

# KOREAN POP CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

Since mid 1990s, the Korean government has embarked on a concerted effort to promote Korean media industry and pop culture as an export industry. To assess the impact of this flow of Korean pop culture into Southeast Asia, this paper maps out the contextual elements that frame the phenomenon. There are three media products in pop culture; namely, cinema, TV dramas and pop music. Each of these has its own audience reach and demands. Thus, this paper considers the spread and influence of Korean pop culture in the context of the specificity and comparisons among the mediums and products.

*Keywords: Confucianism, ethnic-Chinese, visual synchrony, Southeast Asia, foreignness*

## IMPLICATIONS OF KOREAN POP CULTURE TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Since mid 1990s, the Korean government has embarked on a concerted effort to promote Korean media industry and pop culture as an export industry. To assess the impact of this flow of Korean pop culture into Southeast Asia, it is first necessary to map out the contextual elements that frame the phenomenon. There are three media products in pop culture; namely, cinema, TV dramas and pop music. Each of these has its own audience reach and demands. Thus, when we consider the spread and influence of Korean pop culture, it is needed to differentiate and be specific about the medium and products.

## CONSTRAINTS OF THE MEDIUM

Of the three mentioned media products, cinema is potentially the most widely distributed. Indeed, Korean films have moved out of the national boundaries and found their way into the big screens globally. Some Korean film directors, such as Kim Ki-duk and Park Chan-wan, have become familiar names among cinema

audiences and films studies professionals (Shin and Stringer, 2005). However, cinema limits the demand of audience time commitment and emotional and reflective investment to the duration of the screening. Once the screening is over, so too is the audience attention to the film.

The reach of pop music is the most limited because of the nature of the medium. The listening time is relatively very brief, a duration of a few minutes per song. Pop music is only meaningful and sing-able if the listener knows the language of the tune, without the requisite language, it is but a string of nonsense sounds. Consequently, only a small fan base is found in different locations for Korean pop music. To expand their audience base, Korean pop singers often have to resort to singing in English; however, this has limited success because they are then up against the globally dominant English language pop music.

TV dramas have the greatest potential in influencing the attitudes of their audience because they demand sustained commitment from the latter to set aside time and suspend activities in order to watch each episode at regular intervals. If missing an episode is unavoidable, then, arrangement would have to be made to record it and watch it before the next episode unfolds. Each episode draws the audience closer into an intimate relation with the on-screen narratives and on-screen characters. Engagement with the serial is thus sustained over the entire duration of time that it takes to complete the series. Korean TV dramas have penetrated the small screens in Southeast Asian nations since the late 1990s. Their popularity is the main component of what has come to be known in Asia as the “Korean Wave.” Indeed, unlike Korean cinema, the reach of Korean TV drama has been regional rather than global, as they have not entered the media markets in the West, except in the Korean diasporic communities.

## **CONSTRAINTS OF GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURE**

A second contextual element concerns geography and cultures of the potential audiences of Korean pop culture. Geographically, PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea and Japan are proximate and conventionally grouped as East Asia, or more accurately Northeast Asia. The countries in Southeast Asia constitute a different grouping. This geographical division is further embedded in the cultural differences between the two regions.

The Northeast Asian countries may be said to be also ‘culturally proximate’, sharing a historically deep tradition of Confucianism. In some cases, they even shared similar linguistic roots, as between Chinese and Korean languages. Although it may be argued that Confucian philosophy is by now reduced to a field of professional scholarship, nevertheless, some of its precepts remain in practice at the familial level in all the East Asian nations. To the extent that Korean cinema and especially, Korean TV drama draws on these familial practices in its narratives, it would potentially be able to draw resonance from audiences in the rest of East Asia. Vietnam, although geographically considered Southeast Asia, may be said to be culturally East Asian. Singapore, also geographically Southeast Asian, however, by virtue of its overwhelming 75% ethnic-Chinese population who are largely fluent in at least one Chinese dialect, is pop culturally in the East Asian zone.

The rest of the Southeast Asian countries have their own cultural traditions, in which different religions figure importantly. Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar are Buddhist countries and culturally and linguistically distinct from East Asia. In the Malay world, consisting of southern Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and southern Philippines, the lingua Franca was once Malay and the common religion continues to be Islam. In terms of entertainment and pop cultural consumption, the Malay world has its own network of programs; for example, Indonesian and Malaysian TV dramas are part of the regular programming on Singapore Malay language channel. Also, in terms of cinema, Malays are more inclined to watch Hindi movies. In these locations, Korean pop culture played to a greatly reduced audience, although not entirely absent; correspondingly, what cultural influence it might have is also reduced.

Korean pop culture has its greatest impact among the ethnic-Chinese population in the region. However, it should be noted that Korean pop culture is but a recent arrival at a scene in which a long history of production, circulation and consumption of Chinese pop culture is already established. The historical trajectory of ethnic-Chinese pop culture circuit in the ethnic-dominant locations is exemplified by the case of the media entertainment company, the Shaw Brothers. Set up as a film production company in the 1920s in Shanghai, Shaw Brothers moved to and developed in Singapore during the 1930s and 40s. It then moved to Hong Kong in 1958 and saw its heydays in the movie businesses in 1960s and 1970s, when it was the primary producer of Chinese movies for the global Chinese “diasporas,” as the PRC was embroiled in the Great Cultural Revolution and Taiwan was under repressive KNIT military regime, commonly known as the period of “White Terror” (see Liao et al., 2003). With its stable of actors and actresses, the company ventured into the small screen business and set up TVB in mid-1970s, which rapidly became the dominant station in the then British colony. Partly as a consequence of government regulations, the company finally gave up completely the movie making business in Hong Kong in mid-1980s, and concentrates on television business (Curtin, 2002: 92), and from whence it continued to be a primary exporter of TV dramas to the rest of the ethnic-Chinese dominant locations, in Asia and globally. In addition to the Shaw Brothers, there were other cinema companies of which International and Kong Ghee, both owned by Singaporean Chinese movie entrepreneurs, stood out. The integration of the locations in which ethnic-Chinese population predominates — PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore — may be designated for ease of reference as Pop Culture China (Chua, 2001). Within Pop Culture China, Chinese language-base pop culture remains preferred by the overwhelming majority of the audiences, especially respective local programs. Korean pop culture is thus an addition into the regular diet of pop cultural consumption.

All the above media, geographic and ethnic cultural elements must be taken into consideration when attempting to assess Korean pop culture in the region. Given the fact that TV dramas are potentially the medium with the greatest impact, this study is limited to examining the way Korean TV dramas are consumed, i.e. the meaning making practices by ethnic-Chinese audience in the region.

## DUBBING AS DOMESTICATION OF KOREAN TV DRAMA

Almost all TV dramas imported from Japan and Korea are dubbed into either Cantonese or Mandarin for the ethnic-Chinese audience; the dramas may be broadcast in “dual sound,” catering to those who prefer to listen to Korean dialogue and read Chinese subtitles. At the most immediate level, dubbing is the translation of on-screen dialogue from its original or “source” language to one that is common among the “target” audience. Technically, however, dubbing is not simply the replacement of the words in one language by another. Constrained by the need to synchronize lip-movements (lip-sync), particularly in close-up shots, of the, on-screen characters, the translator “must move away from literal conceptions of translation and build up confidence in his or her abilities to put forward alternatives that move away from the source text to focus on the function of the text and on the viewer” (Varela, 2004: 35). In short, changes to the original dialogue to suit the cultural context of the target viewer are unavoidable, indeed necessary. “Visual synchrony” between the translated words and the lip-movements is the most important aspect in creating the belief that it is a “local” program.

Beyond lip and visual synchronies, there are political and cultural concerns in dubbing. In the translation process, often terms, expressions and contextual references of the source language have no equivalent in the target language. Faced with such problems, translation is generally oriented to the cultural context of the target language and expressions are changed accordingly (Agost, 2004: 71). At its most extreme, the “fidelity” to the original is so relaxed that the target “oral colloquial language” is used “to provide the viewers what they are used to” rather than sticking to the greater demands of written norms (Agost, 2004: 68–69). Elements of the culture of the target consumers are thus introduced into the dubbed text. With attention to synchronization, these insertions of the culture of the target audience are largely erased.

An interesting example of how the different on-screen social and cultural elements work together with dubbing to produce a successful transnational drama series in East Asia is the very popular Korean period drama series, *Jewel in the Palace, Dae Jang Geum*. The period drama series “chronicles” the ascendancy of a royal cook in becoming the first female imperial court medical officer to the Korean Emperor in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was dubbed into Mandarin in Taiwan in 2004 and into Cantonese in Hong Kong the following year. The series was subsequently broadcast to very high rating in the PRC and in Singapore in 2006. In this particular instance, consistent with the actual practice during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, all written documents within the TV screen, from reports to the imperial court to personal letters, were written in Chinese characters, rather than in contemporary Korean alphabets. This contextual element further enhanced the “Chinese-ness” initiated by the dubbing into Chinese languages. Further domestication is achieved by direct interventions of Hong Kong TVB in providing additional “explanations,” in Cantonese voice-over, the Chinese equivalents to the Korean recipes and medicinal items featured on screen. All these efforts were further supported by the relatively similar physiognomy of East Asians as a given factor that facilitates domestication of each other’s films and TV dramas.

The popularity of *Dae* is something of a breakthrough. Although every East Asian location, with the exception of Singapore, produces a very substantial amount of historical-costumed drama series, very little of these are exported successfully. This

is because historical drama series require audiences to have at least a rudimentary knowledge of the historical period depicted to comprehend the narrative. In the case of *Dae*, there is actually very little Korean history content. ‘History’ merely serves as a frame for a story of court intrigues, a story of personal growth, of greed versus righteousness and finally, of romance, dressed in period costumes, narrated consistently in close-up focus of the main characters. No historical knowledge is demanded of the audience at all. An interesting comparison is with the popularity of *Dae* among PRC audiences, which exceeds that of the locally produced large-scale period drama *Emperor of the Han Dynasty*; according to one commentator, the former series “resonates with modern viewers” (*The Sunday Times*, 16 October 2005), implying the latter does not because it is presumably too historical.

Dubbing and the contextual Chinese features of the series collaboratively transformed the series into a “local” Chinese drama, making *Dae* easily consumable for ethnic-Chinese throughout East Asia. Dubbing is thus not only a “translation” but also a process of “transmutation” (Varela, 2004: 39); a dubbed drama is equivalent to a locally produced one. Through dubbing audiences are “induced” into consumption of the familiar, which facilitates real-time identification with the characters on screen. This combined with the relatively similar physiognomy undoubtedly contributes greatly to the popularity of East Asian drama series that circulate within the region.

### FOREIGNNESS PRESERVED: CLOTHES AND URBAN ICONS

However, the ethnic-Chinese audiences in Pop Culture China want to be watching a Korean or a Japanese drama series; they are attracted by this foreignness and the “difference” it implies—the “not us”—which are preserved in the various visual elements of the TV drama, particularly costumes and images of the foreign locations; foreignness is visual rather than discursive.

Ethnic costumes are a convenient and efficient vehicle for signaling difference between groups; they are thus common signifiers of culture. Difference is especially inscribed on the female body dressed in “traditional” costumes. This is very apparent, for example, in the case of the above mentioned *Dae Jang Geum*; as the narrative is centered on the life of female servants in the Korean imperial court, there are scenes upon scenes of groups of traditionally dressed female actresses. It is, therefore, unremarkable to single out ethnic costumes as an element that preserves the foreignness in a TV drama series. However, as mentioned earlier, *Dae* is an exception, as generally the drama series that are successfully exported and circulate within locations in East Asia are urban, contemporary drama series. In urban stories the characters on screen are in international fashion, thereby eliminating the one single most convenient carrier of foreignness. Therefore, another vehicle needs to be found and used.

In the urban drama series, if one turns off the sound, the relatively similar physiognomy of East Asians renders it difficult for an audience to distinguish the product of one location from another. This is especially so in indoor close-up shots of the characters, unless the audience is able to identify the specific actors and actresses. “Foreignness” is shifted to “iconic” images that metonymically represent the city in which the scenes on screen are unfolding: the Tokyo Tower, the needle-tower in Shanghai, the Hong Kong ferry and more generically, street scenes where

the neon signs are in local language, as in Korean dramas because Korean cities, including Seoul, lack internationally recognizable icons. The success of locations as markers of foreignness is reflected in the fact that they are marketed and visited as tourist's sites by fans of the TV stars. TV sights have become tourist sites; the exoticism of watching the "foreign" is materially realized in the "exotic" gaze of the tourist. The exoticism of the foreign—the "not us"—allows the audience to distance themselves from the on-screen events, characters, attitudes and behaviors which dubbing tries to indigenize.

Taking the translation/dubbing practices and the visual-foreignness together, it is apparent that consumption of imported TV dramas and other visual media products is a process of identification and distancing, simultaneously or as a series of intermittent moments of one or the other. This identification distancing is replicated in the different modes that audiences of different locations within East Asia watch/read TV drama series imported from elsewhere in the region.

### **AUDIENCE IDENTIFICATION AS SELF-AFFIRMATION**

The effect of dubbing which "transforms" Korean dramas into "Chinese" dramas that remain visually "Korean" is compounded by, above mentioned, "cultural proximity" of familialism derived from Confucian cultural practices. This result is that ethnic-Chinese audience often refers to the "family" narratives that are commonly found in Korean TV dramas. To further cater to the overwhelmingly women audience in the region, Korean TV dramas not only play up the family-narrative but are also commonly women-centered. For example, it is common in a serial to have a woman chief executive in a family enterprise who is assisted by her son with the absent husband/father presumed dead, as in the serials *Stairways to Heaven* (2003-4) and *Rival* (2006 in Singapore). The most prominent example is probably *Dae Jang Geum*, in which the narrative is centered entirely on the court intrigues among maidservants of the emperor, particularly the managers of the imperial kitchen. In this instance, *Dae* was an orphan who was "adopted" by her culinary mentor who, without their mutual knowledge, was the best friend of *Dae's* mother in the days the mother was also a maidservant.

The women-centered, family-narrative appeals to the overwhelming female audience on two levels. First, the trials and tribulations of "women" in an East Asian family can be readily "comprehended" with sympathy by the women audience themselves. Indeed, interviewed viewers often take part of the narrative into their own daily life, for comparison and for lessons to be learned. Conversations among fans of particular serials often take on this "realist" mode. The identification at this level may be said to be gendered and individualized. Second, the ethnic-Chinese audiences have identified the family-narrative as an element that facilitates identification with the on-screen characters "because they are Asian like me," by which they mean "East Asian" Confucian emphasis on hierarchical structure of the family with emphasis on filial piety (Lin and Tong, 2005). Of course, the hierarchical family is often a cause of the women's sufferings in the dramas, as in life; indeed, the suffering of the women in the male-dominant hierarchy is an essential constitutive element of the melodramatic effects. Both the gender-individual and abstract "Asian" levels of identification, which are essential to sustained audience

participation, are modes of audience's self-affirmation, rather than identification with specifically things "Korean."

## AUDIENCE RECOGNITION OF DIFFERENCE

However, as suggested above, audience also desires the "difference" of the foreign between themselves and what is on screen. There are also two levels of recognition here. First, as difference is instantiated through comparison, the female audience has a tendency to compare the on-screen characters, especially the men, with the men in their lives. Thus, there is a tendency for some women audience to "believe" that actually existing or "real" Korean men to be like the on-screen male characters – on looking, gentle and very committed in love, just like the character played by Bae Yong Jun in *Winter Sonata*. If there is any suggestion of perceptual "confusion" of on-screen and real men, it is likely to be intentional, as it is difficult to believe that the largely middle-age women audience, for example in Japan, failed to see or know the "make belief" nature of TV dramas. Furthermore, the intentional "misperception" is probably invoked to serve a different purpose in gender-politics. Indeed, there are suggestions that the 5000 middle-aged women fans that turned up to welcome Bae (Yon-Sama) were quite aware that they were being seen as "irrational" in the media and the eyes of men (see Mori, 2005).

Beyond the individual, some audience in Southeast Asia embrace a sense of difference at the societal level. According to Thomas, Vietnamese youth who flock to Korean movies in Hanoi and Ho Chi Ming City see in the Korean films their aspired "future" on the big screen. For them, the urban scenes with the capitalist-consumerist modernity are the "imaginary" and "imaginable" future that they aspire to for themselves and for Vietnam as its economy liberalized and marketized. The economically developed Korea "signifies prosperity and sophistication and engenders longing, a longing for a richer consumer world, for technical expertise and creativity, and for societies that foster these elements" (Thomas, 2004, p. 186). In this sense the present "Korea/Korean" on screen is the Vietnamese audience desired future. What they desire is thus not "Korean" culture but a symbol of a capitalist-consumerist future.

Before moving further in this analysis, it would be useful to sum up the issues of audience identification with Korean TV dramas: Overwhelming majority of the audience for Korean TV dramas in East and Southeast Asia are ethnic-Chinese, whose preference for pop culture remains local or transnational Chinese programs from Chinese Pop Culture. Korean TV drama is nevertheless increasingly part of the routine entertainment diet of this ethnic-Chinese population; the frequency of viewing per week is largely dependent on the local television stations scheduling. Among the ethnic-Chinese audience, dubbing "indigenizes" the Korean dramas into "Chinese" dramas, facilitating identification. Nevertheless, the "foreignness" of Korean drama is visually preserved and this "foreignness" is a source of viewing pleasure. The combination of indigenization and foreignness is resolved by identifying with the on-screen narrative and characters as reflecting things and sentiments that are "Asian"; this "Asian-ness" is read into the family-oriented storyline of most Korean TV dramas. At the individual level, a female audience will also identify with the on-screen narrative and characters of the women-centered

Korean dramas; the “realism” of the drama-narrative in “reflecting” the everyday life of the female audience. At both levels, the difference of “Korean-ness” or “Korean culture” is dissolved and absorbed into the larger “Asian-ness” and the “feminine.” At both levels the ethnic-Chinese women audience’s identification are modes of “self-affirmation” as “Asian women.”

However, the difference of Korean-ness is preserved through other modes of identification. Here, the on-screen “Korean” is maintained by audiences as a “contrast” to their own respective social conditions. At the societal level, the on-screen Korean is viewed by audience in less economically developed East and Southeast Asian locations as an “imaginable-imagined” future of capitalist-consumerist cultural modernity. At the individual level, often an intentional misrecognition of the on-screen “Korean” is used by audiences as a vehicle to mount a critique of their own respective social, especially gender relations, as in the case of the middle-aged Japanese women fans of *Winter Sonata*. At this level where “Korean-ness” is preserved, the “cultural” impact of Korean TV dramas are much more significant as it serves as the mirror held up by the audiences to critically reflect on their respective social, cultural and economic conditions.

## **BACKLASH TO KOREAN WAVE**

The cultural space of commercial, profit driven media pop culture is part of a larger “popular culture” space. However, it is by no means the equivalent to the totality of this larger popular culture space, which is the political arena in which the everyday life cultural practices of the masses struggle against the elite culture of the society (Hall, 1994). Furthermore, pop culture consumers, individually or as communities, are frequently confronted by the overwhelmingly much larger population of non-consumers, who might be imagined as a “community” by virtue of their non-consumption. Such confrontations occur often as a backlash against a particular pop culture phenomenon, which has a certain structure.

In all pop culture phenomena, non-consumers tend to be the major population. Whenever a confrontation occurs, the non-consumer population would overwhelm the community of “fans,” as most of the consumers are passive leisure consumers who see the dramas as mere entertainment and do not get involved in any cultural politics concerning the dramas. In such confrontation, non-consuming activists could readily and discursively hijack the idea of an overwhelming numerical majority of the non-consumer population and designate it as the “people,” in order to claim this “people” on their side. These activists could further form ideological coalitions with groups that would project their own interests as the “national” interest, such as local media entrepreneurs, professionals and other gatekeepers, and mobilize against the pop culture phenomenon and its consumers in question of “nationalism.” This is what happening as consequences of the perceived “invasion” of Korean pop culture into ethnic-Chinese media industry.

The Korean Wave has given rise to anti-Korean sentiments among the non-consumers of Korean pop culture in different parts of East Asia. For example, in Taiwan, the counter-discourse dubs it the “Invasion of Korean Wave,” implying that the interests of the territorial Taiwan nation have been breached. On the day that Bae Yong Joon visited Taipei to promote *April Snow*, self-fashioned Taiwanese



nationalist rock musicians staged a concert to lambaste Korean pop culture and Bae himself (Observations by Yang Fang-Chih). In the PRC and Hong Kong, media professionals, including the renown Jacky Chan, have been reported to voice their protests against the extensive media coverage that is often given to every visiting Korean artiste, which is an absolutely necessary element in promoting and maintaining the “popularity” of these artistes, while local artistes are taken for granted. In these instances the call to support local artistes is projected by the same self-interested local artistes as “representation” and “expression” of the national interest. In the entire process, the sign of the “nation” has been usurped by a coalition of non consumers of Korean pop culture and ethnic-Chinese artistes for their own cause, marginalizing the consumers, whether avid fans or leisurely, as culturally “unpatriotic” individuals.

## CONCLUSION

It is indubitable that within a very short span of less than a decade, Korean pop culture has become integral to the daily entertainment programs in East and Southeast Asia; Korean films and Korean television dramas are watched daily throughout the regent in big and small screens, in movie houses or privately on television with regular programs or legal or pirated DVDs. These programs unavoidably have their effects on the audience. However, as media texts are objects with different meanings for different audiences, conceptually, the issue of the effects is not one of how Korean culture has influenced the various regional audiences but how the audience in different locations receive and “read” their own conditions into the media texts.

From the point of view of the overwhelming ethnic-Chinese audiences in East and Southeast Asia, the Korean TV dramas are vehicles for self-affirmation of being “Asian,” by which they mean a reduced version of Confucianism to “familial” relations. For the majority of women audience, they are vehicles for gender self-affirmation, being a combination of intermittently “Asian” and “traditional” in mother-daughter filial relations and being “modernist” as independent women in the economy. In the gendered subjectivity, the Korean TV dramas also serve as a platform for the women audience’s critique of their own extant conditions; this is particularly true in the case of the middle-age Japanese women fans who see in the Korean TV dramas a sense of innocence of simplicity of love and gentleness between people. They lament nostalgically the lost of this sense, as a lost “past,” in a Japan that is too capitalist and too “Western.”

Where the Korean TV dramas are seen as “different” from the local, two effects can be identified. Positively, in places that are less economically developed, such as Vietnam, the on-screen Korea is seen as the “future” that the audience imagined their lives could be in terms of consumerist plenty of developed capitalism. Here, the identification is not so much with “Korean” culture as such but with the consumer culture of advanced capitalism, of which the present day Korea is an example. Negatively, the popularity of Korean pop culture is read as an “invasion” that not only displaces local culture in the media realm but is further made to symbolize the global competitiveness of Korean industrialization that threatens the livelihood of local industries and workers/citizens, as we have seen in Taiwan.

On the Korean side, clearly the popularity of Korean pop culture has added to its stable of export industries, along with heavy industrial and high tech exports. It has also projected Korea from a relatively “unknown” country into a desired destination in the expanding regional Asian tourism industry, not least to visit the sites in which the more popular Korean TV dramas were shot. The direct contact with Korea and Koreans through tourism is probably a better space to generate greater understanding of things Korean than consumption of pop culture.

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