Lalaki Dao, Babae Sha: Meteor Garden and Its Gender(ed) Representations in Retrospect

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This paper, which is based on the author's undergraduate thesis on translation as a means of cultural appropriation, is a critique of the Taiwanese soap opera ***Meteor Garden*** *(**MG**). It presents the various gender(ed) archetypes for both male and female characters employed in the serialized drama. Although the chinovela seems to be an innovation from its forerunners in Philippine media, the Hispanic American soaps, the traditional representations of gender found in said soaps are also evident in the text of **MG**. The paper also discusses audience interpretations of gender representations in **MG**. These interpretations are the result of a translation exercise that required the adolescent viewers to provide their own Filipino translations of selected **MG** scenes in their original Chinese version with English subtitles. Although **MG** has a tendency to romanticize gender(ed) relations, its audiences remain enthusiastic viewers possibly because the soap enacts their dreams in ways that are understandable and uncomplicated.*

By the time this article is published, only vestiges of ***Meteor Garden (MG)*** can be seen on Philippine television. Evening replays of the soap are being aired on Cinema One, the movie channel on cable of the ABS-CBN mass media conglomerate. This is the second replay of the series, the first being the weekend lunchtime "rewind" edition a few months ago in the free channel. One of ***MG*** 's predecessors, the Japanese cartoon ***Hana Yori Dango*** aired over Channel 2 on Saturdays at 10:00-10:30 AM, may well be in its last few episodes.

Likewise, arch-rival GMA 7 may have already finished airing ***Meteor Fantasy Paradise***, a post-***MG*** special locally adapted to the Philippine setting through the inclusion of the Sex Bomb Girls, a local dancing and singing sensation. The said show is aired between 11:30 AM and 12:00 PM on Sundays. Daily servings of ***Love Storm*** that stars Vic Zhou and Ken Zhu of the ***MG*** fame have already ended. The series used to be shown at 4:00-4:30 PM from Mondays to Thursdays, and at 3:30-4:00 PM on Fridays.

Meteor in Manila

It has been more than a year now since this series, inspired by a comic book and a cartoon, reached Philippine soil through ABS-CBN. Since then, several TV stations have imported "Asian" TV soaps from Taiwan and South Korea, have translated them to Filipino, and have marketed them to local audiences both through television and through video compact disc (VCD) copies commercially available in video outlets. The country has also witnessed a proliferation of all things popular at some point in Taiwan, from clothes to hairstyles to music.

The success of ***MG*** remains unprecedented in the "Asian" pop category of Philippine mass media. Not only did it prove its economic power: ***MG*** allegedly was able to rake in about a million pesos a day for ABS-CBN (http://info.bpiexpressoline.com) that principally contributed to the 25% to 26% increase in consolidated TV and ratio net profits from advertising revenues for the first half of 2003 (Dumlao 2003; Madrilejos-Reyes 2003; see also "ABS-CBN closes higher on debt restructuring", n.d.), it also captivated a considerable share of audiences. Its audience rating of 24.9%[1] in its first week on air — from May 5 to 9, 2003 — beat main competitor GMA 7's rating of 12% (by more than twice) in the 4:00 PM slot. When it was moved to the 5:30-6:00 PM timeslot, ***MG*** continued to conquer the ratings game at 34.2%, or by more than thrice that of the competition's 11% (Bago 2003; Hicap 2003; Salterio & Ho 2003).

MG introduced Filipino audiences to foreign pop stars who spoke a foreign language other than English. Its lead stars – Jerry Yan, Vic Zhou, Ken Zhu, and Vanness Wu – were actors before becoming a song-and-dance quartet. Their collective name, F4, was first used in the series to refer to the characters of bullies. The name has stuck and the actors continue to use it in other media appearances. An interview with the former print media manager of Sony Philippines revealed that the local producers of F4 music CDs were apprehensive about selling the records in the Philippines primarily because of the language barrier. But if the continued distribution of the music CDs of the group were any indicator, it seems that the gamble of Sony Philippines paid off. The enthusiasm with which the Filipino audience met the four concerts of ***MG*** leading men and Taiwanese boy band F4 — as individuals, as pairs, or as a group — was phenomenal. Front seat

tickets for their concerts fetched up to P15,000 and general admission tickets were priced at P500.[2]

A Matter of Novelty?

According to several local columnists, ***MG*** 's appeal was based on its novelty (see, for example, Celdran 2003; Salterio 2003; Tolentino 2003). Filipino audiences are always looking for something new in their media menu (Kenny & Pernia 1995), so a program of an old genre in a new packaging, such as the soap opera ***MG***, is appealing. ***MG*** was a takeoff from the Japanese comic book (called *manga*) and *animé* ***Hana Yori Dango*** ('***Men are Better Than Flowers***'), which exhibits the prevailing Japanese sense of cool, or *kawaii* (Japanese for "cute"), expressed in the hairstyles, a particular sense of humor, type of conflicts, and other imageries. In China, this sense of *kawaii* has also had an impact (Chin 1995; Frederick 2003; Nakano 2002).

There are no established criteria to measure *kawaii,* but there are some indicators. Chic is almost always equated with designer clothes and high-tech gadgets (Drake 2001; McGray 2002). Women wear their hair long, with red or blonde streaks, and sport knee-length stockings, short skirts, and platform shoes. Men wear their hair similarly. Like the women, they prefer clothes with designer labels. It seems that Japanese panache expressed in both comic books and TV programs borders on the androgynous (see also Gauntlett 1999; Kinsella 1997) the long hair, the various contraptions, the flashy cars, and the élan, these are all found in ***MG***. Some of ***MG*** 's production values buttress the idea that *it is* essentially a comic book in the flesh. For example, superimposed caricatures and text of comments on the scene are found in Episode 7 of the first season. Another example is the superimposed text of the song lyrics each time one of the theme songs plays in the background, or of an episode of bloopers as a season finale. These production elements are not present in the Hispanic soaps. Indeed, as one avid ***MG*** fan said, such elements make ***MG*** dramatically different from the Hispanic telenovelas. ***MG*** has no haciendas, no horses, no philandering landlords or supercilious mistresses. It is remarkable that these production elements are not found either in other "Asian" serialized dramas that were shown in the country after ***MG***.

Moreover, unlike Hispanic and Filipino soap operas whose narratives are original teleplays, the story of ***MG*** was derived from

the 1992 Japanese comic book, or *manga*, ***Hana Yori Dango*** (***HYD***) created by Kamio Youko, as mentioned above. The leap from page to screen did not happen in a straightforward fashion, as can be proven by numerous fan sites in the Internet: from the *manga*, ***HYD*** was presented in Japan as a live action movie[3] in 1995 starring Uchida Yuki and Shosuke Tanihara, an *animé* (TV cartoon) in 1996, and an *animé*-movie in 1997. In 2001, Taiwanese producer CTS released a "sino-nized" version of ***HYD***, with the Chinese title ***Liu Xing Hua Yuan*** or ***Meteor Garden***.

The implication of this is important: ***MG*** had precedents in the forms of comic books, movies, and a cartoon series. Thus, the development of the plot had been guided and determined even before the actual taping of ***MG***. One has only to recall the case of Filipino soaps ***Pangako Sa'Yo*** and ***Sana'y Wala Nang Wakas***, for instance, to understand the comparison. While ***MG*** progressed in a relatively clear-cut, predetermined manner, its local counterparts are written and rewritten with various twists and turns to accommodate such unscheduled events as the absence of an actor from the taping due to illness or the return of an actor from the rival TV station.

Perhaps cognizant of the abovementioned production elements, ABS-CBN positioned ***MG*** to target the segment of young audiences (see, for example, David 2003). ***MG*** was initially presented during the 4:00-4:30 PM timeslot against the cartoon ***Daimos*** of competitor GMA. It was only later that ***MG*** was transferred to the pre-primetime slot 5:30-6:15 PM. This was another departure from the usual practice, since soap operas are usually targeted at home-based females who generally watch television in the morning or in the early to late evening (Chandler 1994; De Bruin 2001; Jabulin 2002; Japasin-Del Rosario 1997; Livingstone 1998; Parra 2001). The positioning of ***MG*** must have worked well. In a study of foreign TV viewership, Pernia and Mateo (2003) noted that almost two-thirds of Filipino university students regularly watch Asian programs, with about 72% of them watching ***MG***.

The series also had a penchant for expensive items. After all, the story was about a rich boy falling in love with a poor girl. The differences were highlighted by the brand names: Prada, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Nokia, and Mazda figured considerably in the narrative (Sales 2004). Such frequent use of commercial appeal in the production of a soap is not seen in other TV drama series.

But the argument that novelty explains ***MG*** 's popularity is contested. Its uniqueness brought about by its being "Asian" is questionable. The concept of "Asian"-ness in global media is problematic for scholars (Otake & Hosokawa 1998). What is "Asian" anyway? Does being "Asian" mean that the development of the ***MG*** plot is different from, say, ***Days of Our Lives*** or ***Coronation Street***? And what about soaps produced in India, in Indonesia, or even in the Philippines? Or how about media materials filmed in the USA with actors who look Chinese? Are they "Asian" as well, or does media parlance refer exclusively to East Asian media when the term is used?

To at least some Asians, ***MG*** 's "Asian"-ness is problematic. When it was shown in mainland China, Beijing frowned on the Taiwanese soap and later banned it on the grounds that it presented "unrealistic ideas about relations between people and society" that has a "tendency to mislead teenagers" (Associated Press 2002; Bezlova 2002). According to the ***Taipei Times***, this was an effort of the mainland to manage what is to be received through media amid the emergent craving among the Chinese for international pop. After its showing was banned, pirated VCD copies and scripts of ***MG*** suddenly enjoyed a brisk – though clandestine – trade (Associated Press 2002; Bezlova 2002). A Fujian fan from the mainland also tried to illegally cross the Taiwanese border to catch a glimpse of F4's Vic Zhou (Mok 2002).

Moreover, in spite of its supposed novelty, ***MG***, like other soaps, is formulaic. The formulas for serialized narratives employ universal and depoliticized archetypes, which are necessary for the soaps to be effectively and successfully marketed. Crofts (1995: 119) writes that "[m]assive success is predicted... upon the recognizability/ acceptability of the textual features [the archetypes – *MJS*]... and upon the acceptability of differences across such axes as wealth, accent and home-ownership". In ***MG***, thus, as in other soaps, archetypical representations of concepts like gender remain fundamentally unaltered even if the setting in which gender is represented appears to be different from that of the typical soaps.

In Search of Archetypes

This paper focuses on gender archetypes present in ***MG***. Although these exemplars may be viewed as stereotypes in that they are simplified generalizations (Rayner, Wall, & Kruger 2001), I consider them as archetypes.

Archetypes and stereotypes are the same in that they both depend on oversimplification. The main difference, however, is in the matter of scope. Whereas archetypes proffer a version within a range of possibilities, stereotypes control signification to accommodate only one image. As we shall later on see, the categories of exemplars I have devised for ***MG*** does not prevent other gender(ed) representations from occurring. For instance, there is no superseding image of the mother. The poor Mrs. Dong is so dissimilar to the rich Madam Dao Ming Feng. The F4 members, while sharing similarities, possess distinct characteristics.

The Paragon, the Maverick, and the Wicked Witch

The female characters in soap operas deserve much attention since they are at the nexus of the development of the narrative. Studies on popular television assert that soap operas highlight active women (Crofts 1995; Geraghty 1991 in Rayner, Wall, & Kruger 2001; see also Peralta 1998 and Santiago 2001). This feminine dynamism, however, does not necessarily connote independence and liberation. As Stempel Mumford (2000) observes, even a seemingly "liberated" twist in soaps – for example, a woman (presumably sexually active) who does not know who the father of her child is – reaffirms patriarchy in the end. Stempel Mumford explains that bearing a child *per se* is a manifestation of power among women since the capacity to name a child's father means that the mother is able to ascribe social position to the child and consequently instigate the distribution of wealth. Nonetheless, she points out that this setup is precarious because the women remain dependent on the men in the final analysis. Women only name the child; the fathers provide the pedigree.

This combination of activity and subjugation is also a theme employed in ***MG***. Surprisingly, ***MG*** 's archetypes match categories proposed by Geraghty (Saffhill 2001).

(From Left) Mei Zhuo (Vaness Wu) Dong San Cai (Barbie Hsu), and Xi Men (Ken Zhu) spend time with each other. (Retrieved from http://www.geocities.com/himurachan2002/scene6_2.html on August 5, 2004)

Teng Tang Chin (Winnie Chan) dances with Hua Ze Lei (Vic Zhou) during the former's birthday party (Retrieved from http://www.geocities.com/novyp/scene4_1.html on August 5, 2004)

Dong Shan Cai (played by Barbie Hsu) is the lead female character of ***MG***. Her position as lead in the soap comes about because of her unique characterization in relation to the other female characters, a point that is further expounded on in the succeeding paragraphs. Shan Cai's strong sense of friendship and a seemingly nonconformist outlook in life set her apart from the other self-absorbed female characters. Allen (in Chandler 1997) argues that in soaps, what matters more is the paradigmatic rather than the syntagmatic dimension. Simply put, relationships among characters in the soap are more significant than the story itself. However, Shan Cai, though the lead female, is not the embodiment of the perfect female in ***MG***. The paragon of femininity is found in the supporting female character, Teng Tang Chin.

The character Teng Tang Chin is the daughter of a business tycoon whose investments are mostly in steel and biochemicals. Educated in France, Chin is an international model and a licensed pilot. Toward the end of the cluster of episodes on Chin, it is revealed that she left Taiwan to pursue a doctorate in Laws in Paris. All snooty girls in Ying-De University, who are engaged in a perpetual competition among themselves in terms of beauty and luxury, surrender to Chin's prowess. They regard her as their idol, a trendsetter, and an authority on how to live the good life. Even Shan Cai, who at the start did not pay attention to her wealthy classmates, aspired at one point to approximate what Teng Tang Chin has achieved. Clearly, Chin is what Geraghty describes as the "serial character", the person who defines other characters in the soap. She is the paragon, the exemplar, for all those females who have gone to school to marry into wealthy and famous Taiwanese business families.

It is insightful to note that although Chin looks as if she were a "free" woman, she is not. Wealth, that very same possession that makes her appear liberated, is also what imprisons her. More specifically, the expectations tied to her privileged social status imprison her. This theme of imprisonment echoes throughout all the episodes featuring Teng Tang Chin and even extends to her beau Hua Ze Lei in some instances.

For example, in one episode, the newspapers banner Teng Tang Chin's announcement during her birthday party that she was giving up being an heiress to the businesses of her father and was devoting her time to charitable work, most probably as a lawyer in Paris (Episode 4). She explains that she has always been a "doll" of the Teng

Corporation and that her father expects to pass his businesses on to her effortlessly; all she is expected to do is to remain beautiful and manage the group of companies. Thus, the only way to manumit herself is to make a career in Law, something not expected of a woman in her position. This she describes as "being herself". The Filipino translation is more emphatic, "malaya na ako sa lahat". (I am free from everything.) To cap off Chin's grand pronouncement, she cuts her long tresses and begins donning a short, almost F4-like, coiffure. This is perhaps a convenient symbol in the whole ***MG*** schema of meaning: girls ought to wear their hair longer than do boys; it is expected. Hence, by cutting off the hair to a length reminiscent of the boys', Teng Tang Chin is able to signify a break from tradition.

On the other hand, female protagonist Shan Cai may be likened to the typical Cinderella. A daughter of a poor couple in odd jobs (i.e., selling their blood to blood banks), she is forced by her mother, Mrs. Dong, to attend classes in the elite Ying-De Academy. The reason is not quality education or scholarship. Mrs. Dong wants her daughter to meet men from affluent families, hoping that she would marry one of them and alleviate her family's poverty. And meet them she does. She gets entangled with her *nouveau-riche* former classmate Qing He, a reclusive son of the business tycoon Hua Ze Lei, as well as the richest bachelor in Taiwan, Dao Ming Shi. (In one episode in the second season, the assets of the Dao Ming family were said to have been more than the Bhutanese royalty's.) Dao Ming Shi eventually becomes her boyfriend.

What separates Shan Cai from the typical Cinderella is the way the conflicts in the two seasons are resolved. Unlike Cinderella, Shan Cai does not become rich. She chooses to remain poor to disprove allegations that she is more interested in Dao Ming Shi's money than in him. This departure from the popular theme of social salvation may have resulted from the Chinese ethos that wealth is evil and that it can destroy families (Fang & Doyle 2001). On the other hand, the theme of "wealthy people are sad people" found in many soaps also resonates in this setup (Katz & Liebes in Chandler 1997).

Shan Cai is admittedly the maverick of ***MG***. Though there are times when she entertains hopes of improving her lifestyle one day (something that almost everybody in ***MG*** wants), her approach toward this end is resolutely individualist. For instance, she rejects an affair with a rich man, unlike everybody else in school. She prefers working

to earn money rather than to ask help from rich friends to fund her search for Dao Ming Shi, who suffers from amnesia in the second season. She does not want her friends Xiao You and Qing He to suffer from the harassment of Madam Dao Ming, so she offers to break her relationship with the heir to the Dao Ming Corporation, if only to protect her friends in the first season. She would rather drop out of Ying-De to work than attend her classes, even though her parents assure her that they are doing what they can to make both ends meet.

Unconventional when compared to other characters in the soap, Shan Cai is what Geraghty calls the "individuated character", the one who possesses a distinct trait that makes her unique. Perhaps, the only difference in Geraghty's description of the "individuated character" from that of Shan Cai is in the area of humor. By no means is Shan Cai humorous, and her character's rendition is not for purposes of comic relief.

This is not to say, however, that Shan Cai is not subjugated. While Teng Tang Chin's wealth imprisons her, the poor girl Shan Cai is tormented by her internal conflicts aggravated by indecision. Shan Cai is always torn between choices. She is made to choose between working and studying. She is made to choose between Dao Ming Shi and Hua Ze Lei, or Dao Ming Shi and Ya Men (a con artist who falls in love with the girl but was originally sent by Madam Dao Ming to seduce Shan Cai). She is made to choose between her relationship with friends Qing He and Xiao You and her relationship with the Dao Ming lad. In both seasons, she has to choose between going back to the city and rebuilding her relationship with her boyfriend, and staying in a remote village and starting anew. The whole second season sees her selecting between the companionship of an amnesic Dao Ming Shi and the friendship of her boyfriend's new love interest, Ye Sha.

Pragmatically, from a production standpoint, Shan Cai's points of indecision serve as launch pads for new story angles to sprout new characters and further typify characters and relationships by playing out archetypical responses. In the end, Shan Cai chooses Dao Ming Shi and assumes a position of subjugation.

Being an individuated character does not imply that Shan Cai does not share any of Chin's characteristics. Physically, Shan Cai is like Chin: fair skinned, long-haired, and svelte. Though Chin favors the more tailored and dressy outfits, Shan Cai does not look ill-dressed in her jeans and shirts. (The differentiation between the rich and the

poor in ***MG*** is expressed through costuming: the rich women wear dresses and high heels; the poor wear t-shirts and denim pants.)

Another female archetype in ***MG*** is seen in the matriarch of the Dao Ming family. As the lead antagonist, Madam Dao Ming vehemently opposes the relationship between her only son and the poor schoolgirl. Always clad in smart business attires, hair in an outlandish bun, and a taut expression on her face, she offers a bribe to the Dong family and harasses Shan Cai, her friends, and even Dao Ming Shi himself, to put an end to the relationship.

While there are other antagonists in the story, Madam Dao Ming stands out as the major villainess in ***MG***. First, she has the right motive. Her son is involved with a poor girl – very bad for business, she says. Second, she has the resources to carry out the measures to separate the lovers. She is the president of a corporation and her family owns "a telecommunications company, two television stations, three oil refineries, four semiconductor firms, 176 international chains (sic) of hotels, [and] 17,845 supermarkets" (Episode 2, 1st Season). With such impressive — though fantastic — assets, Madam Dao Ming is Geraghty's "holder of 'status position'", a quintessential Wicked Witch who has the power to inflict discord.

This interpretation can be extended to stress that the effectiveness of Madam Dao Ming's packaging is produced by what she has, which many female characters (and male characters, for that matter) do not possess. Unlike Shan Cai, Mrs. Dong or even the Ying-De clique of snooty girls, Madam Dao Ming has more money than anyone in ***MG***. And, unlike the rich Teng Tang Chin, she loves her wealth and expects her son to love it, too.

Madam Dao Ming's portrayal as a woman obsessed with her riches illustrates a kind of subjugation. She is consumed by her desire to keep and further expand her wealth through the marriage of her son to a daughter of a rich colleague. In Episodes 10 and 11 of the first season, for example, the supporting female character Xiao Jie is introduced. She enters the story as the girl selected by the Dao Ming matriarch for her son. Apart from the danger of Dao Ming Shi falling stubbornly in love with Shan Cai, the rationale behind the hasty decision is business. The Dao Ming Group was planning to enter into a partnership in petroleum with Xiao Jie's family. A marriage between the scions of the two families is perceived to be a better business guarantee than a signed agreement.

The existence of these three archetypes — the paragon, the maverick, and the wicked witch – does not mean that there were no other female archetypes present in *MG*. Nonetheless, I tend to picture these three categories as unique points within a continuum with the paragon occupying the middle spot, and the maverick and the wicked witch occupying separate extremes. All female characters fall under different places within this continuum and are characterized accordingly. Ergo, Mrs. Dong may be located between the paragon and the individuated character because of her uniquely droll portrayal. Xiao Jie may be placed somewhere between the paragon and the wicked witch because of her position in the love triangle with Dao Ming Shi and Shan Cai, although her depiction was fundamentally good-natured.

The Princes Charming and the Parvenu

Do the abovementioned categories also apply to the male characters of the series? An analysis of the soap suggests that they do, although both Geraghty's "serial character" and "holders of 'status position'" are realized in the same people – the F4 members themselves.

F4 is the name given to the group of four bachelors who belong to Taiwan's richest families. Dao Ming Shi (Jerry Yan), Hua Ze Lei (Vic Zhou), Xi Men (Ken Zhu), and Mei Zhuo (Vanness Wu) have been best friends since their childhood days. Because of their wealth, they are feared by both students and teachers of Ying-De Academy. So influential are they that they can drink alcohol within the campus premises (Episode 2, 1st Season), or harass a student into dropping out of a class (Episode 1, 1st Season). They can also ask the school principal to expel any student for no reason at all (Episode 7, 1st Season), or cut short a graduation ceremony and nonchalantly demand for their diplomas (Episode 1, 2nd Season). Curiously, the F4 are never shown in a classroom scene. They never appear in any situation where they have to study. Their graduation in the second season is the only portion that had a remote connection to academic life.

Furthermore, as holders of "status position", the F4 do not hesitate to display their riches. Dao Ming Shi is especially notorious in this regard. He has an indoor and outdoor pool and a beauty salon in his house (Episodes 1 and 2, 1st Season). He gives Shan Cai a high-end brand of mobile phone when he began to like her (Episode 5, 1st Season), and an expensive dress before taking her to Okinawa (Episode 6, 1st Season) or Barcelona (Episode 1, 2nd Season). He uses his power

in Episode 5 of the 1st season by mobilizing 80,000 workers of the Dao Ming businesses to find the shop where a set of photos is developed. He capriciously buys a new yacht in Episode 3 of the first season so that he can date Shan Cai during the spring vacation. The other members of the F4 can easily go in and out of Taiwan (Episode 6, 1st Season) or engage in nasty brawls in expensive clubs and settle these by a thick wad of dollar bills (Episode 1, 1st Season).

Such images portray an almost universal construction of masculinity in popular culture. Men are powerful, confident, materialistic, and aggressive, but are emotionally inept and cold (Brown 2000; Maiquez 2003).

In spite of all these, the F4 are inscribed with another meaning that is also present in the male characters of many serialized dramas femininity. In other words, the characters of F4, though inscribed with the patriarchal conception of masculinity, are acted out in a feminized manner (see also Stempel Mumford, 2000). Their name, "Flower 4", is feminine. The visual representations are full of symbolic devices that usually connote femininity: fair skin, long hair, floral shirts. They are pictured as cultured individuals – fascinated with astronomy and travel in the case of Dao Ming Shi, interested in violin and pensive solitude in the case of Hua Ze Lei, devoted to the family and fixated with grooming in the case of Xi Men, knowledgeable in classical music in the case of Mei Zhuo – while maintaining their rough edges through frequent brawls with other minor characters in the soap (see also Sharples 1999).

The ascriptions of femininity notwithstanding, the male characters are expected to be sexually active, which is not expected of the female characters. In Episode 3 of the 1st Season, Dao Ming Shi becomes the subject of teasing among his friends because he is still a virgin. Xi Men, Mei Zhuo, and Hua Ze Lei have liaisons with women; Xi Men is notorious for having a different girlfriend every week. As mentioned above, this masculine portrayal contrasts with the construction of the female characters of whom sexual innocence is expected. Because of her *alleged* flirting with the foreigner disc jockey Peter (Episode 5, 1st Season) or with Xiao Xun (Episode 8, 1st Season), Shan Cai is harshly punished.

It is obvious how the F4 are cast in the role of "holders of 'status position'". Their role as "serial characters" becomes evident when they are viewed in relation to Qing He, the Parvenu.

Madam Dao Ming (Zhen Xiu Zhen) plays the major antagonist in the series. (Retrieved from http://www.geocities.com/himurachan2002/scene19_3.html on August 5, 2004)

(From Left) Chen Qing He (Edward Au) and Dao Ming Shi (Jerry Yan) (Retrieved from http://www.geocities.com/novyp/scene4_5.html on August 5, 2004)

Chen Qing He was the classmate of Shan Cai in junior high. They attended the same middle-class school, got separated for some time, and found each other again in Ying-De. But Qing He has grown rich. A parcel of ancestral land that his father inherited is sold and a business is founded (Episodes 2 and 14, 1st Season).

Qing He could have easily belonged to the elite members of the class. Yet ***MG*** portrayed him differently and, as a consequence, set him apart from his rich classmates. Qing He is characterized as a parvenu (Episode 3, 1st season), a nouveau-riche boy who possesses an archetypical dumbness and naivete despite the affluent mien. The ABS-CBN translation is more brutal; it uses the term *bano* ('clumsy' or 'stupid'), which coincidentally sounds like parvenu. Qing He harbors romantic feelings for Shan Cai but the girl fails to notice his insinuations. The characterization positions Qing He as an "individuated character". He is rich but clumsy. He has the money but not the physique. He is but the comic relief.

The F4 constantly berate Qing He and say that he can never be like them. To add insult to injury, Qing He wants desperately to be like the F4. Why is Qing He so fixated with becoming like the F4? The clique of snooty girls also wants to become like Teng Tang Chin, but they would only go as far as gawk at her. To fit in Ying-De, Qing He must be F4-like. He even has a brief chance to become like the F4 when Hua Ze Lei infuriated Dao Ming Shi (Episodes 6 and 7, 1st Season). Sadly, he could only be described as "not F4"; he did not fit in. What this means is that the members of the F4 are the exemplars of the serial characters.

Nonetheless, the F4 are not a homogenous collection of rich, spoiled young men. Although wealth and influence are common to all, each F4 member has supplementary characteristics that work well in constructing the narrative of the soap. Dao Ming Shi is the bad boy. Hua Ze Lei is the artistic recluse. Xi Men is the casanova. Mei Zhuo is the playful and friendly guy. Such depictions of F4 have endeared the group to ***MG*** 's fans. One does not have to like every member of the F4 to like F4 and, consequently, the soap. One may despise, say, Dao Ming Shi, but may continue to watch ***MG*** because of Hua Ze Lei.

As among the female archetypes, the theme of wealth as an impediment is present among the well-heeled male characters. In one episode, the pensive Hua Ze Lei comments that the wealth he and his best friends enjoy condemns them to a life of "invalids" (Episode 6,

1st Season). In contrast, which further reinforces the notion of archetypical roles, Qing He is never regarded as an invalid even though he is wealthy. In Episode 2 of the 1st Season, Dao Ming Shi hints that Qing He is a lot wiser than him.

In spite of his opulent lifestyle, each F4 member is portrayed as suffering from a personal lack. This characterization supports the "wealthy people are sad people" theme. Everyone is constrained by tradition to marry a woman from the same social stratum, with Dao Ming Shi under the greatest pressure to do so. Each one is incapable of a satisfying relationship with people (e.g., classmates, relatives), ironically because each one is used to getting all he wants.

Toward the end of the second season, each F4 member grows conscious that it is time to move on and take on responsibilities as a future business magnate. However, they attempt to change. Dao Ming Shi's is the most radical; he gives up his wealth to be with the girl he has always loved. In a way, the F4 follow the common prince charming construction. They are portrayed as the savior (Sales 2004) but they, too, must be saved. This fits into Vladimir Propp's view of the protagonist (Mellor 2001). According to the Russian structuralist, the protagonist typically undergoes these stages: The protagonist finds initial harmony. He then discovers a lack, goes on a quest to resolve this lack, and earns many helpers and opponents along the way. He is given many tests and is finally rewarded, only to discover a new lack at the end.

These elements are all present in the male leads. They are all comfortably ensconced in their wealth. They realize they are "invalids" when they relate to other people – an awareness produced by Shan Cai's presence. They undergo the process of reforming themselves, meet Ye Sha, Qing He, Xiao You, and a host of other characters, who either want to break F4's friendships or relationships with other people, or want to help them improve.

At some point, they are given tests that make them jealous (e.g., Dao Ming Shi's jealousy of Hua Ze Lei, Ya Men, and Xiao Xun in the 1st Season). There are tests that assess their patience (e.g., Mei Zhuo's affair with Hsiao Chao in the second season) or their love of family (e.g., Xi Men's relationship with his philandering father in the second season). There are tests that examine their fortitude and resolve (e.g., Hua Ze Lei's sacrifice for love of Dao Ming Shi and Shan Cai in both seasons). They are all rewarded at the end either in the form of

girlfriends or careers, but the situation remains bittersweet with the impending need to move on while trying to keep the relationships.

Locating the Audiences

But where are the audiences? Do they recognize the gender(ed) representations of ***MG***? My interviews with my informants[4] and my experiences when completing the manuscript of my undergraduate thesis indicate that they do. In fact, not only did they interpret genders (for media consumption is ultimately an act of interpretation)[5]; the audiences also detected the points that set ***MG*** apart from its Hispanic predecessors.

One informant in my aforementioned study commented that she could relate to the story of the Taiwanese soap more than the plot elements in Hispanic soaps. She said that she found horseback-riding "bidas" (lead characters) of the Hispanic soaps silly and far-fetched. A third year female student commented that while she could relate to the school problems of Shan Cai and the F4, the complexities of marital infidelity and the excessive kissing seen in Hispanic soaps were too much for her.

Audiences approach the consumption of the media text with prior expectations of the characters and the relationships among them. Thus, some commented unfavorably that the original Chinese dialogue sounded nasal. Remember that the soap was translated into Filipino for the local audiences, and the source material for this translation exercise was the version in Chinese with English subtitles. One informant devised a personal correlation and said that when dubbing the dialogues, a big voice must go with a big body.

A more fascinating aspect of this prior expectation is shown in the way my informants manipulated gender(ed) terms in their translations. The first phase of my study shows that ABS-CBN did manipulate the translation by diluting some of the invectives and sex-related terms.[6] The term "slut" in the source media, for example, is translated as "walang kuwenta" (useless), "madungis" (dirty), "manloloko" (charlatan), or "basurang mapang-akit" (alluring garbage). "Bitch" is "salbahe" (bad or savage), "di kagandahan" (not so pretty) or "bruha" (hag). The translations may indicate a negative attitude towards sexual promiscuity of women characters.[7] To describe the male characters of ***MG***, on the other hand, terms such as "bastard"

and "bullshit" are common. The lay translators interpreted these terms as "walang hiya" (shameless), "salbahe" (bad or savage), "walang modo" (without refinement) or – most revealingly in terms of gender "lalake ka" (you, mister), "gago" (as opposed to "gaga" i.e., stupid) and "luku-luko" (as opposed to "luka-luka" i.e., insane). ABS-CBN's version is also revealing: "bastard" may either be "halang ang kaluluwa" (rotten soul) or "hindi matinong lalaki" (insane man). Note how marked gender concepts are in the aforementioned examples. This is perhaps another manifestation of gender(ed) representation in ***MG***, that women are supposed to be virginal and that the woman who violates this rule earns the worst invectives that deride her sexual relations. On the other hand, men are vilified with terms other than those whose meanings are sexual.

Likewise, "bitch" and "slut" never found their way in the dubbed ***MG*** that ABS-CBN broadcast and that many Filipinos watched. Phrases like "have sex all day long" or "pick up guys" or "make love to me even once a month" are not included in the local translations. As in the case of my amateur translators, the ABS-CBN translators also diluted sexually-charged terms into more socially acceptable language, which may be proof of what Padilla-Maggay (2002) detected as the generally conservative nature of Philippine communication, especially with regard to sex.

In addition, the translation exercises that I conducted with my informants attest to the tension between the source and the interpreting cultures. The gender(ed) tenets held by one culture do not necessarily parallel the ethos of another culture.

Postscripts to a Gendered Life

The questions remain: How do these archetypes affect the experience of watching the soap? Is it important to know about these archetypes?

MG 's representation of traditional gender roles is an effective selling point. Not only does it succeed in selling the program; it also sells a lifestyle that reinforces gender divisions. Like Hamilton's (1997) observation on a related media material, the *animé*, ***MG*** 's presentation of exemplars of sexuality through idealized identities and romanticized conflicts makes the issues tied to gender more consumable.

Watching popular television is an active practice, with fans of popular culture actively participating in the production of meaning (see, for example, Jenkins 1992). Flores and De La Paz (2000), writing about the pleasures of soap opera viewing, posit that the charisma of soap operas like ***MG*** comes, not from their being insensitive to the issues of the day, but from being able to incorporate these issues in their production in a manner that is easily grasped by their publics. The audiences feel the same dilemma, however trivial or farfetched they appear to be, because these are the same dilemmas they have. This calls to mind the point asserted by Stempel Mumford (2000) that soaps enable their viewers to enact a dream. They allow their audiences to live out an utopia — that "oppositional moment" to fulfill an epigrammatic fantasy that may probably be absent in real life (Radway in Stempel Mumford 2000).

Indeed, ***MG*** romanticizes the issues of gender(ed) relations, poverty, and related concerns. But through this romanticization, it enables itself to make a stand. It revels in youthful exuberance and portrays the youth in search of meanings behind the dictates of tradition. It speaks of the many concerns that the youth have and their aspirations for a better life.

Most importantly, ***MG*** proclaims that anyone can subvert the path imposed by social status (like Shan Cai did) or by convention (like Dao Ming Shi did). The approach may be funny, unbelievable, romanticized, or gendered – but the desire to live life in the manner one chooses is held in common.

Meteor Garden is now part of broadcast media history in the Philippines. It owes a large part of this place to its promotion and economic clout. Some argue that its success sprang from its novelty. I argue that it derived its success from its capacity to speak the hopes of its audiences in the metaphor they understand: fantastic, romantic, and gendered.

Notes

[1] According to AGB Philippines (www.agb.com.ph), audience rating is the average number of people watching a particular TV program per minute. It can be expressed either as a percentage or as an absolute value. On the other hand, audience share refers to the ratio between the number of viewers watching a particular TV program during a specified timeslot and the total number of people watching television during the said timeslot. A share is

always expressed as a percentage. My resources for *MG* 's ratings were unclear on whether they were referring to ratings or to shares since the word rating was used throughout their discussion, although the same ratings were used in comparison to another station's ratings.

[2] However, the tickets were not sold out. Bad weather and security issues were a problem during the first F4 concert featuring Ken Zhu and Vanness Wu, sponsored by Vigslim (Big Slim, according to other sources) Entertainment Production. A stampede during the concert allowed people who bought cheaper seats to occupy the P1000- to P3000-seating areas ("'The Event' concertgoers air woes, hit organizers", 16 September 2003).

This may have sent out so strong a warning to fans that in the next concert featuring Jerry Yan and Vic Zhou, sponsored this time by ABS-CBN to commemorate its 50th Year, tickets were reportedly still available as of 4 PM on the day of the concert itself (Almonte 2003). When all four came to Manila for a concert on December 26, the 9,000 seats were taken mostly by fans from neighboring Asian countries (Cruz 2003). Also, given the cost of the tickets — with the cheapest pegged at P600 — and with Christmas just over, not as many Filipinos came for the concert (Cruz 2003; Lo 2003).

[3] For lack of a better term, I use live action movie to mean a feature film with actors, as differentiated from a full-length film animation.

[4] For my undergraduate thesis, I compared the Chinese version of *MG* with English subtitles to two translations in Filipino. The first Filipino translation in the comparison was ABS-CBN's. The second was a corpus of amateur translations I gathered from adolescent audiences of the soap. This I did to amplify the concept that translators are communicators (Hatim and Mason 1997) and that any act of translation is an act of communication (Steiner 1998; Temple 1997). The informants are junior and senior students of Meycauayan College, Meycauayan, Bulacan. They were selected because (a) adolescents are important segments in studies about language (Montañano 1996), (b) *MG* is largely an adolescent TV genre, and (c) the selection of students eliminated the potential pedantic approach to translation should professional translators be the sole source of data. The site, Meycauayan College, was selected because it is situated in the predominantly Tagalog-speaking province of Bulacan. I gathered from my Anthropology 170 (Language and Culture) class that the variety of Tagalog spoken in Manila mainly originates from Bulacan and other nearby provinces. Furthermore, I am alumnus of the said school, a connection which facilitated access to the school and its students.

The method of constructing the corpus was inspired by Format II used in gathering anthropological linguistic data proposed by Duranti (1997). A compendium of 15 scenes was lifted from the first six episodes in the first season of *MG* in Chinese with English subtitles. The scenes were selected

using typical case sampling (Lindlof 1995), with special attention given to key words on gender and class. These scenes were repeated thrice and the informants were asked to provide a translation for each scene. A more detailed explanation on the methodology can be found in my thesis.

[5] See, for example, Hall 1973 in Storey 1999.

[6] In 2003, the Alliance of Volunteer Educators (AVE) raised objections regarding the ABS-CBN translation of *MG*. The groups particularly objected to a scene with the female character Xiao Jie saying, "Ginawa ko na ang lahat, naghubad na ako sa harap niya, di pa rin niya ako pinansin". (I did everything, I stripped in front of him, but he still ignored me.) The phrase "naghubad na ako" is allegedly offensive (Punongbayan 2003).

[7] This angle, however, was not fully developed in my thesis as this was not one of my objectives.

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