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The Potential of Fandom and the Limits of Soft Power: Media Representations on the Popularity of a Korean Melodrama in Japan

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This paper examines Japanese and Korean representations of the audience,

fandom and popularity of the Korean drama 'Winter Sonata' as it emerged in media discourse in Japan from the beginning of 2004 through the first half of 2005 to better understand the potential and limits of soft power. In the course of the emergent 'Korea Boom' in Japan in 2004 and 2005, narratives in the media describing the Japanese audience of Winter Sonata differed widely between Japan and South Korea. This paper looks at this gap, examines why and how this discrepancy of fandom representations occurs and what this means to both societies. In Japan, the mainstream media discourse on the popularity of Winter Sonata or the 'Korean Wave' was reduced to the image of middle-aged female fans seeking romance stories and good-looking actors. Rather than taking seriously the activities of Japanese women as they reached across borders to its Asian neighbor and former colony, the Japanese mass media stereotyped and derided Japanese women in the pejorative language of fandom. In South Korea, on the other hand, the media discourse was first and foremost self-centered and nationalistic, but this focus led both conservative and liberal commentators to extend the discussion further to include discussion of an imagined 'Asian community'. Amid this celebration of Korea's growing cultural influence in Asia, women, who were the main driving force of its popularity in Japan, were elided from the Korean discourse on this phenomenon.

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