(Un)making the "Korean" Astro Boy Atom:
National Manhwa, *Korean Pop Art,* and Cultural Hybridity*

KOH Dong-Yeon

Abstract

When the Korean government announced its plan to lift the ban on the circulation of Japanese popular culture in 1998, it immediately articulated its intention to support "genuinely" domestic comic books (called manhwa *in Korean) and animation in Korea. This policy move demonstrated the government's ambivalence toward the influence of Japanese* manga; *at the same time that the government officially encouraged cross-breeding between Japanese and Korean popular cultures and audiences, they became overly protective of Korea's domestic popular culture industry. This paper offers a critical examination of the notion of national culture or national aesthetics by looking at the official policy toward* manhwa *in Korea. In addition, Lee Dong-Gi's and Hyun Tae-Jun's artworks prove to be important alternatives to the notion of an authentic Korean* manhwa *culture. Using theories of the hybridizing process by Arjun Appadurai and Nikos Papastergiadis, I also investigate Lee Dong-Gi's Atomaus, a hybrid of Japanese Astro Boy and Disney's Mickey Mouse, as well as Hyun Tae-Jun's 2007 replicas of classic Japanese animation characters. These characters and artworks show the ambiguous state between original and copy, or national and hybrid cultural products.*

Keywords: nationalism, globalization, cultural hybridity, multiculturalism, Korean pop art, Japanese *manga* and animation, animation studies, contemporary Korean art

KOH Dong-Yeon is currently a lecturer at Korea National University of Arts in Seoul. Dr. Koh's dissertation was published as *Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara: Reframing Male Sexualities in Art and Culture of the 1950s* in 2010. E-mail: dykoh@yahoo.com.

Introduction: Lessons from the 2005 Seoul International Cartoon and Animation Festival (SICAF)

In 2005, the annual Seoul International Cartoon and Animation Festival (SICAF) took place at the opening of the Seoul Animation Center and the House of Cartoons, a space dedicated to year-round exhibitions and events on comic books, called *manhwa* in Korean—and *manga* in Japanese—and the animation industry in Korea.[1] At the 2005 SICAF, there was a special show devoted to heroic figures in Korean history who fought for Korean independence from the Japanese occupation of 1910 to 1945. The year 2005 was the 60th anniversary of Korea's independence from Japan in 1945. The festival was also held on August 15, Korea's Independence Day called Gwangbok-jeol. These historic figures are Yu Gwan-sun, Yun Bong-gil, and An
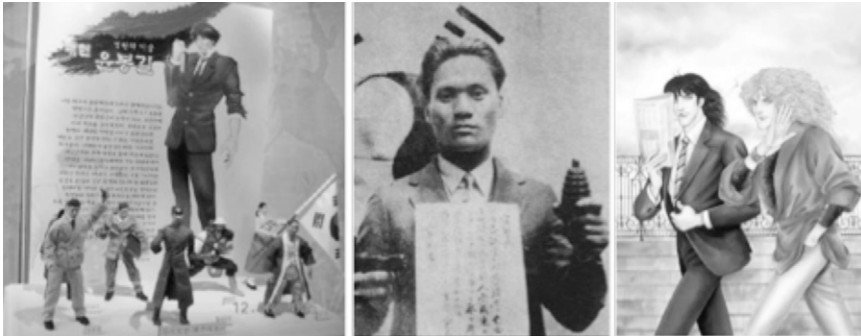

Figure 1. From left to right: An illustration of Yun Bong-gil from SICAF (2005); photograph of Yun Bong-gil; and *Eroica Yori Ai o Komete* エロイカより愛をこめて (From Eroica with Love) (1976)

---

1. The government's support of the domestic industry included the opening of the Seoul Animation Center, the House of Cartoons in Seoul, and the SICAF. The Seoul Animation Center serves as a site for both research and education by recovering some of the important political and social cartoons that had been subjected to censorship under the military dictatorships during the 1970s and 1980s. The SICAF opened in 1995 and attracted more than 300,000 people in its first year, establishing itself as one of the rare occasions for international animation makers and publishers to meet and exchange ideas about the industry.

Jung-geun, most of whom appear in history textbooks in Korea. They were affiliated with the Korean Independence Movement (called *dongnip undong*), either as participants of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea (1919-1948) or as assassins of Japanese colonial officers in Korea.

What is notable about representations of these historic figures is that all of them had westernized and elongated features resembling typical characters in the *Berusaiyu no Bara* ベルサイユのばら (The Rose of Versailles), the popular Japanese *manga* for teenage girls in Korea during the 1980s. The figure of Yun, for instance, wears a purple suit, and has a thin, long face and curly hair, which deviates from the physical appearance of most Korean men. The overly elongated and Caucasian physiognomy of these patriotic figures, as they appeared at SICAF, is important for a number of reasons. First, the physical appearance of the caricatured images defies the typical racial characteristics of East Asian males, including a wide face, flat nose, and hair that is straight and thick. The highly melancholic and moody nature of the depictions also demonstrates the distinct Japanese influence on Korean *manhwa* and animation drawings. Comic books constitute the cultural genre most consistently affected by Japanese artists and industry during the post-Second World War period.[2]

Japanese popular culture is also well known for its hybrid products that combine the characteristics of both Western and traditional Japanese cultures. The postwar Japanese cultural image was either

---

2. According to one statistic, four in five comic books sold in Korea are of Japanese origin (Appadurai 2001, 294). The shift to digitalized forms of *manga* and animation serving a global market during the twenty-first century may have diffused the dominance of Japanese *manga* and animation in Korea. However, Japanese *manga*-style and story lines are often imitated by Korean artists and filmmakers. Most Korean audiences and readers have been exposed to Japanese popular culture for more than 40 years, ever since the first airing of Japanese animation during the early 1970s. Park Chan-wook's movie *Old Boy* is based on a Japanese *manga* of the same name by Nobuaki Minegishi and Garon Tsuchiya, published between 1996 and 1998. The Korean TV drama *Kkot-boda namja* 꽃보다 남자 (Boys over Flowers), which was extremely popular in Korea in 2009, was based on the Japanese *shoujo manga* series of the same name written by Yoko Kamio in 2005.

that of the meaningless scavenger of Western culture or the successful appropriator of Asian and Western cultural and social values. The prominent Japanese economist Saeki Keishi criticizes "Asian modernity" for being characterized by "the greediness to absorb anything universal, irrespective of its origin . . . and to assimilate and hybridize various foreign things with its own 'culture' according to the yardstick of convenience and pleasure" (Iwabuchi 2002, 67). In contrast, Japanese scholar Heita Kawakatsu touts Japan's superior capacity to take the "best" from other cultures (Kawakatsu 1991, 244-247).[3]

Japan has been considered as the forerunner in the hybridization of cultural products in Asia throughout the postwar years. Samir Amin, a renowned scholar on the theory of globalization, explains that the world is composed of a trilateralization system involving the United States, Japan, and the European Union. Within this system, Japan has served to connect Western popular culture with popular culture in the rest of the countries in Asia (Amin 1992, 24). Moreover, according to Koichi Iwabuchi, author of *Recentering Globalization* (2002), Japan's "leading role in creating an Asian popular cultural sphere . . . should feature in fostering the newly articulated modern Asian common" (Iwabuchi 2002, 69).[4] The classical theory of societal and cultural development in Asia has relied upon the flying-geese model: that the leader of the economic "goose group" heads a flying V-formation of other Asian economic geese (Appadurai 2001, 299). Hence, the racially mixed figures at the 2005 SICAF in Seoul could be perceived as symbolic visual artifacts of Asian modernity—

---

3. Heita Kawakatsu claimed that the Japanese excelled in appropriating the best elements from foreign cultures or societies and had a tendency not to resist diverse influences from other cultures (Kawakatsu 1991, 244-247).

4. Such a view was shared by media critics and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Japan. In a round table discussion featured in *Gaiko Forum* 外交フォーラム in 1994, one participant expressed his nationalistic view of Japanese cultural products, such as soap operas, *manga*, and animation targeting Asian consumers: "We are now observing the birth of Asian modern civilization, which is different from American modern civilization. In this process, Japan not only plays a leading role, but, I think, the creation of a new Asian civilization is becoming a constitutive part of Japanese national identity" (Ansart et al. 1994, 54).

the result of the hybridization of Western and Asian cultural elements in the footsteps of Japanese *manga* artists.[5]

Third, these figures, however, belonged to a special exhibition at SICAF, where the major theme was anti-Japanese sentiment thinly disguised as a patriotic tribute to resistant historical figures on Korea's Independence Day. Indeed, the establishment of the Seoul Animation Center and the annual SICAF in 2005 was part of the Korean government's efforts to cope with the official "invasion" by Japanese comic books and animation into the Korea. Immediately after the government announced its gradual plan to lift the ban on the import of Japanese popular culture in 1989, they undertook a number of educational and financial programs to support the domestic industry of *manhwa* and animation.[6]

What follows is an examination of the Korean government's contradictory plans to put forth special efforts to nurture the domestic *manhwa* industry, all the while legalizing the importation of Japanese popular culture to Korea from 1998 onward. For instance, "The Measures to Promote the Development of the Cartoon Industry" of 1996 illustrated the government's increased awareness of the importance of popular culture as a source of marketable and lucrative ex-

---

5. Of course, on the one hand, the notable popularity of the Korean Wave in Japan and Southeast Asia, which was initiated by the Korean TV drama series *Winter Sonata* in 1997, demonstrated that cultural flows could move from Korea to Japan, upsetting the common hierarchy between the leader goose of Japan and the rest of Asia. On the other hand, the national fervor related to the Korean Wave can be construed as replicating the Japanese systematic approach of promoting the Japanese soap opera *Oshin* in the 1980s.

6. As one of the programs, the "Directions for Promoting the Cartoon Industry" (1996) has three primary objectives: first, to develop domestic *manhwa* and animation characters; second, to provide the necessary financial support for the development of "good" *manhwa* in general; and third, to construct separate institutions, organizations, and a center for the *manhwa* industry such as the House of Cartoons as part of the animation center. Subsequently, from the mid-1990s onward, ten private and public universities installed departments devoted to animation or animated films in Korea, including a separate animation department under the School of Film, TV, and Multimedia at the Korea National University of Arts in 1997.

port items.[7] Moreover, as I will argue, the success of Japanese anima-tion, *manga*, and other game-related products (most notably, the global success of *Super Mario* and *Pokemon* by Nintendo) since the 1990s affected, ironically, the Korean government's stance to foster the cultural industry for its global commercial potential. According to Susan Napier, a renowned American scholar on Japanese *manga* and animation, the popularity of the Japanese subculture among youth inspired Western consumers "to know not only more about the prod-uct, but also about its cultural origins" (Napier 2007, 186). Japanese popular culture for youth (broadly represented by the term *otaku*, which means "people with obsessive interests, particularly *anime* and *manga*") was seen as challenging or even replacing American popular culture and, in general, igniting a worldwide interest in Japanese pop-ular culture.

Although the Korean and Japanese governments agreed upon their more open attitude toward transnational cultural flows and interactions with the 1998 Joint Announcement, such decision did not eliminate the nationalist stance. The culture of a foreign origin can be accepted and even celebrated in Korea only if it is in the service of formulating a putatively unique national culture and claim-ing a distinct and superior "Koreaness." Transnational flows of cul-ture are also modified and tamed with a hope of maximizing the profits owing to a range of cultural products in *manwha* and anima-tion industry. Returning to the case of racially intermixed historical figures at SICAF, the incongruence between the patriotic and even anti-Japanese theme on the one hand, and the hybrid representation of their physical features and the graphic style of historic figures on the other hand, proves the deeply paradoxical nature of the Korean

---

7. According to Kim Nak-Ho, beginning in the mid-1990s, the frequent use of the word "animation," instead of "*mahwa* film" or "moving *manhwa*," indicated a growing awareness of different genres within comic books, animation, and charac-ter development industries in Korea. *Manhwa* and animation were no longer con-sidered to be exclusive for children; they instead became established as important creative and marketable genres in popular culture, which required more systemat-ic methodology to develop different types of *manhwa* and animation according to age and taste (N. Kim 2005, 297-299).

government's nationalist approach to the cultural industry.

To illustrate the Korean government's overly nationalistic cultural policy, I will focus on the cases of the *manhwa* and animation industry in Korea, the areas where reactions against the so-called "invasion" of Japanese popular culture into Korea have emerged most strongly. Korean media often uses the examples of Japanese comic books, widely circulated among the younger generation in Korea, as an indication of the Korean youth's lack of historical knowledge and consciousness concerning the tragic memories of the Japanese occupation. In 2005, the national broadcasting channel KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) aired a special program entitled "[Our] Children who are Crazed with Japanese Culture," which focused on a group of *manga* lovers wearing traditional Japanese *kimonos* or other attires popular in Japan (Yamanaka 2007).

In contrast to the nationalist rhetoric in areas of *manwha* and animation, Korean pop artists Lee Dong-Gi and Hyun Tae-Jun toyed with the concept of pure, authentic origins of animation and comic book characters that they had appropriated in their arts from the mid-1990s onward.[8] Lee and Hyun make the viewer aware of the complex process of transforming renowned international animation characters, such as Mickey Mouse[9] and Atom Boy, as they migrate from different societies and cultures. Unlike the Korean government's efforts to promote a nationalistic approach toward popular culture, the artists concentrated on the ambiguous and awkward origins of imported *manga*

─────────────────

8. This new group of artists, who emerged during the 1990s, was characterized by their differences from the dominant group of modernists as well as the *minjung misul* (literally translated as "art for the people") artists during the 1980s. Put roughly, modernists pursued the purity of form and disciplined methods of executing paintings and sculptural materials, while the ideologically oriented *minjung misul* artists underscored images of impoverished people and of the colonized and divided state of the nation. Lee Dong-Gi and Hyun Tae-Jun, on the contrary, belong to a group of young artists called the new-generation artists, who became more involved in a newly emerging consumer society in Korea from the 1990s onward (Yoon 1997, 34-48).

9. Character names are not italicized, but when they are cited as the title of a cartoon, they are italicized.

and animation characters that they had been depicting. Lee's signature character Atomaus is a combination of Tetsuwan Atomu 鉄腕アトム (known as Astro Boy in the United States), or other figures from Japanese animation, and Mickey Mouse from Disney—just as the Japanese Tetsuwan Atomu is widely recognized as a hybrid of Mickey Mouse and Mighty Mouse from the United States during the 1940s.

Brilliantly commenting on the fervent nationalism surrounding the consumption of Japanese animation in Korea, Hyun Tae-Jun titled his 2007 one-person exhibition "A Show of the Products Made in Korea." Most of his sculptures were replicas of Japanese animation characters such as Astro Boy and Gatchaman. As I will argue, Hyun's replicas, made of bodies that are similar to the originals but combined with different faces, demonstrate not only the unfaithful, awkward nature of his copies, but also the historical and domestic circumstances under which foreign animation characters were inadvertently modified by Korean toymakers during the 1970s and 1980s.

The basic traits of Lee's Atomaus and Hyun's replicas demonstrate the notable difference between the government's and Korean pop artists' approaches toward *manwha* and animation industry and characters in Korea. That is to say, hybridity makes cultural difference more pronounced in the final product of Lee's and Hyun's art, revealing the process of cultural blending as ongoing and infinite. In contrast, the rhetoric involved with the Korean *manwha* policy, and the caricatures of Yu and Yun as the ultimate symbols of patriotism in the 2005 SICAF exhibition, suppress the elements of cultural impurity in service of nationalist themes. In his "Restless Hybrids" (1995), Nikos Papastergiadis, an art historian, attempts to distinguish positive hybridity from negative hybridism in fine arts and culture. While hybridism emphasizes the concentric and homogenized result of cultural assimilation, Papastergiadis argues, hybridity acknowledges the incommensurability of cultural difference. Hybridism implies that cultural differences can be adapted into the familiar, harkening back to national culture, while hybridity embraces the failure of such a perfect translation, drawing attention to "the untranslatable bit that

lingers on in translation" (Papastergiadis 1995, 18).

Though Papastergiadis's distinction tends toward binarism, his theory is useful in explaining the crucial difference between the nationalist *manwha* policy and artists' comments on American and Japanese *manga* and animation characters in Korea. While Caucasian physiognomy was adopted for Yu's and Yun's drawings in order to globalize the well-known patriotic figures for contemporary viewers, the hybrid cultural origin of Lee's Atomaus was intentionally under-scored in its name and appearances.

Thus, by concentrating on the different approaches toward nation-al popular culture between Korean policy makers and pop artists, this study problematizes the contradictory relationship between national and hybridized cultures. The pervasive view of the influence of Japanese popular culture in Korea has thus far concentrated on an out-dated notion of culture that involves locating extremely violent and educationally inimical Japanese *manga* on the other side of "our" domestic *manhwa*, while reluctantly acknowledging Japanese *manga*'s persistent presence in Korean *manhwa*. Such a conservative view of culture, which is often shared by educators, is never shy about generalizing Japanese *manga* and animation, which are per-ceived as detrimental to the intellectual and psychological growth of children. From this perspective, society must take extra measures to monitor the influence of the Japanese *manga* industry, particularly among youth in Korea.[10]

---

10. Compared to the censorship of Japanese *manga* and animation in other Asian countries, censorship in Korea was largely led by nongovernmental organizations made up of parents, educators, and sometimes comic book artists themselves (Lent 1999, 179-214). The first legal acts regarding the educationally harmful ele-ments of children's *manhwa* were outlined in 1967 by "The Ethics Council of Korean *Manhwa* for Children," followed by the establishment of the Committee for Ethical Standards in Printed Matter in the 1970s, a committee that was responsible for reviewing not only *manhwa* but also all other books read by Korean youths. Notable studies of Korean youth concentrating on the negative impact of Japanese *manga* and animation include M. Jung (1992, 1995). Their efforts led to the imple-mentation of the Youth Protection Law in March 1997, a legal restriction that regu-lates the circulation of publications and other potentially harmful items for youth in Korea.

According to Arjun Appadurai, certain national boundaries are more difficult to overcome than others in the process through which a particular culture moves from one place to another: "But it is worth noticing that for the people of Irian Jaya, lndonesianization may be more worrisome than Americanization, as Japanization may be for Koreans, Indianization for Sri Lankans, Vietnamization for the Cambodians, and Russianization for the people of Soviet Armenia and the Baltic republics" (Appadurai 1996, 32). Indeed, with regard to transnational cultural exchanges, the national border between Japan and Korea might be more rigid and difficult to blur, as Appadurai notes. However, the Korean government's decision to open the country's door to Japanese popular culture attests to the ambivalent nature of Korean antipathy toward Japanese popular culture. While Japanization can be more worrisome than Americanization for Koreans, Japanese popular culture continues to play important roles in postwar Korea, either as the model of cultural marketing or as a major supplier of comic books and animation in Korea. Therefore, instead of using ethical or economic criteria to assess Japanese *manga*, I will highlight the more complicated and intertwined relationship between Japanese and Korean popular cultures.

The History of Japanese *Manga* and Animation in Korea

The special exhibition at the 2005 SICAF, as mentioned above, proved to be an important case attesting to the Korean government's contradictory approach toward Japanese culture in general and Japanese *manga* in particular. Japanese *manga* has been enjoyed by Koreans; under the Japanese colonial government, the most common types of *manwha* were caricatural political commentaries in newspapers, and aspirated *manga* and other early imports of Japanese animation that entered Korea after 1965, when President Park Chung-hee announced the reconstruction of diplomatic ties with Japan. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, most Koreans, from an early age, became familiar with popular Japanese animation and *manga* titles such as Koji Kab-

uto's *Mazinger Z,* which was first aired in Japan in 1975, and Kyoto Mizuki's *Candy*, *Candy*! (1976). Nevertheless, until 1994, the original Japanese names of characters and places, distributed through major publishers and broadcasting companies, were modified for the Korean context. And although President Kim Dae-jung announced in 1998 the plan to lift the ban on Japanese popular culture between 1998 and 2005, it did not diminish the government's highly nationalistic and protective policy toward domestic comic books and animation. Instead, the government took the more ambiguously nationalistic approach, in terms of policies and rhetoric, as I will argue.

The history of cultural exchange between Japan and Korea is entwined with their notorious antagonism, which continues till today. For example, whenever the Korean Ministry of Culture or Korean ambassador in Japan expressed positive opinions about Japanese popular culture, these remarks have been immediately subjected to public scrutiny and became highly politicized. Moreover, Korea's policy about Japanese popular culture cannot be separated from the recurring economic and diplomatic feuds between Korea and Japan.[11] The allegedly inaccurate account in Japanese history textbooks of the Pacific War and Japanese expansionism in Asia during the Second World War has been a constant source of diplomatic feuding between Korea and Japan. The ongoing dispute over the rightful ownership of the Dokdo island is another controversial issue between Japan and Korea. Numerous efforts have been made in hopes of initiating not just an economic but also a cultural alliance with Japan, but none of these efforts came to notable fruition until the administration of Kim Dae-jung in the 1990s.

The Korean government's decision to open Korea up to Japanese

---

11. In 2000, the Japanese Society for History Reform, a group of conservative scholars, published the *Atarashii rekishi kyokasho* 新しい歴史教科書 (New History Textbook), which downplays Japan's military aggression in the First Sino-Japanese War and Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910. Upon its approval by the Japanese Ministry of Education in 2001, the Korean government announced that it would postpone its plan of accelerating the interactions between the two countries through popular culture until 2003.

popular culture in the late 1990s was the result of various historical factors and ideas. Many believed that Koreans should be determined to end a long history of illegal use of copyrighted cultural products imported from the United States and Japan. The nation had recently joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1989.[12] The most pressing task for the Korean government throughout the 1990s was to provide official routes for the importation of Japanese *manga* in order to abide by the international standard of copyright law. Even after the presidential announcement in 1998, however, the original plan was consistently modified and interrupted whenever public sentiment toward Japan over the problems with Japanese textbooks and Dokdo turned sour.[13] Japanese popular culture has been, thus, a focal point of controversy throughout the ups and downs of Korea's diplomatic relationship with Japan.

Despite these tensions, however, the reality of the powerful presence of Japanese popular culture (particularly, *manga* and animation) in Korea can hardly be denied. Major Japanese *manga* and animation titles have been introduced in Korea, largely due to the countries' geographical proximity as well as similarities in educational systems and other traditional value systems. Most successful Japanese *manga* and animation titles have become popular in Korea as well, such as Mizuki's *Candy, Candy!* and Riyoko Ikeda's *Berusaiyu no Bara* (The Rose of Versailles) (1974), which were published in Korea either as individual volumes or as part of the monthly comics magazine *Sonyeon jeompeu* (Boys' Jump), a Korean version of Japanese *Shonen jump*. Most of the early television programs for children

---

12. With the establishment of strict measures on copyright protection throughout the 1990s, Korean artists faced different challenges. Korean publishers and distributors of media products must fully acknowledge the original Japanese producers by including the artists' names and original titles in their products.

13. Other recurring points in the bitter debate between Korea and Japan are the problems over Dokdo and Takeshima. Dokdo consists of two main islets and 35 smaller rocks, and the islets are administered by South Korea. However, Korea's sovereignty over the islets has been disputed by Japan for decades. In 2005, Japan's Shimane prefecture announced a Takeshima Day, and Koreans reacted with demonstrations and protests throughout the country.

in Korea during the 1970s also had been imported from Japan, largely owing to the relatively cheap rate for Japanese animation programs compared to U.S. animations. The major television networks in Korea began to air Japanese animations in the 1970s: for example, TBC (Tongyang Broadcasting Corporation) first aired *Tetsuwan Atom* 鉄腕 アトム (Mighty Atom) under the Korean title *Uju sonyeon atom* (Astro Boy Atom) in 1970, and MBC (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation) aired Koji Kabuto's *Mazinger Z* in 1975, among many other classical Japanese animations.[14] Korean television networks could broadcast Japanese animations for children, as long as the networks purged any markers of Japanese culture. Therefore, as the cultural anthropologist Han Kyung-Koo claims, the 1994 announcement of the "opening" of the Korean market to Japanese popular culture might be a misnomer. Most trendy Japanese *manga* and animation had already been available in Korea for decades; the governmental plan only provided a legal framework for authorizing and controlling economic transactions involving Japanese cultural products circulated in Korea (Han 1998).[15]

Nevertheless, the Korean government's decision to lift the ban on Japanese popular culture in 1998 remains a decisive historical event as it finally authorized the import and circulation of Japanese popular culture in Korea. However, the government intended the process to be gradual and less abrupt in consideration of Korean people's anti-Japanese public sentiment and other pragmatic concerns. The initial plan laid out in 1998 indicated that the process would take place in

---

14. Tezuka's *Mighty Atom* was also made into a television series in 1963, and the series ran in black and white from 1963 to 1966 and was remade for color TV in 1980-1981, opening a new era for Japanese animation. During the postwar years of the 1950s and 1960s, Japanese *manga* artists began introducing a more dynamic style by utilizing cinematic progression, complex characters, and story development, mostly borrowed from Hollywood (Schodt 2007, 59, 68-71).

15. According to Han, the announcement relates to the protections of legal rights for many of Japanese films, *manga*, and music that had been illegally printed and downloaded in Korea. Therefore, the opening might reform how Japanese cultural products become circulated in Korea, rather than considerably accelerating cultural interactions between the two nations.

four different stages. The first stage, which began in October 1998, allowed the distribution of videos and critically acclaimed Japanese films that won prizes at the four major international film festivals (Cannes, Berlin, Venice, as well as the Academy Awards in the United States). Japanese comic books were included during the second stage in 1999. At the third stage, most major genres of popular culture, such as music and games, were allowed into Korea. Japanese animation that also received prizes in major international comic book and animation film festivals were screened in public theaters in Korea. The public screening of all Japanese animation was finally permitted in 2006.

The basic philosophy underlying the plan involved placing priority on what could be regarded as artistically superior and educationally beneficial materials, such as Miyazaki Hayao's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), which won the Anime Grand Prize in the Japanese anime and entertainment magazine *Animeju* アニメージュ (Animage), and was first released in domestic theaters in 2000. The government took the Japanese *manga* industry as a role model for the domestic comic book and animation industry. "The 5-Year Plan (2003-2007) to Promote the Manhwa Industry" cited the Japanese *manga* industry as a successful model in the international market for comic books.[16] The plan emphasized the dual approaches of commercial success as well as artistic achievement. To enter and win prizes from international film and animation festivals is often considered the criteria for "artistic excellence," similar to the examples set by Miyazaki's international reputation throughout the 1990s.[17] Accord-

---

16. See Republic of Korea, Ministry of Culture and Tourism "Manhwa saneop jinheung 5 gaenyeon gyehoek (2003-2007 nyeon)" (The 5-Year Plan [2003-2007] to Promote the Manhwa Industry), http://www.kocca.kr/knowledge/report/other/1200622_3432.html (accessed on May 28, 2011).

17. The governmental plan was also devoted to the development of Korean characters, which can be used in a range of media and productions, such as animation films, comic books, and games. The efforts reached partial fruition with *Blue Seagull* (1994) and *Armageddon* (1996), animations that opened in theaters, drawing both critical and commercial success. *My Beautiful Girl Marie* (2001) also won the Grand Prix at the 2002 SICAF, followed by its entrance as an official selection to

ing to the 5-Year Plan, the government would provide animation companies producing Korean characters with a 20-percent tax exemption with the aim of transforming domestic production into a more internationally viable and competitive industry, particularly relative to Japanese production companies. The statistics in this report show that almost 40 percent of comic books circulated within Korea are Japanese, and only 0.6 percent of the total profits of Korean *manhwa* are made from sales in the international market. The Korean government's plan to gradually legalize Japanese popular culture in Korea in 1998, therefore, can also be considered a proactive reaction against the success that Japanese comic books and animation achieved in Korea, particularly during the late 1980s and 1990s.

The huge boom in the comic book industry in Korea during the 1990s was significantly aided by the popularity of Japanese comic books, such as *Dragon Ball* in 1989, as well as the support for the domestic industry from the Korean government. While the popularity of *Dragon Ball* caused serious problems due to the piracy of Japanese comic books and what can be considered as the "invasion" of Japanese popular culture in Korea, the circulation of *Dragon Ball* also diversified the genre and style of comic books enjoyed by Korean readers (N. Kim 2005, 303-304). Unlike the Japanese readership of *manga* and animation, which covers a range of age groups, the predominant readers of *manwha* in Korea are children and adolescents. This age disparity is partly because the story lines and drawings of the Korean *manwha* industry are not sophisticated enough to attract adult readers. More importantly, there is resistance against adult Japanese *manga*, which some consider too violent and sexual. Although some pirated versions of Japanese *manga* for adults have become popular in Korea, their influence is limited to groups of young male readers. With government support, however, the market for *manwha* and animation in Korea grew during the early 1990s. Korean comic book

---

the prestigious Annecy International Animated Film Festival in France in the same year. In 2005, the Korean director Park Se-Jong won the prize for new directors with his full-length animated film *Birthday Boy* at the Annecy, in addition to many international prizes he won in the United States and Australia.

artists began experimenting with different genres and styles for adult readers, to move away from the restricted readership of children and adolescents. Therefore, from the beginning, the Korean government's policy toward Japanese *manga* had the dual purpose of using the influences of Japanese creative resources for the development of the Korean cartoon and animation industries as well as of protecting the domestic artists and industry from their Japanese counterparts.

Making a National *Manwha* and Animation Industry in Korea

The nationalistic stance underlying the cultural policy on *manwha* and animation industry in Korea during the late 1990s is contradictory, considering its similarities with the Japanese policy toward its soap operas and animation characters. During the 1980s, Japanese technological gadgets—including electronic devices such as the Sony Walkman—fascinated youth worldwide, but the most internationally recognizable Japanese export during the 1990s was *Pokemon*, a card game that turned into extremely profitable movies and games. Indeed, from the late 1980s onwards, the Japanese government became more systematic in promoting their cultural products, including renowned fictional or animation characters. For instance, the Japan Foundation played an active role in advertising *Oshin*, a Japanese soap opera, to other Asian countries under the cultural exchange programs in South Asia and the Middle East. In 2008, the Japanese government also named Hello Kitty as the official ambassador of Japanese tourism in China and Hong Kong. The government and domestic industries generally go hand-in-hand in protecting as well as transforming what could be considered local cultural assets into the next hot item in the globalized process of art and culture.

The commercial success of *Pokemon* and *Hello Kitty* on an international scale might have influenced the creation of a plan called the "Direction for Promoting the Cartoon Industry" (1996) in Korea. The plan cited the names of renowned Japanese *manga* and animation characters such as Astro Boy Atom and Pokemon, examining how

these characters were utilized for a range of cultural and consumer products in movies, games, toys, and everyday objects. In 2008, the Korean government finally set up a special plan for what they called the "character industry" with the "Future of Nationally Promising and Tactical Industry" and set up a program called the "Midterm Plan for the Promotion of the Animated Cartoon Character Industry." According to this plan, the government promises to support the artistic process of creating domestic characters and establish the international network of character industries to promote domestic characters. In 2010, the Korean Government also announced its plan, "2013 CAN (Cartoon + Animation)," which intends to spend more than 259 billion Korean won until 2013.[18]

Hello Kitty as the new cultural ambassador of Japan also attests to how deeply the nationalistic pursuit of culture is intertwined with the process of cultural hybridization, particularly in today's global era in which cultural and economic exchanges are taking place in everyday lives. According to Iwabuchi, "Japanization" refers to the indigenization and domestication of foreign (Western) culture, which has often resulted in various forms of hybridized culture. French postmodern theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes have noted the "depthless" and "superficial" nature of Japanese popular culture, lacking origins and histories.[19]

Such assessments of culture can certainly fall prey to a generalized view of unitary Japanese culture, but the example of Hello Kitty reveals the contradictory aspect of what Iwabuchi has called "expansionist nationalism." The term "expansionism" alludes to Japanese nationalism during the nation's notorious invasion of Asian counties, notably Korea, China, and Thailand, during the Second World War. Since the 1990s, Japanese expansionism involves not military power,

---

18. See Republic of Korea, Ministry of Culture, "The Announcement of Animation, Comics and Characters Industry Development Strategy," http://www.kocca.kr/notice/report/1199009_3332.html (accessed on March 17, 2010).
19. In *Recentering Globalization*, Iwabuchi provides a detailed explanation of both positive and negative assessments made by both Western and Japanese scholars on Japanese culture as the culmination of hybridized cultures (Iwabuchi 2002, 53-63).

but rather cultural products. Iwabuchi explains that "expansionist nationalism" transpired when "the restructuring of the post-Cold War geopolitics, the development of transnational media/cultural flows, as well as the spread of Japanese popular culture in the region, all joined together" (Iwabuchi 2002, 5). In the case of Hello Kitty, which is noted for blending both human and animal characteristics, its pinkish world of fantasy can also evoke a sense of perversity, with which Japanese subculture, such as *otaku* culture, is often associated.[20] Therefore, although Hello Kitty is supposed to be an ambassador representing Japanese culture, it lacks cultural elements that can be considered *traditionally* Japanese. On the other hand, Hello Kitty is more representative of the Japanese subculture, which is, indeed, notorious for its culturally intermixed characters, such as Astroboy Atom and the male protagonists in Japanese *manga* for girls (*shoujo manga* 少女漫画).

The figures of Yu Gwan-sun and Yun Bong-gil at the 2005 exhibition capture this ambivalent circumstance of culturally mixed characters being imbued with nationalist and patriotic messages. Opening on August 15, Korea's Independence Day, the 2005 SICAF exhibition was designed to provide a "chance to see Korean history in a new light by examining the role of *manhwa* and animation in modern Korean history." Although the exhibition was "in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the nation's liberation from the Japanese colonial rule," most of these patriotic figures were rendered in a style of Japanese *manga* for girls—character representations replete with normative Caucasian features of big eyes, wavy hair, and extremely thin and high noses. Yu Gwan-sun appears to be a modern interpretation of

---

20. Hiroki Azuma, cultural theorist and philosopher, summarized rather boldly the mental state of postwar Japanese as being overly depthless, artificial—what he calls "hyperflatness" (Azuma 2009, 96-116); Azuma's theory has been shared by art critics and artists in Japan. In organizing an art exhibition *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (2005), where Japanese animations and *otaku* culture were juxtaposed with artists's works, Takashi Murakami proposed the similar theory of "superflatness." The image of Hello Kitty was also included in the exhibition and catalogue.

Korea's Jean d'Arc, a fifteenth-century Catholic saint and national heroine of France. She was holding the Korean national flag, called Taegeukgi, while slightly exposing her leg to the viewer. Although Yu wears the reformed *hanbok*, the traditional clothing for woman, her twisted gesture showing off her leg and her small face and elongated body do not match the small and quiet image of Yu that most Koreans have gathered from textbooks. What is interesting is that Yu's updated, contemporary image cannot be separated from its Westernized physiognomy. The method of creating her new image closely resembles that of the characters in *shoujo manga*.

Equally notable is the figure of Yun Bong-gil, who successfully carried out a bombing attack at a Japanese army celebration of Emperor Hirohito's birthday in Hongkou 虹口 Park (later Luxun 魯迅 Park), located in Shanghai in 1932. The bombing killed Yoshinori Shirakawa 白川義則, a general of the Imperial Japanese Army, and Kawabata Sadaji 河端貞次, a Government Chancellor of Japanese residents in Shanghai. Yun was arrested at the scene and executed in Kanazawa, Japan. However, his thin, long face and long wavy hair makes him appear more like a rock star or a prince in Japanese romance *manga* than the real patriotic figure who underwent an intensive period of training and was determined to sacrifice his life for the cause of national independence. Yun's effeminate features and purple suits contradict his historical legacy as a fighter for Korea's independence. In addition, his physical characteristics—large eyes, thin body structure, disproportionately long legs, and small face— remind the viewer of a prince or heir of a well-to-do family, figures that are frequently spotted in Japanese *shoujo manga* and with whom many Korean female comic readers are familiar. Indeed, throughout the exhibition, the influence of Japanese *manga* and animation drawing was hard to miss.

Most of what can be considered nationalistic *manhwa* characters in Korea draws upon traditional fables or popular TV dramas based on historical materials such as *Daejanggeum* (Jewel in the Palace), a story about a fictional female cook in the sixteenth century. Their physiognomies, however, which feature a doll-like face with big

round eyes, are reminiscent of typical characters in Japanese *shoujo manga*. In other words, to adapt these historical and traditional fig-ures for contemporary audiences entailed the introduction of hybrid and foreign cultural elements—whether on the level of physiognomy or modern structures of narrative. In a way, it is not surprising that even the most patriotic theme can be affected by Japanese *manga* style.

Furthermore, not only the individual images, but also the way the Korean *manhwa* industry operates already indicate active trans-nation-al cultural flows. There has been systematic collaboration between the Korean and Japanese industries, to minimize escalating production costs (Lyechad 1992).[21] Skilled workers in Korea are often responsible for the technical aspects of Japanese animations, whereas Japanese animation artists are more responsible for the character creations and plot development. As media theorist Kim Suk-Hoon points out, multi-national productions have become commonplace in the entertainment business (Kim 1995, 241-242); major production companies, such as Disney, Warner Brothers in the United States, and Toei Animation in Japan, consistently recruit international talent and coordinate the pro-duction and distribution process throughout the world in order to sur-vive in a highly globalized and competitive market.

The commercial success of Korean animated films produced from the 1990s has been largely indebted to its on-going reliance on or col-laboration with the Japanese animation and *manga* industry. For instance, two-thirds of the sequel *Hong Gil-dong* (1994), the remake of the first Korean animated film of the same title in 1967, was com-pleted by Japanese animators. More notably, a nationalistic approach toward Korean *manhwa* is not only outdated, but also undesirable for its conservative definition of culture. According to Han Kyung-Koo,

---

21. Most Korean exports were generated by OEM (Order Equipment Manufacturing) of original Japanese *manga* and animation even in the twenty-first century. Not only the Japanese, but also the American industry recruits Korean animators, and some statistics show that Korean animators are involved in the production of 40 percent of the world's cartoons (Lyechad 1992). For the overall economic system related to the *manhwa* and animation industry in Korea, see Han (2004, 161-165).

the nationalistic approach reflects an authoritative idea of culture (Han 1998). Controlling national borders to monitor the penetration of other cultures reflects a misunderstanding of culture as a simple artifact or product that can be literally imported from one culture to another. Such approaches often rely on a protective view of the "national" culture against other and more "advanced" popular cultures, and can undermine the complicated and uneven process of integration between domestic and imported cultures. For example, *Daejanggeum*, the story of a sixteenth-century female cook who later became a medical woman, is changed into a relatively dynamic modern narrative. Despite seemingly "impure" narrative elements, such as the main character improving herself within the rigid social hierarchy of Confucianism during the Joseon dynasty, the story of *Daejanggeum* is still considered as representing the authentically "Korean" virtues of perseverance and sincerity. Except the historical backdrop and elaborate traditional clothing and cuisine, the storyline and the character are quite modern for its portrayal of an ambitious individual overcoming her humble origin.

Within the framework of a nationalistic understanding of culture, cultural hybridity is carefully interpreted not to defy the impurity and superiority of national and traditional heritages. The hybridization of culture, or cultural hybridism, to borrow Papasterdiagis's binary, does not permit inessential elements to challenge the wholeness of a national culture whose integrity is already defined by authorities such as the government or governmental institutions. In addition, a national culture of homogeneity and purity is often appropriated to insinuate, both directly and indirectly, what we might call the superiority of one national culture over others. Therefore, as Iwabuchi has pointed out, cultural hybridization does not mean that the concept of national culture has become insignificant. On the contrary, its persistent significance is newly articulated, ironically through transnational flows of culture. Foreign elements are supposed to be obscured through the process of domestication (Iwabuchi 2002, 54). In a similar vein, the racially mixed physiognomy of patriotic figures at SICAF and the modern adaptation of *Daejanggeum* allude to the larger goal

of a nationalistic cultural agenda prevailing. The cultural hybridism in the drawings of Yu and Yun can only be acknowledged in reflecting transnational flows of culture, but not fundamentally challenging the patriotic message that these figures represent to Korean audiences.

(Un)making "Korean" Pop Art and Cultural Hybridity

Manhwa and animation have emerged as one of the most controversial areas in which the "invasion" of Japanese popular culture has been debated and resisted in Korea, but I suggest that it is also important to discuss the distinctive reactions against the "invasions" of non-Korean cultural influences among Korean artists. The examples of Lee Dong-Gi's and Hyun Tae-Jun's artworks provide a positive case for understanding the open and relatively positive process of hybridization.

Lee and Hyun, regarded as either Korean pop artists or new-generation artists of the 1990s, appropriated famous and iconic images from Japanese and American animation. Their predecessors such as the *minjung misul* artists in the 1980s devoted their energies to theorizing and representing a distinctively nationalistic aesthetics for the Korean people; Lee and Hyun, in contrast, appeared to be preoccupied with changes in popular and consumer culture in Korea. In Oh Yun's painting *Marketing V: Hell Painting* (1980), evil societal forces are equated with American popular culture, as represented by the best-known logos of American consumer products. There has been strong tension between American, imported, and urban culture as opposed to traditional, folk, and countryside culture, often represented in the form of earthy and idealized pastoral landscapes and farmers.

In contrast, Lee's early portrayals of comic characters, both domestic and international, served as important historical artifacts, shedding light on the history of modernization and the early phase of popular and consumer culture in Korea. Lee provided his own description of *Mickey Mouse* in his writing: "During the Depression era, Mickey Mouse enabled ordinary Americans to forget about their pain and to

enjoy consumer culture as soon as the Second World War was over"
(1995). He continued to note the positive message that both *Mickey
Mouse* and *Tetsuwan Atom* delivered to their respective national pop-
ulations, Americans during the 1930s and Japanese during the post-
war years.

Scholars have noted that Lee's and Hyun's works are very con-
scious of the historical origins and transformations of particular comic
books or animation characters. Unlike the *minjung misul* artists who
took the binary position toward traditional Korean culture versus pow-
erful American consumer culture, Lee and Hyun became less interested
in distinguishing popular culture imported from Japan and the United
States from the vernacular culture developed in Korea; instead, their
artistic production centered on the impossibility of copying imported
animation characters precisely as they were created in the original
contexts of Japan and the United States.

In 1993, Lee, one of the best-known Korean pop artists of his
generation, devised his signature character Atomaus by combining
Disney's Mickey Mouse and Osamu Tezuka's Mighty Atom. Accord-
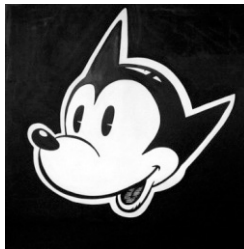ing to the original Japanese animator Tezuka, *Tetsuwan Atom* was

Figure 2. Lee Dong-
Gi, *Atomaus*,
acrylic on canvas,
1993

much indebted to Disney cartoons such as
Mickey Mouse and *Snow White* (Schodt 2007,
45, 59).[22] But one can also argue that in Korea,
Mickey Mouse and *Tetsuwan Atom* were the
embodiments of the two giant economic pow-
ers, Japan and the United States, during the
postwar years. In a way, Lee's Atomaus attests
to the particular cultural flow of American pop-
ular culture imported into Korea via Japan.[23]

The notable aspect of Lee's art does not
rest, however, on the mere copying of iconic

22. In addition to Disney, the flying posture and manteau of Mighty Atom was also
    inspired by Mighty Mouse, another popular animated character, first made in the
    United States in 1948 (Schodt 2007, 45, 47)
23. In all likelihood, *Uju sonyeon atom* (Astro Boy Atom), the title of the Korean ani-
    mation, is a combination of the original Japanese title and the American title.

Japanese characters. Lee's Atomaus character is notorious for its consistent transformation to the degree of being considered a totally new character.[24] Atomaus' outer facial shape has changed from the perfectly circular form of Mighty Atom into an oval shape, and in the later version, the original pointy ears of Mighty Atom are less pronounced. In addition, Lee placed his characters in disparate settings that implied the cultural confluence of East and West or traditional and contemporary. In *Thinking Atomaus* (2003), Atomaus is depicted in an imitation of a seventh-century statue of a meditative Buddha in Korea, called Banga Sayusang. Here, Lee freely moves between the Atom character from a futuristic world where robots coexist with humans and the seventh-century Silla dynasty when the most famous type of Banga Sayusang (contemplation image of Maitreya) was created. The same Atomaus travels all the way to the other side of the earth and presents itself on the cross in *Atomaus-Crucifixion* (2000). The robot character from Japanese animation hangs on a cross as in the Crucifixion, the most important subject of Western religious painting. The cross floating in the air reminds the viewer of Salvador Dali's *Crucifixion* (1954), which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Lee has remained distanced and uninterested in fixed meanings of his Atomaus character—let alone its national and cultural origins. Lee deliberately placed his character in a range of circumstances in which the process of hybridization becomes apparent to the viewer, rather than being smoothed out and seamlessly disguised. According to Papastergiadis, hybridity designates not only the state of mere cultural blending, but also a shift in the "mode of consciousness"

---

24. Atomaus is still in a state of fluctuation; at one point, the character seems to be clearly identifiable, as it literally combines the pointy hair of Mighty Atom and circular shapes from Mickey Mouse, yet at another, the nature of the final character remains confusing. For further reading on the extremely nomadic, rootless, and hybrid nature of the character as the emblem of cultural hybridization in Korea, see Ko (2006). The confusing origins of Atomaus also point to Lee's strategies for inviting non-definite meanings of his work. Lee was an avid reader of the French thinker Roland Barthes; and he became infatuated with the image's openness to diverse interpretations (Kim and Ryu 2006, 145).

Figure 3. Hyun Tae-Jun, *Astro Boy Atom*, plastic and mixed media, 2007

and "a new perspective for seeing newness as it emerges" (2005, 57). Papastergiadis contends that hybridity is more involved with the process of cultural mixing than with the final outcome. Likewise, Lee appears to be interested in revealing his incongruous artistic and cultural sources from both high art and popular culture and from both the West and East.

The hybridization and transformation of popular culture is a major concern of Hyun Tae-Jun. His one-person show, titled "A Show of the Products Made in Korea" (2007), consisted of replicas of robots, most of which originated from the characters of foreign animations that the artist himself enjoyed watching. At the entrance of the exhibition, Hyun set up huge replicas of Mighty Atom (or Astro Boy Atom), Gatchaman, Superman, and Mazinger Z, all of which came from animations aired in Korea during the 1970s and 1980s.[25]

Weirdly enough, Hyun used the same body of Superman for all of his replicas in his one-person show to imitate the method used by Korean toymakers during the 1970s. According to Hyun, this method of toy making reflected what he called the impoverished condition of the toy industry in Korea during the 1970s and 1980s. Saving production costs was priority; using the same body for all of his superhero characters was the cheapest and fastest way of mass-producing these toys. Hyun contends that "You will see only the small brain as opposed to the hugely blown body of the superman. While the body part representing the materialistic condition is huge, the brain part

---

25. Aligning himself with the idea of art that defies the common distinction between depreciative popular culture and fine arts, Hyun underscored the historical significance of the small and seemingly inconsequential toy culture as his primary artistic inspiration. Hyun claimed that "There are toys full of ideas, but they will be disappearing soon since they are not sold well. I prefer awkward stuff over the same old and bland products. Don't you think these objects of collection can become art works?" (Yi 2007, 152-173).

representing the cultural and intellectual aspect of the nation is rela-
tively small."[26] As a result, Mighty Atom's boyish face is incongru-
ously juxtaposed with a masculine adult body with a wide chest,
muscular arms, and extremely long legs.

Throughout the theories of cultural hybridization, scholars have
emphasized the uneven process through which culture may be trans-
ferred and changed in different contexts. Homi Bhabha's concept of
mimicry and Arjun Appadurai's idea of the indigenization process
underscore the uneven, two-way cultural interactions between colo-
nizer and colonized or powerful and underprivileged. Bhabha explains
that mimicry is the process through which "colonial representation
and individuation reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal"
(Bhabha 1994, 114), whereas Appadurai recognizes the uneven and
varied condition of metropolises and societies where the dominant
culture is domesticated and indigenized (Appadurai 1996, 32). While
Bhabha's and Appadurai's theories originated from their observation
of postcolonial conditions in India and South Asia, their interpreta-
tions of how the culture of colonizers or industrialized countries is
inadvertently or intentionally modified by underprivileged groups or
societies acknowledge the resistant, and even critical, meanings asso-
ciated with the act of copying.

The recognizable aesthetic of imperfection is considered less as a
failure or unfortunate circumstance than as a novel means of self-
expression and definition. Hyun's method of making replicas recalls
Appadurai's concept of cultural indigenization. In his famous "Dis-
juncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" (1990; re-
printed in *Modernity at Large*, 1996), Appadurai notes that the critics
of "creeping global homogenization" and "Americanization" failed to
consider that as "forces from the various metropolises are brought
into new societies, they tend to become indigenized in one or another
way . . . . The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a com-
plex overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be under-
stood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that

---

26. Hyun Tae-Jun, interview by the author, Seoul, Korea, October 28, 2008.

might account for multiple centers and peripheries)" (Appadurai 1996, 32). Papastergiadis's reading of cultural hybridization shares a similar hypothesis of an uneven and ambiguous process through which cultural products move from one place to the other. Hyun's conscious efforts to make awkward copies, in turn, remind the viewer of this process; the body of Superman is combined with Atomaus' face, reflecting a particular toy-making procedure in Korea.

Hyun's replicas, as the artist himself claims, further illustrate the history of modernization and industrialization in Korea. During the 1970s and 1980s, the popularity of Japanese animations in Korea might have been due in part to the shared postwar experiences of Japan and Korea. According to Tezuka, the images of Mighty Atom emblematized what he called Japan's "inferiority complex of science" relative to the West, particularly the United States, after their defeat in the Second World War (Schodt 2007, 99). The story of Mighty Atom, who overcomes the painful memory of rejection and moves forward with the help of technology, might have offered a role model for Korean children. Under the military dictatorship of President Park Chung-hee in Korea, technological futurism became the national creed in order to escape from stagnant economic conditions as well as the unstable ideological conditions of confronting the communist regime in the North. The message of technophilia, as implied in "advanced" cultural products from Japan, played a significant ideological role in implying the government's fundamental policy of education and industrialization.[27]

The popularity of robotic animation characters in Korea coincided with the advent of the domestic toy market. According to Hyun, the features of the robot named Taekwon V, a popular Korean anima-

---

27. During the 1970s, Korea entered the third stage of the economic construction plan, shifting its primary focus from light industry to heavy industry. Thus, the scientific knowledge and engineering and technological skills became urgently needed to fulfill the plan. Educational materials for children, including the *manhwa* programs in the media during the 1970s, reflected Korea's overall historical circumstances, a phenomenon that had also occurred in Japan during its reconstructive period during the 1950s and 1960s (Park 2008).

tion character, were modeled after a Japanese toy, and the success of animations such as *Mazinger Z* and *UFO Robot Grendizer* that relied heavily on the popularity of the accompanying products in stores. These plastic toys, called pla-models, were sold in local stationeries located on every corner in Korean neighborhoods. When the Academic Science Company, one of the major toy makers in Korea, sponsored *Taekwon V* (1972), the first Korean animation movie, the company asked that the basic features of *Taekwon V* resemble those of a popular Japanese robot.[28] Such toys were usually categorized as educational materials; they were advertised as enhancing the mental development of children by building scientific knowledge, coordination, and creativity in users. This shrewd marketing strategy worked for parents as well as for Japanese animation lovers, who were mostly children.[29]

Therefore, Lee's and Hyun's art offers visual "testament" to industrialization and nascent youth culture in postwar Korea. While the earlier example of cultural hybridity as presented at SICAF put more emphasis on the homogenous and superior quality of the final product, Lee's and Hyun's copies reveal the hybridized state of culture to the viewer rather than seamlessly covering up its mixed identity. These artists did not hide the imperfect and inferior nature of their copies through their particular mode of production. In fact, as exemplified by Hyun's *Gatchaman*, which sounds like Gajjamaen, literally meaning "fake man" in Korean, Lee and Hyun make quite noticeable the imperfect and even coarse nature of their reproductions. In Hyun's replica, the face of Atom is flat, undermining the cute, round face that would accentuate Atom's likability among children when it

---

28. Hyun Tae-Jun, interview by the author, Seoul, Korea, October 28, 2008. The Academic Science Company was also one of the major donors to the Center for Children, where special events and exhibitions for children were held beginning in 1974. Currently located in Seoul, this center has now been renovated as a wedding hall.
29. These inexpensive toys were good companions for Korean children, who increasingly lost their playgrounds due to the transformation of the countryside into a factory floor during the country's rapid industrialization (Hyun 2008).

first came out in the 1950s in Japan. Through his pencil drawings of the early 1990s, Lee revealed his process of creating the hybrid character Atomaus. The outcome was awkward: the eyes were smaller than and not as round as Mickey Mouse's. His pointy ears were different from the huge and circular ones of Disney's Mickey. Finally, Mickey's nose was very different from Atom's small, round nose. Overall, Lee's Atomaus is cute and both familiar and unfamiliar in relation to the characters of Mickey Mouse and Astroboy Atom.

Most importantly, Hyun and Lee, working with extremely recognizable and lovable characters, emphasized the impure and mixed traits of their creations. Unlike Korean *manhwa*, allegedly representing the core "national" and authentic value of the Korean virtue, Lee's Atomaus and Hyun's plastic replica of Gatchaman, or Gajjamaen, are neither authentic nor fake. These are already well-known Japanese animation characters. At the same time, Lee's Atomaus and Hyun's replicas are original insofar as they imitate the particular mode of toy production during the early phase of consumer culture in Korea.

Postscript to Cultural Hybridity

Figure 4. Lee Dong-Gi,
   Brands, acrylic on canvas,
   2003

This study, using the example of the *manhwa* industry in Korea and artworks by Korean pop artists from the 1990s onward, compared different types of cultural hybridization in Korean popular culture. With Japanese *manga*, animation, and related game products having gained popularity worldwide in the 1990s, the Korean government began to recognize the importance of transnational flows of culture. Nonetheless, international events such as the 2005 SICAF reveal a highly protective and conservative approach toward "national" and "authentic" culture, even as Korea opened its

doors to Japanese *manga* and animation since the mid-1990s. The Korean government's strategy of creating distinctively nationalistic animation characters exhibits part and parcel of the contradictory nature of transnational flows of popular culture. As aforementioned, the globalization process does not mean that the "national" has become insignificant. On the contrary, its persisting significance is articulated precisely through transnational movements of cultures. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how the discussion of cultural hybridization and transitional cultural flows has been prompted by a strong nationalist need to claim distinct and superior cultural products.

One can argue that the effort to create Korean *manhwa* can be considered as a powerful strategy against the homogenization of culture, in particular, against the dominance of Japanese popular culture in Korea. But defining national character in *manhwa*, especially in an era of active cultural exchanges, no longer becomes possible; instead, such efforts often involve suppressing certain cultural elements over the other. For instance, the patriotic figures at SICAF and *Daejang-geum* chosen as the ideal examples of national *manhwa* reflect what can be described as a rigid, unchanging, and conservative view of the pure national culture. These historical figures are supposed to emblematize the virtue of being Korean, be it as an ingenious cook or as brave and patriotic figures. Meanwhile, what can be considered as the impure and awkward elements of foreign influences are usually undermined or deemphasized in national *manhwa*. Lee's Atomaus and Hyun's replicas, in contrast, challenge the simple definition of "original" and "national" animation characters. Lee's Atomaus, which situates the postwar Korean position under the influence of Japanese and American popular culture, and Hyun's collection of toys never settles on a particular identity that favors nationalistic or antinationalistic interpretations, as their artistic motifs originate from the 1970s and 1980s in Korea when Korean youth culture was dominated by the influence of Japanese and American animations.

Lee's and Hyun's artistic productions are closely tied to the personal memories shared by their generation during the history of mod-

ernization in Korea. In "Atom and Mickey Mouse Rendezvous in Korea" (1995), Lee Dong-Gi explains that 20 years ago when these characters were first introduced in Korea, Koreans did not choose one character over another; Korean children were bombarded with different and incoherent foreign animation characters without knowing their origins (Lee 1995). To reiterate, leading scholars on cultural hybridization have revised the idea of misinterpretation and mimicry as failed imitation. In Bhabha's and Appadurai's theories, the culture of colonizer or dominant group is always open to the influence of the Other and the underprivileged culture of the colonized. Moreover, the colonized not only copy the culture of the powerful, but also modify the original through a range of inevitable circumstances and critical purposes. Lee's Atomaus and Hyun's replicas reflect how these artists consciously changed the famous American and Japanese animation characters that they used to enjoy watching. Their revision of these characters, which addressed the influence of American and Japanese popular cultures in Korea, and the historical circumstances of Korea during the 1970s and 1980s can defy the hierarchy of colonizer and colonized, or original and copy. Their revision also problematizes the alleged homogenization of global popular culture, which usually moves from countries that are economically more developed to those that are less developed.

Lee and Hyun acknowledge the mixed nature of their final products. Lee's Atomaus is not the Japanese Astroboy Atom or the American Mickey Mouse; it also is not the original adaptation of these foreign characters, as Atomaus clearly has some association with Astroboy Atom and Mickey Mouse. Therefore, Lee's Atomaus is consistently fluctuating among different characters and cultures. Moreover, the original facial shape of Atomaus in 1992 is different from in the late 1990s: his face becomes more round and his pointy ears become shorter. Lee's and Hyun's works evince the artists' complicated attitudes toward their copies and cultural products that result from the hybridization process. Hyun's replicas of animated characters are also reminders of the distinctive historical context of popular culture in Korea during the 1970s and 1980s when it was difficult to

distinguish the purely "original" from the "fake" or the "domestic" from the "foreign." The lack of a consistent and fixed cultural identity in Lee's and Hyun's works serves as an important indication of postwar conditions in Korea. Indeterminate nature of Atomaus' character, further, makes it a positive example in Papastergiadis' theory.

Nonetheless, the collapse of national culture has not undermined the fervent desire to restore it, as I argue. Moreover, cultural hybridization is consistently subjected to commercialization. The most appropriate example might be the success of Korean popular culture in Asian countries, generally dubbed *hallyu*. In *Brands* (2003), Lee chose to express his oblique attitude toward multiculturalism and the transnational economic and cultural system—a series of phenomena called globalization. In this work, Atomaus flies over an unidentified background, which can represent both an infinite space for the idealistic progression of technology as the original *Astro Boy* symbolized. The space, replete with the logos of multinational companies, reminds the viewer of Astro Boy's history; Astro Boy (Mighty Atom in Japan) was the first Japanese animation character that had been exported to and became popular in the United States during the 1970s. However, the image of Astro Boy surrounded by the logos of multinational companies may indicate the artist's skepticism toward the multicultural state of economic and social systems, as Atomaus is not able to escape its background completely.[30] Indeed, as one of the most commercially successful artists among his generation in Korea, Lee collaborated with design companies to produce mug cups and T-shirts of the Atomaus character.

In this context, one should pose questions concerning not only the definition of a purely national culture, but also its role in an age of cultural hybridization. What are the relationships between the domes-

---

30. Certainly, celebrating cultural hybridity or hybridization cannot be a desirable alternative to the dangerous concept of nationalistic cultures and aesthetics. According to Japanese cultural and media theorist Koichi Iwabuchi, it is important to recognize that the analysis of intraregional cultural flows and consumption also "highlights the newly articulated asymmetrical power relations in the region" in terms of the quantity of media imports and exports (Iwabuchi 2002, 84).

tic and international cultural industries? Do they have a complementary or competitive relationship? Korean national *manhwa* and Hyun's oblique replica of Gatchaman open up discussions about different strategies for defining identity or non-identity in the age of cultural hybridization. However, it is not the specific traits of characters or cultural products alone that determine the proper type of cultural hybridity; the topics of how and why items from popular culture are used are relevant as well. The task is to develop a range of criteria through which one should avoid both outmoded nationalism and uncritical celebration of globalized, or commercially homogenized, cultures.

REFERENCES

Amin, Samir. 1992. *Empire of Chaos.* New York: Monthly Review Press.
Ansart, Olivier, et al. 1994. "Jibun o rikai saseru koto ga fuete na Nihon 自分を理解させることが不得手な日本" (Japan the Country that has had Trouble with Making Itself Understood). *Gaiko Forum* 外交フォーラム (November).
Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. "Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 27-47. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
_____, ed. 2001. *Globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Azuma, Hiroki. 2009. *Otaku*. Translated by Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture.* London and New York: Routledge.
Ching, Leo. 2000. "Globalizing the Regional, Regionalizing the Global: Mass Culture and Asianism in the Age of Late Capital." *Public Culture* 12.1 (winter): 233-257.
Han, Chang-Wan. 2004. *Manhwa gyeongjehak* (The Economy of Cartoons). Seoul: Communication Books.
Han, Kyung-Koo. 1998. "Ilbon munhwa gaebang-eul saenggak-handa" (Considering the Opening toward Japanese Culture). *Ippeop josa yeongu* (Legislative Studies) 253 (October):1-28.
Iwabuchi, Koichi. 2002. *Recentering Globalization*. Durham and London:

Duke University Press.

_____. 2008. "When the Korean Wave Meets Resident Koreans in Japan: Intersections of the Transnational, the Postcolonial and the Multicultural." In *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*, edited by Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi, 243-264. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Jung, Hyun-Min. 1996. "Ilbon daejung munhwa-ui gaebang-e gwanhan yeongu: hanguk munhwa saneop baljeon-eul jungsim-euro" (A Study of the Opening toward Japanese Popular Culture: The Case of Culture Industry in Korea). Master's thesis, Busan National University.

Jung, Mun-Sung. 1992. "Ilbon daejung munhwa-ga hanguk cheongsonyeon munhwa-e michineun yeonghyang-e gwanhan yeongu" (A Study of the Influence of Japanese Popular Culture on Korean Youths). *Hanguk cheongsonyeon yeongu* (Studies on Korean Youth) 3.4: 19-35.

_____. 1995. "Hanguk cheongsonyeon munhwa-e yuipdoen ilbon daejung munhwa-ui siltae" (The Current Status of Japanese Popular Cultural Flows into Korean Youth Culture). In *Cheongsonyeon yukseong gwalleon jeongchaek gaebal mit yeongu* (Policy Development and Research Concerning the Youth Development), edited by the Korea Institute for Youth Development, 291-359. Seoul: National Youth Policy Institute.

Kawakatsu, Heita 川勝平太. 1991. *Nihon bunmei to kindai seiyo* 日本文明と近代西洋 (Japanese Civilization and the Modern West). Tokyo: NHK Shuppan.

Kim, Jong-Ho and Ryu Han-Seung. 2006. *Hanguk-ui jeolmeun misulgadeul: 45 myeong-gwaui inteobyu* (Korea's Young Artists: 45 Interviews). Seoul: Da Vinci.

Kim, Nak-Ho. 2005. "Manhwa aenimeisyeon" (*Manhwa* and Animation). In vol. 4 of *Hanguk hyeondae yesulsa daegye* (An Outline of the History of Korean Modern Art), edited by the Korea National Research Center for Arts, 295-340. Seoul: Sigongsa.

Kim, Suk-Hoon. 1995. "Daejung maeche munhwa saneop-ui segyehwa-e ttareun byeonhwa-ui yangsang" (Mass Media: The Changing State of the Culture Industry in the Era of Globalization). *Sahoe gwahak yeongu* (Social Science Studies) 13.1: 225-248.

Ko, Chung-Hwan. 2006. "Kaerikteo-reul tonghae bon dongsidae misul" (Contemporary Art through the Lens of Iconic Characters). Kim Daljin Art Research and Consulting. http://www.daljin.com/2004/_main/critique/contents/contents.detail.php?code_critique＝G01&code＝C00330&nPage＝4&dal＝56c2a1b02302fcbcf0c20f986166f6ee.

Lee, Dong-Gi. 1995. An exhibition catalogue. Gallery On, Seoul.

Lent, John. 1999. "Comics Controversies and Codes: Reverberations in Asia." In *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*, edited by John Lent, 179-214. Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Lyechad, Gwenda. 1992. "America's Cartoons Built Frame by Frame, in South Korea." *Chicago Sun Times*, September 8.

Napier, Susan. 2007. *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Noh, Su-Een. 1998. "Ilbon manhwa, eotteoke ilgeul geosinga?: geudeul-ui munhwa-eseo uri-ui munhwa-ro" (Japanese *Manga*, How Can We Read It?: From Their Culture to Our Culture). Paper presented at the workshop on Research Methodology in History of Journalism, Sogang University, Seoul. http://moongsil.com/study/manga.htm.

Papastergiadis, Nikos. 1995. "Restless Hybrids." *Third Text* 32 (autumn): 9-18.

_____. 2005. "Hybridity and Ambivalence: Places and Flows in Contemporary Art and Culture." *Theory, Culture and Society* 22.4 (winter): 39-64.

Park, Joon Magnan. 2008. "Our Toys, Our Selves: Robot Taekwon V and South Korean Identity." Paper presented in conjunction with the exhibition *Toy Stories: Souvenirs from Korean Childhood*, The Korean Society, New York, February 7.

Schodt, Frederik. 2007. *The Astro Boy Essays: Osamu Tezuka, Mighty Atom, and the Manga/Anime Revolution*. Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press.

Song, Do-Young. 2007. "Hanguk daejung munhwa-ui honseongjeok hyeong-seong gwajeong-gwa hallyu munhwa damnon" (The Hybrid Making Process of the Korean Pop Culture and the Korean Wave Discourse). *Damnon 201* (Discourse 201) 9.4: 35-74.

Yamanaka, Chie. 2007. "Manwha, Manga and Cultural Identity: Comics Readers and Nationalism in Korea." www.ceri-sciencespo.com/themes/manga/documents/texte_cyamanaka.pdf.

Yi, Sun-Hwa. 2007. "Hyun Tae-Jun, amheuk muljil" (Hyun Taejun, the Dark Material). *Art in Culture* (November): 152-173.

Yoon, Jin-Sup. 1993. "Sinsedae-ui busang, dawonhwadoen pyohyeon yeolgi" (The Emergence of a New Generation, the Heat of Diversified Expression). *Wolgan misul* (Monthly Art Magazine) (December): 76-78.

_____. 1997. *Hyeondae misul-ui jaengjeom-gwa hyeonjang* (Issues and Scenes of Modern Fine Arts). Seoul: Mijinsa.