

Southeast Review of Asian Studies
Volume 31 (2009), pp. 69–80

Transnational Korea: A Critical Assessment of the Korean Wave in Asia and the United States

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In the international spread of popular culture from Korea since the late 1990s, known popularly as the “Korean Wave,” television dramas have won the hearts of fans and paved the way for rising interest in Korean popular music throughout Pacific Asia and in Asian communities around the world. Indeed, Korean popular music has been spreading rapidly; but, as argued in this article, the reasons have relatively little to do with aesthetic and cultural values that could be identified as typically Korean. After providing a theoretical framework for understanding transnational flows and hybridity, this piece looks specifically at the Korean television drama *Winter Sonata* and the music, public personas, and career trajectories of BoA and Rain (비 비), ultimately questioning the cultural validity of the concept of the Korean Wave.

The Korean Wave: Transnational Flows & Hybridity

Regarding the international spread of Korean popular culture over the last ten years, known popularly as the “Korean Wave” (*hallyu* 한류 in Korean), TV dramas have dominated both popular and scholarly discourse, which view Asian “family-friendly” values as the main reason for the success of the shows. As many Korean TV dramas have won the hearts of fans in China, Taiwan, Japan, Southeast Asia, and overseas Asian communities worldwide, prominent cultural scholars like Koichi Iwabuchi and Chua Beng Huat began to analyze the penetration of Korean TV dramas into Asian markets and defined the process as newly “emerging intra-Asian popular cultural flows under globalizing forces” (Iwabuchi 2002, 16). At the same time, Korean popular music has also been spreading rapidly, on a scale scarcely imaginable only a decade ago. However, the reasons behind this new craze have very little to do with traditional Asian family values or uniquely Korean musical elements; instead, interest in Korean popular music seems to be due to its increasingly transnational and hybrid aspects. Today, the issues of transnational cultural flows and cultural mixture (that is, hybridity) are important discourse elements practically everywhere, actively discussed and debated in almost every country around the globe.

The term *transnational*, coined by writer Randolph Bourne (1886–1918) in his 1916 article “Trans-National America,” has been favored by scholars like Arjun Appadurai (1996); Linda Basch, Nina Schiller, and Cristina Blanc (1994); Ulrich Beck (2000); Ulf Hannerz (1996); Iwabuchi (2002); Michael Smith (2001); and Wolfgang Welsch (1999) over such generic or overused terms as *international* or *global*. Basch, Schiller, and Blanc define transnationalism as

the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call those processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. . . . An essential element . . . is the multiplicity of involvements that transmigrants’ [sic] sustain in both home and host societies. (1994, 7, emphasis added)

This definition indicates that the concept of *transnational* refers to multiple connections and interactions linking communities across the borders of nation-states.

Iwabuchi also emphasizes the mobility of the term as he argues that

transnational has a merit over *international* in that actors are not confined to the nation-state or to nationally institutionalized organizations; they may range from individuals to various (non)profitable, transnationally connected organizations and groups, and the conception of culture implied is not limited to a “national” framework. As Hannerz (1996, 6) argues, the term *transnational* is “more humble, and often a more adequate label for phenomena which can be of quite variable scale and distribution” than the term *global*, which sounds too all-inclusive and decontextualized. (2002, 16–17, original emphases)

Consequently, transnational cultural flows concede a “more locally contextualized manner to the interconnections and asymmetries that are promoted by the multi-directional flow” and successfully discount nationally separated boundaries both from above and below (Iwabuchi 2002, 17). This point is particularly important when we look at the ways in which expressions of Korean pop culture—TV dramas in particular—have been unevenly disseminated and differently received by diverse Asian and overseas Asian communities over the last ten years. Contemporary Korean pop culture is built on such unavoidable transnational flows, as its multi-layered and multi-directional mobility has been creating various socio-cultural contacts taking place across, beyond, and outside national and institutional boundaries.¹

With regard to hybridity, cultural scholar Marwan M. Kraidy defines the term as “the fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities . . . which often occurs across national borders as well as across cultural boundaries” (2005, 5). In his landmark study *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi K. Bhabha stresses the in-betweenness of national and

cultural identity by arguing that all cultural systems and statements are constructed in what he calls the “Third Space,” which enables other positions to emerge. Bhabha explains that “it is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this ‘Third Space,’ we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (1995, 209). Bhabha also describes this space as a “stairwell”:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. (1994, 5)

In other words, embracing the hybrid nature of cultures encourages us to move away from the problematic qualities of essentialism and exclusionism inherent in notions of cultural “purity” and “authenticity.” Stuart Hall suggests, in fact, that

we cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about “one experience, one identity,” without acknowledging its other side—the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, [a culture’s] “uniqueness.” Cultural identity, in this . . . sense, is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. (1990, 225)

As Hall sees it, “modern nations are all cultural hybrids” (1996, 617). In the field of music, Martin Stokes argues that “purity of musical expression is not possible . . . [because] the building blocks of every mixed style are themselves hybrids” (2004, 60). Consequently, contemporary transnational popular music certainly carries this ubiquitous hybridity. But while all music is in some sense “hybrid,” I think we can also use the term more narrowly to refer to mixture that is intentional and perceptible. In the following sections, I examine the transnational and hybrid aspects of the Korean Wave as it has been flowing in multi-layered directions and constantly repackaged for different consumers in different regional communities, particularly Asian and Asian American communities around the world.

The Korean Wave: Television Dramas

Cultural Proximity & Family Values

What, then, do Asians and Asian Americans (and other Americans who have been exposed to Korean pop culture) find so attractive about the Korean Wave? Many fans of Korean TV dramas talk about the physical attractiveness of the Korean actors and actresses and their modern and glamorous fashion, make-up, and hairstyles. They also point to the lavish productions, including their skillful editing, beautiful cinematography, good acting, captivating storylines, and accessibility. Thanks to recent IT and digital-media developments, versions of these dramas are available for little or no cost with various subtitle options, including English, Japanese, Thai, Indonesian, Turkish, Spanish, and several Chinese dialects.

Before the Korean Wave, Japanese pop culture, including TV dramas, had been popular in some parts of Asia. Scholars in the field of Japanese popular culture studies—Hirochi Aoyagi (2000), Timothy Craig (2000), Iwabuchi (2002), and Saya Shiraishi (2000)—have pointed that the popularity of Japanese pop culture in Asia was largely driven by the perception of “cultural proximity,” as Japan and other Asian societies share certain cultural values; and, indeed, Asian viewers often referred to this cultural affinity as a reason for their enthusiasm for Japanese TV dramas. However, undying anti-Japanese sentiment due to the colonial experience among the former Japanese colonies and the overtly sexual and violent content of some dramas have created a simultaneous degree of resistance (and, occasionally, official banning). Thus, when Korean TV dramas—which provide a similar cultural proximity but without the colonial legacy and without the offensive content—were introduced to Asian viewers in the late 1990s, the flow was smoother than for their Japanese counterparts. Jin Yaxi, a 25-year-old graduate student at Beijing University, said in 2006: “We like American culture, but we can’t accept it directly. And there is no obstacle to our accepting South Korean culture, unlike Japanese culture. Because of the history between China and Japan, if a young person here likes Japanese culture, the parents will get very angry” (quoted in Onishi 2006). Emma in Hong Kong wrote:

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. . . . [I’m] so surprised to find an ethnic group [that is, Koreans] who possesses such qualities! (quoted in Lin and Tong 2008, 103)

Since the late 1990s, when the first commercial television station (SBS, Seoul Broadcasting System) began broadcasting both cable and regional television stations, Korean television broadcasters have faced intense com-

petition for audience attention. Among the various kinds of programs, TV dramas have always been very popular. In any given week, Korea's three main stations air more than thirty TV dramas, and the stations and news media closely monitor popularity ratings. These competitive circumstances have resulted in high-quality productions of TV dramas and have attracted attention of neighbor countries, China in particular.

In 1997, China's national station (CCTV, China Central Television) aired the Korean TV drama *What on Earth Is Love?* (also known as *What Is Love All About?*), which became a huge hit and was re-broadcast by several other Chinese networks (Shim 2008, 25; Yu 2005, 52). This 55-episode-long comic family drama takes a Confucian approach to the issues of patriarchy and cultural clashes by reflecting conflicts between older and younger generations. The emphasis on "family values" had immediate resonance with Chinese audiences (Han 2007, 154–56). Surprised by the fast-growing fandom for Korean popular culture, Chinese popular media began to use the term *hanliu* 韩流 (Korean Wave). Soon, numerous Korean TV dramas were enjoying popularity throughout China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Japan—and among overseas Asian communities worldwide, including in the United States.

The major Asian and Asian American communities in California, New York, Chicago, and the Washington, DC, areas also became important disseminators of Korean pop culture. In May 2004, a *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist noted that the Korean Wave was not yet a "wave" in the United States, but its ripples had reached these shores: "U.S. audiences for Korean television drama are small, but vocal and devoted. Stations in Chicago, Philadelphia, Honolulu, Los Angeles, Seattle, Washington and New York offer several shows daily. These cities have sizable Korean-American populations, but Korean-Americans are not the sole audience" (D'Alessio 2004). The vice president of WOCH-TV in Chicago, Kwang Dong Jo, explained:

We knew that most viewers of the dramas were first-generation Korean-Americans, but we worried about the second generation, who were losing the language. . . . We started subtitling to reach those younger people, and we asked viewers for feedback to see if they liked the subtitles. . . .

We got nearly 500 e-mails from English-speaking Americans. . . . We never expected non-Koreans to write, and it was a shock to us. I know these dramas are becoming popular even in Latin America—but in the U.S.? We are still surprised. (quoted in D'Alessio 2004)

Winter Sonata & the *Yon-sama Syndrome*

The Korean drama *Winter Sonata* (겨울연가 *Kyōul yōn'ga*, literally "Winter song") has become emblematic of the Korean Wave. Though Korean dramas had begun to make a strong impact in much of Asia as early as the late 1990s, it was not until the tear-jerker *Winter Sonata* (冬のソナタ *Fuyu no sonata* in Japanese) that the Korean Wave hit the shores of Japan. With

its twenty hour-long episodes broadcast—in full—four times between 2003 and 2004 by NHK, Japan’s national public broadcasting company, this drama was nothing short of a sensation for Japanese audiences. In fact, it received a spectacular 20.6 percent program rating (Ham and Hō 2005, 13). *Winter Sonata* is about four young, attractive people’s love and career struggles and family tensions.² Besides the good acting and well-written episodes, Korea’s picturesque countryside and luxurious cosmopolitan city-life shown in the drama wowed Japanese fans.

Given the colonial history between Japan and Korea and some lingering postcolonial conflicts, their national images of each other have been antagonistic: Korea is often seen by Japan as poor and backward, and Japan is seen by Korea as barbarous and greedy. Japanese fans, who are predominantly middle-age women, very often were brought up with prejudice toward Korea and acknowledge that they were very surprised by the beauty of the nation and the people of Korea. One Japanese female fan said, “I am embarrassed to say this, but I didn’t really know about Korea. I just had a bad image of Korea because of their dangerous political situations. But when I was watching the drama, I was really shocked to learn that Koreans are very handsome and beautiful, and the places in the drama looked nice too” (“*Fuyu no Sonata*” 2004). This kind of Japanese attitude of racial superiority toward Korea is not unusual; it is, in fact, well known by Koreans. Thus, when the main actor in *Winter Sonata*, Pae Yong-chun (Bae Yong-jun) 배용준 (b. 1972), became a superstar in Japan, it surprised not only Japanese but Koreans as well.

This actor, nicknamed “Yon-sama” ヨン様 (Honorable Yon) in Japan, gave rise to the so-called Yon-sama syndrome, the huge fandom culture built around his persona. Numerous commercial items related to *Winter Sonata* and Yon-sama’s character have been produced in Japan, and Gosireh, Yon-sama’s upscale Korean restaurant that opened in 2006 in Tokyo, has been very popular among middle-aged Japanese women. Even after five years, Yon-sama syndrome is still present in Japan, and the drama has been repackaged over and over, including a musical version and an upcoming animated version. All of these developments were unimaginable a decade ago.

The latest piece of the Yon-sama syndrome I have encountered came not from Japan but from Los Angeles. In a February 2009 *Los Angeles Times* article, Teresa Watanabe reported on the tensions that grew in Little Tokyo Towers five years ago when Koreans started moving into the predominately Japanese senior housing facility. Complaints from the Japanese residents soon reached the ears of Hongsun Kim and others at the Los Angeles Service Center. Watanabe (2009) described the response as follows: The social service center

sponsored a series of four films, two Japanese and two Korean, to share cultures and bring residents together. The idea was sparked when social workers visited a Japanese resident who often complained about Koreans—only to see a poster of Korean drama star Bae Yong Jun [Yon-sama] in her apartment. The venture was considered a success, drawing 80 seniors who wrote in surveys afterward that the films opened their eyes to new aspects of each other's cultures.

Since then, residents started a “Good Neighbors” group to help smooth over conflicts and have begun various cultural events together, including karaoke nights, basic language study, and joint participation in traditional holiday events. Last summer, they put together a “harmony concert,” featuring traditional Japanese and Korean dance and music; an Asian American jazz group; and three emcees speaking Japanese, Korean, and English. This concert “drew a full house of more than 150 people, half Korean and half Japanese. And more importantly, the complaints about each other have markedly dropped” (Watanabe 2009). This sharing-of-cultures solution might seem too rosy. Only time will tell whether ongoing political tensions between Koreans and Japanese—such as the territorial dispute over tiny Takeshima (Tokto) Island in the Sea of Japan (East Sea)—permit similar “harmony concerts” to occur in the future.

But the evidence is clear that because Korean TV dramas touch the right chord of Asian sentiments, such as family values and respect for elders, they were welcomed by many Asian viewers who share similar cultural values. But how can one explain the expansion in popularity of Korean TV dramas to America, Europe, and Africa? Besides the good-looking actors and lavish production, new cultural products and new patterns of consumption seem to be playing an important role as well. Popular cultural products and cultural consumption in the twenty-first century have become increasingly transnational and hybrid, as national, cultural, and ethnic boundaries around the globe become less clearly defined. Also, consumers of popular cultural—members of the so-called digital generation—are familiar with transnational and hybrid cultural products through the digital world. One fan in Los Angeles claims in the “About Me” posting to her Web log:

My fascination with all things Korean basically started when I watched [the movie] *My Sassy Girl* and it made me cry, which no movie had done for a number of years. Then I moved on to other Korean movies, KBBQ [Korean barbecue] and other Korean dishes, decided to pick up the alphabet [*hangul*], and am now addicted to kdramas [Korean TV dramas]. . . . I'm not Korean, but I try not to let that stop me. (“I Love Koreatown” 2009)

Fans of Korean TV dramas in different regional communities have flowed with the Korean Wave for various reasons and in different ways. While some consumers simply enjoy watching the “family-friendly” stories as viewers, some consumers (Yon-sama fans in particular) became active fans, adding another dimension to the hybrid aspects of the Korean Wave.

Also, fans in Asian communities in the United States have clearly indicated the unpredictable transnational aspects of such cultural flows.

The Korean Wave: Popular Music

Hybridization of Sound

In the early 1990s, under the more liberalized cultural policy and booming economy of South Korea's recently empowered civilian government, the Korean pop-music industry was booming, and Korean pop music continued to incorporate diverse stylistic input from abroad. With the arrival of American hip-hop culture and rap music, which was first adopted by the young-boy band Seo Taiji and Boys, Korean pop music became youth oriented. A number of teenage boy and girl bands targeting audiences in their teens and early 20s have dominated the Korean pop-music world ever since, and boys bands such as H.O.T. (which stands for "High Five Of Teenagers") became popular outside Korea in the late 1990s, at the start of the Korean Wave (Howard 2006). BoA and Rain have been the two most outstanding Korean Wave pop stars since the early 2000s.

BoA

In early 2001, Korea's S.M. Entertainment company was promoting a teenage-girl singer named BoA, whose launch in Korea had been mediocre, but who, they thought, might be successful in Japan. Thanks to formal collaborative agreements with some of the most powerful Japanese media companies (such as AVEX Group), BoA ultimately became one of the most successful pop stars in Japan ("Cool Korea" 2004). Often celebrated as *the* Korean Wave pop star, BoA's successful music career in Japan has little relation to her "Koreanness." She learned to sing in Japanese, to speak it fluently for public appearances, and to present herself publicly as a Japanese pop star. This process of repackaging and de-Koreanizing (or Japanizing) was the key to her success in Japan and became the rule for becoming successful in Japan. Furthermore, BoA's dance moves and fashion styles were often taken from American pop stars like Britney Spears; and most of her song titles, and some of her lyrics, are in English. In BoA's case, the language, musical styles, dance movements, and visual images packaged for her presentation are not Korean but either Japanese or American. BoA is thus an embodiment of the crossover, transnational, and hybrid aspects of twenty-first-century popular cultural production and consumption (see Jung 2009).

After succeeding in Japan and in Asia as a contemporary pop star, and after intensive training in English, BoA made her American debut in October 2008. Her debut was a huge entertainment-news item in both Korea and Japan. For her debut song, "Eat You Up," two versions of the music video

were produced, one by a Korean producer, the other by an American (“Poa Miguk” 2008). In the Korean version, BoA wears a casual jacket and baggy pants and dances on the street with a group of young American boys. In the American version, BoA wears a sexy leather dress, red lipstick, and high-heels and performs suggestive scenes with an American man. Many of her devoted Asian fans criticized the American version for not representing her correctly, saying the overtly Americanized “sexy” images are not suitable for her petite Asian body and girly persona. As of July 2009, it is still too early to judge whether BoA will be successful in the American pop music market. Indeed, it might be difficult for her to satisfy American fans, whose tastes have been shaped by the overtly sexy Beyoncé, J-Lo, Jessica Simpson, and Britney Spears—and whose images of Asian female sexuality have been shaped by stereotypical media representations.

Rain (Bi)

Twenty-seven-year-old male singer, dancer, model, and actor Rain (Bi [비] in Korean) debuted in 2002 in Korea as a singer and began to star in TV dramas. Among them, the 2004 hit TV drama *P’ul Hausŭ* 풀하우스 (Full house), in which he played a famous actor who fell in love with an ordinary woman, became one of the most successful Korean TV dramas across Asia and beyond (Russell 2008).³ Although his stage performances are filled with sexy dance movements that showcase his well-built body, his character in *P’ul Hausŭ* featured a little boy–like smile, cute and cheerful attitude, sensitive emotion, and warm heart. Rain has a rather typical “Asian” face with slender eyes. He confessed that he felt his face was not so handsome and had been an obstacle during his earlier career. He was even told to have plastic surgery to make his eyes bigger (Discovery Channel 2009). As traditional Korean values have rapidly become replaced by Western values, which are seen as more in step with the globalized “modern world,” Western qualities of physical beauty and body type have also become ideal physical features in the Korean imagination, a predilection for hybrid physical appearances, visually projecting the hybrid sounds of the music. In fact, many Korean women and some men undergo plastic surgery to lift their eyelids, raise their noses, plump out their lips, lower their cheekbones, enlarge their breasts, and the like. Plastic surgery is not helpful when it comes to changing one’s height, especially the length of one’s legs. To that effect, many Koreans try alternative medicine or specially designed exercise regimens; or they simply wear high heels or shoes with high insoles. To his good fortune, Rain stands about 6 feet tall and has what in current parlance would be called six-pack abs.

Despite some harsh criticism on his U.S. debut in 2006—for example, he was frequently referred to as a copycat of Justin Timberlake (Sontag 2006)—Rain’s popularity in the United States has been growing (Russell

2008). For his female fans worldwide, Rain offers a kind of “perfect” fantasy guy who is the best of all worlds: simultaneously Asian but modern and Western but not too foreign. In other words, the well-packaged hybridity of his physical and musical presentation is what is effective. Although his music career in the United States has not been as magnificent as his career in Asia, his acting career in America has taken a significant step. He played a supporting role in *Speed Racer*, released in May 2008, and has won the leading role in the martial-arts movie *Ninja Assassin* (scheduled to be released in November 2009). But here, Rain’s roles in both movies are not as a Korean, but as a Japanese! Such is the transnational and hybrid nature of contemporary global popular culture that underlies the Korean Wave.

Riding the Korean Wave into the Future

What is the Korean Wave, really? The Korean Wave may not be as “Korean” or as “authentically Korean” as people might imagine. As discussed in this article, most of its characteristics are transnational and hybrid; and these characteristics involve combinations of local and foreign elements at multiple levels. The Korean Wave does not have a uniform style or a fixed directional flow; it is not simply a phenomenon that originates from Korea and spreads to the world. It is multi-layered and multi-directional. Thanks to digital technological developments and daily exposure to global phenomena, consumers of twenty-first-century pop culture are ready to digest, simultaneously, a wide array of cultural content and material.

Some say the Korean Wave is over, and others say there never was a Korean Wave, as the exports of Korean TV dramas and the popularity of some Korean pop music stars have decreased among those who were previously the most enthusiastic supporters. Still, the Korean Wave has been in the spotlight of global pop culture for the past ten years, and it helped reveal new forms and patterns of cultural production and consumption. However complicated the Korean Wave is to unravel, the transnational flows of hybrid, yet Korean-made, popular culture in the global world of the twenty-first century are only likely to intensify in the future. We should therefore not be surprised to find additional complications and shifts in the Korean Wave that has swept across Asia and the rest of the world.

Notes

¹In this piece, I am not using the term *transnational* in opposition to the term *global*; rather, I prefer the term *transnational* because of its multi-mobility. Distinguishing between “truly” global and “purely” transnational is not only difficult but also not helpful, as Kennedy and Roudometof (2002) argue.

²See Millie Creighton’s (2009) piece in this volume of the *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* for a synopsis.

³No relation to either the ITV (UK) sitcom of the same name that ran from 1985 to 1986 or the ABC (US) sitcom of 1987–95.

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