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Globalization, or the logic of cultural hybridization: the case of the Korean wave

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This article explores a regionally specific phenomenon and logic of transnational popular cultural flow as an example to illustrate the complexity involved in the cultural hybridization thesis and the implications that it has for the debate on the globalization of culture. This article argues that the Korean wave is an indication of new global, as well as local, transformations in the cultural and the economic arena. This phenomenon especially signifies a regionalization of transnational cultural flows as it entails Asian countries' increasing acceptance of cultural production and consumption from neighboring countries that share similar historical and cultural backgrounds, rather than from politically and economically powerful others. The article further argues that the Korean wave is a sign of how a country considered ‘in-between’ (or sub-periphery) can find a niche and reposition itself as a cultural mediator in the midst of global cultural transformation.

Keywords: global culture; cultural hybridization; Korean wave; globalization; Americanization; hybridity

Introduction

Whether it is the rapid proliferation of Starbucks coffee in Tokyo, the changing realities of the real estate market and high technology industry in Shanghai, or the recent boom in South Korean popular music and TV dramas in Taipei, the fabric of everyday life in many cities in the Asia Pacific region are comprised of increasingly transnational elements. Intensification of foreign direct investment, trade, cross-national corporate alliances and mergers, cultural exchanges and university tie-ups have fortified worldwide links between people, organizations, cities and governments of various nation-states (Lynn, 2005). These trends are particularly evident in the recent popularity of South Korean popular culture in Asia, and this requires careful attention and rigorous analysis. In what follows, this article examines a regionally specific phenomenon of transnational popular cultural flow as an example to illustrate the complexity involved in cultural hybridization and the implications that it has for the debate on the globalization of culture. One may understand how local peoples appropriate and articulate global popular cultural forms to express their local sentiment, tradition and culture.

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Global culture and the local mediascape: multidirectional transnational culture

The late twentieth century saw decisive changes in how national cultural and economic structures interacted as their historical influence confronted the realities of global integration. The outcome was a new and distinctive cultural and discursive space (the global) that eroded traditional forms of national culture and identity. These forms are increasingly glocal (Ritzer, 2004), which is to say that local cultures are now thoroughly interfused with the global. The emergence of communication technologies and media networks allowing for faster, more extensive, interdependent forms of worldwide exchange, travel, and interaction are central to this process.

Postcolonial approaches to the question of globalization typically seek to theoretically foreground heterogeneity and to criticize its disparagement or transcendence by any grand narrative. Homi Bhabha (1994), for example, deploys the term third space as signifying the ‘in-between,’ incommensurable (that is, inaccessible by majoritarian discourses) location where minority discourses intervene to preserve their strengths and particularity. Bhabha displaces hybridity from its biological context of miscegenation into the semiotic realm of culture and into the political field of power. For Bhabha, cultural hybridity is constructed by circuitous power dynamics where globality is contested and negotiated by locality by moving through semiotic or symbolic detours.

Stuart Hall (1991) acknowledges that global culture has had a homogenizing effect on local values but recognizes the role of local reception in shaping the communication process, where global culture is understood as a peculiar form of capital only able to rule through local capitals. Emphasizing the heterogeneity even of global cultures, Arjun Appadurai (1996) theorizes a comprehensive and complex global interactive system that is by definition untotizable, non-deterministic, heterogeneous and heterogenizing at a multitude of sites. He proposes to explore the fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics in the relationships among five dimensions of global cultural flows: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes.

From the focused perspective of economic globalization, these flows tend to be centered or unified but, for Appadurai, the global relationship between these ‘scapes’ is deeply disjunctive and profoundly unpredictable. Thus, in his account, arguments about cultural homogenization, commodification, or Americanization have failed to account for the dynamics of local indigenizations of metropolitan forces. Appadurai argues that the polycentric dispersion of the contemporary world has progressed so far that Americanization cannot be the only carrier of cultural power. The articulation of cultural domination is increasingly site and region-specific (Appadurai, 1996). As Appadurai concludes, the complexity of the current global economy is uniquely informed by particularized and fundamental disjunctions among economy, culture and politics, and scholars have only begun to theorize those disjunction and their implications. Even now, a decade after his critique was published in full form, Appadurai’s decentered and fragmented global cultural system contrasts starkly with the universalistically-inclined theoretical pretensions of cultural homogenization or Americanization, revealing the pluralistic and distinct disunities of cultural formations (Ryoo, 2004, 2005).

Along with the strong tides of global economy and culture coursing through the Asian region, the last decade has also witnessed the development of a unique pattern
of media production, distribution and consumption, in which one can see the signs of an increased diversity of originating nationalities. The introduction of new media, such as cable television and satellite provided the technological springboard for this trend, as new media created vast spaces for multi-channel broadcasting. In the midst of this new trend, the rise of South Korean television drama and cinema, following the popularization of South Korean music in many Asian markets, has created an interesting phenomenon which requires closer analysis of the transnational circulation and consumption of media products (Culture Industry and Cultural Capital, 2005). Although newspaper reports and articles on this scene abound, more thoughtful and retrospective observation and interpretation that moves beyond basic press reporting is needed so that these regional cultural trends and flows in an era of globalization can be fully comprehended. As such, the unique cultural phenomenon of South Korea’s media transformation is an interesting and important case in the context of the broader work done by international communication scholars. Hence, the aim and scope of this article is not an ethnographic or textual analysis of the presence and popularity of South Korean mass-mediated culture and its contents in the region. Rather, this paper is more concerned with the historical, social, political economic as well as the discursive construction of the relationship between culture and regional imaginaries and/or identities.

A brief history of the Korean wave

South Korea’s culture industry is presently enjoying something of a heyday. South Korea has become the seventh-largest film market in the world, with national film attendance totals by 2000 exceeding 70 million. In a phenomenon the Asian mass media have referred to as the Korean wave (or pronounced Hallyu in South Korean), South Korea is now a brisk exporter of music, TV programming, and films to the Asia-Pacific region (‘Im Kwon-taek shares,’ 2002). The popularity of South Korean dramas and music has begun to edge out American and Japanese market dominance in Asia, which regionally caught the Korean wave early this decade.

In a basic way, then, the term ‘Korean wave’ simply references the popularity of South Korean popular culture in other Asian countries. The Korean wave began with the exporting of South Korean TV dramas such as Winter Sonata across East and Southeast Asia. When South Korean dramas became popular the spill-over effects also heightened interest in South Korean movies and popular music. A weepy love story, Winter Sonata, became the rage in Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam and Uzbekistan after it drove Japanese audiences into something of a frenzy in 2004. In Thailand and Malaysia, people devoured A Tale of Autumn, and Vietnamese viewers were glued to Lovers in Paris. In China, South Korean dramas are sold and pirated everywhere, and fans adopt the clothing and hairstyles used by South Korean protagonists. South Korea, historically more concerned about fending off cultural domination by China and Japan than in spreading its own culture abroad, has nonetheless emerged as Asia’s pop culture leader. From well-packaged television dramas to slick movies, from pop music to online games, the South Korean media industry and its stars are increasingly defining what the people of East Asia see, listen to and play (Onishi, 2005).

Initially many Asian television companies broadcast South Korean shows because the productions were impressive-looking and their syndication was
inexpensive. As the regional exposure to South Korean drama increased, the programming has resonated with Asian audiences and their popularity has grown; by 2000 the Korean wave was in full swing. Today, observers generally agree that the most likely explanations for the popularity of South Korean shows, singers, and movies throughout Asia include South Korea’s high income levels and the close cultural proximity and affinity they share with neighboring Asian countries. As a result of these and other economic developments, South Korea is now the twelfth-largest economy in the world, and its entertainment companies are able to finance shows and movies with production values much higher than in much of Asia. South Korean pop singing performances are slickly produced and often feature spectacular laser and fireworks shows. Meanwhile South Korean shows and movies deploy themes that Asian audiences can relate to more easily than those of Western entertainment. South Korean dramas typically deal with family issues, love and filial piety in an age of changing technology, and often reinforce traditional values of Confucianism. While some anxiety has arisen about the potentially corrosive consequences of Western culture and the degree to which regional audiences can be said to experience culture in a manner common with South Koreans, their huge popularity implies that Asian audiences find the melodramatic and family-oriented messages relevant to their lives (‘Korean wave’, 2006).

Recently Winter Sonata was a big hit in Japan and other Asian countries. The phenomenal success of Winter Sonata has swept across Asia, making history along its path such as melting the cultural barrier between South Korea and Japan, heightening the South Korean image and promoting tourism to the peninsula. One can say that Winter Sonata has done more politically for South Korea and Japan than the FIFA World Cup they co-hosted in 2002. In an effort to overlook their bitter historical past, both governments promoted cultural exchanges before the World Cup event, but it was not until the huge success of Winter Sonata in Japan that a passion for all things South Korean was triggered. The social impact of this television drama has been felt in countries as close as China and as far away as the Philippines in terms of fashion and social trend. These days, fans tend to imitate their favorite stars, instead of just cheering for them on the sidelines. Even in Singapore, a country known for its warm and humid climate all year round, fans want to learn how to arrange the wool scarf conspicuously worn by Bae Yong-Joon and Choi Ji-Woo (Lee, 2005).

While South Korean dramas are still the most popular branch of the South Korean popular culture in many Asian countries, the love of South Korean popular music, or ‘K-pop’, is also swiftly making its presence felt. Watching South Korean dramas such as A Tale of Autumn or Winter Sonata prompted audiences in Asia to move to K-pop because of its beautiful and also familiar soundtracks. K-pop songs are often seen as showing a fuller affinity for the region’s character, and to express more soulfulness than Western music. For instance, BoA, a South Korean pop music singer, broke records in both South Korea and Japan with her smash hits, including ‘No.1,’ ‘Valenti’ and ‘Listen to My Heart.’ BoA has also become a cross-cultural icon, helping to bridge the historical tensions between South Korea and Japan. She was awarded the ‘Most Influential Asian Artist’ and ‘Favorite Artist’ prizes at the MTV Asia Awards held in Singapore in February, 2004 (BoA, 2006). BoA’s songs are now popular in Taiwan, China and many Southeast Asian countries.
The film industry provides another lens through which the global effects of culture and media can be understood. In recent years, the quantity and quality of South Korean films has led to a so-called ‘renaissance’ in South Korean national cinema, and it is widely considered the most successful and significant non-Hollywood cinema available in the world today. South Korea is one of the few countries where Hollywood productions do not enjoy a dominant share of the domestic market. For example, it should be noted that South Korean blockbusters led the resurgence of the local film industry, both in the domestic market and overseas. Titanic’s South Korean box-office record of 4.7 million viewers was swiftly overcome by the local 1999 action blockbuster, Shiri, which attracted 5.78 million viewers (‘Shiri director,’ 2000). Shiri itself has been trumped within South Korea by the 2000 action blockbuster, Joint Security Area, which in turn was overtaken by the 2001 film Friend, which set a new all-time box-office record of 8.14 million viewers (Berry, 2002; Pacquet, 2002). Both Shiri and Joint Security Area set new records for the export price of South Korean movies to its former colonizer, Japan, with the former selling for US$1.3 million and the latter for US$2 million. Shiri even accomplished the unprecedented breakthrough of topping the Hong Kong box office for three consecutive weeks in 1999 (JSA breaks export record, 2000). In 2001, the overall success was even greater, with a 60% increase in rights sales over 2000 to a total US$11.25 million (Berry, 2002; Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2002).

Furthermore, recent critical acclaim, including the Best Director award for director Im Gwon-Taek (for Chihwaseon at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival) and the Grand Prix for director Park Chan-Wook’s Old Boy (won at the 2004 Cannes), seem to accompany commercial achievements and confirm a long-anticipated renaissance of South Korean cinema (Ryoo, 2004). Chihwaseon, director Im’s portrait of the nineteenth-century painter Jang Seung-Up (known as Ohwon), is the biography of an inspired but also deeply unsociable man. The director lays out this complex mindscape with the precision of one who well understands the artist’s wary relation to his audience (Corliss, 2002). Old Boy, portraying the life of a man placed into solitary confinement by someone he does not know, is a great victory for the South Korean film industry not only in terms of artistry but also commercial success since the movie sold its remake rights to Universal Pictures at the American Film Market in 2004. This dark and gloomy movie experiments with the themes of psychological madness and the sexual distortions existing in contemporary South Korean society and modernity (‘Contemporary culture of South Korea’, 2006). Soon after, Kim Gi-Duk, the director well-known for his Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter and Spring, won the Best Director award in 2004 at the 54th annual Berlin Film Festival for Samaria, which tells the story of a teenage prostitute.

By February 2004, South Korean-made movies enjoyed a domestic market share of 82.5%, an all-time level that broke the record set only a month earlier. Director Kang Je-Gyu of KangJeGyu Films, the mastermind behind South Korea’s first blockbuster Shiri in 1999, broke the 10-million attendance record set by Silmido with his Korean War epic Taegugki (The Brotherhood of War) in 2004, seen by at least 13 million customers. At the American Film Market, Taegugki earned an additional US$500,000 from overseas distribution deals. With the public eager to share in the glory, film-makers hope to attract as many investors as they can to finance better movies that generate bigger revenues (‘Filmmakers offer,’ 2004).
Recent South Korean films have been produced in the context of intense competition in the film industry, directors trained outside of the USA (in France, Spain, the Netherlands, China and Europe), and new script templates that center more fully on distinctively South Korean situations, where the dialogue is built around a contemporary and easily recognized vernacular, and with reliance on younger actors, younger scriptwriters, and less formulaic Hollywood clichés. The impact of the Pusan and Jeonju Film Festivals in annually screening hundreds of new European, Canadian, South American, Chinese and even Japanese films has reconfigured the basic templates in the direction of more original productions. That is, heightened competition has generated more films, and faster and less predictable, even unique, storylines that are more clever and aggressive. Such films in turn have quickly influenced traditional South Korean network soap operas, and introduced a very fast production style for television plots, which then requires even greater innovation in South Korean film-making with even stronger writing and higher definition of the art. Also supporting the South Korean film industry has been active government controls against copying and piracy, which have allowed the film industry to produce many films and assure their overall profitability given very strong DVD and aftermarket sales. In addition, a government-enforced screen quota system since 1967 has limited the number of days per year non-domestic movies can be shown on any one movie screen in South Korea (‘Contemporary culture of South Korea’, 2006). Recently, this practice has come under fire from non-South Korean film distributors as unfair. As briefly mentioned earlier, the cultural flow has tended to move outward from South Korea, where South Korean television shows, K-pop and movies have gained wider popularity in other Asian countries. This is so in part because of a logic of cultural promotion and/or intervention, and the Korean wave is a reflection of the intensified state deregulation that resulted from the transplantation of a discourse of national competitiveness into the media industry.

Globalization, or the logic of cultural hybridization

There are numerous renditions of globalization and also a number of major frames of reference in international communication research to explain this current phenomenon. Among those, one approach comprises discourses that identify cultural hybridity or hybridization that investigate power relations between center and periphery from the postcolonial perspective (Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1994; Shim, 2006; Shome & Hegde, 2002). Some globalization scholars have argued that two opposed and extreme forces (i.e., the views of those who strongly endorse the globalization of economy and culture, as opposed to those who completely oppose the project, sometimes in a reactionary way) contend for influence; this is the dichotomous logic underwriting Benjamin Barber (1992)’s Jihad vs. McWorld model. In contrast, this paper argues that while these binary logics can be defended as offering plausible accounts of world order, they share the common shortcoming of marginalizing democratic practice (neither McWorld nor Jihad are democratic in impulse).

As such, hybridization discourse provides a better and richer theoretical alternative, since it accentuates the adaptation and active articulation of global processes with local norms, customs, taste, needs and traditions. Understood in this way, globalization ironically encourages local or ‘subaltern’ peoples to rediscover the
local that they have neglected or forgotten in their drive towards Western-imposed modernization during the past decades (Shim, 2006; Spivak, 1988). Particularly, the increasing intra-regional flows of popular culture has produced a wide variety of vernacular and multiple modernities, that are never a simple replica of Western and singular modernity and also inherently untotalizable, nondeterministic, and heterogeneous through an ongoing act of cultural hybridization (Appadurai, 1996; Iwabuchi, 2001; Ryoo, 2005). In order to understand the mutual articulation of local and global nexus, one must be able to negotiate their complex intersection, and one may justifiably argue that the Korean wave has achieved its own mode of modernities through South Korea’s unique modernization process both economically and culturally.

The term hybridity is used in postcolonial studies to describe the newness of the many different forms of migrant or minority discourses flourishing in the diasporas of the modern and postmodern periods. For Homi Bhabha (1994), an influential postcolonial theorist, the term hybridization locates the margin where cultural differences come into contact and conflict. Hybridity unsettles all the stable identities constructed around oppositions such as past and present, inside and outside, or inclusion or exclusion. Hybridization hence offers a possible release from the singular identities that are constructed when class, race or gender are seen as primary or exclusive categories of cultural analysis (Macey, 2000, p. 192). Of course, hybridity should not be understood as predicated on the negation, or the contradiction, of identity, but is always mixed, relational and inventive as a function of its inevitable and systemic condition.

Bhabha celebrates the ‘in-between’ spaces created and inhabited by hybrids, and sees all cultures as now caught up in a continuous process of hybridization. He uses the term ‘third space’ as signifying an in-between, incommensurable location where minority discourses intervene to preserve their strengths and peculiarity (Bhabha, 1994; Ryoo, 2004). Hybridization has become a universal feature of ongoing trends in cultural production and consumption, with both the globalization and localization of the culture industry. Hybridization, however, is not merely the blending and synthesizing of different elements that ultimately form a culturally faceless whole, nor is the idea properly understood as the mere summation of difference where eclectic symbolic elements coexist. Rather, the space of the hybrid marks the dialogical reinscription of various discourses in a spatio-temporal zone of signification. In the course of hybridization, cultures generate new forms and invent new connections with each another.

It seems quite clear that hybridization is an inevitable course for all contemporary cultures as well as postcolonial cultures, and reckoning with this account theoretically is necessary to understand the politics of global and local intersections. Although one may raise a question that the hybridization thesis may be tautological in a way, especially in a global context because all cultures are mixed and intermingled form, it is still a useful framework to understand the increasingly glocal cultures. Thus, examining and conceptualizing hybridization entails reformulating international communication beyond popular, yet binary, models such as resistance and domination, symbolic and material, and cultural studies and political economy.

In understanding the postcolonial notion of hybridity, one must not view it simply as a descriptive device, but as a communicative practice constitutive of, and constituted by, multidimensional socio-political and economic arrangement. Thus
hybridization of culture occurs as local cultural agents and actors interact and negotiate with global forms, using them as resources through which local peoples construct their own cultural spaces, as exemplified in the case of South Korean cinema and television dramas. The diverse images and texts circulating within Asia were providing new opportunities to construct an alternative consciousness through the sharing of popular culture. Therefore one may understand that globalization, particularly in the realm of popular culture, engenders an unpredictable, fluid and creative form of hybridization that works to sustain local identities in the global context (Cho, 2005; Shim, 2006). In this context, the Korean wave is pertinent to the field of global communication studies because this cultural phenomenon is quintessentially communicative, central to a notion of shared and mediated culture as a transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic form and action by means of which people communicate, understand each other, and develop their new identities.

Imagined regional community through popular culture

Academic reports of many kinds are generous in forecasting Asia’s bright days to come. Economic developments in the region are not the only aspect of the situation attracting attention, and political and cultural changes are also remarkable. Many Asian countries were long distant from their closest neighbors in terms of cultural understanding and exchanges. Instead, they have tended historically to link more closely to the former colonial empires or advanced Western countries than with neighbors sharing borders. But this trajectory is shifting as cultural spaces in many Asian metropolitan cities are opening to ‘Made in Asia’ ideas and products from popular music to films to television dramas. Despite these changes, however, Asian politics and economies are not moving without posing dangers for the stability of the world order. Political antagonism is still alive among countries within the region, and Asian societies still have some distance to travel before a more stable sphere of public concern and discussion have been created on a transnational level (Cultural Space and Public Sphere in Asia, 2006).

An example of these risks involves the historical differences separating Japan and South Korea, especially their conflicts regarding the collective memory of the colonial period, the territorial dispute over an island referred to as the ‘Independent Island’ (Dokdo in South Korean, Takeshima in Japanese), disagreements about the future of Hong Kong and China and their ongoing struggle for autonomy and control, tensions between China and Taiwan over the Taiwan Straits, and the dispute between Russia and Japan over the four southernmost Kuril Islands (which Japan considers their Northern Territories). It may be premature to speak of opportunities for transnational communities of popular culture to influence these antagonistic relationships at the level of nationalist politics.

Nevertheless, one might hope that popular culture, especially those artifacts of wide-ranging appeal beyond particular nations, could contribute to the vitalization of diverse publics as well as academic discourses on the cultural spaces and the region’s public spheres. In this context, one may understand that the impact of the Korean wave has not only permeated popular culture but is also a measure of a positive lifestyle for many Asian people. Some anecdotal examples evidence the enthusiasm that now greets South Korean programming and media products. ‘We
feel that we can see a modern lifestyle in those shows,' said Qu Yuan, 23, a student at Tsinghua University in Beijing: ‘We know that South Korea and America have similar political systems and economies. But it is easier to accept that lifestyle from South Koreans because they are culturally closer to us. We feel we can live like them in a few years.’ Jin Yaxi, 25, a graduate student at Peking University, said: ‘We like American culture, but we can’t accept it directly’ (Onishi, 2006).

The Korean wave also has significant practical ramifications. Before the Korean wave, many neighboring Asians either did not know much about South Korea or knew only a few simple, often stereotypical things about South Korea. The images Asians traditionally have associated with the country were generally negative and limited to such events as the Korean War and the vicious cycle of poverty, political instability and violent student demonstrations that typified the 1980s, along with the longer term issues connected to the demilitarized zone and national division. These negative images have partly given way to trendy entertainers and new technology, and the overall image of South Korea has changed a great deal after having exposed to contemporary South Korean lives through dramas and movies. Candy Hsieh, 22, who was browsing through shelves of South Korean dramas at a Taipei video store, for instance, said her parents became fans and visited South Korea last year: ‘I used to think that South Korea was a feudalistic, male-centered society,’ Hsieh said. ‘Now I don’t have the same image as I had before, and it seems like an open society, democratic’ (Onishi, 2005).

Regional cultural affinities also help explain this phenomenon in the sense that the success of the Korean wave is closely related to the ability of South Korean culture and media industry to translate Western or American culture to fit Asian tastes. For example, Western popular culture may be too different from that of China, thus the direct importation of Western popular cultural artifacts will not likely succeed because of a certain non-negotiable cultural heterogeneity. However, a South Koreanized version of Western popular culture reinterprets and mediates the imported Western culture in an Asian imaginary, to which Asian audiences can readily relate and accept. The cultural affinity between South Korea and neighboring countries in the region may thus function as an effective bridge or buffer between the West and Asia. The focus of South Korean TV dramas on family lives and their depiction of social relationships based largely on Confucian values and ideology supposedly contribute to their popularity in Asia (Park, 2006). In part this is so because family themes cater to a wider array of audiences, including both old and young people, and since East Asians share the Confucian cultural tradition, although this tradition is also a form of hybridity since all cultures (perhaps the nature of culture) are influenced by, and intermingled with others.

Hence, a hybridization thesis or postcolonial approach would entail a new angle of analysis that neither worships nor discards Confucianism, but comes at it anew, not for the purpose of reclaiming the old as a pure or natural state of being, but as an ‘ironic and mixed’ practice (Eckert, 1999). For example, the task of transforming Confucianism from an old, national or authoritarian version to a more democratic, transnational and participatory approach through the sharing of common culture may be better understood as deploying soft power, thinking about the expansion of certain cultural ideals as a kind of persuasion (as opposed to a continuing reliance on rhetorics that feature regional alternatives as resistance or cooptation) may help Asian people realize a fuller sense of equal responsibility for each person and of the
importance of intercultural support. Soft power may work in the production and consumption of culture, or through the power of persuasion, and there seems to be a lot of power in the ability of a country’s culture to disperse across nation-state boundaries.

It was Japan’s strategy, in the 1980s especially, to become a great cultural power able to promote (from its own perspective) the theme of East Asian civilization. Although often narrowly linked to nationalist pride in Japan’s uniqueness, gradually the theme became associated with the cultural ascendancy of the entire region. After the collapse of the socialist bloc and global condemnation of China in 1989, the Chinese embraced the theme of Eastern civilization as well. China had managed to shift attention from its membership in the failed group of socialist states to an identity as a dynamic East Asian state. These events provided almost ideal circumstances for South Koreans to seek advantage as the most Confucian of East Asian societies, the best judge of whether Japan could shed one historical mantle for another, and China’s restored partner ready to reciprocate for its historical role as teacher (Rozman, 2006).

Japan’s strong political and economic influence in the Asian region, which traces its roots to the colonial period, has facilitated the wide circulation and ready acceptance of its popular culture. However, the colonial past also hinders Japan’s deep penetration into some part of Asia. Given this situation, Park (2006) sees the unique historical legacy as leaving room for South Korean popular culture and its products to find a niche in the Chinese and other markets because the Japanese cultural baggage does not carry over to South Korea; for China, South Korea is free of past bad memories and its traditional relationship with those countries has been non-threatening.

While Japan has long claimed the role of cultural interpreter between the West and Asia, Japanese popular culture and its interpretation of Western pop culture nonetheless do not appeal to all Asian audiences (in fact some find it seriously alienating), and so a Japan-centric cultural model runs the risk of generating a sense of estrangement since they (like the USA) are seen as too post-industrial, too Westernized, and too individualistic to the extent that they seem incomprehensible, incommensurable or for some, simply weird. On the contrary, South Korean pop culture remains for now at a stage likely to retain broader cultural affinities with China and other Asian countries while also being just Westernized enough to mediate information from West to Asia. South Korea’s ‘in-between’ stance, not only in terms of economic development or political power, which is neither too advanced nor too behind, but also the development of culture industry and the degree of its hybridization, eases its connection with many Asian neighbors such as China, Taiwan, Vietnam and Singapore (Park, 2006).

Hence one can argue that cultural exchanges can serve as a momentum to provide images that can prevail over the otherness against each other, and to construct transnational and civil cultural codes beyond the national boundary. Furthermore, this kind of regional dynamism and cross-border cultural exchanges based on shared historical, social as well as collective memories of Asian people, (i.e. colonial and postcolonial experiences in this case) may generate the backdrop for the progressive regional community through mediated and popular culture. It seems quite clear that if the quality of the media contents are deemed to be equal, audiences
would prefer local(ized) products that bear some sort of cultural affinity and shared meaning as noted earlier.

**Backlash and future prospects: towards a new transnational inter-Asian culture**

The Korean wave is a clear indication of new global, and regional, transformations in the cultural arena. At the global level, it signifies multidirectional transnational cultural flows in which the previous cultural peripheries begin to have a presence and a voice in the cultural centers or cores. What this phenomenon also signifies is a regionalization of transnational cultural flows as it entails Asian countries’ increasing acceptance of cultural information from neighboring countries that share similar economic and cultural backgrounds rather than from economically and politically powerful others. Above all, new cultural formations are in the making, and the Korean wave is a first sign of how a country ‘in between’ can find a niche and reposition itself as an influential cultural mediator and creator in the midst of global cultural transformation (Bhabha, 1994; Park, 2006; Shim, 2006).

South Korea has not been a traditional financial or cultural powerhouse in the contentious East Asian region, but the country is emerging as what Chen (2000) calls a ‘sub-Empire,’ in part due to the historical confluence of media liberalizations that occurred in the 1990s. Chen contends that the phenomenon also may have an effect of countering the dominant US system of mass cultural production, and may also enable the mutual exchanges and plural coexistence of diverse inter-Asian cultures. This was possible in that the regional imaginaries are mediated through the image, commodity and sound of mass-mediated culture, a transnational form of cultural production and consumption which is very different from cultural forms associated with nation-states by far (Ching, 2000).

In this process, cultural hybridization has occurred as local cultural agents and actors negotiate with global forms, using them as resources through which Asian people construct their own cultural spaces, as exemplified in the case of the Korean wave. The various cultural exchanges within Asia are not exchanges occurring at the level of the state; rather they are shared by people who have experienced the contemporaneous changes brought about by Asian modernities, and who are seeking to solve its problems. Hence the Korean wave may be a result of the ability of a most secular capitalistic materialist desire to appease the newly emerging desires and diverse anxieties in the Asian region (Kim, 2001, quoted in Cho, 2005, pp. 166–167).

For this reason, one may also argue that transnational popular culture engenders a creative form of hybridization working towards re-imagining regional identities through the reciprocal cultural exchanges in the global/local context. Because the local needs to be understood as the space where global forces become recognizable in form and practice as they are enmeshed in local human subjectivity, and this relationship can only be understood through a multifaceted analysis centering on the complex encounter between local life and global forces. Therefore, the cultural hybridization thesis is relevant to multiple dimensions such as the cultural affinity of the region, economic and technological changes, state media policies, and political and historical considerations.

Of course, concern over a possible backlash is also growing. As South Korean dramas and movies emerge as a dominant cultural force in the region, there is also a
growing sentiment against the Korean wave. Concerns have also grown in countries such as China and Vietnam regarding the out-of-control influx and unregulated diffusion of American consumerism via the imported South Korean pop culture. Some people see the South Korean cultural commodity as a simple relay or partial remake of the American Hollywood original. The South Korean media industries are expanding into neighboring Asian markets, accomplishing what may be viewed as its own mode of cultural imperialism (Jeon & Yoon, 2005) and this may explain the recent decline of its popularity, if not a complete demise. This kind of concern for inverted or quasi-cultural imperialism needs to be addressed since the commercial drive of the South Korean media industry and companies indulge themselves in pursuing profit maximization by getting their products and services to the largest number of consumers, not only in South Korea but also overseas, and this kind of capitalist activity has been justified in the name of national interests.

Some Asian countries, especially those participating in the Chinese Economic Area, have clearly decided to seek to undermine the Korean wave in order to protect their local dramas and their own movie and television industries. In Taiwan, for instance, at least four or five South Korean dramas are being broadcast every night. If one considered re-broadcasts by cable television channels, the number goes even higher. And China’s State Administration of Radio, Film and Television recently announced that it will cut the quota of South Korean dramas by half in 2006. China’s state-run CCTV, along with several provincial television stations, have also expressed their intention to broadcast more dramas from Hong Kong and Taiwan, diversifying the source of foreign dramas, most of which came from South Korea in 2005. In Japan, a comic book entitled Hyomy-Hallyu, which translates as ‘Anti-Korean wave,’ has sold more than 300,000 copies. The story is of a Japanese high-school student who comes to realize ‘the real ugly nature’ of South Korea. This is due to some South Korean production companies giving the impression that they are obsessed with making money through the export of dramas and movies rather than sharing their know-how with locals (‘Hallyu phenomenon,’ 2006).

Therefore, spreading the Korean wave through unilateral investment simply based on an economic logic rather than a cultural exchange seems to spark resistance and animosity from local audiences toward South Korean pop culture. One viable option to continue this hybridized form of cultural phenomenon as a node for fuller intercultural understanding or communicative action in the inter-Asian cultural community is likely to pursue its hybridization even further, such as producing dramas and cultural contents in Taiwan, Indonesia or Vietnam with local staff and to supply such content directly to local audiences. Like any other negotiated and hybridized form of culture, the future of the Korean wave will be sustained only when the producers realize the significance of building such a reciprocal and trustworthy relationship with local audiences.

One may justifiably ask whether a state able to mobilize its economic and cultural resources to create high-quality cultural products will resist the temptation to influence regional imaginaries. Or, one might wonder if South Korea, busy creating cultural products consumed across many other borders in the region, can be considered an example of actual hybridization, or whether its behaviors are better categorized as a form of cultural imperialism. In this context, however, it is important to note that valorizing the political power of one state in deflecting corporate and
economic globalism does not necessarily concede the possibility that other states might be characterized by a relative lack of state mobilization when it comes to cultural exports.

To discount all attempts to valorize any state practice, whether it is a deregulation or intervention, can easily fall prey to the fallacy of zero-sum thinking, a perhaps unjustified concession to the idea that any gain to one party is a loss to the other. This numerical and mathematical pay-offs model, originally derived from game theory in economics, if not thoughtfully deployed can present a rigid and overly functionalist view, especially when understanding global culture and its flows, which are indeed fluid and complex, and such accounts may not be directly applicable to emerging transnational inter-Asian cultures. As the hybridization thesis maintains, every culture intermingles and interacts with one another dialectically to create a new one, and local culture simply does not change because there are many cultural screens and filters working in the process of accepting other cultures.

All told, then, there is a real possibility that the Korean wave might be understood as simply a means of South Korean national empowerment through cultural expansion. Or it might be exploited by the South Korean media industry to deploy hegemonic and ideological discourse by appealing to nationalistic sentiment. One should be able to judiciously decode the fundamentally hegemonic and capitalist discourses embedded in this type of neo-liberal argument. At the same time, one must understand the complex, fluid and multidimensional nature of the Korean wave, as with any other cultural phenomenon, and must avoid any reductionism that risks reducing the phenomenon to a one dimensional thesis, such as an inverted version of the cultural imperialism thesis. For example, considering South Korea’s ‘in-between’ stance, the cultural imperialism thesis fails to explain the success and popularity of the Korean wave in more affluent or stronger neighbors such as Japan and China. As Jeon and Yoon (2005) argued, there is no indication that local audiences in China feel any sense of cultural inferiority fever, and the thesis also fails to answer why so many Japanese women are crazy about Winter Sonata and its protagonists.

The diverse attributes of South Korean media products thus suggest the possibility that the Korean wave might be understood as a potential node of communicative practice for building a peaceful transnational community among many Asian countries that have experienced the harsh memory of colonialism and exploitation. A fuller intercultural understanding, as well as national identity formation, can only be achieved through the interaction with and negotiation of culture, whether it is high or popular. In this vein, the significant contribution of this cultural phenomenon has been to challenge the existing binary division between dominant and dominated cultures, center and periphery, and unidirectional cultural flows. As Park (2006) puts it, the Korean wave has crossed many boundaries (e.g., territorial, political, cultural, theoretical), and is in the process of constructing new kinds of relations across borders.

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