DESPERATELY SEEKING EAST ASIA
AMIDST THE POPULARITY OF SOUTH KOREAN POP CULTURE IN ASIA

This study questions the term ‘East Asia’ by investigating its usage in South Korean mass media and academic discourse about the Korean Wave and by reframing the Korean Wave as a source of new definitions of the cultural geography of East Asia and East Asian sensibilities instead of its current designations as either an empty signifier or a profitable market. Reframing the Korean Wave as a set of seminal iterations of East Asian pop culture includes its multiplicity and historicity, which enables the delineation of the cultural geography of East Asia as neither a unilateral nor fixed topography but rather something that is constantly re-imagined via pan-Asian pop cultures, materialized through actual encounters, and re-invented through shared historic pasts and modernizing desires. Examining East Asian pop culture also helps to illuminate current structures of feeling in East Asia (‘East Asian sensibilities’). The study concludes with suggestions for future collaborative works and theoretical endeavors, which are imperative for the establishment of East Asian pop culture as an object of analysis.

Keywords cultural geography; East Asia; East Asian pop culture; East Asian sensibilities; Korean Wave; South Korea

Introduction: the Korean Wave in Asia

This study first investigates how the term ‘East Asia’ is used in discourse about the Korean Wave, by both mass media and academies in South Korea (hereafter Korea). Second, it articulates East Asian pop culture by framing the Korean Wave as a source for imagining the cultural geography of East Asia as well as East Asian sensibilities.

Currently, it is clear not only that Korean pop culture has spread throughout Asia but also that it is a truly pan-Asian form of pop culture. This trend, called the Korean Wave or the Hallyu, includes Korean drama, dance music, films, animation, games, and fan clubs for Korean stars. It began in the late 1990s when several Korean television dramas took off regionally, gained
momentum in 2003 when Winter Sonata was broadcast by the NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation), and has continued to grow with the success of Korean films in domestic and regional markets and at international film festivals. Throughout its development, the Korean media and academies have generated enormous amounts of discourse, explanations, and analyses.

The wide exchanges of pan-Asian pop culture and increasing transactions among Asian countries have enabled the idea of a supposedly discrete place, East Asia, to be extensively, fashionably circulated both in Korea and throughout the region. Similar popular variations of ‘Asia’ extend beyond the cultural realm: economically, the Pacific Rim is regarded as key; politically, ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) + 3 (China, Japan and Korea) is emerging as a noteworthy regional institution; and, at least theoretically, the voices in favor of reconceptualizing the Third World are garnering more attention. Because of the contrast between the region’s still-nebulous cultural definitions and its rapidly growing global importance, profound consideration of the term ‘East Asia’ is both historically and theoretically necessary.

Rather than exploring the Korean Wave’s essences, reasons, effects, or strategies, as previous studies have done, this study focuses on the term ‘East Asia’ in relation to the Korean Wave and its discourses. Following Stuart Hall’s inquiry (1993), it revisits questions such as ‘Which East Asia?’, ‘What is East Asian culture?’, ‘Whose East Asian identity?’, and ‘Which version of East Asian modernity?’. Based on the diverse perspectives of Korean journalists, critics, and intellectuals, an attempt is made to understand the reconfiguration of East Asia and to articulate East Asian pop culture through the Korean Wave and its associated discourse. This theoretical linkage of the Korean Wave to East Asia helps illuminate the emerging identities, consciousnesses, and mentalities that are being constituted in the region through the consumption, both structural and private, of pan-Asian pop cultures.

The Korean Wave and its discourses in Korea

Since the late 1990s, the Korean Wave has flooded a swath of Asian countries that includes China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Japan. Korean television dramas initiated this fandom. In China, What is Love All About?, which was broadcast regionally by CCTV (China Central Television) in 1997, became the first hit Korean drama; on Taiwanese television, Autumn Tale was the highest-rated program in 2001 (Chun 2006); in Vietnam, 14 Korean dramas were broadcast between 1997 and May 1999 alone, several of which were hugely popular (Lee, H.-W. 2006); in Singapore, Korean talents Yong-Jun Bae and Ryu Siwon were voted the top celebrities in 2004 and 2005, respectively; in Japan, the popularity of Bae, a hero on Winter Sonata, has helped create a
$2 billion effect in exports that includes tourism to Korea (Shim 2006). In addition, the Korean Wave has reached Southeast Asian countries dominated by Islamic culture such as Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as Hindu-dominated India (Chung 2006). In 2005 and 2006, the historic drama Dae Jang-guem [The Jewel in the Palace] achieved extensive success both in East Asian and Southeast Asian countries (Kim, S.-J. 2009, Leung 2009). In Korea itself, the gross revenue from exported television programs skyrocketed from $13 million in 2000 to more than $100 million in 2005 (Shim 2006). Clearly, the Korean Wave has become a major trend in pan-Asian pop culture.

Because the Korean Wave has inspired high domestic expectations for both commercial profit and national prestige, the Korean government and domestic corporations have been busy promoting its essence and developing strategies to sustain it. Governmental promotion has included introducing the Basic Law for Cultural Industry Promotion in 1999 (accompanied by a budget of $148.5 million) and establishing the Culture and Content Agency under the purview of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2001 (Shim 2006). For their part, the Korean mass media and academy have produced volumes of diverse and even contradictory opinions about the Korean Wave. The increased range of topics and the growing speed with which such information is disseminated show that a vortex of national interest and expectations has been created around the Korean Wave.

Because the Korean Wave has spread so far beyond Korea, into a regional phenomenon, an intriguing and important question involves how the term ‘East Asia’ has been utilized and conceptualized in the discourse surrounding it. Based on an examination of publications and research produced by the Korean media and academy, this discourse has been categorized into three approaches: cultural nationalist, neo-liberal capitalist, and translocal regionalist (Cho Han, H. 2003, Cho, H. 2005, Lee, K.-H. 2006, Kim, S.-J. 2009).

The cultural nationalist approach constitutes East Asia as a unilateral entity in which so-called Asian values are commonly shared and situates the Korean Wave as a symbol of Korean cultural excellence and competence. It particularly credits Confucian values such as unbreakable family bonds, patriarchal relations, and pure love for the Korean Wave’s appeal to Asian audiences, who are tired of violent and bloody American pop culture (Kim, S.-Y. 2006). Cultural nationalism, which often predicates on a hybrid thesis, praises Korean pop culture for nicely representing traditional moral values in modern, urban settings. While describing the popularity in Thailand of a Korean film, My Sassy Girl, H.-K. Kim (2006) argues that the success of the Korean Wave stems from the fact that Korean pop culture does a good job of applying traditional and Confucian values to Western cultural forms. In other words, by proving that ‘What is Korean is global’ (Jeong 2002, p. 11), Korean pop culture promotes the nation’s cultural pride and extends the reach of the Korean Wave. The introduction to an anthology of writing by Asian and Southeast Asian scholars in Korea (Shin & Lee 2006) exemplifies this approach.
in its argument that the Korean Wave should become a Global Wave by embracing more of the world’s national cultures (Shin, Y.-H. 2006).

The neo-liberal capitalist approach champions the importance of profit and of developing political strategies for continuing the Korean Wave, not only in Asia but through expansion into other regions. An anthology edited by Korean journalists who have reported the Korean Wave from various Asian countries highlights the importance of Korean cultural contents in the global economy with the motto ‘Soft power, Soft Korea’ (Yoo et al. 2005). The capitalist approach, which began in the mid-1990s with governmental promotion of media production as a national strategy for Korea, continues to harness the Korean Wave to the economic logic of developmentalism by not only requiring coherent commercial strategies such as co-production and localization (Keane 2006), but also by praising the government’s efforts to maximize the Korean Wave. One such effort, announced by former Kyonggi provincial mayor Son Hakyu, is a cultural cluster called ‘Hallyu-Wood’ (Yoon 2006).

Neo-liberal capitalism situates East Asia as the most profitable market for the Korean Wave but also as a place in which Korean pop culture can be tested before advancing to other regional markets.

Translocal regionalism, which is deeply critical of all capitalist approaches, emphasizes reciprocal Asian cultural flows and the establishment of a pan-Asian cultural infrastructure, including the invention of translocal or transnational identities. Pointing out the sub-imperial nature of capitalist discourse about the Korean Wave, K.-H. Lee (2006) suggests that these approaches treat East Asian countries simply as markets or consumers rather than as partners in an ongoing conversation. D.-H. Lee (2004) similarly observes the hegemony of sub-cultural imperialism among Korean Wave discourses. These criticisms of capitalist approaches often result in calls for building Asian cultural blocs against hegemonic Euro-American pop culture. For example, W.-D. Baik (2005), who contends that commercial trends only reveal that Korean pop culture is an imitation of or substitution for American pop culture, argues that the Korean Wave should be used to increase mutual understanding among Asian nations as well as to share East Asian culture in Asia. Along these lines, Cho Han (2003) states that the Korean Wave can contribute to the emergence of new agencies that continuously de-territorialize national boundaries and share porous and nomadic identities. Thus East Asia would be positioned either against Western or American culture or as an abstract space that is identified with cosmopolitan or global spaces.

The variety found in Korean discourse illustrates the diverse configurations of East Asia presented by the Korean Wave, a cross-identification which in turn echoes the acknowledgments by Korean journalists, critics, and academics of East Asia as a crucial element in the Korean Wave. However, the more people talk about the necessity and importance of East Asia within the Korean Wave, the more abstract what the term ‘East Asia’ refers to becomes in this context.
‘East Asia’ in the Korean Wave: caught between the global and the national

As regional flows of pop cultures intensify, Asian audiences can widely, almost instantly, consume regional cultural products that were once unavailable. Likewise, the Korean Wave has given regional momentum to the search for pan-Asian spectatorship and a definable East Asian pop culture. However, the current discourse of both the Korean media and academy indicate the configuration of East Asia only as a profitable market or an empty signifier. When East Asia is treated as a regional market in which Korean pop culture can earn huge profits before advancing into the global market, East Asia becomes both a touchstone that proves the superiority of Korean pop culture and a venue through which Koreans can pursue their national interests. The cultural nationalist approach feeds these interpretations by exaggerating the roles of traditional values and cultural legacy in the Korean Wave and by attributing its success to Korean capability and even Korean ‘cultural DNA’ (Yoo et al. 2005). For their part, capitalist approaches tend to characterize East Asia as a venue in which Korea can realize national success as well as enormous profits. Here, East Asia is often depicted as a stepping-stone across which Korean pop culture can advance to other markets, even global ones. K. M. Shin (2006) argues that the Japanese market can be regarded as the last space in which the Korean Wave tests the possibility of going beyond the Asian market before it enters the global or American market. For example, when Korean media proclaim the singer Rain, a superstar in Korea, as a celebrity in East Asia and a prospective worldwide star (Park 2006), its rhetoric stereotypes East Asia as a middle ground. This identification conjures the hierarchy of national, regional, and global that is rooted in the process of cultural globalization. So the term ‘East Asia,’ originally invoked with nationalist intent, can function as another national myth or even as a testimony to the presence of developmental ideology in Korean nationalism (Cho, Y. 2008a).

East Asia is configured as an empty signifier in two ways. First, the region is rendered as a unilateral entity that nonetheless possesses shared Asian values, a depiction that credits the Confucian elements in Korean pop culture as the main reason for its pan-Asian success. However, Son and Yang (2006) comment that such an Asian-value hypothesis easily loses its validity when one considers that different modes of Korean Wave fandom have developed in different Asian countries (e.g. not all of the Korean dramas and films that have attracted huge audiences in East Asia emphasize the Confucian values that are assumed to be pan-Asian). Still, East Asia in Korean Wave discourse is typically rendered as a one-dimensional space, positioned as the antithesis to Western or American culture. East Asia thus becomes an abstract container of Asian values; the diversity of Asian cultures overall, let alone their varying degrees of affiliation with Western influences or even varying degrees of acceptance/popularity of the Korean Wave, remains unrecognized.
Second, East Asia is romanticized without concrete references or specific schemes for facilitating reciprocal cultural flows. Despite its deeply embedded views of East Asia, the discourse of the Korean Wave does not recommend ways to promulgate mutual transactions of cultural products, construct a pan-Asian cultural infrastructure, or generate East Asian identities. Instead, this view (which is rooted in the translocal regionalist approach) tends to erase the national and regional specificity of the Korean Wave by emphasizing global influences upon Korean pop culture specifically and upon cosmopolitan consumption in Asia overall. As the national characteristics of both producers and consumers are rejected or ignored, historical differences and socio-structural hierarchies in the region are also wiped out. As a result, ‘East Asia’ as used in current Korean Wave discourse is a glamorous but elusive term that does not represent a concrete and indigenized sensibility.

Because Korean Wave discourse in Korea continues to trap ‘East Asia’ between the national and the global while conceptualizing it as either an empty signifier or a profitable market, the term is still subsumed within the rubric of globalism – which is predicated on the idea of national interest (Cho & Lee 2009). Despite it seeming to focus on East Asia, Korea’s new Asianism has become ‘regionalization without regionalism,’ an economic integration without regional consciousness (Shin, G.-W. 2006).

**Articulating East Asian pop culture amidst the Korean Wave in Asia**

The endemic popularity of Korean pop culture in Asia and the numerous discourses associated with it in Korea indicate the possibility as well as the urgency of fully articulating the term ‘East Asia.’ To this end, I attempt to reframe the Korean Wave in relation to East Asia. By taking the Korean Wave as the iteration of East Asian pop culture, this study figures out its cultural geography, which is imagined through pan-Asian pop flows, as well as its sensibilities, which are characterized by diverse spatialities and temporalities.

It is suggested that the first step toward articulating East Asian pop culture is to interpret the Korean Wave as an iteration of it, rather than an invariant repetition of Korean culture, a unique phenomenon, or a derivative substitute for Western pop culture. Within the Korean Wave, ‘the same [East Asian pop culture] is present, but not as an essence generating the merely accidental’ (Gilroy 1996, p. 23). To construe the Korean Wave as iteration necessitates illustrating the relationship between sameness and differentiation that the Korean Wave poses in East Asian pop culture (Gilroy 1993). When the Korean Wave is recognized as something more than simple repetitions or a new combination of cultural phenomena, it can contribute to the historicity as well as the multiplicity of East Asian pop culture.
Consequently, any call to construe must attempt to historicize the Korean Wave in relation to previous pan-Asian regional pop-culture phenomena. By recognizing the Korean Wave as iteration, it becomes possible to constitute any East Asian pop culture as an historic as well as substantial object (Chua 2004). Indeed, many Korean pop products have referred to previous regional cultural products (particularly Hong Kong noir films in the 1980s and Japanese dramas in the 1990s). Korean scholars are also commenting more frequently on the influences of Hong Kong films and Japanese dramas on the Korean Wave. By comparing Korean dramas and their counterparts in trendy Japanese dramas, D.-H. Lee (2004) shows many similarities in their major elements such as characters, settings, and core conflicts. Such recognition of the influence of previous pan-Asian pop cultures upon the Korean Wave not only acknowledges the historicity of East Asia pop culture overall, it also signals a shift in how its internal references are being perceived.

In addition, joint production of films and remaking of regional dramas have become fashionable trends in East Asian pop culture. Recent co-produced films including *The Promise* (2005), *Seven Swords* (2005), and *A Battle of Wits* (2007) combine narratives based on Chinese stories, the films of famous Asian directors such as Chen Kaige and Tsui Hark, and Asian actors including Korean celebrities such as Ahn Sung-ki, Jang Dong-gun, and Kim So-yeon. One recent remake of a regional television drama, *Boys over Flowers*, originated from a Japanese manga in the 1990s that has since been reworked into three ‘new’ dramas (in Taiwan, Japan, and Korea) and a couple of films. The Korean version of *Boys over Flowers* (2009), which became a huge hit throughout Asia, was aired in the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Indonesia, and so on. Such cross-references indicate that Asian producers are utilizing regional cultural elements to attract regional audiences.9

The growth of pan-Asian pop flows, including the Korean Wave, demonstrates that people in Asia are rejecting American pop culture as a single or even primary reference point in favor of other Asian pop cultures. As Chen (2001) contends, American mass cultural productions are only some among a range of choices available to young people in Asia. Of course, it is not intended to suggest that the hegemony of American pop culture in East Asia has been disrupted. Rather, to highlight the growth of contact zones and common subjects for conversation among people in East Asia. With the recognition of these simple cultural shifts it becomes possible to see Korean pop culture as a hybrid outcome of Asian as well as American pop cultural influences. When one also considers the increasing number of internal references within East Asian pop culture, the need for collaborative examinations of the diverse ways that Asian cultural products are produced, appropriated, and consumed becomes clear (Chua 2004, Shim 2005, Lee, K.-H. 2006).

In order to comprehend the ‘changing same’ of the iteration, the term ‘national culture’ should be clarified in the context of East Asian pop culture.
Rather than focusing on the displacement of the national by the local, which often becomes a deterritorial or amorphous space that easily loses its concreteness (Calhoun 2002), it is contended that the Korean Wave as a form of national culture is better suited to the configuration of East Asian popular culture.

In the perspective of critical studies, the term ‘the national,’ once habitually dismissed as negative, was associated with suppressive or even fascist enforcement that erases the diversity and multiplicity of different locales. Although this interpretation does contain some validity, negative views of the national are so easily assumed within critical studies that close examination of the term has become taboo. Thus, I prefer to use the term – cautiously but seriously – as a way of constituting East Asian pop culture. By doing so, it is possible to endorse the Korean Wave as an iteration of East Asian pop culture for both its specificity and its temporality, as Hong Kong films and Japanese trendy dramas have been.

Rather than identifying the Korean Wave as a (unique) source for the facilitation of mutual exchanges of Asian pop cultures, it should be regarded as a descendant of previous Asian pop cultures that will inevitably give way to yet more new ones. Then, as Hae-Joang Cho predicts, in ‘a postcolonial Asia constructed through the flows of popular culture...the term “Korean Wave” will be used together with the “Taiwanese Wave,” “Chinese Wave,” “Vietnamese Wave,” [and] “Malaysian Wave”’ (2005, p. 179). One example of such a post-colonial manifestation is a Singaporean drama, *The Little Nyonya*, which achieved extremely high ratings in Singapore in 2008–2009 and was also aired in several other Southeast Asian countries. *The Little Nyonya* is often compared to a Korean drama, *Dae Jang-guem*, in terms of its similar narratives about the ordeals and successes of the heroines and its focus on culinary activities, including extravagant cooking scenes. Because East Asian pop culture can be recognized as an historic accumulation as well as a sign of the simultaneous presences of different national cultures (Lee, M.-J. 2006), the Korean Wave as a product of national culture contributes to both the overall diversity and the specificities of East Asian popular culture. When more such ‘waves’ are recognized, people in Asia will have more contact zones and items in and by which they can recognize the similarities and differences of their diverse national cultures.

Although the Korean Wave retains ‘the same’ from other Asian pop cultures it does not reify them; instead the Korean Wave is ‘recombinant, ceaselessly reprocessed in the glow of its own dying embers’ (Gilroy 1996, p. 23). Given the decreasing momentum and intensity of the Korean Wave in several Asian countries in 2009, this turnaround might be received with anticipation rather than dread or sadness. In any case, it is possible to conceptualize East Asian pop culture as an historic and substantial entity that consists of a series of independent but nonetheless linked regional pop cultures.
Any interpretation of the Korean Wave as an iteration of East Asian pop culture must include the geography of East Asia that the Korean Wave helps to demarcate. How East Asia is delineated, where East is Asia located, and what makes East Asia an imaginary community vis-à-vis East Asian pop culture must all be determined. Attempts to articulate East Asian pop culture contributes to mapping an alternative geography of East Asia, which is referred to as its cultural geography. This cultural geography – which is limited by topography but not determined by it – is imagined through pan-Asian pop flows, materialized through actual encounters, and re-invented through shared historic pasts and modernizing desires.

One element that enables such connectivity within this topography is a modern form of contemporaneity based on the economic growth of Asian countries and a related emphasis on middle-class Asians in urban settings. The enthusiastic reception of Korean pop culture in Asia is encouraged by a sense of coevality between Asian, non-Korean audiences and the Koreanness represented in the Korean Wave (Iwabuchi 2002). Coevality indicates cultural proximity between non-Korean Asian audiences and the drama-mediated representation of Korea that they consume: for example, the modern, urban elegance depicted in Korean dramas made Taiwanese audiences aware of covalence between Korean and Taiwan (Kim, H. M. 2005a).

Both Korean and other Asian women were drawn to a Korean drama series, My Lovely Sam Soon (2005), whose central character is a single, overweight pastry chef in her late twenties without much of a social life. Accordingly, H. M. Kim (2005b) contends that the regional popularity of Korean drama has been made possible through the contemporaneity of desires among Asian women, who have emerged as a new middle class. In turn, this modern contemporaneity among consumers of Korean dramas, Japanese television dramas, and the Korean Wave often enables Singapore to be included under the banner of East Asia despite its official placement in Southeast Asia. Because of the popularity of Korean pop culture and the modern contemporaneity it represents in terms of modern, middle-class, or even luxurious lifestyles, ‘Korea has become one of the “hottest” new travel destinations for hallyu consumers’ from Singapore (Fu & Liew 2005, p. 217).

Shared pasts (including particular historic experiences) are another element that constitutes the cultural geography of East Asia. In this geography, ‘shared pasts’ refers not only to colonial experiences but also to post-colonial situations such as relationships with the West or Western modernity, and economic conditions. An exemplary case is the exclusion of Australia, which lacks such a shared past, from the cultural geography of East Asia. Australia, which is ‘geographically a continent unto itself and the immediate neighbor of Southeast Asia’ (Chua 2000, p. 20), has recently begun to pursue stronger connections with Asia and become more Asian-oriented (Ang & Stratton 1996). However, despite seeming similarities in urban daily life and economic growth, different modalities exist within the modern contemporaneities of
Australia and East Asia. In addition, Australia’s colonial and post-colonial experiences have been so different and so unconnected with the colonial and post-colonial experiences of East Asian countries that, as Chua (2000) points out, it has been culturally and economically oriented toward Europe and America. Australia therefore stands outside of a cultural geography based on East Asian cultural affinity, and it is ‘clear that the distance between “Australia” and “Asia” is still very wide’ (Ang 2004, p. 305). Thus it is not surprising that Australia has not participated in pan-Asian cultural flows, or that scholarship on pan-Asian pop culture and consumption either ignores Australia or treats it differently (Iwabuchi 2004, Chua 2000).

Proposed boundaries for the cultural geography of East Asia also help us to overcome another bias in the Western-oriented perspective on East Asia, in which the region has been regarded as both a unilateral and a well-fixed place. While the Korean Wave fosters connectivity within East Asian cultural geography, the diversity of its fandoms demonstrates that cultural geography is neither a monolithic nor a reified entity. For example, the ways that Korean pop culture is consumed differ widely from country to country. In Japan the television melodrama (e.g. Winter Sonata) has been the most popular genre whereas in China, K-pops and dance groups have been the most popular. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, historic television dramas such as Dae Jang-guem have been the hottest genre: Dae Jang-guem is based ‘on the real historical figure Jang-guem …who became the first female head physician to the Kin in the patriarchal Confusion society of the Chosun Dynasty of Korea in the mid-sixteenth century’ (Kim, S.-J. 2009, p. 739). By examining newspaper discourses on Dae Jang-guem in several Asian countries, S.-J. Kim (2009) has revealed significant diversity among local receptions of the Korean Wave and the social and cultural meanings associated with it. According to Kim, China and Hong Kong define Dae Jang-guem ‘as a woman’s success story highlighting her perseverance and humanity’ which ‘connects her with Confucian values and culture,’ while Korean news articles regard the heroine as a challenge to ‘the traditional image attitude as rooted in Confucian culture,’ and Japanese newspapers ‘treat Dae Jang-guem as a kind of resource with which Japanese fans can expand their tastes and activities in everyday life’ (Kim, S.-J. 2009, pp. 746–747). The striking differences among these interpretations further indicate the unevenness of the cultural geography of the region and its constant reformulation via pop culture that may have originated in one country (in this case, Korea) but are embraced as regional (i.e. East Asian).

Interestingly, Korea’s historically uncertain role in East Asia furthers the multiplicity of its cultural geography. Its entry onto the global stage has been quite recent, for example in comparison to Japan, which since the 1940s has played a mediating cultural role in which it ‘unambiguously exists outside of the cultural imaginary of “Asia”’ (Iwabuchi 2002, p. 7) in the triangular configuration of ‘East-Asia–Japan–the West’ (Otake & Hosokawa 2005). The ambiguity of Korea’s position, by contrast, can be summarized as
W.-J. Ryoo suggests that ‘South Korea’s “in-between” stance eases its connection with many Asian neighbors’ (2009, p. 146), a role that is confirmed by the nostalgia evoked by Korean pop culture among Japanese audiences, particularly middle-aged women (Hirata 2005). *Hallyu*’s depictions of family roles, heroic characters, and urban landscapes supply Japanese audiences with a connection to a slightly different but nonetheless meaningful past that is no longer salient in fashionable Japanese dramas.

At the same time, however, Korean pop culture heralds the latest trends in China, Vietnam, and Thailand by adding modern, luxurious images of Korean brands in both its shows and commercials, which routinely feature the wave’s biggest stars. According to Chua (2004), countries anticipating the wave or newly experiencing it, such as Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, regard it as a tangible, conceivable phenomenon (possibly because the latter two may be said to occupy, in terms of production and export capacity, the same in-between position as the Korean cultural industry). Positioned in a mediating role within the region’s cultural geography, the Korean Wave functions as a modern, popular cultural form that simultaneously evokes both sameness and difference among contemporaneous ‘Asian’ modernities (Iwabuchi 2004). The recurrent, burgeoning flows of East Asian pop culture have given new substance to the ambiguous imaginary space of Asia. As an iteration of East Asian pop culture, the Korean Wave helps people across the continent generate a sense of connectivity and openness within a specific cultural geography. The wave provides ‘new contact zones within which to find an interest in neighboring Asian countries and to reappraise those who have been “othered” for such a long time in modern Asian history’ (Cho, U. 2005, p. 145). Remarkably, although this cultural geography is still under construction, it is multifaceted, asymmetric, and diverse. Therefore, it is believed that the cultural geography of East Asia, envisaged through these growing pan-Asian cultural flows, is constituted not as a reified, fixed site, but as a variable space of both integration and contestation.

The next step in constituting East Asian pop culture is to clarify the emerging identities, consciousnesses, and mentalities within its cultural geography. The notion of structures of feeling (Williams 1977) proves useful in elucidating these elements, which are referred to as East Asian sensibilities, amidst the Korean Wave. Following Williams’s insight, East Asian sensibilities can be interpreted as emerging structures of feeling within the cultural geography of the region that encompass ‘meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt’ as well as ‘a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating’ (p. 132). This idea of East Asian sensibilities is predicated on the fact that the personal intimacy and socio-economic/geographic mobility implied and enabled by the consumption of pan-Asian pop cultures are experienced publicly and culturally as well as privately.
The emergence of East Asian sensibilities is not solely the result of the Korean Wave but rather a set of converging historic consequences comprised of different kinds of pan-Asian pop cultures that are increasingly exposed to each other, both directly and indirectly, within the cultural geography. Citizens of different nations who were once not only widely separated but also indifferent to each other now enjoy the same pop cultures; in turn, both the cultural content and the experience of consuming it enable them to know each other better and even to imagine each other’s communities (Anderson 1983). East Asian pop culture promotes mutual knowledge across distance, extends this knowledge across the countries in the cultural geography (During 2000), and supplies the people of those countries with common characteristics such as fanhood and consumerism (by virtue of consuming of the same circulated cultural products).

Undoubtedly, these increasing cultural flows within the cultural geography of East Asia have become sources for articulating new notions of Asian cultural commonality, difference, and asymmetry. To grasp these emerging structures of feeling, which are being constituted through East Asian pop culture within the cultural geography of East Asia, it is important to note two salient features of East Asian sensibilities: its asymmetric but synchronous spatialities and its uneven but simultaneous temporalities.

First, East Asian sensibilities reflect spatialities among the national, the regional, and the global that are asymmetric but synchronous in that they reveal a temporal consciousness that reflects an ongoing, uneven competition among national cultures, regional desires for the modern, and the influence of global modernity.

The authenticity of Korean pop culture, as a form of national culture that has emerged under global influence, is a heavily discussed topic in the discourse of the Korean Wave. While some critics claim that the unique Koreanness in Korean pop culture is the primary reason for its regional popularity, others are skeptical of the notion of Koreanness and its alleged appeal to regional audiences. The first viewpoint, which has been ubiquitous in Korean mass media, credits the wave’s representation of regional specificity (Confucian values) within global (Western) formats, whereas the latter evaluates Korean pop culture as merely an imitation of Western culture or at the very least as a hybrid of global and local products (Choi 2008, Ryoo 2009). This hybrid rationale does acknowledge the multiple spatialities of cultural products. However, because it is still filtered through a dichotomist lens that differentiates between the national and the global or the regional and the global, it homogenizes diverse and even contradictory materializations of East Asian sensibilities into a consequence of American pop culture or Euro-American modernity without illustrating their multiplicity or evolution.  

Under this rationale, it is impossible to conceptualize East Asian sensibilities without imposing Eurocentrism or the universality of Euro-American modernity (Dirlik 2000).
More useful than the hybrid rationale is a description of East Asian sensibilities that identifies them as embodying a ‘double inscription’ in which the global cultural, always and already present in national and regional cultures (Hall 1996), dissolves their previously demarcated borders (Stoler & Cooper 1997).16 Double inscription refers to the current saturation of Asian pop culture and everyday life in general with American pop culture; in turn, American pop culture is integrated into the pop culture of economically developed Asian countries (Cho & Chua 2009). In films, the ‘Korean blockbuster’ exemplifies this doubly inscribed condition: the first such film, Shiri (1999), was made in the style of Hollywood action films (i.e. including big-budget, melodramatic elements), but presents a nationally sensitive plot (Korean unification) and also evokes the visual style of Hong Kong action cinema.17

Driven by the Korean Wave, Broadway-style musicals are also finding commercial success in Korea and recognition in Asia: The Last Empress (a Korean musical that premiered in 1995) was the first in this genre.18 In her examination of the production’s development and the musical itself, H. Lee contends that ‘Broadway simultaneously represent[s] the desire to imitate a chief competitor and a foreign rival to be conquered by an authentic Korean product’ (2010, p. 58). The logic underlying the concept of the ‘Korean blockbuster’ or ‘Broadway-style (Korean) musical’ illuminates the complex combination of national elements and Western formats in Korean pop culture. However, this combination must be understood as a set of spatialities that are asymmetric but nonetheless synchronous: America (symbolized by Hollywood and Broadway) still functions as the object to be imitated and Korean-ness (both in terms of fictionalized national history and traditional dramatic elements) is an efficient tool with which to achieve both regional and global success.

As a pan-Asian cultural trend, the Korean Wave shows that global culture is already embedded in regional tastes; its regional appeal has emerged not because it presents traditional or Confucian elements as uniquely Korean, but rather because it reflects the intricate connections among different and uneven Asian sensibilities. As Ching (1998) observed, by construing this asymmetric but synchronous relationship among national, regional, and global cultures, East Asian sensibilities are defined through the substantiality of East Asian pop culture and the cultural geography of East Asia – not through negation (i.e. by what the West is not). Thus, the asymmetric but synchronous spatialities expressed in the Korean Wave indicate that East Asian sensibilities are neither identifiable nor incommensurate with Euro-American modernity. Instead, East Asian sensibilities, already and always inscribed by global modernity, have been historically cultivated and generated by the national and by regional specifics. Like the West, East Asia has no simple origins, nor can its histories be gathered into a singular narrative (Mitchell 2000).
Second, East Asia’s sensibilities reflect uneven but simultaneous temporalities among past, present, and future within its cultural geography. Because many of its countries have accomplished rapid industrialization, the region is emerging as an important part of the global economy wherein state-driven economic policies (based on, for example, a [post-]developmental state model) not only orchestrate markets and promote the export of domestic companies (Cho, H.-Y. 2000), but wherein pro-development regimes also impose sudden shifts upon culture and everyday life as well as economics (Cho, Y. 2008a). During rapid modernization, in the name of preserving tradition, the past is often re-invented and re-embedded in the present in the form of pop culture.

In their academic discourse, Korean scholars tend to advocate a kind of Asian-value thesis that credits the success of Korean pop culture in Asia to shrewd representations of traditional values (Confucianism, family bonds, patriarchy, pure love, filial piety, etc.) via Western plots set in modern, urban surroundings that involve youthful characters. They suggest that this refined setting of Asian values within Western frames appeals to a wide variety of regional audiences. This thesis, which attempts to define the Korean Wave as a stronghold of traditional values against corrosive Western culture, states that the traditional elements in Korean pop culture enable regional audiences to relate to the wave more easily. Its lack of concrete examples limits the Asian-value thesis to more of an assumption than theory; however, researchers have noted a few exceptions. Among Korean dramas, Son and Yang (2006) observe that trendy shows with few Confucian elements are more popular with regional audiences than more traditional shows. It is considered that the Asian-value thesis is, at least, wrong about the Korean Wave, and at most is predicated on a dichotomist lens between the national/regional and the global.

As a way of explicating the uneven temporalities, it is suggested that regional audiences recognize a ‘defamiliarized intimacy’ in the Confucian values embedded in Korean pop culture. For example, regional audiences viscerally recognize the Confucian themes in Korean television dramas. Nonetheless, such recognition does not mean that the Confucian ethos is an integral part of their daily lives, that they feel strongly connected to it, or that it appeals to them. In addition, it seems that regional audiences are often surprised and intrigued to find such strong Confucian characteristics in Korean pop culture. Along with Chua (2004), it is possible that despite their natural, instant sense of familiarity with these products, regional audiences also experience some alienation when they see the wave’s Confucian elements embedded in Western formats, demonstrating Western values. At the same time, however, this co-existence of uneven modalities within Korean pop culture elicits feelings of unexpected pleasure and empathy from regional audiences.

The combination of uneven temporalities is neither unprecedented nor unique in the history of East Asian pop culture. In his analysis of pan-Asian
fandom of Japanese drama, Iwabuchi (2002) introduces the idea of familiar difference, which embraces the condensed co-existence of many temporalities as well as cultures in a shared space. As such, in East Asian pop culture, invented pasts are positioned as the quintessential element of regional commonality. This co-existence of uneven temporalities within the Korean Wave also indicates the swift, almost compressed arrival of modernity that most East Asian countries have recently undergone and to which they are still struggling to adjust (Song 2006, p. 51). Moreover, these uneven temporalities indicate that the experiences of East Asian countries have been relatively coeval in terms of capitalist economic development. Enthusiastic popular reception of regional pop products in Asia signals that ‘Asians from different locations may share a similar orientation towards capitalist-consumerist modernity’ (Chua 2008, p. 81), one that emphasizes urban, middle-class, consumerist lifestyles. Here, past and present are not necessarily successive but rather are simultaneously produced or co-exist as uneven temporalities (Harootunian 2004). Within East Asian pop culture, thus, East Asian sensibilities show the same pattern of juxtaposed sameness and difference.

Conclusion

By examining the Korean Wave and its discourses in Korea, it has been attempted to theoretically refine the idea of East Asian pop culture, offer a nuanced understanding of East Asia, and unveil some of the contradictions and ambivalence articulated in the discursive construction of the region. Instead of designating the term ‘East Asia’ either as an empty signifier or a profitable market, the Korean Wave or East Asian pop culture in general has been utilized as a venue for imagining an alternative version of a place, East Asia. To this end, a cultural geography of East Asia is proposed that is neither a unilateral nor fixed topography but rather is constantly re-imagined and experienced through pan-Asian cultural flows. In addition, it is emphasized that East Asian pop culture helps to illuminate current structures of feeling in East Asia, which are referred to as East Asian sensibilities; these reflect the contested co-existence of diverse spatialites and temporalities. When the Korean Wave is framed as the iteration of East Asian pop culture, the phenomenon not only implies the complex, dynamic potency of living memory among regional audiences, it also demonstrates the multiplicity and mutability of their sensibilities, which are always unfinished, always being made within the cultural geography of East Asia (Gilroy 1993, 1996).

Collaborative research efforts are essential for the discursive construction of East Asian pop culture as an object of analysis (Chua 2004). Within the increasing regional cultural flows, some results of collaborative work in
pan-Asian pop cultures are already apparent. For example, collaborative as well as comparative approaches to the Korean Wave have been published or being prepared (Chua & Iwabuch 2008, Kim, S.-J. 2009, Kim, D.-K & Kim, M.-S. forthcoming). In the hope that this work will inspire further research into East Asian pop culture, it is suggested that historicizing the study of East Asian pop culture and theorizing Asian sensibilities in East Asian pop culture will be of prime importance.

East Asian pop culture needs more collaborative work, both historically and horizontally. Because the Korean Wave is not an utterly new or unique phenomenon, research that connects the histories of various pan-Asian pop cultures is needed, beginning with the early twentieth century when the idea of modern culture first began to be circulated in East Asia. Because the definitions of pop cultures have always evolved, current literature, theater, magazines, and even radio would be relevant to the discussion. An historic approach, however, should be accompanied by empirical research that illustrates how East Asian pop culture is materialized in various regional spaces and timelines. Collaborations such as these would enable multigenerational experts across Asia to produce substantial, cumulative investigations.

In addition, collaborative projects could substantially further the process of theorizing Asian sensibilities in East Asian pop culture. It is imperative to place the emerging identities, consciousnesses, and mentalities that are always under construction as regional pop cultures are shared and consumed within specifically East Asian contexts. Theoretical endeavors that focus on gathering information and producing narratives can also illuminate the changing sensibilities in Asia. For example, ‘not-yet-now’ thinking, still deeply embedded in East Asian pop culture, reflects a desire for ‘the future’ that blends nostalgia for the past (which is invested with the characteristic of stasis) with present desires for modernity. Theorizing the emerging sensibilities within East Asian pop culture will be useful both in reconfiguring the cultural geography of the region and in explicating East Asian modernities.

Although it is essential to further our understanding of the complex entanglement of uneven modernities in East Asian pop culture, precise definitions of East Asian identities and sensibilities remain empirical questions for each country within the region’s cultural geography. Not only will more theoretical and empirical articulation of East Asian pop culture generate further discussion and knowledge about East Asian modernities (and vice versa), the idea of East Asian pop culture in and of itself has much to contribute to current discussions of alternative and multiple modernities in the global era. The effort required to analyze and theorize the complexity of East Asian pop culture ultimately helps us imagine East Asian modernities as idiosyncratic phenomena, neither identifiable nor incommensurate with American and European modernities.
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Notes

1 See the special edition about Bandung/Third Worldism of *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2005).
2 In 1997 *What is Love All About?* became the first foreign highest-rated program, with a 16.6% audience share (Lee, H.-W. 2006, p. 77).
3 This syndrome endows Yong-Jun Bae with a new title, *Yonsama*, loosely translated in Japanese as Beloved and Respected Yong.
5 In 1995, before the beginning of the Korean Wave, the Korean government established the Cultural Industry Bureau within the Ministry of Culture and Sport and also offered tax breaks for film production in order to entice big local conglomerates (Shim 2006). 
6 Several Korean scholars attempt to differentiate media and academic discourse on the Korean Wave. Han Cho (2005) names three perspectives: cultural nationalist, neo-liberal, and post-commercial/post-colonial. In a similar way, K.-H. Lee (2006) groups the discourses into three positions: neo-liberal, cultural nationalist, and culturalist. S.-J. Kim (2009) characterizes research on the Korean Wave into two approaches: capitalist and cultural. My categories are similar to those suggested by Han Cho and K.-H. Lee; however, I also attempt to refine the third approach in relation to the idea of East Asia.
7 Keane (2006) points out that (South) Korea best illustrates a rapid growth development path: the Korean government invested in high bandwidth infrastructure and in some East Asian markets strives to exploit the lure of Korean culture as an alternative to exported Japanese culture.
8 In their examination of the 2002 Korea–Japan World Cup match, Cho et al. (2009) reveal that the social spectacle of the World Cup exemplifies the combination of Korea’s global desires and national intent.
9 A similar trend has begun in academia. For example, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* is devoted to the idea that Asian cultural studies scholars might actually speak to each other rather than primarily to the West (Cho, Y. 2008b).
Calhoun (2002) warns that the fear of bad nationalism leads to the hope that relatively thin identities will predominate.

In the discussion of the struggle to establish unique identities in East Asia, R. M. Lee (2006) also proposes that multiple modernities are potentially nationalistic.

Otake and Hosokawa (2005) investigate the triangulated relationship of Japan, the West, and ‘East Asia’ (excluding Japan) with respect to the phenomenon of ‘global karaoke.’

The term ‘structures of feeling’ acknowledges ‘the tension between the received interpretation and practical experience,’ and a kind of feeling and thinking that are ‘social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange’ (Williams 1977, pp. 130–131).

For a discussion of the universality of Western modernity, see Kuan-hsing Chen (1996), Chua (1999), and Dirlik (2000).

As Dirlik (2000) has observed, Eurocentrism is compelling because of its future as a constituent of most people’s hybridities.

Stoler and Cooper (1997) suggest that the boundary of included/excluded is no longer coterminal with the distinction between metropole and colony.

Shiri was a critical and financial success not only in Korea but also in other Asian markets (particularly Hong Kong).

Non-verbal performances entitled Nanta (1997) and Jump (2002) have been economically successful both domestically and internationally (Lee, H.-J. 2010).

In a similar way, Choi suggests that ‘such “foreign-yet-alike” traits have enhanced Korean media’s aesthetic appeal to close cultural, social and political proximity’ (2008, p. 151).

Chua (2004) suggests that the similarities of young, urban, middle-class consumer lifestyles and a projection of ‘Asian-ness’ facilitate audience identification across East Asia.

In her analysis of social issues during the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis, Song mentions that the fragility of South Korean society ‘was rooted in long-standing latent issues connected with compressed modernity and rapid industrialization’ (2006, p. 51).

As of this writing, an anthology titled Hallyu: Korean Pop Culture Waves in Asia and Beyond is being prepared for the publication by D-Kyun Kim and Min-Sun Kim.

References


Cho, Y. (2008b) ‘We know where we’re going, but we don’t know where we are: an interview with Lawrence Grossberg’, Journal of Communication Inquiry, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 102–122.


