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## **Waxing the Korean Wave**

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## The Waxing Korean Wave

Over the past few years, an increasing amount of Korean popular cultural content including television dramas, movies, pop songs and their associated celebrities have gained immense popularity in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and other East and Southeast Asian countries.<sup>1</sup> News media and trade magazines have recognized the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia by dubbing it the 'Korean wave' (Hallyu or 'Han ryu' in Korean). The Associated Press reported in March 2002: 'Call it "kim chic". All things Korean--from food and music to eyebrow-shaping and shoe styles--are the rage across Asia, where pop culture has long been dominated by Tokyo and Hollywood' (Visser, 2002). According to *Hollywood Reporter*, 'Korea has transformed itself from an embattled cinematic backwater into the hottest film market in Asia' (Segers, 2000).

Yet a decade and a little bit more ago, Korean popular culture did not have such export capacity, and was not even critically acclaimed by scholars. For example, *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, published in 1996, is alleged to have covered 'every aspect of international film-making' but does not make any reference to Korean cinema, although it pays tribute to Taiwanese, Hong Kong, Chinese and Japanese films (Nowell-Smith, 1996).<sup>2</sup> Korean music was also ignored by researchers, as can be seen in the following comment in *World Music: The Rough Guide* published in 1994: 'The country has developed economically at a staggering pace, but in terms of popular music there is nothing to match the remarkable contemporary sounds of Indonesia, Okinawa, or Japan' (Kawakami and Fisher, 1994). The tremendous disparity between such evaluations as noted above, and the recent success of the Korean media has stimulated me to learn, theorize and explain its growth and circulation in Asia.

The major frame of reference in international communication research today is globalization, a word which has now become part of the vocabulary in everyday parlance. The term refers to the process and context of the world becoming integrated, and it is most exuberantly used in corporate slogans. If we are satisfied with this uncritical discourse of a seamless globe, our understanding of globalization will be entrenched in the image of Chinese (or, Thai) people patronizing the Starbuck's Café--an image that appears on a regular basis in the mainstream media (see, *inter alia*, Truehart, 1998).

There are roughly three strains of globalization discourse. The first approach views globalization as an outgrowth of cultural imperialism following the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) discussions of the 1970s. According to this approach, forces of globalization are usually American, and they subjugate weaker, national/cultural identities. While this approach has retained considerable resonance within the political discourse of developing countries, especially with the rise of foreign television programming in their territories, it has fallen under scholarly critique as being overly simplistic (Chadha and Kavoori, 2000; Morley and Robins, 1995). In fact, it is no longer the case that a one-way

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<sup>1</sup> Here, Korea refers to the Republic of Korea, or South Korea. Korean names are given throughout this paper in their original Korean form, that is, surname first followed by given name. Other transliterations from Korean have been made according to guidelines suggested by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism during the Kim Dae Jung administration.

<sup>2</sup> The quote is inside the back cover of the book.

flow of Western media content exists due to the increasing contraflow in international media (Thussu, 2000) and growing plurality of regional media players based on what Straubhaar (1991) calls the 'cultural proximity' factor (also, see Hoskins and Mirus, 1988). In addition, this approach has missed the complexity of audience reception of media content (Wasko, et al., 2001). Finally, there is a danger of romanticism and fetishism of 'national' culture (Morris, 2002).

In the second view, globalization is understood as an outcome of the workings of modernity project (Giddens, 1991). According to Tomlinson (1991), it is 'the spread of the culture of modernity itself. This is a discourse of historical change, of "development", of a global movement towards ... capitalism' (p. 90). This argument is already visible in Weber's (2000) idea that capitalism is a natural extension of the progress of reason and freedom associated with the Enlightenment. In more recent sociological studies, Harvey (1990) and Jameson (1996) argue that humanity has entered into a new historical epoch since the 1970s (from modernity to postmodernity; from capitalism to late capitalism), made possible by the development of new technologies. Some political economists critique this notion by arguing that the conflation of modernity with capitalism is wrong. According to Wood (1998), when 18<sup>th</sup> century French bourgeoisie--supposedly the source of the modernity project--fought against the aristocracy, they fought for universalism and human emancipation. On the other hand, the main aim of capitalism is not the improvement of humanity, but the improvement of property. Therefore, if capitalism has anything to do with modernity, it is that capitalism has destroyed modernity. Wood argues that the geographic term 'globalization' is imperfect as a description of and explanation for the present era. It is better characterized as the universalization of capitalism, when capitalism has penetrated into every aspect of life, society and culture. In a similar vein, McChesney (1998) criticizes the notion of globalization as an outcome of modernity because it tends to provide an aura of 'inevitability' to the rise of neoliberalism and concentrated corporate control of (and hyper-commercialization of) the media in the present era.

In the third approach are discourses that identify the cultural hybridity and investigate into power relations between periphery and centre from the perspective of postcolonial criticism (Kraidy, 2002; Shome and Hegde, 2002). Paradoxically, globalization encourages local peoples to find the 'local' that they have neglected or forgotten in their drive towards Western-imposed modernization during the past decades (Featherstone, 1993; Robertson, 1995). There are two distinct modes of re-localization in non-Western political and cultural formations. While some forces and groups--such as Hindu nationalists in India, and the Taliban in Afghanistan--campaign for a return to the imagined 'good old days', others--such as Asian tiger economies--revisit or strengthen their own developmental routes by embracing and utilizing the new glocal economic situation (Chadha and Kavoori, 2000). In this transnational context of a meeting between the periphery and the centre, hybridity reveals itself as new practices of cultural and performative expression. For example, locals appropriate global goods, conventions, and styles including music, cuisine, cinema, fashion, and so on, and inscribe their everyday meaning into them (Bhabha, 1994; Young, 2003).

In engaging the postcolonial notion of hybridity, I do not view it simply as a descriptive device, but as a 'communicative practice constitutive of, and constituted by, sociopolitical and economic arrangement' (Kraidy, 2002: 317). Therefore, the political economic relations immanent in the first and second lines of discourse are inevitable for an understanding of Korean media development as a metaphor for thinking about the complex relations of cultures to the forces of globalization. It is also important to reveal the political potential

inherent in hybridity following Bhabha's (1994) observation that natives and minorities strike back at imperial domination by recourse to the hybridization strategy. Given this, the Korean wave phenomenon is an interesting case to study in the context of international communication. First, we shall examine the role of the Korean state to understand how the periphery addresses the context of global media power differences. And, second, we shall inquire into how Koreans appropriate global popular cultural forms to express their local sentiment and culture.

This paper is composed of the following sections: 1. What is the Korean Wave?; 2. Korean Media Liberalization and Development; 3. Cultural Hybridization and Korean Pop Music Industry; 4. Discussion, and finally, 5. Afterword: 2011. In the next section, I will examine the processes by which Korean television dramas, music and movies have come to appeal to audiences in neighbouring countries. Through this, we shall understand the degree of popularity that Korean media content and its associated celebrities have enjoyed, and the reactions from Korean businesses and the government to this surprising 'national' achievement.

## WHAT IS THE KOREAN WAVE?

For a start, the Korean wave is indebted to the media liberalization that swept across Asia in the 1990s. The Korean wave seemed to have found its beginnings sometime around 1997 when the national China Central Television Station (CCTV) aired a Korean television drama *What is Love All About?*, which turned out to be a big hit. In response to popular demand, CCTV re-aired the program in 1998 in a prime-time slot, and recorded the second-highest ratings ever in the history of Chinese television (Heo, 2002). In 1999, *Stars in My Heart*, another Korean television drama serial, became a big hit in China and Taiwan. Since then, Korean television dramas have rapidly taken up airtime on television channels in countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia which saw media liberalization beginning in the 1990s. In addition, the recent economic crisis in Asia has brought about a situation where Asian buyers prefer the cheaper Korean programming; Korean television dramas were a quarter of the price of Japanese ones, and a tenth of the price of Hong Kong television dramas as of 2000 (Lee, 2003). Korean television programming export figure has increased so dramatically that in 2003, it reached \$37.5 million, from \$12.7 million in 1999 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2004).<sup>3</sup>

In the late 1990s, a regional music television channel, Channel V, featured Korean pop music videos, creating a huge K-pop fan base in Asia.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the boy band H.O.T. found itself topping the pop charts in China and Taiwan in 1998; the band was so popular that album sales continued surging for a while even after the band's break-up in mid 2001. Following H.O.T.'s successful concert in Beijing in February 2000, many K-pop stars such as Ahn Jae-wook (an actor-cum-singer who starred in *Stars in My Heart*), boy bands NRG and Shinhwa, and girl band Baby V.O.X. have held concerts in China, attracting crowds of more than 30,000 Chinese youth for each concert (Seoul Broadcasting System, 2001). In 2002, Korean teenage pop sensation BoA's debut album reached the number one spot on the Oricon Weekly Chart, Japan's equivalent of the American Billboard Charts; this firmly established BoA in the Japanese music market (Visser, 2002). Now, most of Korea's top-notch singers

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, \$ refers to the U.S. currency.

<sup>4</sup> In Southeast Asia, Korean pop music is called K-pop, while Japanese pop music is called J-pop.

take their concerts to Beijing, Hong Kong and Tokyo and often record their albums in the local languages before marketing their albums in these countries.

In 1999, a Korean blockbuster, *Shiri*, was shown in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, receiving critical acclaim and drawing large audiences (for example, it earned \$14 million at the Japanese box office) (Kim, 2000). Since then, Korean films have become regular fixtures in cinemas across Asia. For example, among the nine movies screened on 9 August 2003 at the cinema Cathay Cineleisure Orchard, Singapore, three were Korean films, including *Conduct Zero*, *Marriage is a Crazy Thing*, and *My Tutor Friend* (sneak preview). When the Korean film, *Joint Security Area*, was opened in Japan on 26 May 2001, it became the first Asian import in the Japanese film market to be shown on as many as 280 screens (Kim, 2001). The success of Korean cinema in Asia has now spread to North America and Europe, with more and more Korean films attracting theatre-goers in these continents (Frater, 2003a). Major US-based distribution companies such as Fox and Columbia have started to take Korean movies on board their global distribution runs (Frater, 2003b). Furthermore, Hollywood studios are eager to buy remake rights to Korean films. For example, DreamWorks SKG paid \$2 million for the remake rights to the Korean horror film, *A Tale of Two Sisters*; that is twice of what the studio paid for the Japanese horror movie, *The Ring*, a few years ago (Ho, 2003).

Against this backdrop, Korean pop stars have become cultural icons in the region. One example is Ahn Jae-wook, who has commanded tremendous popularity in China, as evidenced by his clinching number one spot in a poll of the most popular celebrities in 2001, even surpassing Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio who was then at the apex of his global popularity (*Australian*, 2002). Korean stars have had a big impact on the consumer culture, including food, fashion, make-up trends, and even plastic surgery. It is not uncommon to find Asian youth decorating their backpacks, notebooks, and rooms with photographs of Korean stars. In the streets of Hanoi and Beijing, it is common to find young members of the 'Korea Tribe', or Koreanophiles, sporting multiple earrings, baggy hip hop pants, and the square-toed shoes of Seoul fashion. So popular are Korean actresses Lee Young-ae, Song Hae Gyo, Kim Hee Sun and Jeon Ji-hyun that it has been reported that their wanna-bes in Taiwan and China request for their facial features when going for cosmetic surgery (Joins.com, 2001; *Straits Times*, 2002a and 2002b).

Given their infatuation with Korean culture, the regional fans are eager to learn the Korean language and travel to Korea (SBS, 2001). For example, at Inlingua School of Language in Singapore, the number of students learning Korean had increased by 60% in 2003 compared to 2001 because of the interest generated by Korean dramas (Sage 2005). When Ahn Jae-wook held a weekend 'Meet Ahn Jae-wook camp' in a resort near Seoul in August 2001, about 250 Chinese youth participated in it. They willingly paid a joining fee of \$465, which was several times the average monthly salary in China (Joins.com, 2001). Quite a few travel agencies in the region sell television drama-themed group tours to Korea with titles like 'Best of Korean drama trailer deluxe tour'.<sup>5</sup>

Park Young Su, assistant bureau chief at the Korea National Tourism Organization (KNTO), said: 'Thanks to the success of shows like *Autumn in My Heart* and *Winter Sonata*, we've had 130,000 tourists from China, Taiwan, Hongkong, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand coming to visit the locations where the dramas were filmed' (Lee, 2003). The number of Taiwanese

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<sup>5</sup> Tradewinds Tours & Travel ran an advertisement in the Singaporean daily, *The Straits Times* (29 Apr. 2003).

who visited Korea in 2003 totalled 180,000, a 50% increase from the previous year's figure of 120,000 (Park, 2004).

In this context, Korean big business is making efforts to transform Korean wave fans into consumers of Korean products and services. Samsung Electronics in China successfully took advantage of Ahn Jae-wook's popularity by hiring him as a model for its computer monitor commercials. In Vietnam, LG Household and Health Care saw its sales skyrocketing after it featured Korean actress Kim Nam-ju in its advertisement. Since then, LG has 'notched the first place in brand recognition among foreign cosmetic brands in Vietnam', recalls Oh Kang-kook, public relations manager of the company (Joins.com, 2001). In order to reinforce the existing 'Korean boom' in Vietnam, LG Electronics is reported to have provided Vietnamese television stations with several Korean television dramas for free, even covering the cost of dubbing (*Nae-oe Economic Daily*, 2001). The Koreans have just begun to realize that culture can be as profitable as semiconductors or cars.

The growing popularity of Korean pop culture has more implications than simply earning foreign currency, especially considering that the country has had some diplomatic friction with its neighbours in the past decades. The Vietnamese still vividly remember that Korean soldiers fought against their Liberation Army during the Vietnam War. The Taiwanese have felt betrayed by Korea ever since Seoul suddenly severed its diplomatic relations with Taipei in order to establish new ties with Beijing in 1992. In this vein, Korean pop stars have contributed to improving Korea's foreign relations. In one instance, Korean actor Jang Dong-gun and actress Kim Nam-ju enjoy such popularity in Vietnam that the Vietnamese have even labelled them their 'national' stars. The then Korean President, Kim Dae Jung, even invited the pair to the dinner he hosted for Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong when the latter visited Korea on 23 August 2001 (*Australian*, 2002). BoA, who made the cover of the French *Le Monde* in July 2002 as an icon of cultural exchange between Korea and Japan, was invited to the two countries' summit conference in June 2003 in Tokyo; Japan was responsible for a brutal occupation of Korea during the period from 1910 to 1945 (Macintyre, 2002). In all, Koreans heartily welcome the fruits of the Korean wave in the midst of economic recovery from the 1997 economic crisis, and the subsequent International Monetary Fund (IMF)-directed economic restructuring, which they often refer to as 'national humiliation'.

Is the Korean wave simply a fortuitous event or well-timed phenomenon? In the next section, I argue that the current commercial success of Korean media is an outgrowth of Korea's struggle for cultural continuity when confronted by the threat of global cultural domination.

## **KOREAN MEDIA LIBERALIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT**

The period from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s was an important turn for the Korean media, with the introduction of liberalization in the sector. Until 1987, only domestic film companies were allowed to import and distribute foreign movies in the market. Under the U.S. pressure, in 1988 the Korean government allowed Hollywood studios to distribute films directly to local theatres; since then, more than ten Korean film importers had shut down their businesses by 1994. This market opening to Hollywood majors affected the vitality of the local film industry in general, such that the number of films produced annually fell from 121 in 1991 to 63 in 1994. In 1994, Hollywood's market share in the local market reached 80%, from 53% in 1987 (Shin, 1995; Yi, 1994). Therefore, Korean cinema, which had already been

ignored by local audiences who considered it poorly made, boring, and often maudlin, was drawing its last breath.

A rapid increase in foreign television programming as a result of television channel expansion was also a matter of concern. In its first year of cable television services in 1995, Korea imported \$42.82 million worth of television programming, marking a sharp increase from the previous year's foreign programming import figure of \$19.86 million (Korea Press Foundation, 2002). Furthermore, the spillover of satellite broadcasting, such as NHK Satellite and Star TV, posed a serious challenge to political sovereignty and cultural integrity.

In this context, two factors awakened Koreans to the importance of culture and its industrial development. In 1993 when the common view was that there was no hope for the revival of the local film industry, the film *Sopyonje* unexpectedly topped the box-office chart with more than a million admissions--this was the first in Korean history. The film also received unprecedented invitations for screenings in art theatres, and on college campuses in Japan, the United States, and some European countries. *Sopyonje* is a film about an itinerant family that earns a living performing *pansori*, the traditional popular musical form of Korea in which a story is sung by a singer, accompanied by a drummer. Although *pansori* was designated as a national cultural treasure by the government, it was neglected once the country was subjected to American culture.<sup>6</sup> The film, which portrayed a declining or 'derelict' traditional folk music genre, and largely shot in a beautiful rural landscape, revived nostalgia for and public interest in 'our culture'; the family in the film, on the verge of starvation, symbolized the fate of Korean cinema embattled by Hollywood. *Sopyonje* was released when people were beginning to pay attention to leisure, culture and 'self'--aspects they had gone without during the decades of Korean industrialization.

Against this backdrop, a government report awakened the Korean people to the cultural industry's potential contribution to the national economy. In 1994, the Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology submitted a report to the president suggesting that the government promote media production as the national strategic industry by taking note of overall revenue (from theatre exhibition, television syndication, licensing, etc.) from the Hollywood blockbuster, *Jurassic Park*, which was worth the foreign sales of 1.5 million Hyundai cars. The comparison of a film to Hyundai cars--which were then considered the 'pride of Korea'--was apt enough to awaken the Korean public to the idea of culture as an industry. This revelation became a household topic for quite a long time, in accordance with the globalization-cum-information age discourse of the time. Following the report, the Korean government established the Cultural Industry Bureau within the Ministry of Culture and Sports in 1994, and instituted the Motion Picture Promotion Law in 1995 in order to lure corporate and investment capital into the local film industry.

In their pursuit of a cultural industry, Koreans emulated and appropriated the American media system with the mantra 'Learning from Hollywood'. It was argued that Korea should promote large media companies as well as a more commercial media market. A media policy report submitted to the Korean government in 1995 reads as follows: 'Korea needs to encourage vertically integrated media conglomerates.... While there is a concern for the projected monopoly of information, in order to cope with the large-scale TNCs, we need

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<sup>6</sup> On 7 November 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated *pansori* as an intangible world heritage treasure.



media conglomerates to match their sizes and resources' (Kim, 1996).<sup>7</sup> In this regard, sprawling family-owned, big business groups in Korea, or *chaebol*, such as Samsung, Hyundai, and Daewoo, to name a few, expanded into the media sector to include production, import, distribution and exhibition. In the process, the conventional Korean developmental regimen of an export-oriented economy continued, as evidenced by a remark made by a senior manager of the Daewoo group's film division: 'It is our duty and responsibility to export Korean films overseas' (Groves, 1997). In the context of the public's rising interest in 'our culture' provoked by *Sopyonje*; and the improved film-viewing environment enabled by *chaebol* investment, including expanding film choices and more convenient theatre facilities, Korean cinema gradually began to attract local audiences. Yet the brisk *chaebol* participation in the media stopped suddenly with the economic crisis that began in late 1997. Many *chaebol* folded their media businesses under the IMF-directed restructuring mandate (Shim, 2002).

The short-lived cultural (especially film) industry boom of the mid-1990s characterized by government promotion and entry of the Korean big business was, however, a 'workout' that strengthened the Korean film industry. The big business introduced sophisticated business know-how, such as audience research in film production and marketing, to the mom-and-pop Korean film industry; as noted by a film producer: 'Like Hollywood, we are spending a lot on marketing and research, so our data on the audience is very exact' (Chon, 2001: 49). Each stage in the filmmaking process became more rigorous; it was reported that the scenario for *Friend*, a 2001 Korean blockbuster, was revised 21 times. Further, in order to better analyze and exploit audience trends, audiences are often invited to be involved in scriptwriting, script revision, and editing processes (Shim, 2001).

Since the mid-1990s, fresh talent such as MBAs and graduates from prestigious universities made an unprecedented entry into film companies, which offered decent pay and promised secure 'life-time' employment under *chaebol* ownership. When many *chaebol* folded their film businesses in the vortex of the Asian financial crisis, some of these big business-trained personnel remained in the film industry at large, playing pivotal roles in leading Korean cinema into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Besides, this period saw a new generation of creative young directors, actors and other personnel with formal training from film schools all over the world enter the local film industry, which had long been dominated by those who learnt the craft on the job (Oh, 2001). When *Cine 21*, a major weekly film magazine, compiled 'Top 50 powers in the Korean film industry' in its 1 May 2001 issue, seven out of the top ten most influential persons were in their 30's (*Cine 21*, 2001). Enjoying the more lenient censorship policy, the new generation dealt with such sensitive issues as North-South Korean relations and homosexuality. The long-awaited Korean cinema renaissance was on the horizon.

In 1999, to everyone's surprise, the Korean action thriller *Shiri* attracted 5.8 million theatre goers (with 2.44 million in Seoul alone),<sup>8</sup> surpassing the local theatre attendance record set by the Hollywood film *Titanic*. It was revealed that a venture capital firm, KDB Capital, invested \$333,000 in the movie and earned returns of more than 300%. The financial vacuum left by the exit of the *chaebol* was filled by venture capitalists and investment firms. After having waited so long for alternatives to Hollywood fare, local audiences responded favourably to new Korean cinema, which was equipped with cash, management capacity, and creativity. In February 2001, a military mystery entitled *Joint Security Area* broke the box-

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<sup>7</sup> My translation.

<sup>8</sup> In Korea, official statistics for film viewership are based on Seoul theaters alone.

office record set by *Shiri* by drawing an audience of 2.5 million in Seoul. Another venture capital firm, KTB Network, earned a return of 250% profit for its \$707,000 investment in this film. In summer 2001, a gangland saga, *Friend*, again beat the box office record by selling 8.2 million admission tickets nationwide (Leong, 2003).

As proof of the improved quality of Korean cinema, a number of Korean movies have been invited to compete in top-class film festivals around the world each year, and have won awards. In 2002, Korean director Im Kwon-taek won the Best Director Award at the Cannes Film Festival for his film *Chihwaseon*, and Lee Chang-dong won the Award for Best Direction at Venice Film Festival for *Oasis*. In 2004, director Park Chan-wook won the Grand Prix (second prize) for his film *Old Boy* at Cannes, and Kim Ki-duk won the Best Director's Awards both at the Berlin International Film Festival (for *Samaritan Girl*) and Venice (*Bin Jip: Empty House*). Interestingly, Koreans have garnered best director awards at the three most prestigious international film festivals within a span of two years.

In 2004, Korean cinema was swept up in the box-office success of two local films. In February 2004, *Silmido*, the film about a secret project to assassinate former North Korean leader Kim Il-sung in the early 1970s, set a new box-office record by attracting 10 million theatre-goers. On 3 April 2004, *TaeGukGi: The brotherhood of war*, the movie about two brothers whose lives were torn apart by the Korean War, smashed the box-office record with 11.09 million admission tickets nationwide. The movie was even expected to reach the 12 million theatre-goer mark (Kim, B., 2004). Aided by a string of blockbusters, homemade flicks came to occupy 53.5% of the market share in terms of admissions in 2003, up from 15.9% in 1993. Korea is now the seventh largest film market in the world, with the total number of theatre audiences nationwide in 2003 standing at around 119 million, up from 47 million in 1992. Following domestic success, the Korean film industry exported 164 movies with the total revenue of \$30,979,000 in 2003, which was a huge increase from 1993's figure of 14 movies with \$173,838 (Korean Film Council, 2004). Korean cinema especially won the hearts of Asian audiences, with sales to the Asian region occupying more than 60% of its total foreign sales; this resulted in Korea being touted the 'New Hong Kong' (Leong, 2003).

The Korean government's support of the cultural industry was noteworthy. President Kim Dae Jung, who called himself the 'President of Culture' when he inaugurated himself as president in 1998, established the Basic Law for the Cultural Industry Promotion in 1999 by allocating a total budget of \$148.5 million to this project (Choe, 1999). In this favourable environment, a number of international film festivals have sprouted up in Korea, such as Pusan International Film Festival, which is now considered the best of its kind in Asia. Through these, foreign buyers are exposed to Korean films (Shin, 2003). During the Kim Dae Jung administration, the cultural sector's budget relative to the total government budget per fiscal year increased from 484.8 billion won, or 0.60% of the total government budget in 1998, to 1,281.5 billion won, or 1.15% of the total government budget in 2002 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2003).<sup>9</sup>

As noted earlier, in developing the cultural industry, Koreans have emulated and appropriated American cultural industries with 'Learning from Hollywood' as a slogan. Through this learning process, Koreans have provided their own twists to the foreign styles and forms, by blending and adding their indigenous characteristics and unique flourishes in innovative ways.

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<sup>9</sup> Won is the basic unit of money in South Korea, with \$1 roughly valued at 800 won before the financial crisis in 1997. It has been about 1,190 won since mid-1998.

In the next section, we shall discuss Korean pop music as an illustration of such cultural hybridization and examine the transformation of the music industry.

## CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION AND KOREAN POP MUSIC INDUSTRY

Until the 1980s, the Korean pop music scene had been dominated by what were loosely categorized as Korean ballads and *ppongjjak*. The Korean ballad is characterized by mellow sounds and amorous lyrics influenced by Western styles such as easy listening and American folk music (such as songs by Simon and Garfunkel). *Ppongjjak* is what Koreans onomatopoeically call the Japanese *enka*-influenced musical style, assimilated into Korea around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> Largely associated with the pathos of the older generation, *ppongjjak* has experienced periodic ups and downs, with the government banning of some of the hit songs in the genre for having elements of ‘morbid’ Japanese aesthetics (Provine, et al., 2000).

In general, the Korean pop music market was not vibrant before the 1990s. Korean youth preferred American pop songs to local ones; and live concerts were not common, and on a small scale when they did appear. In fact, the two public television networks, Korea Broadcasting System (KBS) and Munhwa Broadcasting Company (MBC), controlled music distribution and held sway over the direction of music consumption. There was no authoritative record sales chart, except for weekly chart shows on television, which served as the only criteria by which songs and singers were judged popular; and by which audiences decided which albums they should buy. Furthermore, musicians were required to perform with the television networks’ in-house studio bands and dancers, with the consequence that it deprived the country of opportunity for diverse elements of local pop music to grow spontaneously. This condition influenced musical styles to fit into the specifications of the television medium, such that songs usually had a long instrumental introduction and an extended fade-out, to allow emcees to make some announcements or a segue to be devised between one song and another (Howard, 2002).

As the transformation comes from the ‘new and unexpected combination of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs’ noted by Rushdie (1991, p. 394), changes originating from globalization trends and democratic reforms began to transform the local music market. After Seoul’s 1988 lifting of the restrictions on foreign travel, the country became more exposed to the outside world. With the sharp rise in disposable income in the early 1990s, many Koreans purchased satellite dishes to pick up Japanese stations and Star TV. Against this backdrop, Korean music fans came to have a better grasp of global music trends, and hungered for new tunes from local musicians. According to Howard (2002): ‘Political freedoms were mirrored by musical experimentation, as musicians began to realize that they had to attempt to be distinct if they were to succeed in gaining an audience.... [M]ore and more musicians appropriated foreign music styles’ (pp. 88-89). In this context, the three-man band Seo Taiji and Boys, composed of underground bassist-singer-songwriter Seo Taiji and two rapper-dancers, released the single ‘I know’ in 1992. This was arguably the first rap track in Korea, and it excited local music listeners, who were fed up with the ballads and *ppongjjak* that lacked dynamism and musical experimentation.

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<sup>10</sup> Some argue that the melody had already existed in Korea before Japanese influence.

<sup>11</sup> A Korean-style Chinese noodle dish with fermented black soy bean sauce, onions, and chunks of pork.

Until the group disbanded in 1996, Seo Taiji received tremendous support from Korean music fans. Their fans were so ardent that when the Korean Broadcasting Ethics Committee ordered that the lyrics of the song 'Regret the Times' be changed before public release in 1995, the enraged fans protested and eventually, the government had to abolish the censorship system. Seo Taiji's music was so critically acclaimed that in 1998 when a group of music critics and industry people compiled the best 100 albums in Korean music history, all four of the band's albums were included. Furthermore, Seo Taiji was chosen by *The Monthly Joong-Ang* in 1994 as one of 50 people who had changed Korean society since 1945 (Taiji Mania, 2003). Seo Taiji and Boys literally revolutionized the Korean music industry as we know it on the following grounds.

First, Seo Taiji and Boys' popularity was based on innovative hybridization of music. The band creatively mixed genres like rap, soul, rock and roll, techno, punk, hardcore and even *ppongjjak*, and invented a unique musical form which 'employs rap only during the verses, singing choruses in a pop style' (Morelli, 2001: 250) with dynamic dance movements. Each of their albums was in itself a musical experimentation. In their first album, they showed how Korean rap would sound. In their second, they experimented on a crossover between 'high and low' music by inviting the traditional Korean percussionist Kim Deoksu and modern jazz saxophonist Lee Jeongsik to play for their album recordings. From their third album, they became 'vocal' in sending out social messages, with an attempt at gangsta rap. Since Seo Taiji, the syncretism of a wide range of musical genres in one album has become commonplace in Korea. What has come into existence is a hybrid but distinctively Korean pop style.

Secondly, Seo Taiji and Boys not only expanded the scope of the K-pop but also the scale of the music market. In the small, dormant market, the group's first album was 'the fastest-selling record since 1982' (Suh, 1992). During its four years of activities, the band was estimated to have earned more than 10 billion won from record sales (6 million copies of their four albums), music video sales, concerts, and other commercial activities (Byun, 1998). With an endless crop of imitation groups of Seo Taiji and Boys, sales of homegrown pop acts has since outpaced foreign albums by four to one, the Recording Industry Association of Korea reports (Hau and Madden, 2001). As of 2002, Korea is the second largest music market in Asia with \$300 million album sales per year (Macintyre, 2002).

Thirdly, Seo Taiji and Boys did not sing of romantic (and often, sad) sentimentality, as did the singers of ballads and *ppongjjak*; rather they represented adolescents' thoughts and emotions in their songs. They criticized the ills of the education system, taunted adults for their snobbery, and showed the people's desire for North-South Korean unification, thus, improving the social consciousness about pop music. The fact that Seo Taiji was a high school dropout but managed to earn social respect and succeed financially influenced parents' ideas of stardom. In a country where university entrance examinations for children mattered most for the average family, stardom came to be considered a new option for success. It was reported that some parents even constructed spaces in their homes for their children to practice dancing, which exemplified a value shift in the Confucian society (Morelli, 2001).

Finally, Seo Taiji and Boys challenged the broadcasting network-controlled music market. As Seo Taiji chose the other members of the band based on their dancing abilities, the band did not need the resident dancers of the television networks. In owning a personal state-of-the-art music studio, Seo Taiji did not rely on television networks' facilities and music directors. They were the first pop stars who enjoyed the freedom from television networks' direction,

deciding by themselves when they would appear in television shows. As the networks' influence weakened, the paths to stardom diversified and the roles of record companies and talent agencies expanded. Since the mid-1990s, record company scouts have held dance competitions and mass auditions, which have led to the manufacture of boy bands such as H.O.T., Sechs Kies, Uptown, and Shinhwa; these would probably never have developed without Seo Taiji's success.

If Seo Taiji is credited with transforming Korean pop music, and elevating its status in society and setting the standard for Korean dance music that would later suit the tastes of Asian fans, it is Lee Suman, founder of SM Entertainment in 1989, who is credited with the industrialization of the star-making process in K-pop. In a market in which the door to stardom was largely controlled by the networks, Lee challenged the system by 'cloning' talent and grooming pop stars. The best representation of Lee's products is H.O.T., a boy band that debuted in 1996 and exploded in popularity, with more than 10 million CD and record sales in Korea during its existence from 1996 to 2001. Before manufacturing H.O.T., Lee conducted a survey on teenage girls to find out what they wanted from their idols. Armed with knowledge from his research, Lee sifted through thousands of raw audition tapes and selected aspiring idols based on their looks as well as on their dancing and singing abilities. After almost two years of rigorous training in singing, dancing and other aspects to elevate them in the music market, SM Entertainment released H.O.T.'s first album, which sold 1.5 million copies (Howard, 2002; Macintyre, 2002)

Following the success of his boy band, Lee has captured the market with other properties, such as all-girl trio S.E.S., and BoA. Eyeing the Asian market, Lee made his teenage band members go through language training. In fact, two members of S.E.S. were selected partly because of their fluency in Japanese and English respectively. From the beginning of BoA's music career, Lee sent the pop sensation to Japan during school recesses to learn the language and to tap into the Japanese market. After achieving some success there, SM Entertainment is currently sounding out the possibility of BoA's success in the Chinese market. With a series of successes in its portfolio, SM Entertainment became the first Korean entertainment agency to list on Korea's KOSDAQ stock market. Following SM's success, many like-minded talent agencies have, through similar star-making processes, appeared and gradually transformed the entertainment market (Jeon, 2003; Macintyre, 2002).

Through the above experiences (hybridization of music forms and organization of star-making processes), Korean popular culture has prepared itself for forays into regional markets.

## **DISCUSSION**

Korea is not a traditional powerhouse of popular culture in Asia. However, the country is emerging as what Chen (2000) calls a 'sub-Empire' enjoying the historical juncture of media liberalization in Asia starting in the 1990s. In this paper, we have examined the Korean struggle for cultural diversity in the face of a possible erosion of their cultural particularity. In the process, cultural hybridization has occurred as local cultural agents and actors interact and negotiate with global forms, using them as resources through which Koreans construct their own cultural spaces, as exemplified in the case of rap. By this, we understand that the globalization, particularly in the realm of popular culture, breeds a creative form of hybridization that works towards sustaining local identities in the global context.

As to the extent that audiences derive similar identities from watching the same programs, it is also possible to think of ‘imagined communities’ in Asia. According to Iwabuchi, regionally circulating popular cultural products provide ‘a sense of living in the shared time and common experience of a certain (post)modernity which cannot be represented well by American popular culture’ (2001: 56). Ang (1985: 20) notes that ‘popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition’. In other words, how audiences can identify themselves with what they see is most important in their construction of pleasure from media consumption. Hong Kong-based film critic Law has the view that Korean popular culture’s success arises from its ability to touch the right chord of Asian sentiments, such as family values (Chon, 2001). Different from common prejudices against boy bands that they appeal to their fans with rebellious lyrics and gaudy dances, the hit songs from Korean rap band g.o.d. include ‘To My Mother’, a rap song about a sacrificial mother. Its lyrics are as follows:

Mother, I miss you.  
 My family was too poor to eat out.  
 While mother went to work, I used to cook instant noodles by myself.  
 Sick and tired of them, I once pestered mother for eating out.  
 She had to use emergency fund to go to a Chinese restaurant.  
 Mother ordered Jajangmyon but curiously she didn’t eat.  
 She simply said, “I don’t like it. Eat more.”  
 She simply said, “I don’t like it. Eat more.”  
 She simply said, “I don’t like it. Eat more.”  
 ...  
 Mother I love you.  
 I regret that I haven’t said this to you before.  
 I love you. May you rest in peace.

‘Cultural proximity’ factor alone, however, is not enough. According to a Chinese K-pop fan: ‘Korean pop culture skillfully blends Western and Asian values to create its own, and the country itself is viewed as a prominent model to follow or catch up, both culturally and economically’ (quoted in Choe, 2001). This explanation is most appropriate in Vietnam where ‘South Korean TV dramas provide the tightly controlled communist country with an enticing glimpse of the outside world’ (Visser, 2002). As such, ‘vision of modernization’ inherent in the Korean popular culture plays a part in making it acceptable in some Asian countries.

The development of Korean media industries and their advancement into regional markets is clearly a sign of resilience of the subaltern, and of contamination of the imperial, considering the decades-long context of American domination over global cultural industries. However, while Korean cinema is enjoying success, the all-or-nothing blockbuster business has caused concern over a narrowing of diversity. It is reported that as of early February 2004, *TaeGukGi: The brotherhood of war* was playing on 110 screens while *Silmido* was being shown on 53 screens, combining to take up nearly 92% of Seoul’s total 178 screens. Industry observers have begun to say, ‘What Korean cinema needs now is not one movie that attracts 10 million viewers, but 10 movies that attract 1 million viewers’ (Kim, J., 2004; Kim, K. 2004). We have to be reminded that, until now, all the outcries against cultural imperialism have been made to protect ‘diversity’, and the ‘coexistence’, of cultures. Similarly, the commercial drive of the Korean media is also a cause for concern for the media performance. No longer constrained by the obligation of public service, media companies indulge themselves in pursuing profit maximization by getting their products and services to the

largest number of consumers not only in Korea but also overseas, and this kind of capitalist activity has been justified in the name of national interests. However, it is time for us to ask what constitutes national interests.

### **AFTERWORD: 2011**

After experiencing unexpected but tremendous success overseas in the early and mid 2000s, Korean Wave also met backlash from its neighboring countries. Chinese national media and the public raised a question of which country was entitled to the ownership of Asian civilization, after observing Korean drama *Dae Jang Geum*'s huge global popularity. The Chinese got annoyed at the drama's featuring of traditional Korean medicine, which was arguably originated in China. In Japan, nationalist Japanese group published a series of books on anti-Korean Wave, arguing that the Wave was manipulated by the Korean government and/or manufactured by Dentsu, the largest advertising company in Japan. In Taiwan, labor union for entertainers pressured the government to put up quotas on foreign television program imports, seemingly targeting the Korean media.

The Korean television industry was also gradually intoxicated by the success overseas. Far from the fresh, new directions it was taking in the mid-1990s, everyone in the industry resorted to telling variations on the Cinderella story, using some of the same old formula. Television production houses became aggressive to snap up big name actors for their projects for foreign sales. In the end, the economics went out of whack. For example, for a \$100,000-per-episode budget, top two actors get \$20,000 each, as do the writer and the director – that is eighty percent of the budget is already gone. In this process, other elements in drama production are neglected, leading to a decline in production quality. Eventually, a glut of mediocre and poor-quality dramas and films deflected audiences, investors and importers away from Korean content, leading to the downturn of Korean Wave. People in the industry began to say the end was nigh.

- Then a turning point for the Korean Wave occurred. *Boys over Flowers*, the Korean version of Taiwanese TV drama *Meteor Garden*, released in early 2009, made surprisingly a big hit in many Asian countries. Its popularity was meaningful because it marked a new generation of Korean television stars. Without knowing it, the early Korean Wave stars including Bae Yong Jun, Lee Byung-hun, Jang Dong-gun and Lee Young-ae were reaching their forties, supporting an apocalyptic view of the Korean Wave. In addition, the new crop of actors came from K-pop boy bands. The Korean pop music has been brushed aside by television dramas in terms of their popularity overseas. However, Korean music industry's conscious efforts to mix Korean sentiments and global styles as noted above paid off, firstly at home, and then abroad.
- About that time, a girl group Wonder Girls' single *Nobody* made into the Bill Board Hot 100 in 2009. Given it being the first accomplishment for an Asian musician for 30 years, it was reported as a "feat" by the local news media (Lee, 2009). Soon, this news became a spark to ignite the popularity in K-pop overseas, especially with the help of YouTube. Receiving hundreds of millions of views a day, YouTube is ranked as the third most visited website on the Internet, only behind Google and Facebook (Alexa, 2010). Started with grassroots origin and participatory culture in 2006, however, YouTube was gradually incorporated into the corporate media. Becoming "official YouTube users," they took advantage of YouTube in promoting their content to individual users.

- K-pop's global reach can be ascertained by a recent happening in Paris, France on 1 May. Failing to obtain tickets to a K-pop concert organized by the SM Entertainment, or SM Town Live World Tour in Paris, hundreds of French fans staged a flash mob at the Louvre Museum to petition for a second concert, dancing to their favorite K-pop songs including Super Junior's *Sorry Sorry*. Tickets for the concert to be held on 10 June 2011 were sold out less than 15 minutes after they went on sale, much to the disappointment of many fans.
- All in all, we find that the shape of Korean Wave has noticeably changed in recent years. In the early 2000s, it was characterized by scenes of middle-aged housewives in East Asian countries chasing after Korean actors whom they were enamored of from watching television and VCDs (video cassette disks). Now, Korean pop music, or K-pop, has become the centerpiece of the Korean Wave, and it is largely enjoyed by teenagers around the world--not just in Asia. As noted, this change is an outcome of socio-technological development, including file-sharing, VOD (video on demand) on the Internet, which brings us to pay further attention to material aspects and new sensibility of media practices.

The concepts of globalization and hybridization have been so far popularly discussed to account for the simultaneous rise of transnational media corporations and re-localization. What is missing in these discussions is an effort to understand the cultural sensibility inscribed in the nexus of media text and consumers. For this, my next project is to unearth the concept of postmodern, which was in some sense forcibly buried in the last decade. By this, I do not argue that the modernity has passed. As Habermas put it, most of the elements described as postmodern were in fact existent in the modern. Rather, I agree with Giddens that what is considered postmodern is actually a sign of high modernity or radical modernity. Many of those seeming markers of postmodernity such as Toyotism, Sonyism, or niche marketing were outcomes of the global spread and acceleration of capitalism, a representative institution of modernity. What I would like to say is that there are significant *cultural* changes which can be best described in the language of the "postmodern." Thus, "postmodern" can be understood as the cultural sensibility of high modernity. I promise to take up this discussion further in my next paper.



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