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Euny Hong, The Birth of Korean Cool (2014)

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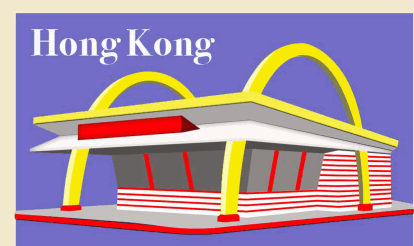
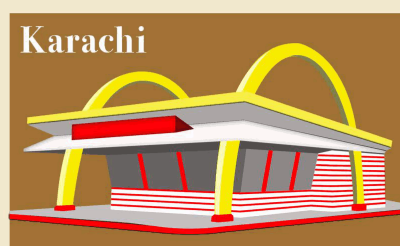
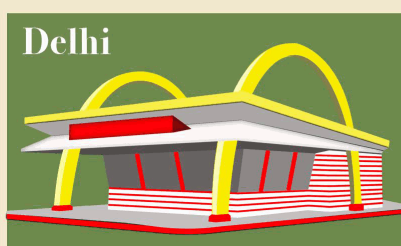
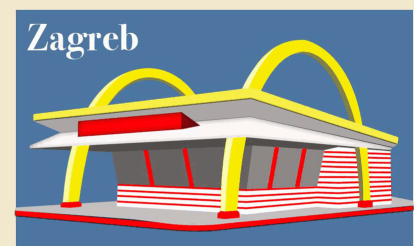
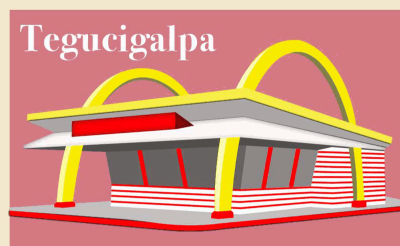
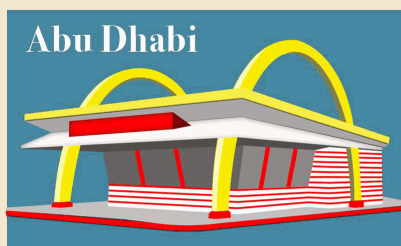
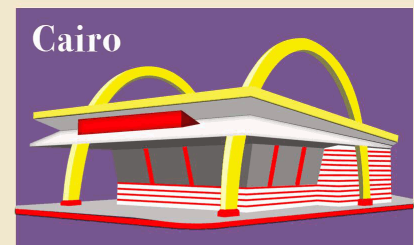
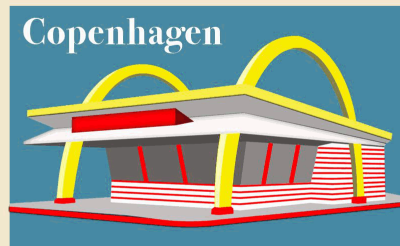
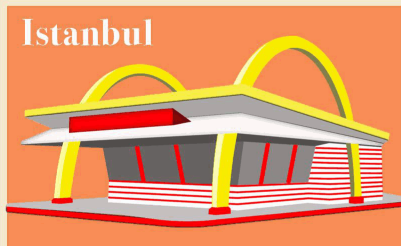
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Euny Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool* (2014)

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Keywords

Korea, Cool, Hallyu (K-pop), Pop culture, Gangnam Style, Samsung

Soonkwan Hong is an associate professor of marketing at Michigan Technological University. His research focuses on sociocultural and ideological aspects of consumption, which should facilitate our understanding of a variety of consumption practices, consumers' lived experiences, and stylization of their lives. Currently, he studies alternative sustainable lifestyles in multiple ecovillages in the U.S. and Europe and conducts research on eco-tourism. His research interests also extend to globalization of popular culture. He has published in international journals, such as *Journal of Business Research*, *Marketing Theory*, *Qualitative Market Research*, and *Arts and the Market*, and regularly presented at prestigious conferences.

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Book Review

Euny Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool* (2014)

Cool does not automatically translate into success unless it is methodically manufactured. As a mantra to revitalize a country in deep political and financial troubles, this seems quite counterintuitive, even atheoretical (Frank 1997; Nancarrow and Nancarrow 2007), but it nonetheless happened, and is still happening, in and around Korea. *The Birth of Korean Cool* by Euny Hong (2014) is keen to demonstrate that Korea is fully capable of rebuilding the country's image by making things that used to "suck" (as in *Samsuck*) look glaringly cool, despite its unequivocally 'uncool' history, tradition, social practices, and, in particular, geopolitics.

Korea is no longer a country of desperate people, suffering from a lack of access to natural resources, entrenched (and almost unfathomable) corruption, deep-rooted regionalism, and lack of creativity and innovation. How has the country managed to solve all these historically haunting issues and overcome such handicaps in a relatively short period of time? *The Birth of Korean Cool* provides a myriad of examples, albeit mostly anecdotal, to answer this question. In Hong's view, one of the crucial approaches Korea has undertaken is to implement, often controversial, government-led projects, such as the formation of The Ministry of Future Creation, regardless of any socio-politico-economical justifiability. *Hallyu*, another name for K-Pop, represented mostly by Psy's *Gangnam Style*, soap operas, and some award-winning movies that are unmistakably popular globally, across all continents, is not a byproduct of the arguably foolhardy top-down initiatives, but the very projected consequence, according to Hong.

In Korea, a country with an enormous amount of Confucian overtone, standing out and challenging opinions and/or decisions of senior members of society has been a taboo held for far too long. Such collective unconsciousness can be directly blamed for various cultural and political afflictions that potentially, and, indeed, nearly prevented the country from becoming truly sovereign, democratic, modern and prosperous. Correspondingly, the book introduces a series of culturally appalling Korean-specific day-to-day practices in both pre-modern and post-modern Korea. Deeply ingrained gender biases, thrashings at public schools, mandatory testing for intestinal parasites, MMPSI (massively multiplayer plastic surgery industry), MMOG (massively multiplayer online game), ultra expensive crammer schools and tutoring, skyrocketing suicide rates, and the very brutal reality imposed by the political economy of *chaebols* (large business conglomerate) are some notable items in the book that

tickle (and possibly satiate) readers' pallets salivating for the exotic, if not a more grotesque version of orientalism (for the reader unfamiliar with the term, the reference is to Said 1979).

Koreans (including me) can possibly echo with Hong who appreciates the modern history of Korea based on the observable misery, irony, adversity, and then the – almost uncanny – glory Korea has recently realized. At the same time, however, the analyses, arguments, and critiques provided may not be 'cool' enough to convince Koreans about their own lived experiences. It may rather come short, for some Koreans and knowledgeable Korea scholars, as "Modern Korea for Dummies." Not wishing to further discount the author's authentic motive followed by the quite unique and useful "up close and personal" accounts for the triumph of the nation, it is imperative to note that the modern history of Korea cannot be summarized merely with K-pop (i.e., *Gangnam Style*) and *Samsung*. This is even more the case if the summary comes from an observer, not participant, who was born and raised in the U.S. until she landed in Gangnam, an affluent district in Seoul, Korea, at the age of 12 and left the country again, presumably after high school.

Korea, certainly, has sociocultural problems, just as do many other countries including first-world countries, but they are probably not as serious as those described in the book. For example, the issue of gendered society, as Hong writes: "No boys allowed in French class and no girls allowed in German class." On the contrary, there were as many boys as girls in my high school French class in Korea, and my favorite teacher was male. Surprisingly, the author and I appear to be the same age – yet the Koreas that both of us observed in our youth seem to be divergent. Also, such issues are neither Korea-specific, nor time and space-specific, as we are still dealing with the same kind of seemingly bulletproof glass ceiling even in the U.S., reinforced particularly strongly by the 2016 presidential election. Take another example. Admittedly, Korea is the "mecca" for plastic surgery, from mild to quite radical procedures, but the chapter entitled "The Gangnam Chainsaw Massacre", in which Hong describes, for example, "...the jaw contouring, called mandible angle reduction surgery" is a relatively circumstantial story, with unverifiable numbers of patients. In fact, there is a good alternative, the injection needle. (Coincidentally, the industry is turning their focus to "medical tourists" from other Asian countries. *Hallyu* now evidently includes plastic surgery.)

Besides these anecdotes, some of the information from the interviews also induces doubtful double-takes. For example, Hong conveys an excerpt from an interview, "...American television is losing the

future because it has done almost nothing to accommodate to global tastes...the world loves K-dramas.” What is palpably missing in Euny Hong’s account is the fact that American television has been picking up its pace and committed fans in the last few years: *Game of Thrones*, *House of Cards*, *The Walking Dead*, to name a few. Paradoxically, many Koreans have been indulging with *Mid* (American dramas). Hong carries on with another quote that is also questionable; “Minorities in the U.S. are increasing, so race and language are less significant barriers. The audience for Korean films is obviously going to increase.” What is, de facto, obvious is that race and language issues are resilient and not going away, at least not at any projectable speed, or so effortlessly. As such, several stories in the book demonize, hyperbolize, and then gentrify Korean culture, and its people, to sentimentalize the success story (albeit in a very efficient and fascinating manner.)

Notwithstanding the aforementioned potential misrepresentations, *The Birth of Korean Cool* ultimately deserves a great deal of credit for introducing the concept *Han*, which is essential to better understand ‘Korean’, as the mystical momentum of the country, as well as the national psyche. *Han* is a concept, as well as a medical condition, specific to Koreans, defined as hopeless and helpless resentment, agony, and unidentifiable pain. Such “wrath” is mainly caused by the numerous invasions Korea has had to endure throughout its long history, and as recently as the 36-year Japanese reign in the early last century. This “racial memory” is still at the heart of many Koreans who dance like *Psy*, sing like *Girls’ Generation* (Korean girl group), produce films like *Oldboy*, perform like Yon-sama (Bae Yong-joon, a Korean actor), and work hard to invent *Galaxy* phones: these are cultural and technological vendettas on the erstwhile oppressive traditional forces, of the East and the West.

In the end, Hong leaves readers with a fundamental, and yet stimulating (perhaps highly clichéd), question that invites a plethora of responses: Are we about to witness a paradigm shift in the global political economy based on the new cultural currency, ‘cool’? I would answer the question with another: Are we ready? Clearly, as Hong points out, it is irrefutable that Kimchi and Bibimbab have gained vast interests from the West in the past decade, and Korea has flourished enough to almost, if not entirely, forget the national trauma of needing to accept emergency relief funds from the IMF (International Monetary Fund) less than twenty years ago. The daunting and acute reality obscured in the book, however, is that the nation is not actually “conquering” the world in any aspect of our lives (notwithstanding the fact that the word “conquer” sounds so colonial in the age of postcolonialism). Many Koreans in the U.S., and other

developed countries, still struggle to find a place that has decent Kimchi, driving by countless Chinese and Japanese restaurants. Barack Obama's brief idea about copying Psy's horse dance at his inauguration ball (USA Today 2012) does not necessarily conjure up anything close to the mythical images surrounding John Lennon, the recent Nobel Laureate. Samsung is facing the demise of the whole Galaxy line because of physical risks associated with Galaxy Note 7, and it is reluctant to bring up the massive recall for top-loading washers.

What is still not so cool about Korea is the practice of "overidentification" (as in Zizek 2009) and the collective misconception of itself as unique and novel. Koreans have been "overidentifying" with the global competitors in terms of the methods, contents, and forms to beat or meet them, as well as the overall system. We have seen many government-led projects – in the West and now in Asia – aimed at reviving a country's economy (viz., The New Deal, Chinese Economic Reform, India's New Industrial Policy 1991, and more recently Japan's Abenomics) with a wide range of sociopolitical ramifications. Although the results of the programs have been mixed, each country is left with a cultural, not pop cultural, legacy that is more extensively and intensively encroaching upon global consumers' lives. As Hong would agree, Korea has just not been honored with such a cultural triumph. Focusing on pop culture may or may not enable the country to conquer anything, even with the great work ethic owing to *Han*.

Poignantly, it is recognized later in the book that the country as a person would be diagnosed with neuroticism, oscillating between inferiority and superiority complex. The demon exists deep inside the society. Koreans will become able to defeat it when they realize pop culture is simply a façade of any given culture, and the exchange rate for the currency, cool, is exceptionally high. Unfortunately, by the same token, the author spoils her own conclusion in her note at the beginning; "Korea refers to South Korea, unless otherwise specified." Watching a news show featuring the celebration of Halloween in Korea, a guy asks me, "So you're a professor from Korea, right? North or South?" When the question becomes a "rhetorical" one, Koreans may be able to celebrate Halloween even harder without any domestic sociocultural repercussion. Until then, Hong's account remains highly relevant and current.

While *The Birth of Korean Cool* is a brilliant way of educating cultural novices about Korea and its culture, it may have offered only marginal perspectives for (pop) cultural connoisseurs. But, all said and done, the author has launched a useful discourse on nationalism and 'cool'.

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