Hybridity And The Rise Of
Korean Popular Culture
In Asia

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Background: Three Strains Of Globalization Discourse

- Over the past few years, an increasing amount of Korean popular cultural content – including television dramas, movies, pop songs and their associated celebrities – has gained immense popularity in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and other East and Southeast Asian countries.

  - According to Hollywood Reporter, ‘Korea has transformed itself from an embattled cinematic backwater into the hottest film market in Asia’

- The first approach views globalization as an outgrowth of cultural imperialism following the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) discussions of the 1970s.

  - It is no longer the case that a one way flow of Western media content exists due to the increasing contra flow in international media and the growing plurality of regional media players based on what Sczauba (1991) calls the ‘cultural proximity’ factor.

  - In addition, this approach has missed the complexity of audience reception of media content.

  - Finally, there is a danger of romanticizing and fetishizing ‘national’ culture.
Background: Three Strains Of Globalization Discourse

- In the second view, globalization is understood as an outcome of the workings of the project of modernity...it is the spread of the culture of modernity itself.
- the idea that capitalism is a natural extension of the progress of reason and freedom associated with the Enlightenment.
- that humanity has entered a new historical epoch since the 1970s (moving from modernity to postmodernity; from capitalism to late capitalism), made possible by the development of new technologies.
- an outcome of modernity because it tends to provide an aura of 'inevitability' to the rise of neoliberalism and concentrated corporate control (and hyper commercialization) of the media in the present era.

Background: Three Strains Of Globalization Discourse

- third approach comprises discourses that identify cultural hybridity and investigate power relations... globalization encourages local peoples to rediscover the 'local' that they have neglected or forgotten in their drive towards Western-imposed modernization.
- There are two distinct modes of re-localization in non-Western political and cultural formations.
  - Some forces and groups - such as Hindu nationalists in India, and the Taliban in Afghanistan - campaign for a return to the imagined 'good old days'.
  - Locals appropriate global goods, conventions and styles, including music, clothes, cooking, fashion and so on, and inscribe their everyday meaning into them.

What is the Korean wave?

- Beginnings:
  - China Central Television Station (CCTV) aired a Korean television drama What Is Love All About?, which turned out to be a big hit. In response to popular demand, CCTV re-aired the program in 1998 in a prime-time slot, and recorded the second-highest ratings ever in the history of Chinese television. In 1999, Stars in My Heart, another Korean television drama serial, became a big hit in China and Taiwan.
  - Since then, Korean television dramas have rapidly taken up airtime on television channels in countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia, which saw media liberalization beginning in the 1990s.
What is the Korean wave?

- Asian buyers prefer the cheaper Korean programming; Korean television dramas were a quarter of the price of Japanese ones, and a tenth of the price of Hong Kong television dramas as of 2000.

What is the Korean wave?

- In the late 1990s, a regional music television channel, Channel V, featured Korean pop music videos, creating a huge K-pop fan base in Asia.

- Now, most of Korea’s top-notch singers take their concerts to Beijing, Hong Kong and Tokyo and often record their albums in the local languages before marketing their albums in these countries.

What is the Korean wave?

- In 1999, a Korean blockbuster, Shiri, was shown in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, receiving critical acclaim and drawing large audiences (for example, it earned $14 million at the Japanese box office) (Kim, 2000). Since then, Korean films have become regular fixtures in cinemas across Asia.

- The success of Korean cinema in Asia has now spread to North America and Europe, with more and more Korean films attracting theatre-goers in these continents. Major US-based distribution companies such as Fox and Columbia have started to take Korean movies on for their global distribution runs.
What is the Korean wave?

- Korean stars have had a big impact on consumer culture, including food, fashion, make-up trends and even plastic surgery. It is not uncommon to find Asian youth decorating their backpacks, notebooks and rooms with photographs of Korean stars.

- Given their infatuation with Korean culture, the regional fans are eager to learn the Korean language and travel to Korea. For example, at Inlingua School of Language in Singapore, the number of students learning Korean had increased by 60 percent in 2003.

What is the Korean wave?

- In this context, Korean big business is making efforts to transform Korean wave fans into consumers of Korean products and services.

- In Vietnam, LG Household and Health Care saw its sales skyrocket after it featured Korean actress Kim Nam-ju in its advertisement.

- The Koreans have just begun to realize that culture can be as profitable as semi-conductors or cars.

Korean Media Liberalization And Development

- 1980s to the mid-1990s was an important turning point for the Korean media, with the introduction of liberalization in the sector. Until 1987, only domestic film companies were allowed to import and distribute foreign movies in the market.

- Under US pressure, in 1988 the Korean government allowed Hollywood studios to distribute films directly to local theatres and, by 1994, more than 10 Korean film importers had shut down their businesses.
In its first year of cable television services in 1995, Korea imported $42.82 million worth of television programming, marking a sharp increase from the previous year’s foreign programming import figure of $19.86 million.

Further, the spillover of satellite broadcasting, such as NHK Satellite and Star TV, posed a serious challenge to political sovereignty and cultural integrity.

In this context, two factors awakened Koreans to the importance of culture and its industrial development.

The film *Sopyonje* (1993) unexpectedly topped the box-office chart with more than a million admissions – the first Korean film ever to attract such a large audience.

The film also received unprecedented invitations for screenings in art theatres, and on college campuses in Japan, the United States and some European countries.

The family in the film, on the verge of starvation, symbolized the fate of Korean cinema embattled by Hollywood.

Against this backdrop, a government report awakened the Korean people to the cultural industry’s potential contribution to the national economy.

The comparison of a film to Hyundai cars – which at that time were considered the ‘pride of Korea’ – was apt enough to awaken the Korean public to the idea of culture as an industry.
In this regard, sprawling family-owned, big business groups in Korea, or chaebol, such as Samsung, Hyundai and Daewoo, to name a few, expanded into the media sector to include production, import, distribution and exhibition.

The short-lived cultural (especially film) industry boom of the mid-1990s characterized by government promotion and entry of the Korean big business was, however, a ‘workout’ that strengthened the Korean film industry. When many chaebol folded their film businesses in the vortex of the Asian financial crisis (mid-90’s), some of these big-business-trained personnel remained in the film industry at large.

In 1999, to everyone’s surprise, the Korean action thriller Shiri attracted 5.8 million theatre-goers (with 2.44 million in Seoul alone), surpassing the local theatre attendance record set by the Hollywood film Titanic.

The financial vacuum left by the exit of the chaebol was filled by venture capitalists and investment firms. After having waited so long for alternatives to Hollywood fare, local audiences responded favorably to new Korean cinema, which was equipped with cash, management capacity and creativity.

In general, the Korean pop music market was not vibrant before the 1990s. Korean youth preferred American pop songs to local ones; live concerts were not common and, when they were held, they were on a small scale.

In fact, the two public television networks, Korea Broadcasting System (KBS) and Munhwa Broadcasting Company (MBC), controlled music distribution and held sway over the direction of music consumption.

These conditions influenced musical styles to fit into the specifications of the television medium, such that songs usually had a long instrumental introduction and an extended fade-out, to allow emcees to make some announcements, or a link between one song and another.
Transformation comes from the 'new and unexpected combination of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs', thus changes originating from globalization trends and democratic reforms began to transform the local music market.

Against this backdrop, Korean music fans came to have a better grasp of global music trends, and hungered for new tunes from local musicians.

First, Seo Taiji and Boys' popularity was based on innovative hybridization of music. The band creatively mixed genres like rap, soul, rock, and roll, techno, punk, hardcore and even ppinggjak, and invented a unique musical form which 'employs rap only during the verses, singing choruses in a pop style'.

The group were the first pop stars to enjoy freedom from television networks' direction, deciding by themselves when they would appear on television shows. As the networks' influence weakened, the paths to stardom diversified to expand the roles of record companies and talent agencies.

Lee Suman, founder of SM Entertainment in 1989, is credited with the industrialization of the star-making process in K-pop.

The best representation of Lee's products is H.O.T., a boy band that debuted in 1996 and exploded in popularity, with more than 10 million CD and record sales in Korea during its existence between 1996 and 2001.

With a series of successes in its portfolio, SM Entertainment became the first Korean entertainment agency to be listed on Korea's KOSDAQ stock market.
Cultural Hybridization And The Korean Pop Music Industry

...Through the above experiences (hybridization of music forms and organization of star-making processes), Korean popular culture has prepared itself for forays into regional markets.

Conclusion And Discussion

globalization, particularly in the realm of popular culture, breeds a creative form of hybridization that works towards sustaining local identities in the global context.

regionally circulating popular cultural products provide 'a sense of living in the shared time and common experience of a certain (post) modernity which cannot be represented well by American popular culture'...

'popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition'

Conclusion And Discussion

'Korean pop culture skillfully blends Western and Asian values to create its own, and the country itself is viewed as a prominent model to follow or catch up,'

' the 'vision of modernization' inherent in Korean popular culture plays a part in making it acceptable in some Asian countries.'