

## Hybridity and the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia

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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.<sup>1</sup> News media and trade magazines have recognized the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia by dubbing it the ‘Korean wave’ (*Hallyu* or *Hanryu* in Korean). The Associated Press reported in March 2002: ‘Call it “kim chic”. All things Korean – from food and music to eyebrow-shaping and shoe styles – are the rage across Asia, where pop culture has long been dominated by Tokyo and Hollywood’ (Visser, 2002). According to *Hollywood Reporter*, ‘Korea has transformed itself from an embattled cinematic backwater into the hottest film market in Asia’ (Segers, 2000).

Yet a few years ago Korean popular culture did not have such export capacity, and was not even critically acclaimed by scholars. For example, *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, published in 1996, is alleged to have covered ‘every aspect of international film-making’ but does not make any reference to Korean cinema, although it pays tribute to Taiwanese, Hong Kong, Chinese and Japanese films (Nowell-Smith, 1996).<sup>2</sup> Korean music was also ignored by researchers, as can be seen in the following comment in *World Music: The Rough Guide*, published in 1994: ‘The country has developed economically at a staggering pace, but in terms of popular music there is nothing to match the remarkable contemporary sounds of Indonesia, Okinawa, or Japan’ (Kawakami and Fisher, 1994). The tremendous disparity between such evaluations as noted above, and the recent success of the Korean media, has stimulated

me to learn, theorize and explain their growth and increased circulation in Asia.

The major frame of reference in international communication research today is globalization, a word that has become part of everyday vocabulary. The term refers to the process and context of the world becoming integrated, and it is most exuberantly used in corporate slogans. If we are satisfied with this uncritical discourse of a seamless globe, our understanding of globalization will be entrenched in the image of Chinese (or Thai) people patronizing Starbucks – an image that appears on a regular basis in the mainstream media (see, for example, Truehart, 1998).

There are roughly three strains of globalization discourse. The first approach views globalization as an outgrowth of cultural imperialism following the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) discussions of the 1970s. According to this approach, forces of globalization are usually American, and they subjugate weaker, national/cultural identities. While this approach has retained considerable resonance within the political discourse of developing countries, especially with the rise of foreign television programming in their territories, it has been critiqued by some scholars as being overly simplistic (Chadha and Kavoori, 2000; Morley and Robins, 1995). In fact, it is no longer the case that a one-way flow of Western media content exists due to the increasing contraflow in international media (Thussu, 2000) and the growing plurality of regional media players based on what Straubhaar (1991) calls the ‘cultural proximity’ factor (also, see Hoskins and Mirus, 1988). In addition, this approach has missed the complexity of audience reception of media content (Wasko et al., 2001). Finally, there is a danger of romanticizing and fetishizing ‘national’ culture (Morris, 2002).

In the second view, globalization is understood as an outcome of the workings of the project of modernity (Giddens, 1991). According to Tomlinson, it is ‘the spread of the culture of modernity itself. This is a discourse of historical change, of “development”, of a global movement towards . . . capitalism’ (1991: 90). This argument is already visible in Weber’s (2000) idea that capitalism is a natural extension of the progress of reason and freedom associated with the Enlightenment. In more recent sociological studies, Harvey (1990) and Jameson (1996) argue 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. Some political economists critique this notion by arguing that the conflation of modernity with capitalism is wrong. According to Wood (1998), when the 18th-century French bourgeoisie – supposedly the source of the project of modernity – fought against the aristocracy, they fought for universalism and human emancipation. On the other hand, the main aim of capitalism is not the improvement of humanity, but the improvement of property. Therefore, if

capitalism has anything to do with modernity, it is that capitalism has destroyed modernity. Wood argues that the geographic term 'globalization' is imperfect as a description of and explanation for the present era. It is better characterized as the universalization of capitalism, with capitalism penetrating into every aspect of life, society and culture. In a similar vein, McChesney (1998) criticizes the notion of globalization as 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.

The third approach comprises discourses that identify cultural hybridity and investigate power relations between periphery and centre from the perspective of postcolonial criticism (Kraidy, 2002; Shome and Hegde, 2002). Paradoxically, globalization encourages local peoples to rediscover the 'local' that they have neglected or forgotten in their drive towards Western-imposed modernization during the past decades (Featherstone, 1993; Robertson, 1995). There are two distinct modes of re-localization in non-Western political and cultural formations. While 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', others – such as the Asian tiger economies – revisit or strengthen their own developmental routes by embracing and utilizing the new glocal economic situation (Chadha and Kavoori, 2000). In this transnational context of a meeting between the periphery and the centre, hybridity reveals itself as new practices of cultural and performative expression. For example, locals appropriate global goods, conventions and styles, including music, cuisine, cinema, fashion and so on, and inscribe their everyday meaning into them (Bhabha, 1994; Young, 2003).

In engaging the postcolonial notion of hybridity, I do not view it simply as a descriptive device, but as a 'communicative practice constitutive of, and constituted by, sociopolitical and economic arrangement' (Kraidy, 2002: 317). Therefore, the political economic relations immanent in the first and second lines of discourse are inevitably involved in an understanding of Korean media development as a metaphor for thinking about the complex relations of cultures to the forces of globalization. It is also important to reveal the political potential inherent in hybridity, following Bhabha's (1994) observation that natives and minorities strike back at imperial domination by recourse to the hybridization strategy. Given this, the Korean wave phenomenon is an interesting case to study in the context of international communication. First, we shall examine the role of the Korean state in order to understand how the periphery addresses the context of global media power differences. And, second, we shall inquire into how Koreans appropriate global popular cultural forms to express their local sentiment and culture.

This article is composed of the following sections: (1) What is the Korean wave?; (2) Korean media liberalization and development; (3) Cultural hybridization and the Korean pop music industry; and, finally, (4) Conclusion and discussion. In the next section, I will examine the processes by which Korean television dramas, music and movies have come to appeal to audiences in neighbouring countries. Through this, we shall understand the degree of popularity that Korean media content and its associated celebrities have enjoyed, and the reactions of Korean businesses and the government to this surprising 'national' achievement.

### What is the Korean wave?

For a start, the Korean wave is indebted to the media liberalization that swept across Asia in the 1990s. The Korean wave seems to have come into existence sometime around 1997, when the national 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 (Heo, 2002). 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. In addition, the recent economic crisis in Asia has brought about a situation where 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 (Lee, 2003). Korean television programming exports have increased so dramatically that in 2003, they earned \$37.5 million, compared with \$12.7 million in 1999 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2004).<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the boy band H.O.T. found itself topping the pop charts in China and Taiwan in 1998; the band was so popular that album sales continued to surge, even after the band's break-up in mid-2001. Following H.O.T.'s successful concert in Beijing in February 2000, many K-pop stars such as Ahn Jae-wook (an actor-cum-singer who starred in *Stars in My Heart*), boy bands NRG and Shinhwa, and girl band Baby V.O.X. have held concerts in China, attracting crowds of more than 30,000 Chinese youth for each concert (Seoul Broadcasting System [SBS], 2001). In 2002, Korean teenage pop sensation BoA's debut album reached the number one spot on the Oricon Weekly Chart, Japan's

equivalent of the American Billboard Charts; this firmly established BoA in the Japanese music market (Visser, 2002). 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.

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. For example, among the nine movies screened on 9 August 2003 at the cinema Cathay Cineleisure Orchard, Singapore, three were Korean, including *Conduct Zero*, *Marriage is a Crazy Thing* and *My Tutor Friend* (sneak preview). When the Korean film *Joint Security Area* opened in Japan on 26 May 2001, it became the first Asian import in the Japanese film market to be shown on as many as 280 screens (Kim, 2001). 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 (Frater, 2003a). Major US-based distribution companies such as Fox and Columbia have started to take Korean movies on for their global distribution runs (Frater, 2003b). Furthermore, Hollywood studios are eager to buy remake rights to Korean films. For example, DreamWorks SKG paid \$2 million for the remake rights to the Korean horror film, *A Tale of Two Sisters*; that is twice what the studio paid for the Japanese horror movie, *The Ring*, a few years ago (Ho, 2003).

Against this backdrop, Korean pop stars have become cultural icons in the region. One example is Ahn Jae-wook, who has commanded tremendous popularity in China, as evidenced by his clinching number one spot in a poll of the most popular celebrities in 2001, even surpassing Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio who was then at the apex of his global popularity (*Australian*, 2002). 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. In the streets of Hanoi and Beijing, it is common to find young members of the 'Korea Tribe', or Koreanophiles, sporting multiple earrings, baggy hip-hop pants, and the square-toed shoes of Seoul fashion. So popular are Korean actresses Lee Young-ae, Song Hae Gyo, Kim Hee Sun and Jeon Ji-hyun that it has been reported that their wanna-be fans in Taiwan and China request their facial features when going for cosmetic surgery (Joins.com, 2001; *Straits Times*, 2002a, 2002b).

Given their infatuation with Korean culture, the regional fans are eager to learn the Korean language and travel to Korea (SBS, 2001). For example, at Inlingua School of Language in Singapore, the number of students learning Korean had increased by 60 percent in 2003 compared to

2001 because of the interest generated by Korean dramas (Sage, 2005). When Ahn Jae-wook held a weekend 'Meet Ahn Jae-wook camp' in a resort near Seoul in August 2001, about 250 Chinese youth participated in it. They willingly paid a fee of \$465, which was several times the average monthly salary in China (Joins.com, 2001). Quite a few travel agencies in the region sell television drama-themed group tours to Korea with titles like 'Best of Korean drama trailer deluxe tour'.<sup>5</sup>

Park Young Su, assistant bureau chief at the Korea National Tourism Organization (KNTO), said: 'Thanks to the success of shows like *Autumn in My Heart* and *Winter Sonata*, we've had 130,000 tourists from China, Taiwan, Hongkong, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand coming to visit the locations where the dramas were filmed' (Lee, 2003). The number of Taiwanese who visited Korea in 2003 totalled 180,000, a 50 percent increase from the previous year's figure of 120,000 (Park, 2004).

In this context, Korean big business is making efforts to transform Korean wave fans into consumers of Korean products and services. Samsung Electronics in China successfully took advantage of Ahn Jae-wook's popularity by hiring him as a model for its computer monitor commercials. In Vietnam, LG Household and Health Care saw its sales skyrocket after it featured Korean actress Kim Nam-ju in its advertisement. Since then, LG has 'notched the first place in brand recognition among foreign cosmetic brands in Vietnam', recalls Oh Kang-kook, public relations manager of the company (Joins.com, 2001). In order to reinforce the existing 'Korean boom' in Vietnam, LG Electronics is reported to have provided Vietnamese television stations with several Korean television dramas for free, even covering the cost of dubbing (*Nae-oe Economic Daily*, 2001). The Koreans have just begun to realize that culture can be as profitable as semi-conductors or cars.

The growing popularity of Korean pop culture has more implications than simply earning foreign currency, especially considering that the country has had some diplomatic friction with its neighbours in the past decades. The Vietnamese still vividly remember that Korean soldiers fought against their Liberation Army during the Vietnam War. The Taiwanese have felt betrayed by Korea ever since Seoul suddenly severed its diplomatic relations with Taipei in order to establish new ties with Beijing in 1992. In this respect, Korean pop stars have contributed to improving Korea's foreign relations. In one instance, Korean actor Jang Dong-gun and actress Kim Nam-ju enjoy such popularity in Vietnam that the Vietnamese have even labelled them their 'national' stars. The then Korean president, Kim Dae Jung, even invited the pair to the dinner he hosted for Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong when the latter visited Korea on 23 August 2001 (*Australian*, 2002). BoA, who made the cover of the French *Le Monde* in July 2002 as an icon of cultural exchange between Korea and Japan, were invited to the two countries' summit conference in

June 2003 in Tokyo; Japan was responsible for a brutal occupation of Korea during the period between 1910 and 1945 (Macintyre, 2002). In all, Koreans heartily welcome the fruits of the Korean wave in the midst of recovery from the 1997 economic crisis, and the subsequent International Monetary Fund (IMF)-directed economic restructuring, which they often refer to as 'national humiliation'.

Is the Korean wave simply a fortuitous event or well-timed phenomenon? In the next section I argue that the current commercial success of Korean media is an outgrowth of Korea's struggle for cultural continuity when confronted by the threat of global cultural domination.

### **Korean media liberalization and development**

The period from the late 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. This opening of the market to Hollywood majors affected the vitality of the local film industry in general, such that the number of films produced annually fell from 121 in 1991 to 63 in 1994. In 1994, Hollywood's market share in the local market reached 80 percent, from 53 percent in 1987 (Shin, 1995; Yi, 1994). Therefore Korean cinema, which was ignored by local audiences, who considered it poorly made, boring and often maudlin, was drawing its last breath.

A rapid increase in foreign television programming as a result of television channel expansion was also a matter of concern. 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 (Korea Press Foundation, 2002). 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. In 1993, when the common view was that there was no hope for the revival of the local film industry, the film *Sopyonje* 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. *Sopyonje* is a film about an itinerant family that earns a living performing *pansori*, the traditional popular musical form of

Korea in which a story is sung by a singer, accompanied by a drummer. Although *pansori* was designated as a national cultural treasure by the government, it was neglected once the country was subjected to American culture.<sup>6</sup> The film, which portrayed a declining or 'derelict' traditional folk music genre, and was largely shot in a beautiful rural landscape, revived nostalgia for and public interest in 'our culture'; the family in the film, on the verge of starvation, symbolized the fate of Korean cinema embattled by Hollywood. *Sopyonje* was released when people were beginning to pay attention to leisure, culture and 'self' – aspects they had gone without during the decades of Korean industrialization.

Against this backdrop, a government report awakened the Korean people to the cultural industry's potential contribution to the national economy. In 1994, the Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology submitted a report to the president suggesting that the government promote media production as the national strategic industry by taking note of overall revenue (from theatre exhibition, television syndication, licensing, etc.) from the Hollywood blockbuster, *Jurassic Park*, which was worth the foreign sales of 1.5 million Hyundai cars. 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. This revelation became a household topic for quite a long time, in accordance with the globalization-cum-information age discourse. Following the report, the Korean government established the Cultural Industry Bureau within the Ministry of Culture and Sports in 1994, and instituted the Motion Picture Promotion Law in 1995 in order to lure corporate and investment capital into the local film industry.

In their efforts to create a cultural industry, Koreans emulated and appropriated the American media system with the mantra 'Learning from Hollywood'. It was argued that Korea should promote large media companies as well as a more commercial media market. A media policy report submitted to the Korean government in 1995 reads as follows: 'Korea needs to encourage vertically integrated media conglomerates. . . . While there is a concern for the projected monopoly of information, in order to cope with the large-scale TNCs, we need media conglomerates to match their size and resources' (Kim, 1996).<sup>7</sup> 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. In the process, the conventional Korean developmental regimen of an export-oriented economy continued, as evidenced by a remark made by a senior manager of the Daewoo group's film division: 'It is our duty and responsibility to export Korean films overseas' (Groves, 1997). In the context of the public's rising interest in 'our culture' provoked by *Sopyonje*, and the improved film-viewing environment enabled by *chaebol* investment, including expanding

film choices and more convenient theatre facilities, Korean cinema gradually began to attract local audiences. Yet the *chaebol* participation in the media ended suddenly with the economic crisis that began in late 1997. Many *chaebol* folded their media businesses under the IMF-directed restructuring mandate (Shim, 2002).

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. Big business introduced sophisticated business know-how, such as audience research in film production and marketing, to the mom-and-pop Korean film industry; as noted by a film producer: 'Like Hollywood, we are spending a lot on marketing and research, so our data on the audience is very exact' (Chon, 2001: 49). Each stage in the film-making process became more rigorous; it was reported that the scenario for *Friend*, a 2001 Korean blockbuster, was revised 21 times. Further, in order to better analyse and exploit audience trends, audiences are often invited to become involved in scriptwriting, script revision and editing processes (Shim, 2001).

Since the mid-1990s, there was an unprecedented entry of fresh talent, such as MBAs and graduates from prestigious universities, into film companies, which offered decent pay and promised secure 'life-time' employment under *chaebol* ownership. When many *chaebol* folded their film businesses in the vortex of the Asian financial crisis, some of these big-business-trained personnel remained in the film industry at large, playing pivotal roles in leading Korean cinema into the 21st century. Besides, this period saw a new generation of creative young directors, actors and other personnel with formal training from film schools all over the world enter the local film industry, which had long been dominated by those who had learnt their craft on the job (Oh, 2001). When *Cine 21*, a major weekly film magazine, compiled 'Top 50 powers in the Korean film industry' in its 1 May 2001 issue, seven of the top ten most influential persons were in their 30s (*Cine 21*, 2001). Enjoying the more lenient censorship policy, the new generation dealt with such sensitive issues as North-South Korean relations and homosexuality. The long-awaited Korean cinema renaissance was on the horizon.

In 1999, to everyone's surprise, the Korean action thriller *Shiri* attracted 5.8 million theatre-goers (with 2.44 million in Seoul alone),<sup>8</sup> surpassing the local theatre attendance record set by the Hollywood film *Titanic*. It was revealed that a venture capital firm, KDB Capital, invested \$333,000 in the movie and earned returns of more than 300 percent. 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 favourably to new Korean cinema, which was equipped with cash, management capacity and creativity. In

February 2001, a military mystery entitled *Joint Security Area* broke the box-office record set by *Shiri*, drawing an audience of 2.5 million in Seoul. Another venture capital firm, KTB Network, earned a return of 250 percent profit for its \$707,000 investment in this film. In summer 2001, a gangland saga, *Friend*, again beat the box office record by selling 8.2 million admission tickets nationwide (Leong, 2003).

As proof of the improved quality of Korean cinema, a number of Korean movies have been invited to compete in top-class film festivals around the world each year, and have won awards. In 2002, Korean director Im Kwon-taek won the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival for his film *Chihwaseon*, and Lee Chang-dong won the award for Best Direction at Venice Film Festival for *Oasis*. In 2004, director Park Chan-wook won the Grand Prix (second prize) for his film *Old Boy* at Cannes, and Kim Ki-duk won the Best Director awards at both the Berlin International Film Festival (for *Samaritan Girl*) and Venice (*Bin Jip: Empty House*). Interestingly, Koreans have garnered best director awards at the three most prestigious international film festivals within a span of two years.

In 2004, Korean cinema was swept up in the box-office success of two local films. In February 2004, *Silmido*, the film about a secret project to assassinate former North Korean leader Kim Il-sung in the early 1970s, set a new box-office record by attracting 10 million theatre-goers. On 3 April 2004, *TaeGukGi: The Brotherhood of War*, which is about two brothers whose lives were torn apart by the Korean War, smashed the box-office record with 11.09 million admission tickets nationwide. The movie was even expected to reach the 12 million theatre-goer mark (B. Kim, 2004). Aided by a string of blockbusters, Korean-made films came to occupy 53.5 percent of the market share in terms of admissions in 2003, up from 15.9 percent in 1993. Korea is now the seventh largest film market in the world, with the total number of theatre audiences nationwide in 2003 standing at around 119 million, up from 47 million in 1992. Following domestic success, the Korean film industry exported 164 movies earning a total revenue of \$30,979,000 in 2003, which was a huge increase from 1993's figure of 14 movies and \$173,838 in earnings (Korean Film Council, 2004). Korean cinema especially won the hearts of Asian audiences, with sales to the Asian region occupying more than 60 percent of its total foreign sales; this resulted in Korea being touted the 'New Hong Kong' (Leong, 2003).

The Korean government's support of the cultural industry was noteworthy. President Kim Dae Jung, who called himself the 'President of Culture' when he inaugurated himself as president in 1998, established the Basic Law for the Cultural Industry Promotion in 1999 by allocating a total budget of \$148.5 million to this project (Choe, 1999). In this favourable environment, a number of international film festivals have sprouted up in Korea, such as Pusan International Film Festival, which is now considered

the best of its kind in Asia. Through these, foreign buyers are exposed to Korean films (Shin, 2003). During the Kim Dae Jung administration, the cultural sector's budget relative to the total government budget per fiscal year increased from 484.8 billion won, or 0.60 percent of the total government budget in 1998, to 1,281.5 billion won, or 1.15 percent of the total government budget in 2002 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2003).<sup>9</sup>

As noted earlier, in developing their cultural industry, Koreans have emulated and appropriated American cultural industries with 'Learning from Hollywood' as a slogan. Through this learning process, Koreans have provided their own twists to the foreign styles and forms, by blending and adding their indigenous characteristics and unique flourishes in innovative ways. The next section provides a discussion of Korean pop music as an illustration of such cultural hybridization and examines the transformation of the music industry.

### **Cultural hybridization and the Korean pop music industry**

Until the 1980s, the Korean pop music scene had been dominated by what were loosely categorized as Korean ballads and *ppongjjak*. The Korean ballad is characterized by mellow sounds and amorous lyrics influenced by Western styles such as easy listening and American folk music (for example, songs by Simon and Garfunkel). *Ppongjjak* is what Koreans onomatopoeically call the Japanese *enka*-influenced musical style, assimilated into Korea around the turn of the 20th century.<sup>10</sup> Largely associated with the pathos of the older generation, *ppongjjak* has experienced periodic ups and downs, with the government banning some of the hit songs in the genre for having elements of 'morbid' Japanese aesthetics (Provine et al., 2000).

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. There was no authoritative record sales chart, except for weekly chart shows on television, which served as the only criteria by which songs and singers were judged popular, and by which audiences decided which albums they should buy. Furthermore, musicians were required to perform with the television networks' in-house studio bands and dancers, which deprived the country of the opportunity for diverse elements of local pop music to grow spontaneously. 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 (Howard, 2002).

Transformation comes from the 'new and unexpected combination of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs' noted by Rushdie (1991: 394), thus changes originating from globalization trends and democratic reforms began to transform the local music market. After Seoul's 1988 lifting of restrictions on foreign travel, the country became more exposed to the outside world. With the sharp rise in disposable income in the early 1990s, many Koreans purchased satellite dishes to pick up Japanese stations and Star TV. Against this backdrop, Korean music fans came to have a better grasp of global music trends, and hungered for new tunes from local musicians. According to Howard: 'Political freedoms were mirrored by musical experimentation, as musicians began to realize that they had to attempt to be distinct if they were to succeed in gaining an audience. . . . [M]ore and more musicians appropriated foreign music styles' (2002: 88–9). In this context, the three-man band Seo Taiji and Boys, composed of underground bassist-singer-songwriter Seo Taiji and two rapper-dancers, released the single 'I Know' in 1992. This was arguably the first rap track in Korea, and it excited local music listeners, who were fed up with the ballads and *ppongjjak* that lacked dynamism and musical experimentation.

Until the group disbanded in 1996, Seo Taiji received tremendous support from Korean music fans. The fans were so ardent that when the Korean Broadcasting Ethics Committee ordered that the lyrics of the song 'Regret the Times' be changed before public release in 1995, the enraged fans protested and eventually the government had to abolish the censorship system. Seo Taiji's music was so critically acclaimed that in 1998, when a group of music critics and industry people compiled the best 100 albums in Korean music history, all four of the band's albums were included. Furthermore, Seo Taiji was chosen by *The Monthly Joong-Ang* in 1994 as one of 50 people who had changed Korean society since 1945 (Taiji Mania, 2003). Seo Taiji and Boys literally revolutionized the Korean music industry as we know it on the following grounds.

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 *ppongjjak*, and invented a unique musical form which 'employs rap only during the verses, singing choruses in a pop style' (Morelli, 2001: 250) with dynamic dance movements. Each of their albums was in itself a musical experimentation. In their first album, they showed how Korean rap would sound. In their second, they experimented with a crossover between 'high and low' music by inviting the traditional Korean percussionist Kim Deoksu and modern jazz saxophonist Lee Jeongsik to play for their album recordings. From their third album, they became 'vocal' in sending out social messages, with an attempt at

gangsta rap. Since Seo Taiji, the syncretism of a wide range of musical genres in one album has become commonplace in Korea. What has come into existence is a hybrid but distinctively Korean pop style.

Second, Seo Taiji and Boys not only expanded the scope of K-pop but also the scale of the music market. In the small, dormant market, the group's first album was 'the fastest-selling record since 1982' (Suh, 1992). During its four years of activity, the band was estimated to have earned more than 10 billion won from record sales (6 million copies of their four albums), music video sales, concerts and other commercial activities (Byun, 1998). With an endless crop of imitation groups of Seo Taiji and Boys, sales of home-grown pop acts have since outpaced foreign albums by four to one, the Recording Industry Association of Korea reports (Hau and Madden, 2001). As of 2002, Korea is the second largest music market in Asia with \$300 million album sales per year (Macintyre, 2002).

Third, Seo Taiji and Boys did not sing of romantic (and often sad) sentiments, as did the singers of ballads and *ppongjjak*; rather, they represented adolescents' thoughts and emotions in their songs. They criticized the ills of the education system, taunted adults for their snobbery, and showed the people's desire for North–South Korean unification, thus increasing social consciousness of pop music. The fact that Seo Taiji was a high school dropout but managed to earn social respect and succeed financially influenced parents' ideas about stardom. In a country where the average family viewed university entrance examinations for children as being of the utmost importance, stardom came to be considered a new option for success. It was reported that some parents even constructed spaces in their homes for their children to practise dancing, which exemplified a shift in the Confucian values of society (Morelli, 2001).

Finally, Seo Taiji and Boys challenged the broadcasting network-controlled music market. As Seo Taiji chose the other members of the band based on their dancing abilities, the band did not need the resident dancers of the television networks. Since he owned a personal state-of-the-art music studio, Seo Taiji did not rely on television networks' facilities and music directors. 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 expanded. Since the mid-1990s, record company scouts have held dance competitions and mass auditions, which have led to the manufacture of boy bands such as H.O.T., Sechs Kies, Uptown and Shinhwa; these would probably never have developed without Seo Taiji's success.

If Seo Taiji is credited with transforming Korean pop music, elevating its status in society and setting the standard for Korean dance music that would later suit the tastes of Asian fans, it is Lee Suman, founder of SM

Entertainment in 1989, who is credited with the industrialization of the star-making process in K-pop. In a market in which the door to stardom was largely controlled by the networks, Lee challenged the system by 'cloning' talent and grooming pop stars. 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. Before manufacturing H.O.T., Lee conducted a survey of teenage girls to find out what they wanted from their idols. Armed with knowledge from his research, Lee sifted through thousands of raw audition tapes and selected aspiring idols based on their looks as well as on their dancing and singing abilities. After almost two years of rigorous training in singing, dancing and other aspects to elevate them in the music market, SM Entertainment released H.O.T.'s first album, which sold 1.5 million copies (Howard, 2002; Macintyre, 2002)

Following the success of his boy band, Lee has captured the market with other properties, such as all-girl trio S.E.S., and BoA. Eyeing the Asian market, Lee made his teenage band members go through language training. In fact, two members of S.E.S. were selected partly because of their fluency in Japanese and English respectively. From the beginning of BoA's music career, Lee sent the pop sensation to Japan during school recesses to learn the language and to tap into the Japanese market. After achieving some success there, SM Entertainment is currently sounding out the possibility of BoA becoming a success in the Chinese market. 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. Following SM's success, many like-minded talent agencies have, through similar star-making processes, appeared and gradually transformed the entertainment market (Jeon, 2003; Macintyre, 2002).

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**

Korea is not a traditional powerhouse of popular culture in Asia. However, the country is emerging as what Chen (2000) calls a 'sub-Empire', enjoying the historical juncture of media liberalization in Asia starting in the 1990s. In this article, we have examined the Korean struggle for cultural diversity in the face of a possible erosion of their cultural particularity. In the process, cultural hybridization has occurred as local cultural agents and actors interact and negotiate with global forms, using them as resources through which Koreans construct their own cultural spaces, as exemplified in the case of rap. By this, we understand that the

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

As to the extent that audiences derive similar identities from watching the same programs, it is also possible to think of ‘imagined communities’ in Asia. According to Iwabuchi, 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’ (2001: 56). Ang notes that ‘popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition’ (1985: 20). In other words, how audiences can identify themselves with what they see is most important in their construction of pleasure from media consumption. Hong Kong-based film critic Law has the view that Korean popular culture’s success arises from its ability to touch the right chord of Asian sentiments, such as family values (in Chon, 2001). In contrast to common prejudices about boy bands – that they appeal to their fans with rebellious lyrics and gaudy dances – the hit songs from Korean rap band g.o.d. include ‘To My Mother’, a rap song about a sacrificial mother. Its lyrics are as follows:

Mother, I miss you.

My family was too poor to eat out.

While mother went to work, I used to cook instant noodles by myself.

Sick and tired of them, I once pestered mother to eating out.

She had to use emergency fund to go to a Chinese restaurant.

Mother ordered Jajangmyon<sup>11</sup> but curiously she didn’t eat.

She simply said, ‘I don’t like it. Eat more.’

She simply said, ‘I don’t like it. Eat more.’

She simply said, ‘I don’t like it. Eat more.’

...

Mother I love you.

I regret that I haven’t said this to you before.

I love you. May you rest in peace.

The factor of ‘cultural proximity’ is not enough to explain the success of K-pop across the region. According to a Chinese K-pop fan: ‘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, both culturally and economically' (quoted in Choe, 2001). This explanation is most appropriate in Vietnam where 'South Korean TV dramas provide the tightly controlled communist country with an enticing glimpse of the outside world' (Visser, 2002). As such, the 'vision of modernization' inherent in Korean popular culture plays a part in making it acceptable in some Asian countries.

The development of Korean media industries and their advance into regional markets is clearly a sign of resilience of the subaltern – and of the 'contamination of the imperial', considering the context of decades-long American domination of global cultural industries. However, while Korean cinema is enjoying success, the all-or-nothing blockbuster business has caused concern over a narrowing of diversity. It is reported that, as of early February 2004, *TaeGukGi: The Brotherhood of War* was playing on 110 screens while *Silmido* was being shown on 53 screens, combining to take up nearly 92 percent of Seoul's total 178 screens. Industry observers have begun to say, 'What Korean cinema needs now is not one movie that attracts 10 million viewers, but 10 movies that attract 1 million viewers' (J. Kim, 2004; K. Kim, 2004). We need to be reminded that, until now, all the outcries against cultural imperialism have been made to protect 'diversity' and the 'coexistence' of cultures. Similarly, the commercial drive of the Korean media is also a cause for concern for the media performance. No longer constrained by the obligation of public service, media companies indulge themselves in pursuing profit maximization by getting their products and services to the largest number of consumers, not only in Korea but also overseas, and this kind of capitalist activity has been justified in the name of national interests. However, it is time for us to ask what constitutes national interests.

Are the arguments presented here on Korean popular culture's hybridity limited to describing the Korean mainstream media's co-opting of a hybridity strategy, without any clear sign that they are also serving *popular* interests? The topic of hybridity as a *popular* appropriation of content originating from both TNCs and the local mainstream media is under-explored. I hope that future scholarship will take up these challenges.

## Notes

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1. Here, Korea refers to the Republic of Korea, or South Korea. Korean names are given throughout this article in their original Korean form, that is, surname first

followed by given name. Other transliterations from Korean have been made according to guidelines suggested by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism during the Kim Dae Jung administration.

2. The quote is inside the back cover of the book.
3. Throughout this paper, \$ refers to the US currency.
4. In Southeast Asia, Korean pop music is called K-pop, while Japanese pop music is called J-pop.
5. Tradewinds Tours & Travel ran an advertisement in the Singaporean daily, *The Straits Times* (29 April 2003).
6. On 7 November 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated *pansori* as an intangible world heritage treasure.
7. My translation.
8. In Korea, official statistics for film viewership are based on Seoul theatres alone.
9. The won is the basic unit of money in South Korea, with \$1 roughly valued at 800 won before the financial crisis in 1997. It has been about 1,190 won to the dollar since mid-1998.
10. Some argue that the melody had already existed in Korea before Japanese influence.
11. A Korean-style Chinese noodle dish with fermented black soy bean sauce, onions and chunks of pork.

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