [the center of Seoul]" (168). He explained that in Seoul he had the feeling that he could "do anything." At the end his chapter, Hyong-chol reflects that in the past he had not fully realized the extent to which his becoming a prosecutor wasn't his ambition alone, but his mother's dream as well (112).

We meet the younger daughter, a trained pharmacist, who has just returned from taking her children abroad for several years, which any Korean reader can immediately recognize as *chogiyuhak* in which families take children abroad prior to college to develop their English, multiply their options, and somehow secure brighter futures for them — a strategy steeped in cosmopolitan striving ("She thought living in America would be a good experience for the kids" (51)). *Please Look After Mom* finds that younger daughter, however, stranded on the outskirts of Seoul (not being able to afford to live in the center city), struggling with her kids' readjustment to school in South Korea (174); and the mother in turn devastated by her daughter's harried and seemingly unfulfilled life, one hauntingly much too much like her own: "I wonder why you'd studied so much if you were going to live like this," she muses (178). Painfully observing her daughter's domestic labor, she says, "...sometimes I'm angry about the choice you'd made" (179). That youngest daughter was unique among the mother's children for being the first to attend "a place called kindergarten" (180): "You were the best student in our small town" (181) and (because she was able to properly school her) "You were the child who **let me feel** freed me from that feeling [of not being able to do for

her other kids what a mother should do]" (181-2). The mother reflects that this younger daughter gave her the gift of mobility for having shown her "another world": "You were the only ~~child~~ **one of my children** who was freed from poverty. **So**, all I wanted was ~~for you to let you~~ be free from everything. ~~And~~ with that freedom, you often ~~showed me another world~~ **gave me a peek at a different world**, so I wanted you to be ~~even freer~~ **endlessly free**" (184). That her daughter's life ended up somehow betraying that education, opportunity, freedom, and mobility, rings tragic in the mother's chapter. She had hoped that with all her talents and good fortune she, of all of the kids, might live bigger, with greater purpose, with a bigger footprint. The two sisters make an interesting couplet: the eldest who is able to travel freely (and write) and procure that rosary; and the youngest who *despite having traveled* somehow is so not free after all.

The husband's story, one of deep regret for having been cruel to his wife — "whom you'd forgotten about for fifty years" (122) throughout their married life — also turns on the mother's illiteracy: "Your wife believed that *you did everything you did* because you looked down on her, because of her illiteracy" (120, emphasis added). Among *Please Look After Mom's* many semi-tragic regrets on the part of family members, is the father's for having literally always left his wife behind, never walking by her side: "... your habit of always walking in front of your wife during all those years of marriage" (138).

Education is again at the heart of what is arguably the most emotionally wrenching narrative in the novel: the story of the husband's bright little brother Kyun, who was in 6th grade when the mother married into the family. Kyun begged to go on to middle school and the young bride in turn pleaded with her husband to let this happen. What follows though is a devastatingly sad story about Kyun's devotion to his sister-in-law (the mother), even as he was not after all able to attend middle school. The story goes that Kyun cut down an apricot tree to burn for warming his sister-in-law who after the birth of her second child was on the brink of death in a cold winter; his sister, however, took this to be a grave and symbolic misdemeanor and

lashed out cruelly at Kyun for his part in it. Later, the mother would find Kyun in a state of delirium at the tree stump where he eventually collapsed dead. The great irony was that later the sister-in-law would scream at the young bride, "You killed my baby brother" (156). The husband's account of this sequence of events came to this: "Your wife changed after that happened to Kyun ... she stopped smiling" (157). This painful narration of his many marital regrets lands, late in his chapter, at a remarkable moment from "one night a few months ago": "Your wife shook you awake. **'Hey, about Kyun do you think Kyun he wouldn't have done it ended up that way [i.e., killed himself] if we'd sent him to school?'** Then she whispered, almost to herself, 'When I got married, uncle was the nicest to me ... I was his sister-in-law, but I couldn't even send him to middle school, even though he wanted it so badly. I don't think he's been able to go to heaven yet. I saw him again in my dreams. It seems that he still hasn't been able to get to a good place'" (159). In this account, even life itself, the life-force, is tied up in education and educational deprivation. Kyun's story reveals, we take it, the twisted emotional foundation of the mother's pain in *Please Look After Mom*.

VII. A Mother's Own Desire

Over the course of the book, each family member wakes to the mother as herself desirous, even as she has become for each child that place to which each of them could turn to in the whirl of modern life, riveted as it was by each of their own dizzying desires. The mother thus works doubly: the mirror or source of their desires and the safety net for the ravages of those same desires. The younger daughter, for example, asks, "Why did I never give a thought to Mom's dreams" (219) and longs to "console her for her old dreams that are buried somewhere in the pages of time" (220). Chi-hon remarks, "You realize **figure out** that you **had lived** habitually ~~thought~~ **thinking** of Mom when something in your life was not going well, because when you thought of her it was as though something got back on track, and you

felt re-energized **something inside of you ignited again**" (235). But she also muses, "As you got on the Rome-bound plane ... you wondered for the first time *whether Mom's dream was to travel*. Mom would always worry and tell you not to get on planes, but when you came back from somewhere, she would ask you detailed questions about the place you'd visited" (230, emphasis added); and "It was Mom who'd told you to live someplace far away. It was also Mom who'd sent you **away** at a young age to live in a city **the furthest far** from your birthplace" (231). And it was the mother who kept a scrap book of Chi-hon's travels. Each child's mobility is thus keenly tied, literally, narratively, historically, every-which-way, to the mother. Each child's flight — the inevitable grammar of a society with one of the world's most compressed modernity stories — is finally tied to the mother in the aforementioned two-fold fashion: she is its architect (her hard labors and desires launched them each), but she is also salve for the broken wings and bruised hearts of that very flight.

Revealingly, the mother's own account of her exit or death is a desirous one, saying to herself, "Be well ... **now I'm going to** leaving this **family house now**" (211). Earlier telling her sister-in-law that she did not want to be buried with her husband's family, she had said, "I just want to go **to my** home. I'll go rest there" (208). With these seemingly modest desires, we appreciate that the mother has in fact boldly asserted a kinship quite beyond the patriarchal family. In this way the cosmopolitan desires that animate *Please Look After Mom* are profoundly gendered, with particular meaning for women whose mobility was often more profoundly constrained.

VIII. A Final Image

We end with an image from sculptor Yi Yong-baek's "Pieta" series featured at the 2011 Venice Biennale — a series Abelmann chanced upon when searching "Pieta in Korea" in Google. In the series a ceramic mold (Mary) and the sculpture it fashions (Jesus, born of the mold) battle with one another. Yi describes his series as the

predicament of modern people, “the meaning of their [self] love and [self] death.” His explanation strikes us as so apt for *Please Look After Mom*: “If I express the biggest sadness in the world, isn’t it our own death? We express that we have realized our dreams when the real me and the hoped for me are one and the same. Through that other me who embraces the deceased me, I set out to express modern people’s self-pity (*yônmin*) and self-death.” Broadly what we take from his design and words is the intimate mesh of desire, striving, realization, and death that is the modern predicament for the mother (parent)-child duo in South Korea today.

We suggest that vivid in *Please Look After Mom* is the post-IMF, neoliberal South Korea in which so many observers have weighed in on the ways in which people are stranded as they go to herculean efforts to fortify themselves for increasingly indeterminate futures. As aforementioned, we suggest that perhaps these are efforts that resonate for that exploding world population of globalizers.

IX. The Last Word

Foundational to the whole novel, that the reader understands to be the work of Chi-hon, the writer of the family, is the mobility and freedom entailed in writing *itself*. In translation the book has indeed achieved its foundational cosmopolitan desires — the writing has literally traveled. As the father says to Chi-hon in the final words of “his” chapter, “So, whatever happens, you have to ~~keep writing~~ **write your letters** well”; the Korean language here calls attention to the material act of writing itself, writing from that other shore of illiteracy (where the mother stands). He also tells Chi-hon that when people asked the mother what her daughter did, she would tell them “‘you wrote words’ [i.e., the stuff on the page]” (164).

In March 2012, *Please Look After Mom* was announced as the 5th winner — and Shin the first woman — of the Man Asian Literary Prize. Professor David Parker, Chair of the Board of Directors of the Prize praised, “‘*Please Look After Mom*’ is a deeply moving, humane

and intricately wrought book, at once culturally specific and universal. It is a book that will be loved everywhere" (The Man Asian Literary Prize, 2012). In this essay we have not tried to deny the work's simultaneous particularistic and universal appeal, but to think anew about the nature of these constructs. The particularity might be not of the culture-drenched exotic variety but instead the particularity of the intense culture of cosmopolitan desire. The universal might again not be the universal "human experience" that comes easily to mind, but the universality of global striving *today*. In this way, indeed the particular and the universal begin to blur, to lose meaning somehow. We submit that this written word, material as it is — old fangled in genre and form — has teased readers, social observers, and commentators alike: for being just that (old fangled in genre and form) it has seemed all the more promising, signaling South Koreans' arrival and future prospects in the heretofore Western-dominated frontier of cultural content. What we have argued instead is that genre, form, and apparent touchstones aside, *Please Look After Mom* is quite new, but might have little to bode generally for the future of Hallyu — unless of course, we are right that the world is hungry for the likes of *Please Look After Mom* and South Korean boy-girl bands which offer a kind of striving that strikes a familiar chord, or perhaps touches a shared anxiety.

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