

Culture and Empathy

International Journal of
Sociology, Psychology, and Cultural Studies

ISSN: 2635-6619 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://cultureempathy.org/>

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To cite this article: Alex Taek-Gwang Lee. 2018. “Popular Culture and Nation-Building: A Consideration of the Rise of Korean Wave .” *Culture and Empathy* 1(1-4): 3-17, DOI: 10.32860/26356619/2018/1.1234.0002

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.32860/26356619/2018/1.1234.0002>



Published online: 8 Oct 2018.



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Popular Culture and Nation-Building: A Consideration of the Rise of Korean Wave

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Abstract

In South Korea, popular culture serves as a form of modernity and has developed separately from (or in a dialectical relationship to) the state-culture, which was shaped by military dictatorship during postwar economic development. The military regime impacted the field of popular culture through the late 1980s with direct censorship in full swing. At the beginning of the 1990s, however, the ways in which the authoritarian government directly controlled trends in popular culture were no longer possible. Instead, the public committee, although still under the influence of governmental authority, came to be responsible for inspecting cultural products. The gradual marketization of popular culture has seen the rise of the Korean Wave, a global phenomenon that refers to the increasing popularity of Korean culture since the 1990s. In this way, popular culture in South Korea may be considered a field in which the government attempted to suppress the collective desires of ordinary people to further a political agenda. However, the attempt to mobilize the will of the people was not successful, and ironically, precipitated a democratic culture that has paved the way toward consumerism. We recognize the ambiguous contribution of popular culture to democratization in the contemporary history of South Korea—particularly the unevenness of popular culture in the postwar world system, which has brought about the rise of the Korean Wave. The uneven development of the culture industry allowed the Korean entertainment business to gain “primitive accumulation” by taking advantage of geographical differences between cultural importing countries and cultural exporting countries. My argument contends that popular culture in Korea is not only the effect of modernization, but also an affirmative response to capitalism. The culture industry produces cultural commodities, the reception and consumption of which are not merely passive on the part of audiences worldwide.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 August 2018
Revised 24 September 2018
Accepted 30 September 2018

KEYWORDS

Korean Wave, Nation Building, Asian Modernity, Modernization theory, Culture Industry

Introduction

It is symptomatic that the term “culture” has gradually become a buzzword in the political scenes of South Korea since the 1990s. Some problems seem to lurk behind the phenomenon. First, the

term comprises the official definition of culture (which is normally celebrated by the government insofar as culture is beneficial for the development of the economy)—the official meaning of culture in Korea easily correlates with the culture industry that produces profits by selling cultural commodities. Secondly, the term indicates the “cultivated” in general, which is derived from German term for agriculture *bildung kultur*. This implies a middle-class demand for an advanced capitalist society. In this way, the doctrine of modernization serves as the master signifier of ideology in South Korea. Aspiring toward a highly developed modern society is the hidden impetus behind Korean consumerism. It is undeniable that the attention to culture in South Korea is a function of a nationalist project promoted by governmental policies to encourage the exportation of the Korean Wave. Seemingly, the Korean Wave is kind of “the answer to the real” for many Koreans who yearn for a highly modernized nation-state. The soft power of the Korean Wave is closely related to globalization, while embodying a fervent nationalism. Ironically, when it comes to pushing globalization, Koreans cannot be self-assertive in the cultural commodities produced by the “Korean” culture industry. Instead they come to find themselves diluting “Koreanness” in the cultural wave. Above all, the mode of cultural production is adaptable in fulfilling the demands of multi-national investments. This situation, however, is not merely disadvantageous to cultural and aesthetic production. The globalized sphere of the culture industry allows many more opportunities to circumscribe better conditions for output.

Using Korean film since the 1960s as an example, the favored style of representation appears to be mutable regional identities. So effective is the strategy that it is hard to parse the real Korean identity. Many of the most exciting (and contentious) successes in contemporary Korean blockbuster films in South Korea have been the spitting images of Hollywood blockbusters, contaminated, ironically, with an appeal to nationalism. What Korean commercial film production offers against Hollywood globalization is the re-branding of Hollywood genres such as action, sci-fi, thriller, gangster, and romantic comedies (Kang 2015).

The cultural strategies of the Korean filmmaking system in the context of globalization are in fact to imitate Hollywood with the slogans of anti-Hollywood. The paradox of nationalism is evident here. Observing these phenomena as a dialectical interaction between globalization and localization, the repercussions of the Korean film industry due to its cultural logic are ambivalent. Hollywood is a dominant cultural element that has influenced Korean popular culture since 1945. In a sense, Hollywood endowed Korean popular culture with an image of modernity and supported the ideology of Korean modernization after the 1970s.

Nevertheless, Korean audiences reject the Hollywood spectacle in terms of their own claims to reality. This is the reason why the Korean domestic film market is still in full swing in contrast to other countries. The current rise of the Korean film industry is a symptom of globalization. That is, globalization nullifies the real identity of a nation-state on the one hand, yet at the same time, encourages the collective demand for a new national image by way of repetitive compulsion to reconstruct a spectacular version.

In this respect, cultural resistance to the dominance of Hollywood cultural production seems to rely on the re-appropriation of national imaginary and authentic narratives. Yet it is not easy to simply assert that the Korean cultural rejection of Hollywood is another face of nationalism. Strategically re-branding Hollywood genres, the Korean film industry seems destined to establish a new image of “Koreanness” through this impactful cultural practice.

The complexities of this phenomenon are deeply related to the ways in which globalization facilitates the failure of nationalism while enhancing collective demand for a new cultural identity in South Korea—a nation without nationalism. From this perspective, the attempts of popular culture to attain a new national identity are nothing less than a by-product of a frustrated utopian impulse to symbolically resolve real social contradictions, which are caused by globalization. It is undeniable that globalization is a recent influencer in Asian films, complicating the goals and identity of the industry more than ever before. In this sense, it is difficult to say that popular culture is inclined toward nationalism or ethnic imaginary—rather any form of popular culture is a fantasy behind which something real is hidden. Fantasy is false, but at the same time, it is true. Truth always lies in the realm of fantasy. Popular culture is a screen upon which the truth of any society reveals itself in the dialectic of desire, even when all traces of politics have been erased from the surface.

In South Korea, popular culture serves as a form of modernity and has developed separately from (or in a dialectical relationship to) the state-culture, which was shaped by military dictatorship during postwar economic development. The military regime impacted the field of popular culture through the late 1980s with direct censorship in full swing. At the beginning of the 1990s, however, the ways in which the authoritarian government directly controlled trends in popular culture were no longer possible. Instead, the public committee of Arts Council Korea, although still under the influence of governmental authority, came to be responsible for inspecting cultural products.

The gradual marketization of popular culture has seen the rise of the Korean Wave, a global phenomenon that refers to the increasing popularity of Korean culture since the 1990s. In this way, popular culture in South Korea may be considered a field in which the government attempted to suppress the collective desires of ordinary people to further a political agenda. However, the attempt to mobilize the will of the people was not successful, and ironically, precipitated a democratic culture that has paved the way toward consumerism. We recognize the ambiguous contribution of popular culture to democratization in the contemporary history of South Korea—particularly the unevenness of popular culture in the postwar world system, which has brought about the rise of the Korean Wave. The uneven development of the culture industry allowed the Korean entertainment business to gain “primitive accumulation” by taking advantage of geographical differences between cultural importing countries and cultural exporting countries.

My argument contends that popular culture in Korea is not only the effect of modernization, but also an affirmative response to capitalism. The culture industry produces cultural commodities, the reception and consumption of which are not merely passive on the part

of audiences worldwide. British cultural studies have long suggested the transgressive and protesting power of popular culture against the traditions of modernization, thereby presenting cultural consumption as a symptom of the decline of modern civilization. This theoretical approach to culture in general does not transcend the limits of Adorno's culture industry theory, a theory regarding the cultural industry as deception, however, despite its insightful contribution to our understanding of the predicament of consumer culture.

The new rise of consumer culture in the era of globalization seems unprecedented. As Mike Featherstone points out, "the promise of consumer culture is central to the expansion of the new Asian economies" (2007). Consumer culture is not easily separated from popular culture in Asian countries such as Korea, because popular culture is brought in with the establishment of the culture industry. As such, the marketplace is a spot for modernity, introducing so-called "advanced culture" into the domestic lives of citizens. The Korean Wave effectively reveals the ways in which popular culture meets modernization. The big business of cultural production is a site of modernization, but more specifically, it is an ideological crisscross in which encoding and decoding processes occur in an overall scheme of uneven development. To be a modern state is imperative for developing countries, and the development of popular culture serves as an indicator of modernization. In this way, the success of the Korean Wave is nothing less than a dramatic consequence of the intersection of modernity and capitalism. To some extent, capitalism is overlapped with modernity, but two occasionally seem asymmetrical. Modernity is conceived as the mode of living, while capitalism is understood as an economic system in East Asia. Due to the case of China, it is not difficult to say that modernization could be carried out without capitalism.

According to Michel Foucault, the state is a matrix upon which totalization and individualization go hand in hand. He argues:

I don't think that we should consider the "modern state" as an entity which was developed above individuals, ignoring what they are and even their very existence, but, on the contrary, as a very sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns. (1982)

Indeed, the state is a contingent reality founded on normative and conceptual charts. The operations of secular institutions are constructed by transactions and power relations. By this argument, it is necessary to see that what is defined as modern is particularly Eurocentric, insinuating a teleological process. In other words, modernity is a historical outcome specific to the West, which has spread gradually from its origins to the rest of the world. Here is not the place to discuss the problem of Eurocentrism or Orientalism, but rather I want to point out aspects that are non-represented—or invisible—in the construing language of reality. The term Asia is this type of a word—a term that could not possibly relay the entire identity of the geographical location.

In this vein, my essay focuses on the relationship between the Korean Wave and modernization theory and examines the commodification of popular culture in South Korea. I also claim that the resisting power of popular culture (i.e., the populism of modern cultural politics) occasionally brings forth the eruption of desires over the pleasure principles of consumerism.

Popular Culture and Power Relations

The 2015 release of *Avengers 2: Age of Ultron*, a Hollywood blockbuster movie based on the Avengers super hero team from Marvel Comics, was a lighthearted event of great pop cultural magnitude. The fact that the film represents some landscapes of Seoul, the capital of South Korea, was immediately recognizable. Like Hong Kong, Tokyo, and more recently Shanghai, Seoul has finally become a symbol of the Asian megalopolis in representing so-called high modernity—or, to use an old-fashioned term, “the post-modernity of globalizing late capitalism.”

In this sense, I would say that *Avengers 2* reinforces the mirror-effects of modernization, the dialectical relationship between the dominant and the dominated subjects. As Franz Fanon claims, the dominant creates the dominated as a fixed identity (1967). Thus, it is the Westerners as dominant who establish the identity of non-Westerners, such as Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, American Indians, and others, in the minds of audiences and consumers worldwide.

Avengers 2, a spectacular product of Hollywood, a phantasmagoria of Western modernity presented to non-Western audiences in the early stages of global capitalism, thus functions as a mirror in which Korean audiences are reflected as dominated. However, the image in the mirror is not exactly the image they expect, but instead is strange and unfamiliar, revealing distorted versions of what Korean people experience in everyday life. Some Korean audiences have complained that the movie’s representation of the place wherein they live is not realistic, even though some scenes depict actual landscapes of Seoul. A representation cannot satisfy the passion that we hold for the real, and always misses something from within. In this way, the tension between the symbolic and the real is the very locus of a political plane. Let us consider some examples.

Some interesting events occurred when Hollywood film crews were on location in Seoul to shoot *Avengers 2*. Korean audiences seemed to welcome them, and nothing out of the ordinary occurred on a large scale. However, a dead body floating in the river was found as filming began below one of the city’s bridges, Mapodaegyo. Having retrieved the body, police announced that it was a university student who had committed suicide due to mental depression. This sad event was not anomalous, but rather the truth of today’s Seoul. Suicide rates in young generations of Koreans have increased rapidly, and in this single event, the film crews encountered an unfortunate reality of South Korea. To emphasize the point, this might be an instance where the tragedies of reality bumped harshly against the imaginary trappings of the Hollywood dream factory. Even worse, there was another shock during

filmmaking, this time from the sky. North Korea fired artillery shells over the south military borderline without warning—another jarring, threatening jolt of the real. Following these events, a joke emerged on social networking services, one of the most popular public spheres in South Korea, suggesting that the real Korea had defeated the fantastic super heroes. Of course, a joke is intended for fun, not to state the truth, but popular jokes do tend to reflect our bale beliefs about any given topic. In this vein, these events and the people's reaction suggest an uncomfortable truth of so-called "Asian modernity."

There is another episode with pertinence. On March 4, 2015, US ambassador, Mark Lippert, was slashed in the face and hands by an attacker armed with a knife in Seoul. The assailant was identified as Kim Ki-jong, a nationalist activist. Ahead of the attack, Kim had reportedly shouted, "South Korea and North Korea must be reunified!" His attack stirred pro-American demonstrations, mobilized by right-wing supporters in Seoul. They called Kim a fanatic and held a protest against the attack outside the hospital where Mr. Lippert was treated, waving signs that read, "Get well soon! Mark Lippert" and "Korea-US alliance is solid". The contingent even performed Buchaechum, a traditional fan dance, and prayed for the quick recovery of Mr. Lippert in front of the US Embassy. The scene they made was most likely not so much a political demonstration as a religious ritual. In fact, those who blamed Kim for being a fanatic seemed to betray their own fanaticism against what they criticized as fanaticism. Why did they dance for Mr. Lippert? Bearing in mind that the "traditional fan dance" was initially invented for US visitors, it is not difficult to understand the hidden meaning behind the performance. The fake-traditional performance (i.e., Buchaechum) was the symbolic representation of a fixed identity created by the dominant. No doubt, this is the structure of modernity, the ideological paradox of reality. Indeed, ideology, according to Slavoj Žižek, is a filter through which the split of reality seals off (Žižek 1989).

What then is the ideology that produces the paradox of pro-American protesters? Ideological recognition is the result of dialectics between inclusion and exclusion. In other words, the process to include something and, at the same time, to exclude something. The problem here is who decides what would be in or out. This is the point that Fanon raises in his discussion of the dialectical relationship between the dominant and the dominated. The dominant enforces a ruling ideology upon the dominated. This may be identified as the function of authoritarian or disciplinary power. Popular culture is one of the battlefields on which the tension between the dominant and the dominated comes forward. Popular culture is the fantasy that exposes the truth of the real.

The role of popular culture in South Korea has been crucial in the context of trends of democratization, which have dovetailed with neo-liberal globalization. It sounds paradoxical to juxtapose democracy with neo-liberalism, yet, what has been around since the so-called democratization of South Korea is the deployment of "democratic materialism" in Badiou's sense of the term (2009). Popular culture functions as the screen upon which the dreams of Koreans are featured. To paraphrase Žižek, however, the screen does not show what Koreans desire, but rather how Koreans desire. The screen is the structure of desire in the age of globalization—that is, the dialectic of global capitalism in the field of cultural production.

Social Transformation in South Korea

According to Paik Nak-chung, a literary critic and academic who is credited with establishing the theory of nation-literature, the uprising of June 1987 (known as the June Struggle) put an end to the military rule of the regime of Chun Du-hwan and opened a new chapter in South Korea's democratic history. There are similar struggles of significance in the development of Korean democracy, including the Student Revolution on April 19, 1960, the Busan-Masan Uprising of 1979, and the May Uprising of Gwangju in 1980. However, as Paik writes, the protest of June 1987 represents:

... [A] categorically new achievement in having initiated a democratization process that has continued for the past twenty years without experiencing reversals such as the military takeovers of May 16, 1961 and May 17, 1980. At the same time, there is a widespread sense of crisis in Korea today that the so-called 87 regime that was formed after June 1987 has now reached its limit and is in need of a new breakthrough. (2007)

Opinions on the outcomes of the June Struggle of 1987 vary. Choi Jang-jip, a Korean political theorist on democratization, suggests that even though procedural democracy was formalized through the June Struggle, substantive democracy (particularly in economic and social fields) has remained inadequate, or perhaps has even regressed (Choi 2010). From this perspective, the Korean left raises a question about the nature of democracy founded by the 87 regime, which, analysts agree emerged as a new democratic system following the events of 1987. What the leftists emphasize is that the democracy of the 87 regime is limited to serving the interests of the middle class, leaving the working class and minorities to pursue further reform. That is to say, there is tension between those who celebrate the achievements of the June Struggle and those who criticize the limitations of the 87 regime. Defending the accomplishments of the June Struggle, Paik argues that "political democracy itself, even after its foundation was laid by the establishment of a democratic constitution and the direct presidential election in 1987, still had to be fought for and arduously extended at each step through the regimes of Roh Tae-woo, Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, and Roh Mu-hyun." Paik's viewpoint is that the 87 regime is the result of an unfinished democratic project in general. The point that Paik focuses on is the "irreversible achievement" of the 87 regime insofar as "the possibility of reversal through a military coup has more or less been eliminated" (Paik 2007). Paik also emphasizes, "just as the July-August Great Labour Struggles of 1987 led both to improvement in workers' welfare and an advance in procedural democracy, the distinction between the 'form' and 'substance' of democracy is at best facile" (Paik 2007). For Paik, the June Struggle was not a movement for building people's democracy or socialism in South Korea.

In this way, the democratization of Korean society inevitably called into crisis the socialist and radical visions that dominated the movements of the 1980s under the iron fist of military dictatorship. Situations of violence blinded the left from anticipating what would happen after the disappearance of authoritarian power and in the period since 1987. The orthodox perspective of official Marxism still hovered over Korean radical activities. In this context, social movements catalyzed by "civil society" attempted to replace the struggles of the

1980s that were oriented toward socialism. The Korean civil society is nothing other than a new social campaign based on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which mainly represents the interests of white-collar workers and the urban middle class. Since 1987, the offspring year of the 87 regime, the middle class (including white-collar workers) has participated in street politics. It is arguable that, over the course of a decade, the political assertion of the middle class dramatically transformed ideological apparatuses—and even the South Korean way of life as a whole. To put into practice the ideas of a democracy formed by way of political conflict with military authority in the 1980s, the middle class (in a sense, the white collar working class, due to the hierarchy of Korean society) supported liberal governments such as the regimes of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Mu-hyun. This is the historical background against which “postmodern theory” suddenly became a buzzword—the term seemingly accompanies the rise of liberalism. For many leftists, the term “postmodernism” has meant the same thing for both liberalism and consumerism, because it seems to encourage “de-Marxification” and praise individualism against communitarianism.

The role of the middle class is crucial in the development of democracy in the Korean society. As such, the arrangement is largely suitable to the ideology of stability and security, however, rather than the revolutionary left. The aim of the Korean middle class is ambivalent insofar as they want to sustain the possibility of climbing up the status ladder to a higher class, but still demonstrate compassion toward the working class. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the political projects of the Korean left declined in short order, with the presence of the Korean left becoming weaker than in the 1980s. Indeed, the discursive hegemony was taken over by reformative liberals who ardently came to terms with neo-liberalism by composing the blueprint of capitalist innovation against stuffy socialist conservatives. The economic crisis of 1997 was the very moment at which the theory of business administration appropriated the leftist conceptualization of revolution for the sake of validating capitalist innovations in the context of social systems, thereby emphasizing competition rather than collaboration among members. The early politics of the ascending bourgeois re-emerged in the name of global capitalism, coming to indicate the actual situation in which financial capitalism was poised to prevail and dominate throughout the world. In South Korea, economic reformation stood not only to benefit a free market, but also to impose flexible employment systems on the middle class as well as the working class. It goes without saying that a new economic system of so-called flexible accumulation capitalism precipitated the collapse of the middle class.

In South Korea, class consciousness is always repressed in the name of national security. The national agenda is consistently prioritized ahead of individual issues. This type of thinking results in situations wherein real politics cannot transcend an empirical dimension—a dimension that remains informed by a regional mentality. This does not mean, however, that Korean politics are premature or pre-modern. Korean people do not trust any politician who purports to be representative of them. In other words, Korean society is now firmly driven by political populism.

The trend of candlelight protests, which occurred in 2008 and in 2016-17, perfectly exemplifies an aspect of Korean popular politics in which the conventional meaning of politics turns problematic. In the cases of candlelight vigils for public demonstration, defining an actual event becomes a political practice to influence a hegemonic struggle. The candlelight vigil of 2008, known officially as the 2008 US Beef Protest, occurred in downtown Seoul from May 24 to July 14, approximately one month after the South Korean government agreed to resume beef imports from the United States. Before 2008, the Korean government had banned the import of US beef in 2003 following an outbreak of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), commonly known as mad cow disease (Pang 2013). Subsequently, the new Lee Myung-bak government decided to re-import US beef, thereby re-opening political baggage. The diplomatic failure of the Lee Myung-bak administration together with issues related to mad cow disease stirred up anxiety in the Korean middle class. The event also reflects a sense of humiliation in terms of Korean nationalism. This mentality may be characterized as an expression of anti-Americanism, which has long lurked in the Korean mind. However, it is necessary to clarify the hidden impetus behind “anti-Americanism,” which in South Korea presupposes the more complex dialectics of desire. Anti-Americanism does not refer to the rejection of America, but rather demands an equal relationship between the two countries.

Thus the 2008 candlelight protest departed from the category of conventional politics, resisting the framework of black-and-white logic in terms of understanding current events. The primal political scene that emerged from the protest against the import of American beef is different from common conceptualizations of politics in South Korea. The political mobilization of the people had nothing to do with political leftist ideology, but rather was rooted in a doctrine of “well-being”— of personal security, or to go a step further, of ensuring a happy life. This does not mean that candlelight protests are not political acts. What is crucial to emphasize is the changed aspect of this particular political act. By focusing on the pertinent issue of the Free Trade Agreement between the US and South Korea, the rise of the candlelight protest can be interpreted as intrinsic in the revitalization of a civil rights movement and the mobilization of people toward democracy. Nevertheless, the symbolism of the candlelight protest seems to hide a disturbing truth within its logic. Indeed, the movement appears to re-assert citizenship against the authority of the state, while at the same time, rejecting any who should not be included as citizens. Thus, the significance of “candlelight” citizenship is altered to stand for the qualification of a citizen. These implications of “candlelight politics” clearly represent the emergence of democracy in South Korea into a new stage of development. With the constitutional republic having been previously set up, individuals followed to internalize it and lay the foundation for the norms of citizenship with the candlelight protest.

The stable normative democracy of South Korea, settled with the eruption of populist opinion via the candlelight protest, showed itself again in 2017. The people mobilized to bring down former-president Park Geun-hye, political heiress to her father Park Chung-hee, a strongman who pushed compressed economic growth in South Korea. Park’s administration was successor to the political legacies of the Lee Myung-bak administration, but the Park administration did not faithfully carry out its duties. Park was impeached by the National

Assembly on charges of influence peddling by her closest aide. In the early stages of agitation, however, most of the members of the National Assembly hesitated to agree to impeachment. The established politicians, including the opposition party, attempted to stabilize the critical situation that had been exacerbated by the candlelight protest. There was distinctive tension between the aims of the politics of the establishment and the politics of the South Korean “grassroots democracy” in its transformative process.

Therefore, “candlelight politics” in various iterations, whatever it may be called, is a symptom that seems to imply the crisis of representative democracy. In this context, the candlelight protest in South Korea would be the eruption of repressed democratic demand triggered by two conservative administrations, the administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, which had attempted to return South Korea to the state of the industrial development era. Hence the people’s reaction to the decline of democracy in South Korea; however, the problem is not only an increasing hatred of the democratic establishment, but also the dominance of economic priorities in the field of social development. What is important here is a market rather than the political sphere. This gives rise to the hatred of politics in general, and furthermore, to anti-intellectualism and de-politicization.

Hollywood and the Passion toward the Real

Popular culture goes hand in hand with de-politicization. Popular culture is the culture in which symbolic exchange takes place, an exchange wherein social structure is first and foremost. Indeed, the structure is brought about by the exchange of what cannot be exchangeable. Therefore, once the structure is established, conflict arises around what cannot be exchangeable in the structure’s balanced and stabilized state. In this way, popular culture is constructed in collaboration with social norms and contributes to perpetuating any given ideological subject, as well as sustains the imaginary relationship between ideology and pleasure. This causes many paradoxical interactions in the consumption of cultural commodities. Examples of this paradox are that consumers should enjoy popular culture, and at the same time, further desire products that push the boundaries of limitations and that the culture industry attempts to mitigate the risks of pleasure investment for the sake of profit returns, but the pleasure of consumption goes far beyond the rationale.

Let us take the case of Asian films as an example to shed light on the relationship between popular culture and local identity. It might be incorrect—certainly incomplete—to state that an aim of Asian film is to imitate Hollywood. Conversely, there is in fact a major trend in Hollywood today to remake Asian films from Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea. Thus, the cultural influence is not one-way, but rather mutual (even if unequal). As Gary G. Xu points out, “Hollywood has had a long history of remaking commercially successful foreign films” (2011). Early Hollywood remakes of classic films stayed mostly within European tradition, although filmmakers have long been interested in Japanese films as well. None of these previous trends are comparable to the current push to remake Asian films, however. The remaking of Asian films now happens on a major scale, with strong intensity, huge publicity, and massive profits.

More interestingly, direct importation of films from Asian countries has noticeably increased among American audiences. As an example, *The Host*, one of the most successful Korean blockbuster films directed by Bong Joon-ho, found mass consumption in the American market upon its release. The film tells the story of a father attempting to rescue his daughter who has been kidnapped by a monster. Following its release in 2006, a total of 13 million tickets had been sold at the end of the film's run on November 8, 2006. Intentionally made as a commercial film, *The Host* won critical praise, including awards for Best Film at the Asian Film Awards and the Blue Dragon Film Awards.

From the outset, *The Host* presupposes that the audience knows everything about the monstrous predator of the film. To reveal why the mutant has come to exist, the film opens with a scene in which the US army secretly ditches formaldehyde, the poisonous liquid flowing into the Han River. This formulates for audiences the simple conclusion that pollution produces a brutal monster.

Regardless, it is difficult to accept that the movie intends to deal with environmental and ecological issues concerning the revenge of nature (as often seen in Hollywood monster films). This motion picture instead seems to be interested in doing something different, aspiring to achieve something only occasionally attempted by a Korean movie since the 1990s. Indeed, *The Host* tries to visualize what Korean spectators really want to see—namely, more real reality.

The Host is a film that exactly answers the passion of Korean audiences toward the real. It is the first occasion in which computer graphic technology successfully occupies a movie's central narrative in the Korean film industry. Not until *The Host* had the Korean film industry wholly realized the triumph of fantastic imagination with the use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) technology. As with *King Kong* (1933), which is well known as a symbolic achievement of technological synthesis among industrial apparatuses, *Jurassic Park* (1993) is regarded as a technological quantum leap in filmmaking based on the idea of a new technology economy. At the time of *Jurassic Park*, Industrial Light and Magic (ILM), an American motion picture and visual effects company, was the right generator for development of these groundbreaking techniques in film. Experimenting with computer graphic technology for filmmaking, the ILM team used Silicon Graphics, formerly a high-performance computing manufacturer, to make the images of the dinosaurs in the film. In this way, the technical film crews of *King Kong* had invented a new apparatus called "Real Projector" to produce more realistic action sequences and heighten the impact of the film's fantastic scenes. To great effect, audiences paradoxically regarded the imagery as more real and more fantastic at the same time. Thus, the magic of technology serves to confuse the realms of perception.

Just as the *King Kong* team projected recorded scenes of animated monsters on the screen and the actors performed as if they were in front of real monsters, the *Jurassic Park* team employed similar techniques to realize their imagination on the screen. Whole sequences of the film are organized around actors performing as if they are encountering real

dinosaurs. However, there is a remarkable difference between King Kong and Jurassic Park. In the making of King Kong, the director wholly controlled the processes of film production—he knew and understood what his team should do, and the animation techniques of clay miniatures still belonged to the realm of handcrafts.

On the contrary, Jurassic Park rejected such material determinism. The movie pushed fantastic imagination beyond the materiality of handy crafts. In Jurassic Park, technology itself became the framework of filmmaking; therein, technology is the magic by which the unreal is transformed to the real. What the film aims to feature is not the images of dinosaurs in and of themselves, but rather the wonders of technology, the means by which such images are produced. This is why the acclaim for Jurassic Park is largely devoted to discourse around the development of this technology.

Eagerly following the wild success of computer generated films in Hollywood, *The Host* adapts the technological achievements of Jurassic Park while staying true to its own stance as a political drama. *The Host* does not aim to agitate for political messages of anti-Americanism or environmentalism, but rather to outsize graphic images of a monster—the very monster that Korean audiences were already longing to enjoy.

The Korean film, *The Host*, was imported to the US as part of America's regular consumption of exotic cultures. More than just a marketplace, Hollywood is a dream factory for East Asian movies. Nevertheless, identifying East Asian films as popular culture does not separate them from their socio-economic connection to an America-led postwar world system. Strongly intermingled with this structure of geopolitical relations, East Asian popular culture resists this way of identifying itself. Furthermore, the realities of globalization have impelled Asian countries to face up to cultural conflicts between traditional values and Western values. The ongoing processes of modernization and globalization are tacitly interwoven with the logic of cultural forms.

Modernization Theory and Popular Culture

As has been discussed, questions of popular culture necessarily confront the problem of identity. Popular culture is general, but is based on specific national sentiments. For instance, in attempting to parse the hallmarks of popular culture, we cannot ask what “Asian culture” is (the spirit of this type of question does not seem to properly identify Asian popular culture)—Asia exists geographically, but is not a single or a whole unity. Therefore, a question such as, “what is Asian popular culture” should be revised along the lines of, “where is Asian popular culture?” Strictly speaking, Asia is not a continent, as in the cases of Europe, North America, and South America. Asia consists of multiple entities, not a single entity. Many countries comprise what a person might typically call Asia. In fact, it is not easy to say what Asia is; it is always discursive, as Hannah Ardent says—a dislocated, floating idea. Our understanding of Asia cannot be fixed on a single concept of Asia.

Asia can even be classified into two regions including North Asia and South Asia. The former includes China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, which emerged out of a postwar Western distinction from the latter. As an economic bloc, the countries are usually called East Asia, but more specifically, no unified identity ties them together in the same category. The term East Asia is useful for economic purposes only, intentionally separating wealthy Asian countries from other Asian nations in poverty. In short, the word seems to be coined from the perspective of economic power as opposed to from cultural commonality.

Ironically, any case study to determine Asian identity and culture would find many “Asias”. The Asian identity today is an invention of the modern world, and more specifically, the postwar world system that has been informed by American-led geopolitics. The issue at play around the identity of Asian popular culture is not its ethnicity or nationality, but rather its authenticity. Asia has been rapidly transformed from rural communities to an industrial and urban society dominated by industrialization and urbanization (i.e., the modernization of the Asian region following World War II). The idea of modernization in many Asian countries has been founded on ambition toward the building of post-colonial nations. From this post-colonial perspective, popular culture as such is easily regarded as a product of Western civilization or the remnants of colonialism.

For the sake of national identity, what is urgent in postwar Asian countries is to restore the traditions lost in the colonial age. Attempting to bring culture from the past back to the present, however, is necessarily incompatible with the idea of modernization. The experience of colonialism resides in the transcendental loss of the nation state (i.e., the collapse of the imagined community). Thus, the only solution to failed nationalism is to conflate two paradoxical categories into one, thereby yielding the concept of modernization as the invention of tradition. This is the general way to build the national identities of Asian countries in their post-colonial context.

The phenomenon of the Korean Wave is one of the outcomes of modernizing or inventing a tradition. To dissolve political resistance in the process of nation building, Americans introduced “modernization theory” to South Korea in the 1960s. The duality of their problem evoked Scylla and Charybdis: Americans needed a strong military government, such as the dictatorship of Park Chung-hee, to suppress political resistance from Korean intellectuals during quick but stable economic growth. Simultaneously, Americans worried that “the growing estrangement of intellectuals from the Park government would prevent them from participating in the economic development process” (Brazinsky 2007). Instilling the precept of a hierarchical division between “modern” and “traditional” societies, the modernization theory presupposed that:

. . . [The] traditional mores and customs of less developed nations prevented them from acquiring the rationalistic outlook essential for modernization. Contact with advanced societies such as those of Europe and America, however, should initiate the process of social change in traditional societies. This process, according to American social scientists, would encompass an array of interrelated social, economic, and

political changes that would ultimately produce mature industrial capitalism and liberal democratic governments. (Brazinsky 2007)

Popular culture serves to suture the irreconcilable gap between modernization and tradition. The rise of the Korean Wave might be the most typical example of national identity being brought forth by modernization. In the early stages of nation building, the South Korean government encouraged the reinstatement of traditional culture along with a compressed form of economic development. Popular culture in those days comprised American and European culture only—the culture of advanced societies, so to speak—for the small population of the country (mostly the upper class) to enjoy. The importation of American popular culture into South Korea sometimes turned into a cultural battlefield wherein the authoritarian culture of traditionalism and the youth culture of American liberalism collided with one another. As part of a deliberate anti-communist strategy, the United States compelled the Korean quasi-democratic government of the time (actually a military dictatorship regime) to follow American policies of economic development in terms of modernization.

Conclusion

In the 1990s, when the first civilian government overtook the military government, popular culture began in earnest to play the role of a deconstructive machine in South Korea. In other words, popular culture stood to weaken the balance of tension between two rival ideologies (i.e., revolutionary nationalism and anti-communist patriotism). In addition, a critical approach to popular culture (e.g., cultural studies) began trending, producing a perspective that was altogether different from nationalist and orthodox Marxist criticisms. Until then, the Korean public sphere had suffered from an anti-communist witch hunt and had attempted to find alternative ways between an actually existing pseudo-socialist system in the North and a capitalist system in the South following the fall of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Even if the propaganda of militants was still alive in many political and social practices in the 1990s, the marketization and commercialization of popular culture became more and more conspicuous. The culture industry rationalized the production of popular culture and transformed the whole scope of the Korean culture since that point. This transitive phase of cultural output, which traded the development of popular initiatives from the authoritarian state to the culture industry, marked a crucial moment in the development of the Korean Wave.

As discussed, there was acute tension between the policies of the Korean government to reinstate aspects of traditional culture for their ideological justification and the strategy of the United States to encourage the introduction of American popular culture to South Korea. The success of the Korean culture industry relieved this cultural strain insofar as the national pride of the Korean Wave reconciled these different vibes. Ultimately, the Korean Wave as popular culture presents a solution to the dilemma of post-colonial nation building in South Korea. By way of the phenomenon of the Korean Wave, the identity of South Korea becomes national and at the same time, global, traditional and at the same time, modern. This

paradoxical identity tells us of the unevenness of popular culture. That is, of the legacy of modernization theory, which brought in a cultural division between traditional and modern societies as a link in the chain of the American-led global nation-building programs of recent history.

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