Introduction: Conceptualizing the Korean Wave

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This essay introduces the "Korean Wave" special feature of this volume of the SERAS.

About This Special Issue

This special issue of the Southeast Review of Asian Studies grew out of a panel at the 48th Annual Meeting of the Southeast Conference of Asian Studies, held in Atlanta in January 2009 (see the conference program on p. 356). That panel, "The Korean Wave: Hallyu in Transnational Perspective" and this special issue were generously supported by a grant from the Academy of Korean Studies, part of the Strategic Initiative for Korean Studies promoting research on "The Korean Wave (Hallyu) and Korean Studies Abroad." The Korean Wave itself is a relatively new phenomenon, but research on the subject has grown rapidly and has reached a high level of sophistication. Our purpose in Atlanta, therefore, was not only to build on previous research but also to suggest new directions for the study of the Korean Wave and how such research should connect to Korean Studies, East Asian Studies, and cultural studies in general.

What Is the Korean Wave?

In the narrowest sense, the "Korean Wave" (hallyu 한류 in Korean) refers to a surge in the international visibility of Korean culture, beginning in East Asia in the 1990s and continuing more recently in the United States, Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Europe. The wave consists principally of two forms of media, television serials and pop music (K-pop), although Korean feature films and other musical forms are also part of the phenomenon.

Because the Korean Wave involves the export of Korean culture, it is inherently both a national phenomenon and a transnational phenomenon.
The emergence of a distinctly Korean popular entertainment idiom—and the impact of that idiom on other Korean cultural practices—are issues best understood in a Korean national context. But the “success” of the Korean Wave is a transnational issue: The salient questions are why and how Korean pop culture was received so enthusiastically abroad. These two questions, while distinct, are not unrelated: When promoters or government officials measure the success of the Korean Wave by overseas sales, they are making foreign consumers the arbiters of cultural value. This projection has the ironic impact of making Korean culture successful to the degree that it is enjoyed by non-Koreans. Indeed the term “Korean Wave” (한류 hanlui "流") itself was coined by Chinese journalists to describe the wave of Korean pop that struck China in the 1990s.

The Korean Wave also lies at the intersection of several different fields of inquiry. Because it involves pop culture, the Korean Wave has been studied most extensively in the field of cultural studies (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Howard 2006). But the Korean Wave is also a marketing and business phenomenon, involving concerted efforts by promoters, publicists, and corporate agents to sell Korean culture as a commodity (Cho and Kang 2005; Han and Lee 2008; Kim and others 2008; Lee, Scott, and Kim 2008). This process, in turn, has a distinctly political dimension. The Korean government has promoted the Korean Wave as an export industry, with efforts that range from celebrating Korean pop stars in tourism materials to the direct support of Korean media companies. Thus K-pop stars figure prominently on the Chinese and Japanese versions of the Korean Tourism Organization Web site, and government promotions specifically highlight K-pop celebrities (Yu-Shan Lin and Hwang 2008). At the same time, the Korean government has offered subsidies for “cultural industries” (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008, 28), and industry representatives have called for low-interest loans in order to support the continued success of hallyu (Kang 2009).

The Korean Wave as National Phenomenon

The four papers on our panel that have been revised for inclusion in this volume dealt with both the national and transnational aspects of the Korean Wave. Okon Hwang and Hillary Finchum-Sung were concerned primarily with the domestic aspects of the Korean Wave. Eun-Young Jung and Millie Creighton, by contrast, dealt with how K-pop was received abroad and how existing cultural conditions and practices shaped that reception.

Okon Hwang’s essay, “No ‘Korean Wave’ Here: Western Classical Music and the Changing Value System in South Korea” (56–68) is striking because it shows how the Korean Wave affects Korean culture more broadly. Hwang contrasts the Korean Wave with the fate of (Western) classical music in contemporary Korea. Classical music has historically been enor-
mously popular in Korea as a measure of cultural attainment, and thus, although sales of classical music recordings by Korean performers are dismal, families have poured considerable resources into classical music training for their children. In Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, training in classical music consumes economic capital but builds “cultural capital.” The Korean Wave, however, problematizes this “high culture” versus “low culture” distinction, since it gives official support to a redefinition of pop culture as legitimate and authentically Korean. The Korean Wave thus appears as a threat to the status of classical music in contemporary Korea.

In “Image Is Everything: Re-imaging Traditional Music in the Era of the Korean Wave” (39-55), Hilary Finchum-Sung treats the parallel case of traditional Korean music, or kugak, understood broadly as musical forms developed during the Choson dynasty (1392-1910). Since the 1960s, kugak has enjoyed government support from the Bureau of Cultural Properties to “preserve cultural forms that were disappearing from popular use” (42), and traditional musical forms were linked to a “search for unique cultural expression” distinct from “Western” music and art (43). “Traditional” Korean culture was contrasted, in broad terms, with “Western” individuality and materialism.

The success of the Korean Wave, however, undermined this concept of Korean culture. Demand for K-pop turned pop culture from a problem to an export, and the Korean government changed its conceptual framework accordingly. The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism now promotes kugak performances in non-traditional venues and its advertising campaigns connect, rather than contrast, kugak and Korean hip hop. The Korean Wave has thus generated new categories of cultural production, and Finchum-Sung carefully explores the dynamics of these new forms.

The Korean Wave as Transnational Phenomenon

Eun-Young Jung’s essay, “Transnational Korea: A Critical Assessment of the Korean Wave in Asia and the United States” (69-80), focuses, by contrast, on the cross-cultural face of the Korean Wave. “The Korean Wave,” she writes, “may not be as ‘Korean’ or as ‘authentically Korean’ as people might imagine” (78). Korean culture is popular overseas, she argues, partly because is it “transnational and hybrid” and “involve[s] combinations of local and foreign elements at multiple levels” (78). The Korean Wave was successful first in China and Japan because of a broad range of shared cultural tropes. Here Jung echoes a point made elsewhere, that the Korean Wave was successful in part because “Korean TV producers have not just imitated but also creatively appropriated and transformed Japanese TV dramas, so much so that Korean youth drama has now become popular throughout East Asian markets, including Japan” (Iwabuchi 2008, 153). In
the absence of such common cultural references, however, “riding” the Korean Wave is more difficult. Jung explores the difficulties of marketing the hip-hop performer Rain in the United States, where he was dismissed as “a copycat of Justin Timberlake” (77). But such adaptations, she suggests, may be precisely what is necessary to sell the Korean Wave in the United States: The singer BoA produced a special version of her video “Eat You Up,” featuring more overtly sexual imagery than the domestic version. Nonetheless, despite BoA’s success in Japan and Taiwan, she has yet to cross-over in the United States.

In the lead article, “Japanese Surfing the Korean Wave: Drama Tourism, Nationalism, and Gender via Ethnic Erotics” (10-38), Millie Creighton examines the Korean Wave from the standpoint of Korean-Japanese relations, with a particular focus on gender relations. The romantic appeal of Korean pop and drama stars such as Winter Sonata star Pae Yong-chun, she observes, threatened a legacy of transnational gender relations from the colonial era. Instead of a colonial regime, in which Korea, the colonized, is female, Pae (better known in Japan as “Yon-sama”) positioned Korea as male, and his throngs of Japanese female fans indirectly spawned an angry subgenre of Japanese pop culture: the “I hate Kanryû [Korean Wave]” movement. These anti-Korean books and comics (manga 漫画) were written predominantly by middle-aged and older men, precisely the demographic whose wives were the most avid Yon-sama fans. Creighton concludes that for “established males to whom the older, officially espoused definitions of Japanese culture granted more power and control” the Korean Wave was not merely a pop-culture phenomenon but a challenge to patterns of “career, family, and gender constructions” (34).

At the same time, Creighton notes how the Korean Wave has created possibilities for Japan and Korea to move beyond colonial and postwar relations. The Korean Wave, for example, has prompted a broader reevaluation of Korean culture, changing Korean cuisine, for example, from a strange ethnic food into a dining experience for special occasions. While many political legacies of the colonial era remain unresolved, Creighton suggests that this new appreciation of Korean culture has genuine potential and that Pae Yong-chun has “likely done more to contribute to positive relations between Japan and Korea than most of Japan’s political leaders” (16).

**Future Research on the Korean Wave**

Where might research go from here? Clearly a central question is “What is Korean about the Korean Wave?” Or, rephrased, “Are there features common to the Korean Wave across different cultures and markets, or is the appeal of the Korean Wave specific to local norms?” At Emory University, as part of our Korean Wave research project, we are examining the Korean
Wave in lesser-known markets, such the Americas and the Middle East. Our preliminary conclusions suggest that we can indeed find transnational constants in the appeal of K-pop, although these constants do not obviate the importance of local culture.

One striking constant in the appeal of the Korean Wave is its achievement of intense romantic passion without overt sexuality. This quality was described by a fan from Hong Kong quoted by Jung (72):

Those Korean dramas I watched ... [are] very different from Japanese dramas; Japanese dramas always have sexual scenes! And then you discover, there has been no such restrained love [in TV dramas] for a long time, and [you finally] find it in Korean dramas! That is, just a kind of eye contact, just a little touch, [one] still gets very excited. (quoted in Angel Lin and Tong 2008, 103)

This absence of explicit sex has helped the Korean Wave in the Middle East, where displays of physical sexuality can draw censorship, protests, and lawsuits (Emam 2008; Ying 2008). And the gentler, romantic ethos of the Korean Wave may also lie at the heart of its appeal in Latin America. In response to the general question “Why do you think Korean pop culture is popular in Latin America?” two Peruvian K-pop bloggers independently offered two strikingly similar responses. Respondent A reported that “I believe that dramas are so well liked because of the emotion that Koreans express through their actions, and the delicate way of representing love and other emotions” (translated from Spanish). Respondent B observed (in English) that “their plots are totally different from what we are used to. . . . their stories are sweeter, romantic in a beautiful way, funny, the plot grips you. . . . the actors seem to be different (sweets [sic], caring and handsome) and the Korean culture in general . . . is different (and better in some ways) from our own culture and we like that.” Despite the formidable cultural differences between Hong Kong and Peru, the non-physical sexuality of the Korean Wave seems to have common appeal.

What of the United States? As Jung observes, promoters have tried to “sex-up” Korean performers for the U.S. market but have had only mixed results. Further, this approach would seem to run against the broader appeal of the Korean Wave. Intriguingly, the latest attempt to promote K-pop in the United States draws on its desexualized romanticism. In summer 2009, the Korean band Wonder Girls began touring the United States as an opening act for the Jonas Brothers, a group known for its own American brand of chaste sexuality. The brothers sing about romantic passion (“If it’s you and me forever, if it’s you and me right now”) but have declared that they are all virgins and will remain so until marriage. The band deploys a series of devices to desexualize their romantic appeal. For example, the band members wear “purity rings” which symbolize their intention to remain sexually chaste (Wyatt 2008). At their August 22, 2009, concert in Atlanta,
the logic of this cross-cultural continuity was readily apparent. The show opened with Honor Society, an earnest, clean-scrubbed boy band recently signed to the Jonas Brothers’ own record label. The Wonder Girls then performed their single “Nobody But You” before yielding the stage to American Idol–winner Jordin Sparks, who led to the main act. The Wonder Girls, styled as a preteen-friendly version of the Supremes, fit seamlessly into this lineup. Their song of monogamous but non-sexual devotion fit perfectly between similarly themed songs by the two boy bands. Indeed, the entire evening was a reminder that Disney has long profited from an American tradition of earnest, fun-loving, non-coital sexual sexuality that began with Annette Funicello, the original Mickey Mouse Club sex kitten. The pairing of the Wonder Girls with the Jonas Brothers thus highlights and foregrounds how the Korean Wave can be understood as a single cultural phenomenon: a celebration of chaste sex appeal.

At the same time, however, there are profound differences in the impact of the Korean Wave in different markets. Selling Wonder Girls songs to U.S. preteens raises a radically different set of political concerns than those prompted by Pae Yong-chun’s appeal to adult Japanese women. Indeed, the response to the Korean Wave in the United States reflects local anxieties about race: On U.S. pop-culture blogs, the comments on K-pop focus largely on questions of racial authenticity. At the Perez Hilton celebrity gossip site, a recent exchange on the performer SeungRi was representative: “HMMMM, IT’S ALWAYS FUNNY TO ME WHEN I HEAR LIGHT SKIN PEOPLE TALK HMMMM GHETTO! FO SHO!” prompting the response, “LOL according to the racist people on this blog site, Seungri can’t do hip hop, dance, sing or rap because he’s asia [sic] and he’s not ‘darkskinned’ or white?????” (“Watch & Listen” 2009). Notably, these exchanges say little about Korea, instead reflecting historically constructed U.S. racial categories, especially the question of whether East Asians are “white” or “colored.” Indeed, these categories reduce the hybridity of the Korean Wave to another attempt by “whites” to appropriate “black” culture. This is a striking contrast to the Japanese response to K-pop. While Yon-sama’s appeal to middle-aged Japanese women expectedly encountered the legacy of Japanese colonialism, K-pop rappers in the United States have unwittingly bumped into U.S. racial discourse, including the legacy of the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Gentlemen’s Agreement, and the Civil Rights Movement. All this must be difficult to navigate or understand for promoters based in Seoul, and in this way the Korean Wave, for all its global reach, is ultimately shaped by local practices and local concerns.

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References


