

Korean TV Dramas in Taiwan: With an Emphasis on the Localization Process

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Abstract

The Korean pop culture wave refers to the rapid spread of Korean pop culture throughout Asia in the popularity of Korean dramas, dance music, films, animation and games. Due to the desires of the Korean society carried in the Korean pop culture wave, most research on the theme in Korea has had a tendency to emphasize the universal superiority of Korean culture or the economic effect of the phenomenon based on economism. This paper aims to provide a detailed empirical case on the concrete processes of distribution, circulation, and consumption of Korean pop culture in Taiwan using the specific case of Korean TV dramas. Taiwan has been one of the biggest importer of Korean dramas. The images delivered through the Korean TV dramas have very much influenced the Taiwanese to view contemporary Korean society as a country of modern and urban elegance, and woman-centeredness. This article also stresses that fact that the popularity of the Korean drama can be understood in the context of the specific reprocessing and consumption system in Taiwan to reduce the high economic risk of the business. One way of adapting that has been developed to maximize profits and minimize the risks of the cultural industry is the accompaniment of various localization processes. The localization process sometimes entails the “hybridity” of the Korean drama’s text as well.

Keywords: globalization, Korean pop culture wave, Korean TV dramas, Taiwan, localization, cultural industry, gender, trendy dramas, fans, hybridity

Introduction

The Korean pop culture wave refers to the rapid spread of Korean pop culture throughout Asia in the popularity of Korean dramas, dance music, films, animation and games and fan clubs for Korean stars. It was in 1999 that reports of an emerging “Korean Wave” in China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, and other Asian countries first started to come out. This unprecedented phenomenon grabbed the attention of and stirred an excitement in not only the cultural industry of Korea but also the government and academia.

This excitement may not have been totally unrelated to the psychological constriction that took hold of Korea with the onset of the economic crisis in the late 1990s. The official entry into the IMF management system in 1997 had so deeply shaken up Korea’s belief in the industrial modernization process that there was widespread desire throughout the society to make use of the cultural industry with its high added value to overcome the national crisis. There was also a background of heightened interest of Koreans in the possibilities of culture and information, which reinforced this desire. The “high added value aspect” of the cultural industry and the economic gains to be derived from cultural exports and keeping up state competitiveness were somewhat overestimated.

Due to the desires of the Korean society carried in the Korean pop culture wave, most research on the theme in Korea has had a tendency to emphasize the universal superiority of Korean culture or the economic effect of the phenomenon based on economism. With some exceptions, there was little study of the actual processes behind this pop culture flow in each specific locale (Chun 2002; Lee, Min Ja 2002; Jang 2003; Park 2004; Hirata 2005; Baek 2005).

In fact, the popularity of Korean pop culture in the Asian regions has created a very positive meaning in a postcolonial Asia. Many Asians who have had no contact with Asian cultural products except for a few movies may have images of other Asian societies that are quite different from the actual state of things. This may come from the commonly held idea that Asian countries are culturally and economically not up to standard of the Western world, an idea that comes from not knowing the realities of the different Asian countries. Through Hollywood movies and other cultural icons of the West, Asian countries have deeply internalized the “Western gaze.” Until quite recently, the only

desirable Asian cultural products were taken to be those of the refined Japan, the “exception” of Asia, and there were neither “cultural imaginations” pertaining to other Asian countries nor recognition of any such need. Considering the environment of Asian cultural consumption during the past decades, the rapidly growing cultural exchange and popular culture flow in Asia today seems extraordinarily promising and could even be seen as a current that is allowing diverse perceptions of different Asian cultures to be generated through images. The Korean Wave is a part of the inter-Asian pop culture flow.

One way to mutually contextualize the cultural exchange between Korea and other Asian countries is to interpret through specific and empirical research the ways in which cultural contents produced within Korea are consumed and experienced differently within each country. This paper aims to provide a specific and detailed research of the emergence of Korean popular culture as a new cultural resource in Taiwan where previously the popular cultures of America and Japan held sway. Based on my field research in Taipei in 2002 and literature research on recent news clippings and web pages, I try to trace the concrete processes of distribution, circulation, and consumption of Korean popular culture in Taiwan using the specific case of Korean TV dramas.

Taiwan was the biggest importer of Korean dramas until 2003. In this paper, I will discuss how Korean popular culture, represented here by TV dramas, is received in Taiwan, from both “historical” and “localization” perspectives. The cultural industry of the twenty-first century creates new structures of desire by producing images, fantasies, and imaginations, which the general capitalist system then incorporates into itself. However, these cultural images, fantasies, and imaginations are formed differently depending on location, technology, and characteristics of cultural consumption. Also, when cultures of different “symbolic structures” cross national boundaries, they are influenced by historically accumulated images that each nation holds of one another. The images delivered through the Korean TV dramas have very much influenced the Taiwanese to view contemporary Korean society in a specific way, but the dramas themselves are altered once they are imported into Taiwan, for the localization process accompanies with it an endless translation of “culture.”

There are a variety of ways in which the original episodes of the Korean TV dramas are transformed within the symbolic system of Taiwan’s culture. By delineating the process of distribution, circulation, modification, and interpretation of the Korean TV

dramas in Taiwan, I wish to portray the historical specificity of the recent emergence of the inter-Asian flow of popular culture.

The History and Present State of Korean Dramas in Taiwan

The leading force of the Korean Wave is generally considered to have been TV dramas. The export rate of TV dramas rose significantly after the year 2000.¹ According to statistics from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in 2001, South Korea exported to other countries of Asia US\$12,356,000 worth of broadcast programs. Of these, 20.1% went to Taiwan.² This figure is high compared with the 20.1% that went to China, 9.7% to Japan, 9.4% to Hong Kong, 7.9% to Singapore, and 2.8% to Vietnam. Of the total exported broadcast programs, US\$7,945,000 worth, or 64.3%, were TV dramas consisting of 9,515 programs. Even though the share of dramas among total broadcast exports was high, the price at which they were sold was cheap, at an average of only US\$840 per program in 2001, a slight increase from US\$600 in 2000. But in 2004, due to the high popularity of Korean dramas and stars in Japan and other Asian countries, the average price per program of drama rose as high as US\$4,046. Since 2003, Taiwan's import rate of Korean dramas has dropped due to its overabundance and the cultural fatigue people are feeling from watching so much of it.

In Taiwan, the cable channel GTV, which was established in 2000, specialized in presenting Korean TV dramas. With the sudden popularity of such Korean programming, Videoland, which had until then specialized in Japanese dramas, began importing and broadcasting Korean dramas as well. Other Taiwanese TV stations such as FTV, CTV, Power TV, E-Phil, have also begun airing them. GTV is particularly famous for making its "place" as a cable TV channel, and currently two-fifths of its dramas are Korean. The popularity of Korean dramas can be once again confirmed by how easily they are found in popular video rental stores in VHS and DVD formats.

Analyses of the sudden rise in demand for Korean TV dramas in Asia generally point to the substance and technique of the dramas and the appeal of the actors, namely that the plotline and structure of the dramas are refreshing and dynamic, the subject matter is familiar and close to everyday life, the production skills such as set design, musical score, and camerawork are outstanding, and the actors are physically attractive,

strikingly individual, fashionable, and have strong acting ability (Shin 2002). It is also often noted that the popularity of Korean TV dramas in Asia owes much to the familiarity of Confucian-based values, such as family-orientedness, respect for the elderly, preference for sons, and the unique relationship between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law. The cultural proximity has been stressed as one of the important factors explaining the popularity of the Korean drama (Park 2004).

On the other hand, there are claims that the phenomenon has more to do with the economic, cultural, and political phase that each receiving country is undergoing. That is, when a country reaches a certain level of quality of life through continuous economic growth, but does not yet have a compatible “alternative” culture, Korean popular culture may fill in the void, one such example being the “Korean Wave” in China (Shin 2002, 18; Lee M. 2002).

Most important is analyzing the process in which “meaning” is created when cultural texts are circulated across borders and received in specific regions. For this, it is necessary to look through the historical process in which Korean TV dramas have been consumed in Taiwan. According to most accounts, the first Korean dramas in Taiwan were shown in 1997. Ms. Pao, who has been importing and distributing Korean dramas since 1997, says that the P Broadcasting Station, which airs programs related to the local cultures of Taiwan, started showing *Jang Noksu* and *Little Lady (Assi* in Korean) but quickly canceled them due to extremely low ratings. In those days, no one had any deep knowledge of Korean dramas and no one knew much about the modern lifestyle of Korea either, so only old history dramas were imported. The history drama *Jang Huibin* managed to attract a small following due for the most part to the nostalgic emotions evoked in the Taiwanese viewers thinking that the Korean royal life portrayed in the drama was a remnant of the lost “traditions” of the Chinese culture. In fact, this is also why highly educated intellectuals, who would normally disregard TV, watched this drama. According to Ms. Pao, a history professor once said, “Korea emulated the imperial culture of China, so I watch this drama to learn what China might have been like 300 years ago.”

Other dramas that were later imported, such as *Full River (Man-gang* in Korean), were deemed too slow and ended abruptly with no satisfactory conclusions. A belief came to be formed that Korean dramas were deficient in technical and storytelling skills.

Dramas that came in afterwards such as *The Widow* (Mimang in Korean) and others mostly portrayed the past, usually the Korean War, and therefore created the impression among the Taiwanese that Korea is poor and ruled by ideas of “male superiority.” The numerous scenes of men violently assaulting women or neglecting them gave the impression that the underdeveloped material life in Korea was directly connected to underdeveloped mentality.

Later, Zenith Satellite Studios imported the dramas *Young Cops* and *Mr. Q* that starred the Korean actress Kim Hee Sun, who at the time was causing a ripple of interest with her supposed scandals with the Chinese actor Leon Lai. These dramas, however, failed to win over a large audience. Lee Ji Gun of Insrea Productions, which holds all distribution and importing rights of KBS dramas, began importing Korean dramas because he was familiar with the “developed” reality of Korea. But it was not until 1999 that Korean dramas were considered products worthwhile to import, and broadcasting stations even demanded fees for the time allotted to “hying up” Korean dramas.

From “Poverty” and “Male-Centrism” to “New Woman-Centrism” and “Plastic Beauties”

The consumption of Korean dramas in Taiwan was, until the importation of the “trendy” serial dramas, building up images in the Taiwanese people’s minds of Korea as a country ruled by political unrest and male-centrism. This kind of limited understanding existed despite the close geography and continuous crossing over of people and goods between the two countries. Unlike the United States and Japan, Korea was perceived by Taiwan as having no cultural images worth emulating and this perception was deepened by the IMF crisis. Despite the Olympics held in Seoul in 1988, the dominant image of Korea was filled with roughness, violent tendencies, and lack of material and cultural refinement.

But the images of Korean society took a sharp turn with the trendy TV dramas, which appeared in the early 1990’s in Korea and were exported to Taiwan beginning in 1999. Lee (2003) defines Korean trendy dramas as an imported genre from Japan, classified by the Korean media as TV dramas “satisfying the tastes of the video generation,” “relying on the stars of the new generation,” “sensitive and light-hearted,” “emphasizing visual imagery,” “with fast tempo and cheerful background music,” and “following the latest fashion.” In Korea, the creation of trendy dramas was geared toward

satisfying the cultural taste of the “new generation” who came to dictate the consumer patterns in the 1990s. In other words, the trendy dramas were a cultural product that came out of the rapid spread of consumer culture worldwide. The trendy Korean dramas in their mini-series forms were imported by Taiwanese TV broadcasting stations that had to eradicate the previous images of the Korean dramas and construct a new “viewing desire” for the Taiwanese audience. Taiwan’s GTV launched a full-scale promotion of these dramas and succeeded in reconstructing an audience group.

Because past audiences had had a stereotype of Korean TV dramas as being of low quality and sensationalist, GTV had to start anew in building up their image and audience. Using promotional methods borrowed from Japanese TV dramas, securing regular media coverage, and inviting the Korean stars of the new TV dramas to visit Taiwan, GTV has generated the recent popularity of Korean serial dramas (Sinorama, June 2001).

The TV drama *Sparks* (*Bulkkot* in Korean), shown since October of 2000 by the cable TV station GTV, illustrates how the popular image of Korea can be constructed by Taiwanese viewers in their process of consuming the cultural text. *Sparks*, which rocketed Cha In Pyo and Lee Young Ae to the ranks of “national stars,” was the main contributing force that changed the image of Korea as a traditional and authoritarian country, as established by earlier imported Korean cultural products.³ This drama is said to have been launched under the tag line of “love amiss of four men and women who struggle to attain true love,” with the producer’s intention of showing the true meaning of love. But what was new about this drama was that it featured a one night stand between the two main characters while they were traveling, ultimately leading to a happy resolution, which raised the issue of sexual intimacy, a rare subject in Korean dramas.

Following is a brief summary of the storyline of *Sparks*: A TV drama writer, the pure, passionate, and delicate female lead played by Lee Young Ae, catches the eye of a rich heir and son of a conglomerate owner, the male lead played by Cha In Pyo, who pursues her one-sidedly and marries her. Objectively, the Cha In Pyo character is near perfect, but he is far from the love that the Lee Yeong Ae character dreams of. Right before getting married, during a trip to Thailand, Lee runs into a sensitive, soft-mannered, and down-to-earth plastic surgeon played by Lee Gyoung Young, and “a flame is set” in both of their hearts. But after the trip, they go their separate ways, with Lee marrying Cha and the surgeon marrying a female doctor friend who actively pursues him. Even after

getting married, the two struggle with their longing for one another. Ultimately, they each divorce and reunite. The drama grabbed the attention of the Taiwanese audience because it portrayed “extramarital affairs,” a sensitive social issue in Taiwan but never directly portrayed in Taiwanese dramas. Also, because the conclusion to this drama was not the usual “woman returning home and getting due punishment” scenario, it was considered as advocating the “new woman-centrism” of Korean society. Rather than appealing to the young generation, this drama gained popularity among adult Taiwanese women, for it addressed the issues of desire and intimacy of married women in their 30s and 40s.

Riding the waves of success created by *Sparks*, *Endless Love* (known as *Ga-eul donghwa* in Korean), which paved the way for Korean idol dramas, gained such a large following that even the soundtrack and adapted novel became incredibly popular. Following this, other trendy dramas, which had been hurriedly imported, all had the common element of a romantic love story between young professional women and men who exuded urban sophistication. The Korean dramas currently being distributed throughout Taiwan are mostly love-themed trendy dramas, and therefore the image of “gender” has become an important icon in representing the characteristics of contemporary Korean society. These dramas consistently portray “financially stable and good-looking men” showing unconditional “devotion” to one woman. This new image of gender has been interpreted as a sign that Korean society has transformed itself from a male-centric society to a new woman-centric one.

Compared to the Taiwanese dramas that deal not only with romance but other problems of life as well, such as financial difficulties, the trendy dramas of Korea, which invariably place romance and love at their center, are understood as reflecting the desires of women, thus the conclusion of a new woman-centrism in Korea. However, the new woman-centrism found in the Korean TV dramas is based on the archetypal gender model of patriarchal fantasy and is to be distinguished from feminist texts that delineate gender struggles as part of a complex web of human relations and provide diverse ways of thinking about them. In spite of the plotlines that are obviously targeted at tear-jerking built around “the unrealistically blind devotion of men toward women,” the Korean dramas are getting the audience to participate in the stories and the participants are fishing out selected parts from the dramas, creating meaning through empathy.

The Korean shows appeal most to viewers who already have their own share of life experiences, enabling them to watch what might be their own stories, retold onscreen before them, rendered beautiful and poetic, with all of life's wild storms, dreams, and regrets (Sinorama 2001).⁴

As indicated by Martinez (1998), owing to the capacity of the consumers to consume cultural products differently, pop culture is a space of negotiation where tradition, the present, future, national identity, gender identity, class identity and so forth are reflected, coerced, disintegrated, and created or recreated. **In this sense, the consumer pattern of Korean trendy dramas in Taiwan lends insight into the pleasurable experiences of the most unrealistic modern love myths had by Taiwanese women, married women in particular, removed from the all too real actualities, such as jobs, housework, and financial hardship.** Sure, *Endless Love* is a cultural text that, for the same reasons as above, is in high demand in Korea as well, but in Korea, such texts are not read as a symbol of a new woman-centrism. These dramas have a melodramatic aesthetics that expands their emotional impact through “excess” (Hollows 2000), but the “fantasy” of Korean men who situate themselves as the “savior of women” remains the main impetus of their production. Nevertheless, if past Korean dramas were structured from the viewpoint of the main male character, the recent trendy dramas can be said to have maximized the romantic aesthetics by emphasizing women's perspective and narrative.

The images formerly provided by imported Korean dramas and the Taiwanese's fixed perceptions of Korea as an “impoverished country” have been replaced by images represented by the recent trendy dramas, furnishing the satisfaction of “material brilliance” and “simultaneity of desires” to match the capitalist economic development of both countries. It was against this background that Korean dramas suddenly began to gain great popularity in Taiwan. The modern and urban elegance portrayed in these trendy Korean dramas made the Taiwanese realize that Korea had all of the same qualities of a capitalist consumer society as Taiwan, validating the covalence of Korea and Taiwan, the foundation for cultural exchange.

But while emphasizing the new woman-centrism and urban sophistication of the trendy dramas, the Taiwanese media are also highlighting the “plastic beauty” of Korean stars. The corporations that import Korean dramas and broadcasting systems agree that one of the biggest strengths of Korean dramas is the beauty of the young actors as well as their excellent acting abilities. Korean dramas are recognized for the dazzling capitalist

materialism they portray. The environment in which the love stories of these dramas take place, with their breathtaking scenery, luxurious houses, chic outfits, and fabulous professions, operate to homogenize all class differences and social relationships in Korean society and create an unreal entity of urban spectacle. That what is shown on TV could not possibly be “real” but is a momentary and “artificial” representation of Korean society is further evoked by the Taiwanese media, which repeatedly emphasizes the idea that the Korean actresses are “artificial beauties” and that their appearances are not “true natural born.” For example, a magazine outlining the makeup how-to’s of popular Korean actresses Kim So Yeon, Lee Young Ae, Chae Lim, and Kim Hee Sun described the differences between Japanese, Taiwanese, and Korean makeup styles. Dark eyeliner and thick eyelashes define the sharp characteristics of Korean makeup. Korean actresses are considered more beautiful compared to their Taiwanese counterparts who appear on TV with “overly natural appearances,” but the Korean actresses are also said to look too much like artificial beauties. “Plastic beauties” was the key word that differentiated Korean stars from Japanese or Taiwanese stars. Whereas the mystical and sophisticated look of Japanese stars was described as “performative” and the look of Taiwanese stars as “natural,” the appearance of Korean actresses was differentiated as reconstructed through plastic surgery.

About the growing phenomenon of young women of China and Taiwan trying to replicate for themselves the looks of Korean actresses such as Kim Hee Sun, there is a clear difference between the political stances taken by the Korean and the Taiwanese and Chinese media. While the Korean media is stressing that the popularity of Korean stars is generating a group of young adults who want to imitate them, using it as an example of the influence of the Korean Wave, the Chinese and Taiwanese media are criticizing Korean actresses as the foremost symbol of capitalist materialism who are commercializing themselves by undergoing complete, surgical transformation. This also implies that the glamour and beauty of Korean society represented by the trendy dramas are actually urban fabrications of weak foundation.

Contrast between Japanese and Korean Dramas

One of the reasons behind the increased popularity of Korean dramas in Taiwan is that the Korean dramas were dubbed in the Min Nam dialect, the language of southern

Taiwan, so that people living in the provinces and with low incomes could understand them, in contrast to Japanese dramas, which are captions-only. The low income and low educated people of southern Taiwan were able to become important viewers of Korean dramas. That Korean dramas are highly popular and receiving high ratings in Taiwan should be viewed in a positive light in that the Taiwanese people are able to form more contemporary images about Korea. The sudden ascension of Korean dramas has also met resistance from Taiwan's "low capital" entertainment industry.⁵ However, Korean dramas do not monopolize TV viewing in Taiwan. Many of the recently imported Korean dramas have received less than a 1% viewing rate, whereas some of big hits such as *Jewel in the Palace (Dae Janggeum)* and *Lover in Paris (Pari-ui yeonin)* maintain a Taiwanese fan base. In the case of Japanese dramas, there are 10 channels that air them, with one channel exclusively devoted to these shows. In addition, there are around 100 channels broadcasting dramas from Hong Kong, China, and Singapore, which are also immensely popular. At present, American TV series such as *CSI*, *Sex and the City*, and *Friends* have been very popular, leading to high demand for their DVDs among Taiwanese viewers.

Also, the variety of genres among Korean dramas is not especially wide, most being love-themed mini-series. These types of dramas are likely to be well received by Taiwanese viewers who are accustomed to similar trendy Japanese dramas. These Japanese dramas have had a steady audience since Taiwan repealed its law prohibiting the broadcasting of Japanese dramas in November of 1993. The beautiful and fantastic urban settings and the solid storylines of Japanese "trendy dramas" have attracted Taiwanese teenagers to Japanese fashion and music and created a Japanese sightseeing boom. However, as the popularity of trendy dramas began to decline in Japan and the price of individual shows rose, Taiwanese viewers needed a new cultural substitute. The trendy Korean dramas starring handsome and beautiful actors and actresses were relatively cheap and able to fill the void of Japanese dramas with rival romantic images.

The people I met in Taiwan made some distinctions between Korean and Japanese dramas. Japanese dramas are usually composed of 12 parts, and the stories are complicated, compressed, and deliver abstract messages. In contrast, Korean dramas unravel a simple love story between men and women. Although the stories are sometimes unrealistic, such as with sudden deaths caused by car accidents or leukemia, Korean

dramas do not demand from its audience a high level of complicated “thought.” Therefore, Korean dramas are able to approach viewers in a friendlier manner. However, though the simple love stories of Korean dramas have contributed to mass distribution and consumption, there is a limit as to how much they can pull the audiences in as active participants. A major factor contributing to the general perception of Japanese dramas as “cultural text” is the public forums in newspapers and on the Internet, which analyze and rate Japanese dramas. Taiwan’s *China Times* publishes viewers’ opinions along with columns about Japanese dramas every Sunday, and since the advent of the Internet, online chat rooms discussing Japanese dramas have been appearing in rapid succession. However, it is difficult to find any public forum discussing the “texts” of Korean dramas. All reactions to the Korean dramas are centered on the stars, not the text. If Japanese dramas have connected the realities of the young Taiwanese to the complicated human relationships portrayed therein and functioned as an interactive text, Korean dramas, with their simple love stories, are gaining mass popularity but lacking in lasting “reverb.”

Also, the simplistic quality of Korean dramas reduces their ability to weave the effects of “fantasy” and “imitation” that cultural images are supposed to be able to produce. Korean stars are seen not as “charismatic” but as “amiable,” and it is for this very reason that people perceive them as objects to consume rather than to fantasize about and imitate. Vivian Hsieh, of Videoland Broadcasting Station, which began showing Korean dramas after handling only Japanese dramas, says, “What is strange is after Japanese dramas began gaining popularity, Japanese clothes, fashion, and styles also became popular. However, in Korea’s case, even after Korean dramas became popular, the fashion and styles of stars have yet to gain any prominence.” This implies that images of Japanese stars and culture are still perceived as high quality, unique, and more desirable.

As a shortcut answer to the question of how to promote Korean TV dramas, Taiwanese importers, along with their Korean counterparts, put an excessive emphasis on the stars and love themes. However, due to cultural fatigue over the theme of tragic romance, which was the main theme of Korean dramas, the trend has changed among Taiwanese viewers, who now prefer stories that centers on romance with a comic touch and cheerful, happy endings. Reflecting this change of taste, the Korean drama *Full House* has received the highest viewing rates out of all imported Korean dramas

(www.lkoface.com). Since the popularity of Korean dramas depends heavily on just a handful of stars, the number of hand-carrying merchants traveling to Korea to find the early works of famous stars is increasing; this has led to serious price competition. One Korean station manager said he sees one to two hand-carrying merchants everyday. Such choosing and buying of star-centered dramas means that the wide range of cultural diversity of a country is “simplified” into one kind of cultural representation. Despite the popularity of Korean dramas at the moment, the reason behind the falling viewing rates among all channels of every broadcasting station lies in the extreme competition among importers. More and more hand-carrying merchants are bringing in copies of TV dramas with popular Korean stars, even from their early days, through individual sources.

Moreover, seeing the actors before they became stars through these early works weakens the sense of “wonderment” that viewers feel.

The ‘Simultaneous’ Asian Culture Consumer Era and the Localization Process

The sudden influx of Korean TV dramas in Taiwan and its origins can be also found in economics. At first, Korean exporters of Korean dramas from the broadcasting companies lowered their prices to get their shows into the overseas market. This made for low costs and high profit margins for Taiwanese television stations. However, as Korean TV serial dramas became popular, their price competition over Korean dramas has become severe, leading to a decrease in quality and an increase in prices. The impetuous actions of Korean broadcasting stations, which suddenly raised the prices of their dramas by 100-500 %, constituted serious problems that media people whom I have interviewed unanimously pointed out.

In order to deal with unpredictable low profit margins, Taiwanese TV stations, which are normally small or medium sized companies with low budgets, tend to develop diverse strategies to maximize profits. It is not a necessarily uniquely Taiwanese mode. It is also related in a larger context with the emerging conditions of the coexistence of rapid technological advancement and the pre-modern distribution systems characteristic of

Asian cultural circulation. Movies, dramas, music, games, and music videos have been illegally copied and hand-carried between Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and other Asian countries in line with the proliferation of personal computers. The reason behind the widespread expansion of Korean pop culture fans throughout Asia is also related to the fact that people can now experience the latest Korean culture instantaneously through the Internet.

In the West, the globalization of cultural products was accomplished through license agreements, official distribution routes, intellectual property laws, and other legal devices. In Asia, the recent local Asian culture flows between China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Korea are due to the rapid expansion of globalized media such as cable TV, satellite, and the Internet. In order to fill out airtime, more than 124 cable TV stations in Taiwan need to import foreign programs at cheap prices. In many cases, “Asian products” are perceived as easy to replicate, and cheap to be imported. It is within this distinct characteristic of the globalized media system that we must address the Korean Wave and gain a clear understanding of the economic added value benefits of the cultural industry. The distribution and consumption of popular culture within Asia where illegal copying is a natural pattern renders culture a high-risk industry of which the economic return is difficult to assess.

Many local agents that import Asian pop culture are developing various ways of adapting to the ever-changing tactics. One way of adapting that has been developed to maximize profits and minimize the risks of the cultural industry is the accompaniment of various localization processes. The “one source, multiple uses” strategy, which was originally adopted from the Japanese pop culture industry, aims to maximize profits by organically linking diverse multimedia cultural products. In the case of TV dramas, depending on the level of demand, the profit can be maximized by making various added value products and obtaining the selling rights to them. For example, when a Korean drama becomes popular, “novels” are made based on the drama and picture books composed of signature scenes and photos of actors and actresses are made and sold with VCDs. This type of strategy contributes to the development of fans who are not ‘temporary,’ but enthusiastic and loyal, by providing them with a series of experiences that continually create and satisfy the consumers’ cultural curiosity

Broadcasting stations and production companies in Taiwan and Korea are

beginning to recognize the possibility of developing complex cultural by-products and are leading the way for what is called in Korea the “New Korean Wave.” The “New Korean Wave” refers to the trend of repackaging a popular cultural product in order to make profit in related industrial areas such as tourism, shopping, and fashion. It is a pop culture boom that is a “planned boom” to take place not in foreign countries but in the country of origin, Korea, including events such as visits to concerts of Korean singers, visits to drama sets, and arranged meetings of Korean actors and their fan clubs (JEON, 2002:73-74). Here, a TV drama is considered a “product to be processed” and taken out of the cultural text into other related industries to be reprocessed into “products” of various other forms. For instance, the top ranking dramas in Taiwan such as *Endless Love* and its sequel, *A Winter Love Song* (Kyoul Yeonga in Korean) are taken through a series of remanufacturing procedures. Lin Chun Shwi's book *Endless Love Voyage*, which is a spin-off from the drama *Endless Love*, is a travel book carefully detailing the settings of important conversations in the drama as well as the homes and workplaces of the main characters and locations of kissing and fighting scenes. Such was the popularity of *Endless Love* that “Live the Drama” sightseeing tours to Korea's Sokcho Aba-I Village, Dae-gwan-ryong Farm, and Pheonix Park of Gangwon province, where romantic scenes were shot in *Endless Love*, created a huge boom in Taiwan. *A Jewel in the Palace* (Daejanggeum in Korean), which gained much popularity in 2004 and 2005, also generated a Taiwanese fan base that is willing to pay money to travel to Korea to eat traditional Korean food and visit the settings of the drama.

The localization process entails the “hybridity” of the drama's text as well. Taiwanese agents import the dramas either by monopoly or free competition and sell them to Taiwanese broadcasting stations, which then add dubbing and sound effects before broadcasting them. Broadcasting systems such as GTV and Videoland that hold the rights to the dramas usually don't show the original episodes as they are. Unlike the dramas from Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and China which are only captioned, Korean dramas are captioned as well as dubbed by Taiwanese voice actors. In order to minimize potential economic risk, a variety of commercial devices are added to the original episodes. The most common way is selling airtime before, in-between, and after the drama to advertising agents and record companies. Taiwanese record companies usually buy the airtime during the opening and ending credits and broadcast the latest singles by

new artists that they are producing. Broadcasting stations also extract the soundtracks from the original Korean dramas and insert Taiwanese songs instead. Since it is possible for cable TV channels in Taiwan to rerun a show 2 times after its initial broadcast and since on weekends all the shows broadcast throughout the week are rerun, selling airtime is one important way to maximize profit.

The awareness of economic risk is apparent in the conflict between Korean broadcasting stations who strive to sell “complete” dramas for higher profits and Taiwanese broadcasting stations and importers who try to import only the dramas without any music or sound effects in order to add local touches and flair later.⁶ This also shows that Korean dramas are not considered “perfect” cultural products and are being distributed throughout Taiwan in a hybrid form that is the Taiwanese adaptation of Korean dramas.

The localization process also includes “misinterpretations” and “intentional rewrites.” The chief import managers of broadcasting stations usually listen to the advice of go-between agents rather than evaluating the merits of the drama based on story, visual imagery, and technical expertise, and end up buying the dramas starring the “best known actors.” Private importers try to minimize translation expenses by hiring Korean students and Chinese immigrants and rarely know anything more about the drama that they’ve imported than the general outline of the story. This holds true for import managers in broadcasting stations as well. Korean dramas also become incorrectly translated and intentionally ad-libbed during the actual dubbing process. According to a person in the dubbing industry that I interviewed, Korean students and Chinese immigrants usually translate the script and the voice actors intentionally change some of it during the dubbing.

When the foreign students deliver the completed translated script, there are phrases that are not used by Taiwanese people. Since there is no time to fix these mistakes, the voice actors usually ad-lib the lines while dubbing. For example, in *SoonPoong Hospital*,⁷ there are lines that are supposed to be funny but fail to be so due to translation problems. In this case, the voice actors insert Taiwanese jokes or suddenly use the Min Nam dialect to create comical lines that will be funny (Chu, Voice Actor)

Cultural texts of genres such as TV dramas are put through the process of local adaptation

and improvisation owing to the choices made by broadcasting stations and importers in the service of minimizing economic risk factors, and as a result, they are reborn as “hybrid cultural products.” But texts that are not so malleable to local “reprocessing,” such as those of certain films, end up failing at being received by the Taiwanese audience. For example, the Korean film “Friends” attracted 8 million people to movie theatres in Korea, but in Taiwan it closed after only three days. This film was hugely popular among contemporary Korean men for its nostalgic restoration of male identity, fallen in the IMF era of the late 1990’s, through images and language of gangsters, violence, and male social bonding. The Taiwanese who saw the movie commented, “We’re clueless as to why this movie is so popular in Korea.” They could not empathize with the camaraderie among the men in the film who all came from one place and shared strong feelings of solidarity and nostalgia. The commercial failure of “Friends” in Taiwan was also partly caused by the translation, which failed to properly convey the cultural uniqueness of the dialect of Kyung Sang Province, well known for its patriarchal conservatism and old boys network. To the Taiwanese moviegoers who are surrounded by the high-tech digitally enhanced action sequences of Hollywood movies and the traditional action flicks of Hong Kong, it was difficult to find “simultaneity” with this film as the “symptomatic text” of Korean men’s anxiety. If TV dramas were a popular genre that contributed to expanding the Korean Wave in Taiwan and other Asian countries, it was not only because of their everyday-ness, romantic fantasy, and simultaneousness, but also because they were an open text that allowed for local reprocessing.

Concluding Remarks

Regardless of its origins, the term “Hallyu” came into wide usage through the Korean mass media and it cannot but be Korean-centered. Even in areas where Korean pop culture enjoys high popularity, it does not have sweeping command and competitive power over all popular cultures of other nationalities. Due to the desires of Korean society that are carried in the Korean pop culture wave, discourses and research on the theme in Korea has had a strong tendency to emphasize the universal superiority of Korean culture or the economic effects of the phenomenon, which are seen through the lens of

economism. When diverse cultures cross borders and meet, it is important to understand the manner in which a specific culture is read and interpreted. An important perspective in analyzing the Korean pop culture is understanding the “relationship” formed between a specific genre of Korean pop culture and its consumers in other regions. In Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, where Korean cultural images to emulate or an envy for the Korean economic model were lacking, the popularity of Korean pop culture had to do with the emergence of a new global consumer group that ‘chooses’ its cultures based on individual preference and orientation, rather than the nationality of said culture. Although Korean cultural products are still designed for limited age groups in substance and form or use hackneyed plots, the local receivers who ‘consume’ them may use them to supplement the particular cultural imagination which that their own society fails to provide. TV dramas, perceived as the most realistic text, were at the forefront of the Korean pop culture wave has to do with the success they have had in entering everyday lives of the viewers and inducing empathy. In Taiwan, the country with the largest importation of Korean dramas from the year 2000, Korea’s national image has undergone a fast transformation thanks to the images recently represented in Korean TV dramas.

The Taiwanese viewers who regarded Korea as an impoverished country or a country of violent tendencies have been turned around to a country of material brilliance and simultaneity of desires. This article also stresses that fact that the popularity of the Korean drama can be understood in the context of the specific reprocessing and consumption system of the Asian cultural industry to reduce the high economic risk of the business.

Notes

¹ Exported Korean TV dramas can be grouped into three categories: those produced by Korean public broadcasting stations such as KBS, MBC, and SBS; those produced by cable stations; and those made by independent producers. Dramas produced by public stations comprise the bulk of exports.

² Of the total exports of popular culture products, 64.3% are dramas, 2.7% documentaries, 19.8% are animations, 3.2% are entertainment shows, 0.7% are music shows and 9.3% fall into other categories. In the case of foreign cultural products imported by Korea, 6.3% are dramas, an extremely small amount, 10.8% are documentaries, 13.8% are animations, 66.3% are movies, 0.2% are entertainment shows, 0.1% are music shows, and 2.5% fall into other categories. Movies are the dominant imported product. (Cited from a

statistical survey by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, <http://www.mct.go.kr>)

³ “In Taiwan, there have been many Korean dramas that ‘pioneered the frontier and irrigated the lands.’ However, it was only after the success of *Sparks* that Korean dramas received any kind of renown.” *Chinese Gazette*, December 15, 2000

⁴ Eric Lin, “Taiwan’s New Must-See TV: Korean TV Dramas,” Sinorama, 2001, cited from http://www.sinorama.com.tw/en/search/show_issue.

⁵ The article, “The Entertainment Labor Union Holds Demonstration on Streets Today: The Invasion of Korean and Japanese Dramas Leave No Breathing Room for Taiwan’s Entertainers,” published in the *Pai Tai* paper on May 5, 2001, is about the efforts to secure labor and life rights by the entertainment labor union by participating in the May 1st Labor Day grand demonstration. This article quotes the words of union chairman Yang Gwang Yo, who argues that Taiwan’s entertainers receive no fixed wages and are not even guaranteed a minimum wage, making them the poorest laborers despite their glamorous appearances on-screen. The article goes on to point out that the popularity of imported dramas makes the situation even worse. “Japanese and Korean dramas feature beautiful actors and actresses and use heartwarming stories and plots to sweep the Taiwanese audience off their feet. This leaves no breathing room for Taiwanese entertainers.”

⁶ A total of 123 programs were exported by broadcasting stations in the year 2000. Among these programs, those sold without music or sound effects numbered 53, or 43.1% of the total. In the year 2001, the percentage reached 61%. In the case of independent producers, the percentage is even higher.

⁷ The most popular Korean TV show in Taiwan in 2001 was the sitcom *Sunpung Obgyn Hospital*. Ms. Pao of Teamworks, the company that holds all representation rights to the show, says, “*Sunpung Hospital* is the first Korean comedy sitcom to be shown in Taiwan, where mostly love-themed dramas are aired.”

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