



Pop culture bridges Korea and Singapore

Prevalence of Korean pop culture overseas provides inspiring example for the city-state

In the last few years, Korean films, TV dramas and pop music have become immensely popular abroad, a phenomenon known as the Korean Wave. This is the 18th in a series of essays by a select group of foreign scholars and journalists looking at the spread of Korean pop culture in Southeast Asian countries and beyond. — Ed.

By Kelly Fu and Liew Kai Khiun

While visiting South Korea with a tour group from Singapore, our bus took a break at a rest stop somewhere along the eastern coast of the Peninsula. As we were purchasing snacks, a middle-aged sales staff asked in Korean if we were Koreans.

We replied in Korean that we were not local. Then he asked if we were from China. We told him that we were from Singapore, to which he replied with a smile, "Wow! That's far!"

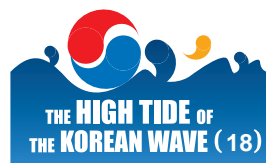
Whereas East Asian travelers have traditionally formed the bulk of tourists, the popularity of Korean popular culture in Southeast Asia, particularly television dramas, has increased tourists' arrivals from this region. It also raises the question of the absorption of Korean culture, and in particular, its popular cultural products.

It would seem hard to believe that cultural exposure to South Korea has been relatively recent in Singapore, given that Korean television dramas are now aired almost nightly in prime-time television slots.

Historically, the presence of Koreans in Southeast Asia had not been visibly significant compared to the Japanese and Chinese. For the older pre-1945 generation of Singaporeans, Koreans were almost singularly associated with those serving Japanese military auxiliaries, particularly during the three and a half years of Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945.

Chaebol were first established in the new Republic of Singapore in the 1970s to assist in the construction of its physical infrastructure. Thus, Koreans were typically associated with male construction workers and engineers.

During the 1980s, the images became those of angry but highly organized male students and workers in headbands clashing with rows of riot police. Meanwhile, Singaporeans were also occasionally fed propaganda advertisements in national newspapers from the North Korean Embassy in the republic. Hence, the Korean presence



in Singapore has largely been culturally ambiguous and skewed toward the male gender, where the Korean Peninsula was only about politics, economics and men.

In contrast, popular culture productions from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan — whether films, television dramas, cartoons or toys — have become part of the everyday lives of Singaporeans. In general, the pervasiveness of these productions can be attributed to the decreasing reliance on local official media stations for entertainment choices as VCRs became commonplace from the early 1980s. Many ethnic Chinese Singaporeans were also familiar with both Cantonese and Mandarin.

In addition, the transnational Chinese media networks between Southeast Asia and Hong Kong and Taiwan were well-established by as early as the beginning of the 20th century, permitting a faster and smoother flow of cultural products.

While Japanese language and culture had been relatively alien to the region, this did not pose a significant barrier to the consumption of its products, particularly by the late 1970s, which coincided with the ascendancy of the country as a major economic player on the world stage. From anime and J-pop for children and teenagers to family-centered soap operas, Japanese popular culture managed to gain a following from a broad spectrum.

Last on the scene was Hollywood, where the spread of English as the main medium of instruction in schools from the 1970s made American popular culture more easily accessible to the local market.

Only independent Korean films such as "Green Fish" were screened during the annual Singapore International Film Festival. In 2000, the Korean drama "Autumn Tale" starring Won Bin, Song Hae-gyo and Song Seung-heon was screened in Singapore for the first time and was so well-received that television stations were inundated with calls and e-mails requesting a re-run. "Winter Sonata" the following year secured the K-drama craze.

Interestingly, the consumption of Korean popular culture

in Singapore in its early phases mainly followed the trends in China and Taiwan. When K-dramas first became popular in Singapore, retailers imported Korean drama box-sets from China and Taiwan for sale in Singapore. These products typically carried their own Chinese titles and synopses and were dubbed over in Mandarin. Because these versions were in VCD instead of DVD format, costs were kept low.

Consumption of these products were, consequently, based not on the ability to speak Korean, but to speak or read Mandarin. The screening of Korean dramas on the Chinese-language channels, often dubbed over in Mandarin, also reinforced the notion that Korean products were of interest only to the ethnic Chinese majority which makes up 75 percent of the population. Malays and Indians (mostly Tamils) comprise 15 percent

of the population. The demand for such products continues despite the cheaper Chinese-dubbed versions that are exported from China.

Aside from the appeal of these well-refined male images, one other possible reason for the gendered or feminized consumption of Korean popular culture has been the portrayal of women in K-dramas as more active personalities, rather than cardboard beauties. For the female protagonists of these scripts, although seeking Mr. Right may have been imperative, behind the love stories are more constant struggles to establish their careers and provide and care for their families.

A greater variety in subtitles has in turn made such productions more readily accessible to more non-ethnic Chinese consumers in Singapore, principally the ethnic Malay and Tamil Singaporeans.

For ethnic Chinese audiences, the themes and formats of most Korean historical dramas are not alien. In fact, the references of these dramas and films to the various Chinese dynasties have given Chinese Singaporean audiences rudimentary yardsticks to understand the Korean contexts.

Linguistic translation alone, however, would not have commanded such an extensive following in K-dramas in Singapore. The main appeal of K-dramas lies in their ability to

platform a highly modern and urbane lifestyle without, at the same time, disregarding the focus on the familial responsibilities and issues.

Moreover, the romantic pursuits in these productions are also comparatively more sexually restrained and conservative than Hollywood and even Japanese and Taiwanese television dramas. Along with the emphasis on more formal attire in their productions, K-dramas have also struck a chord with Malay Muslim female audiences who are less comfortable with content baring too much "sex and flesh."

Overall, we suspect from our anecdotal experiences as students in Korean-language schools, observations in DVD retail outlets and our participation in a conducted tour to South Korea that Korean popular culture in Singapore is mostly consumed by women. Even advertisements by the Korean tourism authorities feature

women form a base of fans not commonly imagined by the Korean public, but who are an important part of the diverse body of K-pop fans.

The second important shift in the consumption of Korean popular culture here has also been the greater desire for "authenticity." Whereas the Mandarin-dubbed versions were preferred in the past, people now seek dual-sound versions with Korean and Chinese soundtracks. With greater exposure to Korean popular culture, audiences in Singapore want to listen to the original Korean vocalization, which they feel provides greater coherence with the acting and hence allows for more pleasurable and "authentic" viewing.

The growth in the popularity of the Korean language also means that television dramas are used as tools of language acquisition and learning, resulting in the demand for dual-sound products.

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Popular culture diplomacy: Possibilities and limitations

In Singapore, increased familiarity with Korean popular culture encourages greater interactions between Singaporeans and Korean residents in the republic beyond the confines of short-term tourist visits. Interest in learning Korean has spurred the growth of language centers offering Korean-language instruction, which was in the past mainly confined to the Singapore Korean School. Today, private schools such as the NUS Extension work with Korean universities to offer two- to three-month scholarships for the study of Korean.

The formalization of student exchanges between Korean and Singaporean universities has also become an interesting feature in the past two to three years. Aside from traditional fan clubs, Korean cultural clubs such as the Korean Cultural Society set up in the Nanyang Technological University also offer the increased possibility for social interaction between Korean and Singaporean students.

Cultural flows are also present

in the estimated 6,500 Korean students in local and international schools in Singapore, a number that has seen a significant jump in the recent years. The education market in Singapore has drawn many South Korean students whose parents are attracted by the safe environment, the relative proximity to Korea and the strength of the multilingual education here.

It is widely perceived that because Singapore is an Asian society, it would be a more suitable environment for younger school-going children. South Korean students in local schools typically study English and Mandarin, or English, Mandarin and/or Korean in the international schools.

As English is the medium of instruction in Singaporean schools, education here is regarded as good preparation for the much-desired entry to American universities or for better job prospects in South Korea where these students would be equipped with English, Chinese and Korean language skills.

It is hoped that the presence of these South Korean students would serve as cultural ambassadors in building more sustained socio-cultural relations.

Limits to popular culture consumption

Although many Singaporeans have become interested in traveling to Korea, long-term or in-depth cultural exchange is limited by language barriers.

Despite the interest in the Korean language since 2000, only the Korean School in Singapore offers advanced Korean-language classes. There is currently no department for Korean studies in all of the tertiary institutions in Singapore, unlike the more well-established Chinese and Japanese studies department. Where Korean is offered, this is at the basic level.

Consequently, without advanced Korean-language training, it becomes difficult for Singaporeans to seek long-term employment or to pursue studies in South Korea. The lack of an in-depth understanding of Korean culture and history also limits the range of movies made available and consumed by local audiences. In the case of "Taegukgi" (2004), it was the presence of lead actors Won Bin and Jang Dong-gun — known through television series — instead of the subject of the Korean War that attracted audiences here.

Efforts to ensure the long-

term cultural possibilities of "popular culture diplomacy" should therefore include the improved availability of training in the Korean language, particularly beyond the basic levels of instruction.

In particular, funding for Singaporeans who wish to further their interest in the Korean language and culture is crucial in ensuring that both students and working adults who study Korean and progress well are encouraged to seek further training which allows them to transform a "hobby" into a long-term career possibility. Although Korean-language scholarships are currently offered here, this covers only tuition fees and not living expenses.

Furthermore, while longer-term cultural exchanges are offered through the local universities, focusing primarily on funding university-level training exclusively would exclude a substantial number of adult learners who may become very good at the language but who become hindered by the lack of language-training opportunities.

Ensuring that the interest in Korean culture continues beyond Hallyu, therefore, requires the quick and concerted response to the interest in Korean-language learning and the important and belated opening of a Korean studies department or institute.

In the meantime, the prevalence of Korean popular culture outside the Korean Peninsula has served as an inspiring example to Singapore. Sharing the legacy of the post-war "dragon economies," local media have been pondering whether a similar phenomenon is possible for the city-state.

Given the fact that the "tiny red dot" (a derogatory nickname given to Singapore by a former Indonesian president) is now considered a model of development for many postcolonial Third World countries, this envy of the Korean Wave is indeed ironic. Nonetheless, the projection of South Korea's soft power has shown to Singaporeans that one does not need to be in the center of the world to be popular.

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