



# Women, Class, and Family in South Korean Television Series

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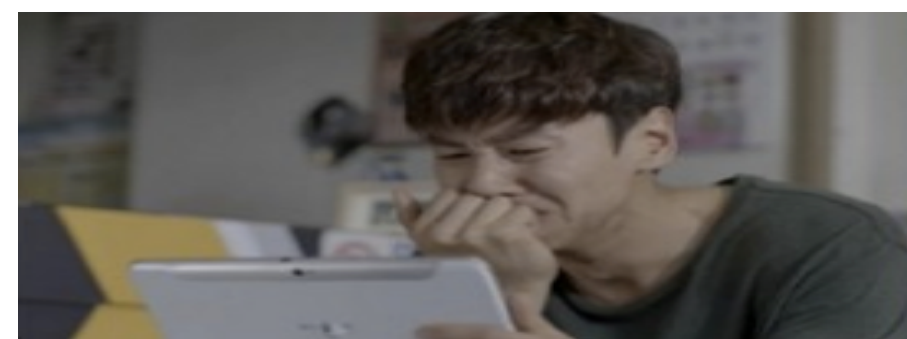
How do generational histories, ideologies, relationships of class, family obligations frame the subjectivities of women in media representations, such as *Dear My Friends* (2016), directed by Jong-Chan Hong?

## Introduction:

Through South Korea's past experiences of colonial modernization, the image of strong and self-sacrificing mothers produced expectations that invincible women should have boundless fortitude in the face of men's shortcomings. The struggle for women to find their own spaces amid the frustrations of modern history brought about generations of ideals, resulting in conflicting roles of women and images against to which women measured themselves. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the transition of postcolonial South Korea from traditional patriarchy to modern patriarchy and the rise of consumer society transformed Korean women's vision and subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> These circumstances made women's subjective experiences ambivalent and conflicting. As such, I draw upon popular culture, from television series, specifically *Dear My Friends* (2016), to explore Korean women's concepts of femininity as they are linked to the profound social transformations of Korean society.



Jung-Ah with her mother right before she passes away.



Min-Ho watches his mother through his iPad from the cameras installed in her house as her onset of Alzheimer's worsens.



Wan kissing her mother after a treatment of chemotherapy.

## Dear My Friends/디어 마이 프렌즈:

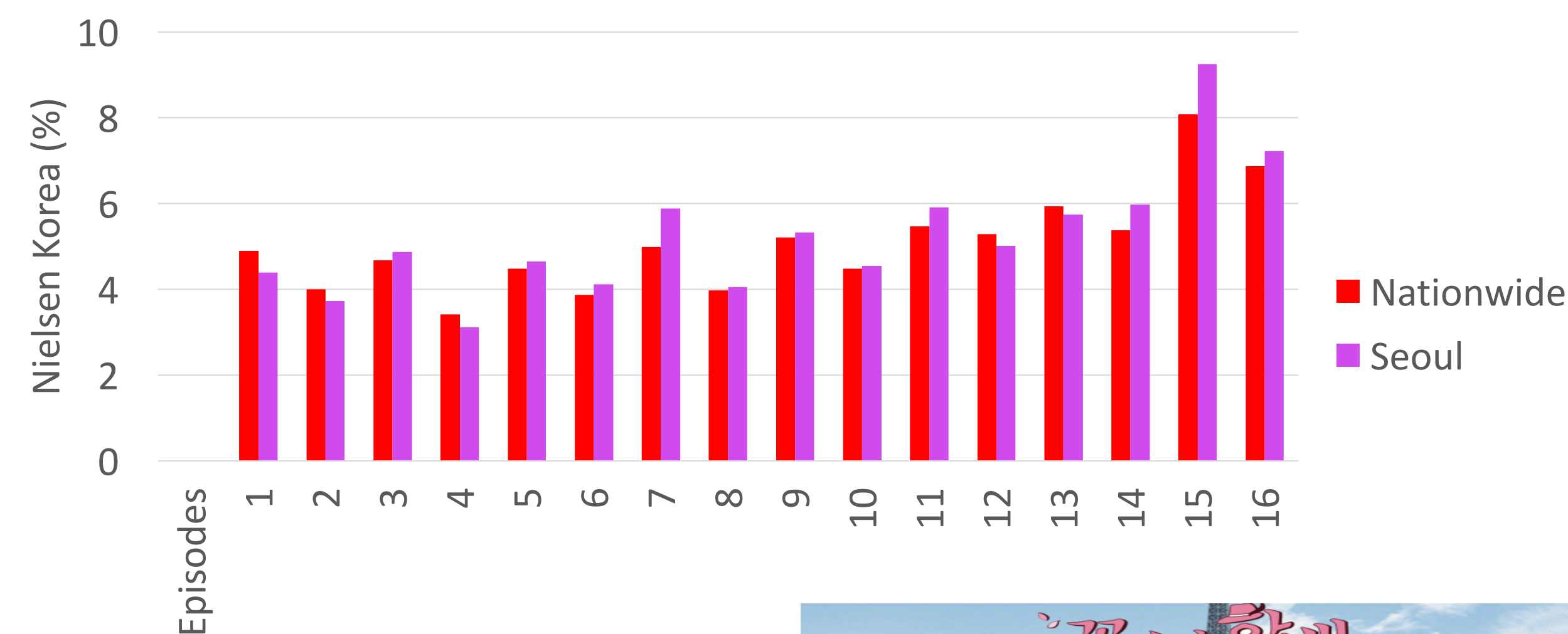
*Dear My Friends* is a drama, written by a female writer—Hee-Kyung Noh, that begins with Hee-Ja Cho, a 76 year-old, sitting in a café in metropolitan Seoul, South Korea. Once she leaves the café, she is rebuked by a younger female staff member for being a *kkonde* (a derogatory term used for old people or teachers for students) because she does not accommodate the café's "self-serve" policy. Despite this, Hee-Ja obliviously walks away, and gets to a building to attempt suicide, but decides not to. The scene jumps to the narrator's mom, Nan-Hee Jung, played by Doo-Shim Go, trying to persuade her daughter to drive her and friends to an alumnae gathering by the countryside. The daughter, Wan Park unabashedly declines. The introductions of female characters and the tensions that arise between the younger and older generations are **representative of complex identifications, engagement with both conservative and contemporary gender discourses, and responsibilities affiliated to familial and friendship relationships**. As the drama progresses throughout the sixteen episodes in the series, events such as the advancement of Hee-Ja's Alzheimer's, Nan-Hee's diagnosis of cancer, the betrayal of Choong-Nam's artists and academics that she sponsors, Jung-Ah's newfound independence and freedom from motherhood and wifehood, Yeong-Won's closure to a past relationship, and Wan's completion of her book on her mother and friends occur. In the end, Wan and the older characters take a vacation in an RV, and look outwards. The last scene, shown below, illustrates through positionality, the succession of days to come as the sun sets with the older men and women sitting down, while younger Wan stands by the growing tree.



## Episode Ratings:

In South Korea, *Dear My Friends* has had steady amount of viewers tuning in to watch the golden cast, who are in their 60s and 70s.

- Each episode has an average rating of 4%, which is a respectable figure for a cable network program that often do not exceed the 1% mark.
- Viewers of all ages tuned in—from those in their 30s to 60s.
- While for some, the show is an antidote to the deluge of rose-tinted romances featuring youthful actors and actresses, for others, this series is no anomaly as other types of shows (such as reality TV) starring elderly actors was also popular.



Dear My Friends



Reality TV show, *Grandpas Over Flowers*, which follows four elderly actors in their 70s on backpacking trips.

## Methodology:

In addition to using *Dear My Friends* as a primary source, secondary sources that vary in disciplines—Korean studies, anthropology, sociology, popular culture, and history—have been studied to examine how class, family, and generational differences inscribe the ways in which women experience femininity and modernity in a specifically South Korean context.

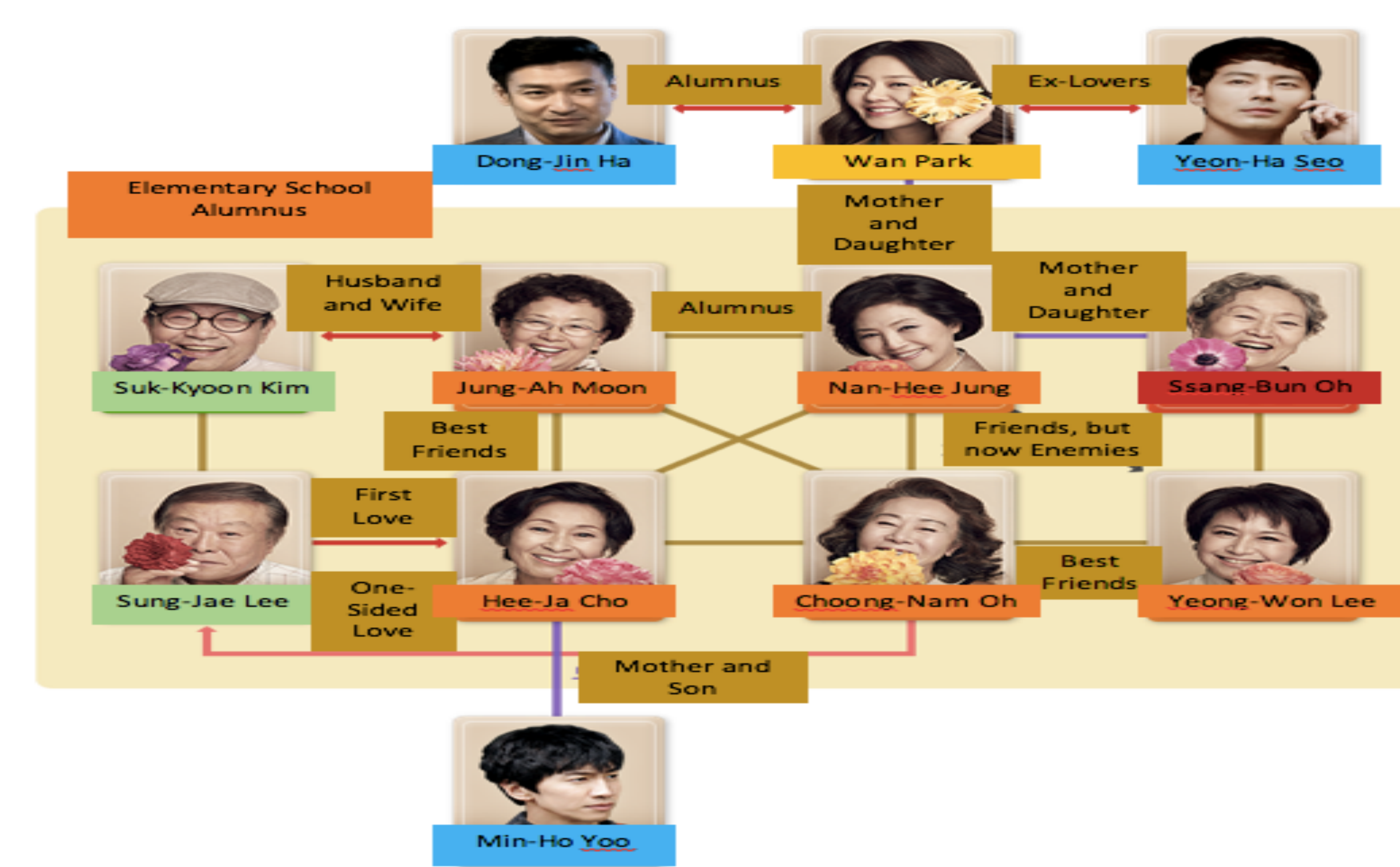
### On the Series

- Through the meta-narration of this series by the female protagonist, who is a "writer" and of a different generation from her mother and "aunts", it becomes clear that this story is about women within South Korea's modernity (despite the intermittent, but meaningful, portrayals of circumstances not having changed very much).

### Textual Sources

- Close viewing and the readings of sources illustrate how South Korea's "aborted modernity" made it "difficult" for patriarchs to maintain flexibility and a sense of reality, turning toward women to compensate for loss.<sup>2</sup> Despite the claim of agency of women through newly emphasized roles, such as "strong mother" and "smart wife", representations of women in media make ambivalent such gender discourses in South Korea. Hence, further research will demonstrate how concepts regarding women, class, and family are understood.

## Character Chart



## Women and Class:

This study is interested in not only women as social subjects or entities, but in gender as impressed in social life and narrative. The focus on women speaks to their important contribution to class distinction over the course of South Korean development. The women in *Dear My Friends* are not just mothers of younger protagonists; instead, they are the protagonists that the story develops around, and they have their own mothers, friends, siblings, and children.



After deciding to write about her mom and her friends, Wan meets with them to listen to their life stories. One of the more dramatic characters states: "Life is not beautiful. Life is a soap opera. That's the reality of our lives", while reminiscing about the adversities that she has had to overcome—her poverty, cruel mother-in-law, the passing of her husband, and more.

## Family:

Daniel Bertaux states that in times of dramatic social mobility, family stories "stimulate the sociological imagination" and are "loaded with sociological insights".<sup>3</sup> While the stories about the support of family by the financially independent of the elderly female protagonists attest to Bertaux's statement, the formation of a family-like relationship between women in this series is most interesting because together, they care for and help each other in every little and big way—more than what some actual family members could do for one another.

## References:

1. Abelmann, Nancy. *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk, and Class in Contemporary South Korea*. N.p.: U of Hawaii, 2003. Print.
2. Ibid.
3. Cho, Haejoang. "Living with Conflicting Subjectivities." *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*. By Laurel Kendall. N.p.: U of Hawaii, 2002. 158-165. Print.

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