

## Editor's Interview with Dr. Ann-Gee Lee, Winner of the 2024 Felicia Campbell Memorial Innovative Contributions to Popular Culture Studies Award

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**I** Your work encompasses a number of intersecting points of interest for popular culture scholars. These include K-dramas, *The Walking Dead*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Community*, and American Chinese food, just to name a few. What draws you to the study of various areas of popular culture? Why is it an important scholarly field?

When I disclose that I get to watch TV as part of my job and publish articles on certain shows, people don't usually take me seriously—not even family. So I make sure to tell my students that writing about popular culture or media, which may fall under qualitative analysis, is not always considered real research. Yet popular culture is closer to the daily interactions and social issues that affect us. Through media consumption, we learn a little about cultures worldwide and different aspects of language without traveling. We practice all kinds of critical-thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills based on character choices; we learn what *not* to do with a smidge of *schadenfreude*. We superficially learn what it's like to be from different sexualities, social classes, races, abilities, etc. Most of all, we hopefully learn to be more empathetic toward one another.

K-dramas are an interesting product of globalization. Everyone reacts to them differently. The same can be argued with

any show. *The Walking Dead* isn't just zombie media—it's a playing field for various leadership styles. *The Big Bang Theory* isn't just about science but how cultural imperialism and gender come into play. *Community* isn't just about college culture but how to navigate friendships and odd social situations. Examining American Chinese food brings to light an interesting racial history that is still problematic. While I still think we learn more from reading, popular culture in its various forms, if shown accurately, can be a great teacher as well.

2 You were co-editor of the book *The Rise of K-Dramas: Essays on Korean Television and Its Global Consumption* and contributed an article to it entitled “Korean Dramas as Chinese ‘She Economy.’” In that article, you talk about the consumption of K-dramas in China and how popular these shows are. What are some of the distinguishing features of the K-drama fandom in China?

K-culture's effect on other countries is strangely political, making media consumption a soft power. China is a huge market and geographically close to Korea, so K-companies think trying to appeal to Chinese is just common sense. Chinese are also quick to follow fads, so media consumption takes up a large part of the culture. Genuine designer products appearing in K-dramas sell out quickly, leading some to resort to similar K-beauty brands or counterfeit Chinese versions. There are also *wanghong* or internet celebrities capitalizing on K-beauty products or knockoffs, though these *wanghong* can also be exploited. K-beauty and K-fashion were especially popular along with the Korean Wave, but during COVID, C-beauty companies were able to catch up, create more appealing products, and market knowingly to

their own. Since the K-beauty industry has been losing Chinese consumers quickly, I have been arguing that they should expand their color palettes and come to the U.S., where fans eagerly await.

**3** K-dramas are now gaining a strong foothold in the American streaming market. Popular shows range in genre from *Squid Games* to *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* to *The Glory*. Why do you think that K-dramas are finding such a strong and passionate audience in America?

Popular culture is how I connect to my students. More than one student kept telling me about *Squid Game* because it's unlike anything else they watch. Viewers may not really think about it, but there's a K-drama for anybody. For example, I'm a foodie, so I prefer K-dramas, such as *My Lovely Sam Soon* (2005), *Coffee Prince* (2007), and *Pasta* (2010). In between all the food is people trying to figure things out. To me, K-dramas also bring out more realistic and innocent romantic aspects. There is the usual meet-cute and the build-up to the first kiss, but also fun to watch are all the misunderstandings and adorable awkward moments when getting to know a person. Along with K-dramas is K-pop that has been immersing itself into American culture. I can hear BTS songs on the radio, students flock to K-pop concerts in different states, our university has a K-pop Appreciation and Dance Group, and because of both K-dramas and K-pop, students especially want to study in Korea or travel there. I felt the same anticipation of traveling to Seoul for a conference because what I knew about Korea, I learned from friends and K-dramas. Lastly, the Korean language is a lot easier to learn than Mandarin with fewer characters (I know as a Mandarin teacher),

and the Korean language contains a lot of loan words from English that also sound like English.

4 I found your work considering Nüshu to be fascinating. Can you briefly describe what Nüshu is for readers? You mention in your article about Nüshu that it exists in the modern day, but that materials that once would have been made by hand are now bought in stores, and that the styles and forms are geared toward consumers. You also indicate that there are very few left who are able to transmit traditional knowledge about Nüshu. Do you think that the commercialization of Nüshu can eventually help to draw women to learn more about its roots? Will this commercialization eventually take over traditional Nüshu completely?

Nüshu is a written secret language used by women in a small area of China to communicate with one another in a time when women weren't allowed to be educated; it was sung, written, and embroidered. It proliferated through Third-Day Books or multimedia scrapbooks women gave one another as wedding gifts. Inside these books, they would insert advice, poems, stories, letters, or drawings; embroidery floss, a papercut decoration, or a clump of silk for ink; in the back of the book would be blank pages for women to keep as a diary. With Nüshu, women's mental health improved.

Though Nüshu was "discovered" as an academic topic in the 1980s, a small group of scholars have tried to preserve it electronically. However, it took Lisa See, an American, to write a novel, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), also a film (2011), for people worldwide to care about it. People from

China don't really know about Nüshu. In the 1970s, authorities thought it was witchcraft. Moreover, authentic Nüshu artifacts were burned during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) or buried with the women who used them. As a written language, Nüshu can be difficult to learn, but it can only survive with people's appreciation of the art form through replicas and hence its commercialization.

5 You have presented a number of papers and led discussions on issues related to feminist study. For example, you have considered what it means to teach in the era of #Me-Too. Would you share a bit more about the connections you see to your areas of interest in feminist study and popular culture?

In graduate school, we had an entire year of feminist studies. My first semester in Fall 2004, my professor shared an article with me about Huanyi Yang, the last woman to use Nüshu in her life. I knew right then Nüshu would be my dissertation topic. I also learned about feminist historiography, about the women who have been left out of history, and the academic value of women's private and public practices. We learned about Aspasia, who was supposedly Socrates's teacher. I have always been interested in covert forms of rhetoric, which includes nonverbal communication. Along this line, women's contributions in history have been silenced. It took them a while to be included in the literary canon and even much later to include women of color.

Some colleagues and I went to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville to listen to Tarana Burke speak on #MeToo before we held a panel on what it means to teach in relation to the issue. I was more like the moderator, asking professors from different fields about their life experiences and how

those translate to their teaching. They had grown up with accepted sexism and were uncomfortable with it. How this all ties to popular culture is that we get to see that type of mistreatment of women in historical shows such as *Mad Men*, *Lessons in Chemistry*, etc. Fortunately, we can also see stronger characters in novels and films such as *Enola Holmes* and different forms of masculinity and mental health in shows like *Ted Lasso*. In class, we discuss the importance of representation in media in terms of intersectionality as well.

6 Where will your areas of interest take you next? Are there any projects you are working on that you might share with us?

I get ideas for writing by scouring the University of Pennsylvania's English Department's CFPs; I post for collections I am working on there as well. I never know what I will be writing about, but my interests are vast. Also, I know that if I miss the chance to write something one time, it will come back around again. For example, I found out about a collection on American Chinese Cuisine in 2015 and was only able to peer review for them; I had planned to write about the material rhetoric aspects and cultural meanings of Chinese food dish names. However, I recently submitted a draft to a new edited collection on food, diaspora, and memory for which I can write about the history of American Chinese Cuisine, its interesting social implications, and some thoughts from family and friends. Academic writing also takes time. The first time we wrote about *The Walking Dead* was when the first season of the show came out; when working on a new, more recent iteration of the article, we needed to include all the seasons and mention the spinoffs.