

# Reading the “Korean Wave” as a Sign of Global Shift

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## Abstract

In this paper, I examined the discourse surrounding the “Korean Wave,” the phenomenon of Korean popular culture’s burgeoning popularity in Asian societies, within South Korea media from 2001 till 2005. Struggling to interpret a constantly changing reality, the cultural nationalist, the neoliberal, and the postcolonial camps were drawing the discursive terrain of the “Korean Wave,” sometimes clashing and at other times engaging each other in strategic compromises. The initial diverse discourses congealed and merged in their concentration on economic profit later on, which is indicative of a neoliberal turn in the 2000s Korea. The media technology revolution and global capitalism prepared the system for the manufacture of cultural products and circulation within Asia, and formed the coeval space of capitalist Asia. However, the diverse images and texts circulating within Asia were providing new opportunities to construct an alternate consciousness through the sharing of popular culture. Non-Western societies which used to measure their modernities against Western standards entered the new stage of subject formation.

Keywords: globalization, modernity, culture industry, cultural nationalism, neoliberalism, postcolonialism, contact zone

“The world knows us better than we know ourselves” – Electronic Ad Copy in Seoul 2001.

### **Dramatic Happenings, Hard Lessons**

There are signs all over the world of the decline of the sovereign nation-state and of new forms of territorialization within the rapid flows of globalization. Caught in their midst, people are trying to make sense of such changes. Such processes are especially dramatic and painful in countries that have undergone processes of rapid and compressed modernization. South Korea is among those countries that have undergone a compressed period of modernization, experiencing colonial domination, war, and rapid economic growth all within the same century. With neither time to prepare for future “disasters” nor a buffer zone, Koreans have had to “study” such drastic changes through direct experience. They particularly struggle to understand the phenomena that have unfolded after the sudden news of the “IMF crisis” (Cho 2000).

In 1997, the Asian financial crisis struck, precipitating the need for an economic bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The shock of the crisis drove the whole country into a severe depression. In its midst, however, was a boom in Internet ventures. Once Koreans became aware of the flow of various forms of capital around the world—financial, investment, and speculative—they threw themselves into that world created by full-blown capitalism. One of the most unexpected dramas to emerge from these large movements of capital, media, culture, and people centered around *hallyu* or the “Korean Wave.” When the phenomenon of Korean popular culture’s burgeoning popularity in Asian countries first emerged in news channels and was christened the Korean Wave, almost everyone with “something to say” put their pen to paper.

In this paper, through a discourse analysis of the Korean Wave, I attempt to show how people in South Korea are trying to make sense of a world in transformation. Rather than an analysis of the phenomenon of the Korean Wave per se, this essay is more a study of the reflexive learning process of people living in the semi-periphery of the world system. Just as Korean people were able to develop new perspectives on the world through the “IMF crisis,” news of the Korean Wave enabled Koreans to develop new senses of globalization, the culture industry, and a newly forming Asia in a short time span.

I have taken as my chief source of texts the numerous writings that began to proliferate with the initial boom of the Korean Wave in 2001 and continued through July 2005. Much of the data is comprised of newspaper and magazine articles dating from February 2001, when news of the Korean Wave first broke, to October 2001, when

the discussion heated up. As luck would have it, the advent of the Internet made it relatively easy to collect data. I also alternated between collecting written data and doing field work. Whenever I went to cities such as Hong Kong, Taipei, Tokyo, Beijing, Yanbian, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, I visited areas known to be centers of Asian cultural traffic and talked to consumers of Asian pop culture. I also attended academic symposiums and gave talks on the Korean Wave at several universities where I had valuable discussions with academics and students. Back in Korea, I spent time confirming my findings by interviewing experts in the cultural industry, both on a one-on-one basis and through workshops.

I have chosen to quote from various sources that I feel best express the diverse aspects of the phenomenon of the Korean Wave, as well as Korean society's responses to it. At the end of this paper, I present my own "reading" of the Korean Wave and discuss the several issues raised by this discourse in relation to globalization, neoliberalism, colonial modernity, and the formation of "Asian" subjectivities across national boundaries.

### **What is the "Korean Wave"?: Unprepared and Bewildered**

Articles on the Korean Wave first started appearing in celebrity gossip pages during 2001. In February, Yi Jong-hwan filed a report for the *Dong-a Ilbo* from Beijing, entitled, "No End in Sight for the Korean Wave in China." He wrote:

The Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism has declared October "the Month of Korean Culture," and is currently meeting with Chinese officials to set up a tour of large cities for groups including H.O.T., Baby Vox, and the National Ballet Company. The stars of the "2001 version of Korean Wave" are expected to include Bak Jin-yeong, who scored big in China with his song "Honey," and Kim Min-jong, who became a star among Chinese teenagers with the Chinese telecast of the Korean TV drama *Mister Q*. The Chinese were captivated when Korean ballads and dramas started airing on TV. Popular Korean dramas . . . in what has become known as "Korea mania" (Yi Jong-hwan 2001a).

Yi Jong-hwan reported that music and dramas popular in Korea were gaining popularity in China and that "mania groups" had formed for Korean pop singers. Soon, all newspapers covered the news of "the heated surge of the Korean Wave." Yi Jong-su, the special correspondent for the *Daehan maeil* also sent news of the popularity of Korean pop songs and dramas from Hong Kong, Taipei, and Vietnam (Yi Jong-su 2001). Jeong Hui-jeong, a reporter for *Munhwa Ilbo* explained that the term "*Hallyu*, the Korean

Wave in Chinese Character” came from the title of a compilation of Korean pop songs that was a smash hit in China (Jeong 2001). She tried to credit the core agents responsible for the Korean Wave, such as Kim Yun-ho, a former stock-broker whose love for Korean pop music led him to quit his job in Korea in 1997 in order to start a Korean pop music show on a Chinese FM broadcasting station. Many reporters further noted how the pop music and dramas that comprised the main elements of the Korean Wave had spin-off effects in terms of promoting Korean food, language study, cultural products, and tourism in Korea.

It has become the case that kids have to be able to sing one or two Korean songs in order to fit in . . . . During H.O.T.’s highly successful concert in Beijing in February, H.O.T. T-shirts sold like hotcakes and a brand of H.O.T. cosmetics appeared along with H.O.T.-themed coffee shops aimed at young people. More than 100,000 copies of H.O.T. records have sold. Korean singers are also now directly entering Chinese living rooms . . . . On billboard charts, Korean songs are the only foreign songs featured in the Top 10. Im Gyeong-ok, who shot to stardom in China with *Sarang-i mwogillae* (What is Love), signed on recently as a star with a Beijing TV drama producer. Chun Paice, the president of the company said that one of the reasons that he signed Im Gyeong-ok was because, as a drama producer, they could not afford to not ride the “wave” of Korean dramas (Yi Jong-hwan, 2001b).

News reporters busily listed numerous other phenomena as proof of the rising popularity of Korean cultural products. In August, Choe Yong-sik, a staff reporter of the *Korea Herald*, wrote an interesting report from a cross-cultural perspective:

Back in 1965, the Beatles were named “members of the most excellent order of the British Empire.” The members of the pop group that rocked the world with their powerful music were honored as esquires, the rank below knight . . . . Today, if the Republic of Korea were to award the equivalent of British knighthood to a Korean celebrity, the first person on the list would be actor-cum-singer Ahn Jae Wook (An, Jae-uk), who may have accomplished something that no politician, businessman nor diplomat could ever do for the nation. . . . Ahn now commands unrivaled popularity in China, having surpassed Leonardo Di Caprio as the most popular celebrity in a recent poll . . . (Choe 2001).

By endowing these main agents of the Korean Wave with the status of the Beatles in the 1960s, Choe puts this phenomenon in a world historical context. He further explains the Korean Wave” in terms of the emergence of youth fan power and the efforts of aggressive marketers in the culture industry:

The nascent boom for things Korean was further bolstered by the advance of Korean movies and, more than anything else, Korean pop music, which often incorporates dynamic rhythms, powerful dances and, more often than not, lyrics

deemed progressive or rebellious enough to appeal to young local fans . . . the current Korea boom is further consolidated by the deliberate marketing efforts of some Korea companies operating in these countries. Beyond listening to Korean pop songs and watching Korea TV dramas, the new generation of consumers classified as the “Korea tribes” are aggressively adopting and emulating Korean lifestyles ranging from fashion, food, and consumption patterns, to even plastic surgery. Some ardent fans of Korean pop stars and dramas go as far as to make pilgrim voyages to Korea on packaged tour programs that make their dreams come true—meeting their idols and checking out the shooting locations of their favorite dramas.

At the time, vivid descriptions in the papers instantaneously gave the Korean Wave a reality of its own. Various discussions in early reports offered bewildered readers ideas on “spectacle popular culture,” “culture capital,” and “youth culture.” The heated discussions also caused wise readers to realize that it is crucial to recognize multiple voices regarding this new phenomenon.

### **Three Takes: Different Perspectives and Foci**

From October 2001, discussions around the “Korean Wave” began to settle down. While cynical voices claimed that the Korean Wave was nothing more than a bubble, various groups such as the Munhwa Yeondae (Cultural Action) and major intellectual magazines and journals began to discuss the phenomenon at length. Academic symposiums on the topic were held. In this section, I classify the discourses advanced by this early phase of reporting in news, columns, and cultural criticism into three groups, based on the position and focus of the authors. Each group shares the same general historical perspective, although there is some diversity in their strategic approaches to the material. These three different perspectives, namely, the cultural nationalist perspective, the neoliberal perspective, and the postcolonialist perspective, persist up to 2005, sometimes clashing and at other times complementing one another in their trajectories.

*The Cultural Nationalist Perspective: “The Victory of Korean Culture and Asian Pride!”*

1) “What is Korean is International!”

In reaction to news that Korean pop culture had gained popularity in Asia, many columnists seemed to have had the instant feeling that “Korea has finally made it.”

For those of us who have eulogized the aesthetics of living in seclusion for a long time next to a powerful country, the spread of our cultural products throughout the world these days cannot but be good news . . . the news that *Joint Security Area* has earned about two million dollars in Japan is proof that the foreign competitiveness of Korean films has vastly improved. Above all, it appears that the Korean temperament is touching people's hearts around the world. . . . We can now say that what is Korean is, in fact, international (Park G. 2001).

Park declares above that a "Korean sensibility" is "the sensibility of the whole world." Still, his effort to dismiss dance music as a central force in the Korean Wave is interesting. "When we look inside the Korean Wave, we see Chinese teenagers who have had no outlet to express their desires. They appear fascinated by the sophisticated appearance and stylish dance moves of young Korean singers, as well as by the fast, exciting dance music. This makes it difficult to see the Korean Wave as a result of a deep affinity for the sensibility of the Korean people. Its implication is that the foundation for reproducing the Korea Wave is weak. Park praises the popularity of Korean movies in the same breath that he neglects to mention dance music. Why does Park highlight "Korean culture" but not "popular culture" despite his recognition that the Korean Wave is a phenomenon of popular culture in the same column?

This emphasis on pride of "Korean culture" or "recovery" is a natural reaction for nationalist people who felt that Korea had finally joined the ranks of advanced nations. The downplaying of popular youth culture highlights Korea's competitive edge while deemphasizing the demotic aspects of the Korean Wave. Kim Hyun Mee (2001) relates this high expectation that nationalists had of the Korean Wave to the contemporary sense of crisis felt by Korean people during an era of high unemployment, especially after the IMF financial crisis. It is very plausible that these high expectations were a response to the sense of diminished self that Korean people experienced from the crisis. Kim also suggests that upon hearing of the Korean Wave, it was possible to imagine a "Korean dream" similar to the fabled "American dream" dreamt by Koreans decades ago. In order to explain popularity in terms that speak to nationalist desire, the discussion among nationalist writers ended up revolving around two ways of understanding this ascendance: the violence and sensationalism of American and Japanese pop culture versus the non-violent and familial ethos of Confucian culture, and the wide spread anti-Japanese sentiment that permeates Asian nations.

## 2) The Culture of Violence vs. the Culture of Familism

The recovery of Korean people's sense of pride and self-confidence is linked to notions of cultural essentialism. The prevalent assertion that the popularity of Korean popular culture stems from family values and a Confucian sensibility assumes a common "Asian culture." Kim Han-gil, the head of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT), explained the popularity of Korean drama in China this way: "Compared to Western drama's sensationalism and violence, which doesn't suit Chinese sensibilities, Korean dramas are drawing interest from Chinese people" (*Daehan Maeil*, July 21, 2001). An MCT administrator said in an informal interview, "Compared to American and Japanese popular culture, which is so violent that people are repulsed, Korean culture is relatively easier to consume because it has been filtered through a Confucian sensibility."

Is the assertion that American and Japanese dramas are more sensationalistic and violent than Korean dramas true? The idea could be defended if one considers family-oriented dramas such as *What is Love*, which circulated in the beginning of the Korean Wave. However, there are many counter examples, such as a report that parents in Vietnam wish to prohibit Korean TV dramas because they "emphasized sexual love and promoted luxurious and hedonistic lifestyles among Vietnamese youngsters" (**Kang Jin-gu** *Kyunghyang*, September 20, 2001). Cultural nationalists who claim that Korean culture, because of its Confucian base, is less violent and sensationalistic than other cultures are likely the ones who call Korea a land of family and filial piety. They ignore the reality that the divorce rate of Korea ranks as high as most OECD nations in 2005.

### 3) "Anti-Japanese Sentiment Has Helped"

The argument that Korean pop culture is popular in Asia because of anti-Japanese and anti-American sentiments was a point emphasized in many articles, particularly in the cultural nationalistic discourse. Im Jin-mo, a pop critic, contributes to this discourse:

First of all, China is ideologically opposed to the United States. A sense of nationalism operates against the United States. It's the same with Japan. When the younger and older generations in China hear the word "Japan," they feel an inward hostility. . . . Korea is entirely different. First of all, there is no sense of competitiveness with Korea. That doesn't mean that the Chinese look down on Korea; they view Korea as a country to learn from. Just like we turned towards Hong Kong rather than Japan in the past, they feel comfortable with Korea. . . . People who have come back from China report that when the Chinese talk about Korea, they say, "Somehow, it is not a hateful country," or, "It is a country that is strangely attractive." . . . In a situation in which the United States and Japan are both disliked, Korea becomes the logical choice for China's affections (Im 2001, 7).

Koichi Iwabuchi (2000, 54), who has for years researched the reception of Asian dramas, adds that “the remnants of Japanese imperialism in Asia form a barrier to the export of (Japanese) cultural products abroad.” Socio-political factors, such as anti-Japanese sentiment arising from Japan’s imperial past or Korea’s status as a “marginal” nation (less threatening to other countries), must be at work here to explain Korea’s rising popularity. However, Japanese dramas and songs are also popular in many parts of Asia (Kim Hyun Mee 2003). Paik Won Dam (Baek Won-dam), who studies Chinese culture, asserts that China, after going through the chain of events that included the Tiannenmin Square Massacre, the Asian Games, and full economic liberation, was able to break its fantasy about the West and turn to Asia after the mid-1990s (Han et al. 2002). However, the nature of this turn to Asia during this period was not the Korean Wave but the “Japanese Wave.” The Korean Wave followed later, with teenagers acting as its main agents.

It is possible that an argument stressing anti-Japanese sentiment as a reason for the Korean Wave is a projection of the anti-Japanese sentiments of nationalists. Whatever degree of truth this interpretation is based on, it is important to remember that any sentiment toward Japan involved in the Korean Wave looks quite different for the younger generations than for those older. With increasing cultural exchanges across national borders and the internalization of consumer society, which must continually find things that are new and different to appeal to consumers, the younger generations have already divested themselves of such consciousness around national borders. This is precisely where the gap between the older generation, who comment on the phenomenon of the Korean Wave, and the younger generations, who are enjoying it, can be most keenly felt.

#### 4) A Cultural Center in the Global Village

The position of Im Jin-mo is further developed in his discussion of the Korean Wave as the retrenchment of American culture in East Asia.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Korean popular music scene is a smaller version of the American music scene. . . . Even though we like to believe that we have discovered our country’s code through the rapid assimilation and processing of any and all American and British music styles, we haven’t yet discovered the creative musical code that leads the world. . . . Some people also say that the pop songs and TV dramas that form the basis of the Korean Wave are in fact nothing more than copies of American and Japanese Waves. Right now, China is learning the “here and now” of the cultural scene through the Korean Wave. . . . Right now,



[China] is emerging from the past, gazing steadily at and learning from the present while preparing to take off into the future. . . . In fact, there are signs of East Asia becoming nothing more than a production center and a subcontracting base for Europe and America—a cultural colony. No East Asian country has been able to successfully export its culture to America or Europe (Im 2001, 7).

To Im Jin-mo, cultural hegemony is the key concept through which to think about the Korean Wave. Im, who does not think Asian culture advanced enough to be equal in the world, proposes the China-Korea connection as a solution for Western cultural hegemony.

Although Japanese jazz has received some attention, that hasn't translated into increased sales or other forms helpful to the cultural industry. Meanwhile, hits from Europe and America are spilling into Korea everyday. . . . What China undoubtedly dreams of doing is transforming itself into a "global cultural center." For China, it is not just about escaping the status of a cultural colony; it is about becoming a cultural center. China is waiting for the day when it can control the world's cultural flows not politically, but as a cultural superpower. For China, Korea is a stepping stone towards this goal. If China emerges as a new cultural furnace, it will mostly likely mean East Asia's emergence from cultural colonialism. . . . We need to view the Korean Wave not in terms of market expansion but as an opportunity to establish an identity. There needs to be a serious debate as to whether we have our own unique cultural code and grammar, whether ballads are really Korean music, and whether TV dramas are really creative. . . . Through the Korean Wave, we must create a sense of cultural solidarity with China and use that position to raise the status of East Asia vis-à-vis Europe and United States (Im 2001, 7).

Im Jin-mo, who views popular culture products as imports of a global American culture, uses the terms pastiche (*bekkigi*), subcontract base (*hacheong giji*) and counter cultural flow (*munhwa yeongnyu*). To counter cultural colonization, he recommends searching for something "authentically Korean" and rejecting commercialism. Im proposes a strategic China-Korea alliance as a way to escape Korea's marginal position. In phrases such as "cultural products that are really ours," and, "our very own identity," one senses a worldview that is at once defeatist and hegemonic. The dichotomy of margin and center, and the oppressor and the oppressed is clearly expressed in his writing. A similar ideological position to that of Im is expressed by Kim Han-gil:

The interest in the Korean Wave has reached such a feverish state that not only are teenagers registering with Korean language institutes in order to learn the lyrics of Korean pop songs, but also Korean tastes have become a marker of distinction between the generations. . . . The Korean Wave is not only fighting back against the monopolistic position held by American and Japanese cultures in the Asian region, it is also demonstrating how a Korean culture, which has been oppressed for over 5,000 years, can, using the cultural similarity between Asians and Asians' familiarity with Korean culture as its basis, spread throughout the world" (*Daehan Maeil*, July 21, 2001).

Kim here takes on an imperialist modernism that prides itself on penetrating territory that until now was monopolized by American culture; as an essentialist nationalist, he views the Korean Wave as the manifestation of 5,000 years of pent-up energy

It may be worthwhile to borrow an insight from a study of the “Japan Wave”: Iwabuchi in his study of fandom (2000, 59), argued that though Japanese dramas are tremendously popular in Taiwan, they occupy a different position from the American culture that was previously the object of envy. In interviews with Taiwanese viewers of Japanese dramas, he was unable to find attitudes indicative of Taiwanese viewers’ identification with or envy of the powerful. According to Iwabuchi, the Taiwanese audience viewed Japanese dramas with the attitude that “they were living lives similar to ours,” and there was no sense that Japanese culture was superior. With increasing cultural flow among the Asian countries, he finds instead that a growing number of people are experiencing various forms of cultural homogeneity along gender, class or generational lines across national boundaries.

*The Industrialist and Neoliberal Position: “Culture is Money. Let’s Produce More Cultural Exports”*

While cultural nationalists emphasize the existence of “authentic culture,” industrialists and neoliberals highlight the cultural “industry.” What excites them is news that Korean companies greatly increased their sales by featuring the main stars of the Wave in ads for products ranging from computers to cellular phones. Many columnists proposed the development of a large potential market by linking the boom in popular culture to the market distribution system and to the improvement of the country’s image. Fear that the Wave will fade like a fad inspired frequent discussions about the need for state support and appropriate state policies. The bulk of editorials and columns by news reporters, government officials, and people in the culture industry are concerned with how to advance and continue the promotion of the Korean Wave. Lamenting a lack of strategies, people in the forefront of cultural export institutions sought clever ways to crack open the enormous emerging Asian market. To them, the origin or quality of cultural products did not matter as much as the market and the bottom line.

1) “Not the Culture, but the Market, Matters.”

Not unexpected in a society that has undergone state-led economic development, the

Korean government took the position that the Korean Wave must be the product of sheer competition in the global market and an export-oriented policy should be established to maximize economic profit. In an interview, Kim Han-gil stated: “the Korean Wave, spreading like wildfire throughout Asia, especially China, is proof of the international competitiveness of Korean popular culture”; he added, “we will actively support the penetration of our culture into foreign markets” (*Daehan Maeil*, July 21, 2001). Those working in the culture industry urged the government to station experts in various countries to gather information on cultural trends and set up permanent consultative bodies between national governments (**Lee, Jong-su 이종수, Lee Song-ha 이송하, et al. *Daehan Maeil* August 29, 2001**). The government moved quickly to increase the national culture industry’s budget, to station government specialists in large cities in China and elsewhere and to set up a “hall of the Korean Wave.” In response, there were reports of the Chinese government’s displeasure and fear that the South Korean government was acting too aggressively. The government, which so anxiously leapt into this field, realized that, with no experience in the field of popular culture, it might now be in over its head and that it should refrain from direct interference. The government became aware that that it could provoke a backlash from its partner governments and jeopardize the penetration of Korean products into foreign markets by being too visible as promoters of the Korean Wave.

In an interesting discussion by cultural industry figures on how to “**promote long-term development by allowing a counter (Korean) wave,**” (Kim, Ji-yeong, and Bae Guknam, *Hankook Ilbo*, September 2 2001), the main concern was to transform the Korean Wave into a sustainable source of income. Proposals for dismantling the “barriers to maintaining the Korean Wave” included developing a stronger strategy for continuous distribution through larger scale production, regulation of content quality, and delinking the Korean Wave from nationalistic fervor. Export-oriented government officials and businessmen had in common their concern about a lack of a coherent policy or strategy. A “cultural engineering mindset” was emphasized over and over in their discussion of how to produce and sell competitive cultural content. They urgently discussed solving problems faced by small event planners, ranging from the issue of establishing diplomatic agreements to that of making an exemption from compulsory military service for male singers.

2) “Not High Culture, but Mass Culture; not the Old, but the Young”

Television documentary producer Seo Hyeon-cheol, returned from a month-long intensive field investigation in Asia, excited about the enthusiastic consumption of Korean popular culture. He was convinced that Korean dance music could be a world competitive export item.

Even though we still need to wait and see when it comes to dramas and movies, I am confident that our dance music is a competitive product in Asia . . . weren't all singers who have occupied the throne of pop music—Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, and Madonna—all dance music artists? By combining visual and auditory elements, dance music is easily accessible to the masses . . . (Seo 2002).

According to Seo, Korean dance music singers, like Elvis, Michael Jackson or Madonna, became stars by dancing together with the “masses” in their countries. The main agents of the rise of Korean Wave then are the popular masses who irrepressibly love to dance. Seo goes on:

Even though we derive our dance music from America or Japan, it is inevitably colored by Korean sensibilities during the process of copying. The reason that the Chinese are crazy about our dance music is not because our dance artists and singers created the music with the Chinese market in mind. The music that they like is the music that we created for the domestic Korean market—that is, music reflecting a Korean sensibility and sung in Korean. . . . We are probably the only nationality that enjoys dancing on tour buses. . . . Some people say that the Korean Wave is the product of “B”-grade cultural capital and that it should not represent our cultural character. . . . Those who created the Korean Wave are not the people who create the so-called “high” or traditional “Korean culture,” nor the classical music played by Koreans. The Korean Wave derives from Korean dance music, which we like so much that we treat it with contempt (Seo 2002).

Seo objects to discussions of high/low culture, and stresses that the cultural commodities received so well by the Asian youth are popular mass culture; the competitive product was not made by or for elites, but the masses who enjoy mass culture. Note here that Seo calls “the love of music and dance” a “Korean sensibility.”

### 3) “Building a New Express Highway!”

**Lee Song-won** (이송원), the CTO of Miro-Vision, a film production and distribution company, shares a similar opinion. He says the film industry has woken up to the fact that there is no use in making a “good film” without a proper distribution network. Stating that, “once the system for the commercial films is set in place, the art market will also emerge by default,” **Lee** says that the most urgent task at hand is to increase

the scale of production and to establish a distribution channel by making many commercially successful films. To Lee, building a new express freeway is the most urgent task.

O Jung-wan (오정완), the CEO of Bom-Film Production, also expressed that it is time to prioritize making Korean blockbusters and cultivate the market and distribution system. In order to get a foot in the door of the market led by the U.S. film industry, she believes it is necessary to imitate Hollywood's movies. The Korean Wave provided producers and agencies in the film industry a great opportunity to pave a powerful distribution channel.

*The Postcolonialist Position: Building Cultural Infrastructure and Rewriting a History in Specific Contexts*

A postcolonialist perspective views the Korean Wave as a result of several centuries of modernization, capitalist expansion, and homogenization of global culture. Most of those who take this position are cultural researchers sensitive to global shifts. Many of them are also consumers who actively enjoy these popular culture products themselves.

1) "B-class Culture Created by the Colonial Modernity"

Paik Won Dam and Lee Dong Yeun (Yi Dong-yeon) are particularly critical of commercial culture. Paik views the Korean Wave as a creation of shrewd agencies in the Korean cultural industry. She flatly claimed the Korean Wave to be nothing but the product of capitalism.

Regardless of whether it is called colonial modernization or uneven capitalism, the first form of popular culture to emerge out of that modernization is the Korean Wave. I mean that the Korean Wave is the embodiment of the West penetrating our bodies (from Han 2002, 19?- let me confirm when I get to Korea on January 6)

Paik warns against the creation of a shallow and snobbish culture of capitalism and take a position contrary to the neoliberal position.

The Korean Wave is nothing other than a game of pop stars produced by capital. The cultural relations between Chinese teenagers pursuing the Korean Wave, Korea and China, and Korea and East Asia are all ultimately formed through the logic of capital. Especially in China, the first version of the Korean Wave, positive or negative, functioned to fill in the culturally empty space left by enormous changes that swept through China in 1990. In the confusion, the marketing strategies of Korean companies in China had the good fortune of hitting their

targets, creating the Korean Wave (Paik 2001, 6).

To Paik, the Korean Wave is a temporary appearance within the “cultural void” created in the period in which the Chinese have not yet become ready to make “Chinese” cultural commodities. Opposing the positions that Asian neighbors are economic targets and that transforming Asia into one big market is desirable, she suggests: “By frankly exposing the cultural ups and downs of modernization, let us establish healthy chains of communication and authentic means of understanding. That way, we can control the Korean Wave and create a genuine culture.” Paik wishes to promote “*minjung* culture” rather than commercial culture. In fact, from the 1980s, she helped Kim Min-gi, the prominent artist of “*minjung* movement” to produce his musical *Subway Line #1* in China.

Cultural critic Lee Dong Yeun, who also views the Korean Wave as a product of shallow capital culture and the industrial state, is particularly critical of chauvinist nationalism and the entertainment industry. He sees not only the stage on which the Korean Wave is perched but also its background, and writes:

Congratulations are in order to the entertainment industry, which took the initiative to plant a flag of victory in the popular cultural market of mainland China, with all its endless possibilities. Even the government, which has been grappling with an advancing modernity, is performing a supportive role this time. . . . Historically, no country other than Korea has ever held an emergency meeting and dispatched bureaucrats to another country to help its entertainment industry settle in foreign soil (Lee 2001).

Lee then scathingly reports on the lack of a genuine cultural infrastructure in order to point out a need for it, and claims products that emerge from a barren ground have little hope of sustenance. He argues that products created by the “illicit union” of an export-oriented state and short-term capitalist logic that forces everything to either turn a quick profit or disappear, cannot but remain low quality. He further urges the government to invest in libraries, live stages, and conditions that allow pop artists to live properly. According to Lee, a leader of the Cultural Action, since the state carried out an economic development responsible for reducing “culture” to a disposable item, it should now provide citizens a chance to activate their cultural lives. Lee’s ceaseless efforts to reclaim a “public cultural sphere” and to secure survival rights for “indie” and underground musicians emerge from his commitment to a democratic cultural society.

## 2) “Building an Asian Cultural Bloc”

Cultural researcher Won Yong-jin, whose position is postcolonialist, raises new issues in his column, “Reading the Korean Wave Inside Out”:

Ten or twenty years ago, we worried about the social effects of American and Japanese culture on our country. We scolded young people who indulged in American and Japanese culture and took measures to protect our culture. When the American and Japanese cultural invasion turned into economic invasion through the sale of cultural products, we got angry and raised our voices. Now that the shoe is on the other foot, we do not think seriously about what the Korean Wave means for people on the other side. If we were to view ourselves from the other side, we would be ashamed (Won 2001).

Won calls into question the lack of self-reflection within Korean society and those who are eagerly promoting the export of popular culture. He writes sarcastically, “Gather everything that we can sell! . . . ‘Let’s make sure we use this opportunity to increase our market share!’ . . . The logic of market expansion rules the day. . . . I wonder if we are not engaging in ‘cultural sub-imperialism.’” Nonetheless, he wishes to use this phenomenon as an opportunity to create an Asian “cultural block” that could stop the flow of Western or American culture into Asia.

The first priority should be to set up a cultural block to the flow of American culture. The Korean Wave, an Asian event, is an ideal opportunity to construct an Asian regional community. In order to construct a strong cultural block, we need several things. We should not make commercial mass culture and consumer culture the basis of the regional cultural block. . . . The formation of an Asian cultural block is important for the creation of a community based on a mutual understanding. . . . The Korean Wave is an important start so it is unfortunate that we are discussing it only in terms of increased business opportunities and profit maximization. We are incurring a bigger loss by pursuing a smaller gain (Won 2001).

Won views the Korean Wave from a cultural relativist position (*yeokjisaji* 易地思之), or putting in the other’s shoes). In order to respond to the power of the North America, he thinks that Asia should create its own cultural economic bloc just like Europe. Cultural anthropologist Kim Hyun Mee (2001) proposes similar but more realistic suggestions to move beyond grand analyses or normative declarations. She suggests a two-pronged strategy: getting to know the workings of secular capital and finding the site of intervention for building postcolonial communities in a “coeval” Asia.

Today’s situation, in which various pop cultural products flow and are exchanged, definitely differs from the period in which pop culture was mainly produced and distributed by major Western record companies, film companies, distributors, etc. Precisely because of this, it is imperative that we understand the “Asian context” of cultural production, distribution, consumption, and “fandom.” . . . One way to

understand the flows of pop culture within the Asian region is the ‘coevalness’ of cultural production and consumption. The various cultural exchanges within Asia are not exchanges occurring at the level of the state. Regardless of the boundaries of nation-states, it is shared by people who have experienced the contemporaneous changes brought about by Asian modernity and who are seeking to solve its “problems.” . . . Rather than being a product of Korean popular culture’s uniqueness or superior quality, the Korean Wave may be a result of the “ability” of a most secular capitalistic materialist desire to appease the newly emerging desires and diverse anxieties in the Asian region (Kim Hyun Mee 2001).

Kim describes the desire to turn the Korean Wave into a golden hen able to lead South Korea into an era of high value-added cultural industry. Viewing the Korean Wave as part of the process of global capitalism and the unique experience of modernization in the Asian region, Kim suggests the need to look carefully at the innumerable points of exchange created through the operation of transnational financial capital and human flows. Won and Kim particularly emphasize the reciprocal cultural exchanges and the coexistence of multiple cultures.

Kim emphasizes the importance of field work in understanding the historical context and specificities of the “locals” to be contacted. She stresses that the popularity of Korean dramas must be understood in relation to the vast increase in the number of cable television channels to about 120 channels in Taiwan and the viewing habits of an audience used to viewing diverse foreign programs (Kim Hyun Mee 2003). She also notes the much cheaper price of Korean dramas compared to Japanese dramas as another factor of the Korean Wave. She criticizes simplistic approaches to the Korean Wave, saying that inter-Asian cultural flows create complicated and multi-dimensional transnational ones. Kim particularly emphasizes the different patterns of East Asian cultural consumption along class, race, and gender lines.

### **The “Second Korean Wave”: After 2003**

The discourse analysis of writings on the Korean Wave that appeared from the beginning of the year 2001 ends here. Optimists hoped that in a short period of time South Korea would become a first-rate “cultural nation” while more cynical observers predicted that the Korean Wave would soon cool. However, contrary to most expectations, the Korean Wave seems to have grown stronger. In the fall of 2003, *Gyeongju yeon-ga* (the Winter Sonata), a drama of romantic love, became a big hit in Japan.

Research by the Korean Economic Research Center calculated 3 billion dollars



as the profit generated from the “Yonsama (the male actor) Heat Wave.” Tourism revenue alone totaled 840 million dollars, and the running royalties for KBS reached more than 100 million dollars.<sup>1</sup> Another drama, *Daejanggeum* (A Jewel in the Palace), which portrays the heroic life journey of a dedicated female cook who finally receives the title of “master” from a king during the Joseon dynasty, also became hugely popular in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. Movies and dramas continue to be popular in Asia and sell well in Japan, as well as other parts of the world, including the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Norimitsu Onishi, a New York Times correspondent in Taipei reports that about 80% of Taiwanese tourists to South Korea pick television-themed tours, visiting spots where their favorite dramas were filmed (*New York Times*, June 28, 2005).

Films such as *Chin-gu* (Friends), *Silmido*, *Taegukgi*, *My Sassy Girl* and many others have become big hits in Asia and are shown in the West. In 2002 and 2004, three film directors were chosen as the best directors of the year by the world-renowned film festivals, namely, the Cannes Film Festival (2002), the Venice Film Festival (2002) and the Berlin Film Festival (2004). Having received internationally renowned awards meant much to people in the “margin.” Several pages in special editions of weekly and monthly magazines paid tribute to Korean film’s historical figures (*Weekly Chosun*, February 19, 2005, 30-31).

The Korean Wave surged once more around TV dramas and films in the spring of 2004. Some media described it as the “second” or “new” Korean Wave (*Weekly Chosun*, March 11, 2004, 25; *Sisa Journal Weekly*, April 13, 2004). The *Weekly Chosun*, a conservative magazine, reported the international popularity of Korean movies in this way: “Korean Movies Resolve People’s Age-old (historically accumulated) Wrath” (*Weekly Chosun*, February 19, 2004, 22-23). The tone of media discourse about the “Second Korean Wave” is less ideological, although the nationalist undercurrent remains strong. The news and reports are more fact-oriented than the discussions of 2001, and include world maps full of celebrity photos, the names of hit movies and dramas, and figures describing the prevailing popularity of Korean pop culture.

Research reports, academic conferences and policy meetings soon followed. The Samsung Economic Research Institute (2005) drew up a special report on the economic effects of the Korea Wave. Entitled “The Korean Wave Sweeps the Globe,” the report classifies countries that import Korean pop culture into four stages, in terms

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<sup>1</sup> Even though the profits are shared by Japan and Korea, NHK earns a lot more through its licensed broadcasting of the *Winter Sonata* than Korean broadcasters. Producer Bak Jae-bok, who has played a key role in exporting the dramas, said, in response to complaints that NHK earned more money than the production company, that NHK deserves the money for their carefully tailored service (Institute of Korean Culture and Tourism 2005, 39).

of their pattern of consuming Korean cultural products. The first stage is that of simply enjoying Korean pop culture, and this is applied to Egypt, Mexico and Russia. The second stage involves buying related products such as posters, character items, and tours; Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are classified in this category. The third stage is buying “Made in Korea” products; China and Vietnam fit this description. The final stage reflects the development of a general preference for Korean culture itself. According to the report, there are no countries that belong to this category yet. The report urges the development of high quality “content” by paying more attention to “marketing strategies,” such as the “co-development of content.”

The report concluded by proposing the reinvention of something uniquely Korean. This report concluded, “If the Korean Wave represented an East Asian trend in Korean contents, then we need to make people interested in Korean culture through “feeling Korea” and increasing the export of Korean food, drinks, and lifestyles, which contained the essence of Korean aesthetics, emotions, traditions, and culture.” Modeling itself after “Japonism,” through which Japan at the end of the nineteenth century made its existence known to European culture, with expressions like “Japanese style,” “Nippon feel,” and “Japanese Wave,” “feel Korea” was an attempt to create a structure of consciousness and feeling through which South Korea could make itself known to the world. The report added that when the sensibility contained in these contents surpassed “Korean sensibility” to include Asian values such as Neo-Confucian and family values, then it would be more appealing to non-Koreans and that South Korea could build a cultural Silk Road (SERI 2005, 19-20).

If the report by the Samsung Economic Research Institute reflects the convergence of market logic and cultural nationalism, then the discussion contained in *Munhwa siseon* (Culture/Gaze), a semi-academic journal published by the Korea Culture and Tourism Policy Institute (KCTPI), reflects more diverse voices in the field. The discussion took place in March 2005 with the postcolonialist Won Yong-jin as the chair, and six academics including Kim Hyun Mee (KCTPI 2005, 30-57). At the forum, Bak Jae-bok and other participants predicted that the Korean Wave would continue to surge for some time. They agreed that the traffic in Asian drama began with the liberalization of Taiwan’s drama market in the early 1990s, Japan being the main exporter at the time. Korean drama, then, entered the niche market in the late 1990s when consumption of Hong Kong and Japanese popular culture was declining.

For the last five years, Bak has argued that the dance music that started the upsurge in the Korean Wave is not very prominent in Asia now. Even though its energetic tunes brought an enthusiastic response from Asian teenagers, the industry did

not have enough stamina to keep on producing competitive products for Asian teenagers. In contrast, from the mid-1990s, the Korean dramas started entering the living rooms of all Asian countries, as Samsung and LG distributed free copies of Korean dramas to the broadcasting stations in Asia to promote its own products. In the case of South Korea's drama industry, the state's protection of South Korea's three broadcasting stations from foreign media is said to have largely contributed to the high quality of the current dramas. The existence of the three large broadcasters KBS, MBC, and SBS, which received the monopolistic protection of the state, further helped mobilize the viewers into one group while competition among them caused "popular products" to emerge. In contrast, the facts that the film industry was able to put in place the "screen quota" system and that many filmmakers were student activists who entered the film industry with a historical consciousness are both stressed as key differences of the film industry [ from the cases of other countries].

The government's roles in the rise of the Korean Wave were assessed at the forum, and Bak and Sim Sang-min both criticized the government's lack of assistance in the development of the cultural traffic, both in terms of the lack of resources and the way that money was invested. Stressing the idea that Korean culture was being received and consumed in each culture differently, Kim Hyun Mee emphasized the need for differentiated policy measures depending on the consumption pattern of popular culture in each country. She stated that, in contrast to multi-media and multi-cultural industrial countries like Japan and Singapore, where consumer choice is important and the government has little room to intervene, in post-socialist countries such as China and Vietnam, there is greater room and need for the government to intervene. Kim Hyun Mee emphasized the need for field research to deal with various problems that arose due to ignorance of local agencies, such as the preparation of cooperative agreements regarding intellectual property rights, and support for the translation industry, etc. Kim Hyun Mee also maintained that it is time for the market people to reinvest their economic gain from the Korean Wave in order to improve the poor working conditions of laborers in that industry (2005, 45).

Professor Paik Won Dam, who in 2001 called the Korean Wave the "embodiment of the West having penetrated our bodies" published a book in 2005 entitled *Korean Wave: The Cultural Choice of East Asia*, in which she goes beyond her initial proposition that the "conscious *minjung*" should engage in a cultural exchange. Following Koichi Iwabuchi's argument that Japan's penetration into Asian culture—or the "Japanese-style Korean Wave," as she puts it—occurred through erasing traces of the national origins of the products, she wrote that the Korean Wave, in contrast, "is

entering the Asian cultural market with a 'Made in Korea' sticker displayed proudly on its sleeve" (2005, 288). Following this logic, she further stated that the "Korean Wave is ultimately not something that can be continued through the efforts of state and capitalism . . . rather, the Korean Wave is something that we need to create in order to shake off the burden of an unhappy history and head towards more peaceful relations." What is notable about her book is her positive reevaluation of the Korean Wave, seen in her statement, the "Korean Wave is enabling mutual communication in East Asia," and in her high confidence in the ability of "ordinary Asian people" to communicate with each other through the Korean Wave.

In contrast, Lee Dong Yeun, who declared that "the Korean Wave is simply another form of B-class culture created by colonial modernity and its derivative culture," recently presented a paper entitled "Korean cultural capital's phenomenon and cultural nationalism" in the Marxist journal *Munhwa gwahak* (Culture/Science) (Lee 2005, 154-175). In this article, he identifies many ominous traces of cultural nationalism within the phenomenon of the Korean Wave. He concludes his article by warning, "If the Korean Wave continues to surge, reflecting the diplomatic relations that supports a capitalist logic rather than a strengthening of the communicative power of civil society to provide the possibility of diversifying the cultural tastes of the masses, then it will have to put up a hard fight against China's ethnocentrism and Japan's malleable nationalism."

The discussions of the Korean Wave that emerged in the early millennium were so hot that they did and continue to affect the whole country. Overall, market-oriented vocabularies became more and more prominent as the economic possibilities of the Korean Wave were eagerly calculated. At present, it is difficult to invoke strong criticism against the Korean Wave, which is heralded as "the drum of victory." Struggling to interpret a constantly changing reality, the cultural nationalist, neoliberal, and postcolonialist camps are redrawing the discursive terrain of the Korean Wave, sometimes clashing, sometimes engaging each other in "strategic compromises." The initial diverse discourses surrounding the Korean Wave in some respects congealed and merged in their concentration on economic growth. This fact is itself indicative of larger problems at work in Korea, especially neoliberal turn that has been taken since the IMF crisis. However, I think it is possible to attend to the logic of capital at work in the Korean Wave while still holding out for other stories that can be told about the dissemination of and response to this new cultural phenomenon.

**Constant Learning about the Self and Society:  
Globalization, (Post) Modernity, (Post) Coloniality, Neoliberalism and “Asia”**

Within the rapidly swirling whirlpool of which we are all a part, our lived realities are radically different. The world is moving so rapidly and in such a complex manner that we have almost given up any attempt to analyze it comprehensively. However, as is apparent in the diverse discussions presented above, the real learning has just begun.

When we sort the different stories above, several things become clear. First, it is worth considering the way that nationalist fever helped coin the term “Korean Wave” in the first place. One story says that the term Korean Wave was created when a record company put it on the cover of a Korean pop record jacket. Another story insists that it was a term the Korean government attached to promotional copies of Korean records (Paik 2005, 179). However, the term “Korean Wave” would seem to have first appeared in 1999 when a Chinese newspaper used it in an article about a H.O.T. concert in Beijing. Some Chinese informants told me that the word has a cynical nuance since the word also sounds like “cold wave.”

When it was introduced to South Korea, however, it caught the imagination of the Korean media, causing them to believe that the wind of Korean culture was blowing through the entire Asian region. To the people of “a marginal country,” who had for so long lived under the oppressive culture of other countries, the news that their own culture was influencing other countries’ cultures could have been nothing other than amazing and wonderful. The statement, “We’ve never had this experience of seeing our culture spread outside our country. I’m very proud but also very cautious,” captures well the sentiment of Korean people who first heard the news.

After all, the Korean Wave is not an incident centered in South Korea but part of the phenomenon of capitalism’s rise in Asia. As Lee Dong Yeun, Paik Won Dam and Kim Hyun Mee and others have indicated above, the Korean Wave was a pop culture spectacle that appeared as part of the process of global capitalism. Accordingly, an understanding of the Korean Wave, or the production and circulation of Korean popular culture, has to start from a look at the political economy. The circulation of popular culture within Asia started with the development of media technology, particularly in the 1990s. Iwabuchi (2002, 152) has emphasized the development of communication technologies in the advent of giant transnational media corporations such as News Corp, Sony, and Disney having facilitated the simultaneous circulation of media images and texts on a global level. Since the 1990s, media interactions between East Asian societies have increased through the global capital of the media industry.

In other words, the media technology revolution and global capitalism have prepared the system for the manufacture of cultural products and circulation within Asia. During that process, for South Korea to become an exporter nation after having been a cultural importer was akin to it becoming a producer of Nike shoes after having simply been its manufacturer. At present, with the Nike factories that opened in the 1980s in Korea having fled to Southeast Asia, Korean drama producers are planning the release of different products and preparing a system for their circulation. The industry that began in 1993 with the export of the trendy drama *Jiltu* (Jealousy) to Fukuoka, Japan, reached the stage of exporting the hugely popular *Winter Sonata* within a decade. The popular culture industry that was established in the late 1990s, especially through the efforts of entrepreneurs who were looking for an escape from the IMF financial crisis, is at present reaching its zenith through the export of diverse products.

Of course, these products are, as Lee Dong Yeun and Paik Won Dam point out, copies. The Korean ballads were imitations of Western music while most of the Korean dramas were clearly copied in many aspects from those of the Americans and Japanese.<sup>2</sup> In a way, the South Korean cultural industry succeeded in creating their version of the products through quickly copying Western blockbuster films and Japan's comedies and dramas. However, in the global modernization process, most subcontractors eventually make their own brands. Modernity is a history of imitation, and one should not deny or underestimate the power of "copying."

Within a "turbo capitalism" society that raced forward without the space to engage in cultural reflection, popular culture started easily dominating everyday life. In other words, the more a society becomes accustomed to pursuing the new rather than guarding the old, the easier it is to "massify" it. As Seo Hyeon-cheol indicated above, Korean dance music was created through a massification process. The dramas and dance music that was made this way is now captivating Chinese women and teenagers who are becoming part of a "turbo capitalist" country at an even faster pace than South Koreans did. In contrast to viewers in Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, and Japan, who feel a sense of identification as fellow "urban, global, and middle-class" citizens in viewing the "sophisticated and individualistic Korean stars," teenagers in countries like China, Thailand, and Vietnam are enthusiastically consuming the images and messages offered

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2 Lee Dong-hoo (2004, 270-271) who did comparative research of Korean and Japanese dramas, argued that the drama *Jiltu* (Jealousy), which was extremely popular in 1992 in Korea and which signaled a turning point in Korean drama production, shared a very similar storyline and cinematography with the Japanese drama *Tokyo Love Story*, which was made in 1991. Both dramas portray young lovers with urban and cosmopolitan life styles. The sit-com, *Three Men and Three Women* (1996) is heavily influenced, if not a copy of, *Friends* (made in the United States), while *Old Miss Diary* or *My Name is Kim Sam-sun* shares similar plots and expressions with *Sex and the City* (made in the United States).

through Korean-style block-busters and soap operas with the desire to enter into that class.

After all, the crucial issues here are those of global capitalism and class. As Kim Hyun Mee emphasizes, the Korean Wave is a product of the consumer desires of Asia's rapidly emerging middle-class, which is "eager to transform their (and their parents') economic capital into cultural capital using notions of 'individuality' and 'distinction' in order to construct their identities" (Kim Hyun Mi 2001). Korea's dance music and the dazzling images of the drama heroines became the medium for the transformation of capitalist Asia. In a way, the Korean entertainment industries have contributed greatly to form a new subjectivity for a rapidly changing Asia, especially by defining "Asian femininity."<sup>3</sup> As the United States has circulated capitalistic desire through Hollywood movies and popular dramas since the mid-1950s, the Korean culture industry is accomplishing the same with neighboring Asian countries. Korean pop culture is gaining popularity in fact, not only in Asia but outside as well.<sup>4</sup> More accurately, it appeals to a certain global middle and lower middle-class by presenting upscale hyper-modern lifestyles. In a way, the Korean Wave plays a significant role in accelerating the transformation of global residents into neoliberal subjects in an era where all types of communities are being disintegrated and atomized.

However, the diverse images and texts circulating within the region known as "Asia" are causing unexpected ripple effects. The final topic that I would like to emphasize is this aspect of postcoloniality, a conjuncture and disjuncture of people and culture (Appadurai 1990). Within the international context, the existence of an Asian middle-class audience that was either antagonistic towards or bored with Western cultural hegemony played a significant role in promoting the Korean Wave. Even though the world looks as if it is heading towards homogenization under American rule, in fact, the trend towards regionalization is gathering force. Although they are similar to American products, the products that have recently been called the Korean Wave are said to possess the distinction of evoking a sense of familiarity among people in Asia.

What is significant about cultural proximity is not the sum of shared values, but rather "the dynamic process of feeling 'real time' resonance in other non-western modernities while simultaneously recognizing difference" (Iwabuchi 2001, 73). The

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3 One has often heard the criticism that Korean dramas are creating a hyper-consumeristic culture and promoting plastic surgery. Observing Chinese teenagers becoming addicted to Korean on-line games, the Chinese newspaper *Guangming Daily* recently called Korean on-line games "electronic heroin" (Paik 2005, 8).

4 The *Times* (November 14, 2005) reports about Korean pop culture under the title of "Reinventing Korea." The *South China Morning Post* has a report on the worldwide popularity of Korean pop culture with the headline, "It's Seoul Cool in America" (October 31, 2005).

circulation of popular culture is narrowing the geographical, social, and psychological distance between Asians by providing many topics for conversations, stimulating tourism, and providing opportunity for diverse meetings.<sup>5</sup> The non-Western people who have so far confirmed their existence only through the West are finding new opportunities to construct an alternate consciousness through the sharing of popular culture.

The importance of encountering and “discovering” neighbors (and selves), who have so long existed as “the other,” cannot be underestimated in the discourse of post-colonial history of Asia. Mandy Thomas, an anthropologist who works primarily in Vietnam, observed that East Asia is “no longer seen as politically and socially different from Vietnam, as popular culture is being shared throughout the region” (Iwabuchi et al 2004, 181). In other words, the trend through which people in Asian countries are forming new groups, discovering new selves, and are constructing a new “contact zone” is becoming stronger. In fact, there is an abundance of research confirming that middle-class women in the Asian region are engaging in historical reflection through watching dramas (Iwabuchi 2002, 121-157, 2004, 165; Kim Hyun Mee 2003; Kim E. 2005).

Many cultural researchers trivialize the effects of TV dramas, and view them as something viewed only by bored housewives. There are also many Westerners, especially American academics, who view the consumption of Korean dramas as being no different than consumption of American soap operas. However, the position that popular culture occupies in South Korea, Asia, or some other part of the world is different. The popular media has become a powerful voice influencing and disseminating public opinion. Because of this, television and dramas are not the trivial pursuits of people without power, but rather, represent a popular genre that plays a key role in the construction of public opinion.

In the similar manner, the discussion about an “Asian bloc” also has room to be freshly interpreted. There is a tendency within Western academia to easily dismiss stories about Asian solidarity as another form of nationalism. However, cultural exchanges within Asia are not just the exchanges occurring at the level of the state. They are shared by people who have experienced the contemporaneous changes brought about by colonial modernity and who are seeking to solve its “problems.” In the

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5 Yukiko Sato (43) immigrated to Los Angeles from Japan in her 20s and now works as a hair stylist. Unable to resist the strong suggestions of a customer, Yukiko, who did not consider herself a “drama person,” was persuaded to view a Korean drama *All In*, featuring the star Lee Byung Hyun. Now she has become an ardent fan of Lee and Korean dramas. Going frequently to the Korea Town to rent videos, she became interested in Korean food and she, who could not even eat spicy food, now loves to cook spicy *kimchi* (*gimchi*)stew. She recently purchased a DVD copy machine in order to copy her favorite dramas and give them to her friends. She has plans to visit Korea soon.



American context in which Asians/Asian Americans are racialized and marginalized, for example, Park Jung-sun (2004, 292) finds a construction of an imagined pan-Asian community in which people of Asian backgrounds share common cultural references, feel comfortable and have fun. Of course, the “people” here are not one subject but diverse subjects. They include women, men, youth, the middle-aged, teenagers, gays, and diverse people and communities with diverse desires and dreams.

Is it possible to say the “public realm” is being constructed through the common consumption of popular culture in the place where the public realm has not been yet been constructed? Ordinary fans as well as cultural researchers have begun to engage in postcolonial practices through discussions about alternative forms of cultural production and the strategies of “subversive,” not “submissive,” mimicry. Derrida (2001, 164) suggested that with such multifaceted transformation occurring, “we must not forget that nationalist sovereignty can resist the concentration of power in transnational capitalist power and, at the same time, weaken the very notion of national sovereignty.” I imagine a post-colonial Asia constructed through the flows of popular culture where the term “Korean Wave” will be used together with the “Taiwanese Wave,” “Chinese Wave,” “Vietnamese Wave,” “Malaysian Wave,” etc. I plan to pay more attention to the Korean Wave rather than discarding it, since it provides me/us with new “contact zones” (Pratt 1992) within which to find an interest in my/our neighbors and to reflect upon both them and myself who have been “othered” for so long in modern history.

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