

# Contemporary Chinese Narratives on Korean Culture

Jang Soo Hyun

## Abstract

This paper aims to examine contemporary Chinese narratives on Korean culture. In traditional China Koreans were considered a politically subordinate and culturally inferior people. In the era of globalization, however, there has occurred a radical turn-around. Chinese people today show strong interest in South Korea's national strength and economic accomplishments. One line of argument stresses strong Confucian cultural traditions in Korean society. A closely related argument focuses on the mental strengths that Koreans acquired by living through innumerable hardships in their history: a strong sense of national identity and independence, do-or-die spirit, perseverance, and diligence. Latest narratives on the "Korean Wave" (hallyu), bring the hybridity of Korean culture into focus: its popularity derives from cultural creativity, that is, the ability to create unique cultural products by mixing up Asian and Western culture.

Keywords: globalization, Korean culture, China, Confucianism, national character, mass culture, Miracle of Hangang river, IMF Crisis, Korea-Japan World Cup, Korean Wave

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The weight and meaning of the word “globalization” come to have full force when we consider the dramatic changes in the relationship between South Korea and China. Despite geographical proximity, Communist China was a forbidden zone to South Koreans during the Cold War period. The open-door policy of China since the late 1970s opened its gate to the world and triggered a remarkable change in the politico-economic terrain within which the two countries interacted. With the rapid expansion of its market economy, economic exchange between them has greatly increased and diversified. The establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1992 was the political seal for this change in the economic sphere.

Today South Korea and China enjoy unprecedented human and cultural exchanges. The number of visitors on both sides has considerably increased, with ever so diversifying purposes. Thanks to the constant flow of people and information, South Korea seems to have found definite coordinates in the cognitive map of many, if not all, Chinese people. How, then, is South Korean culture perceived by contemporary Chinese? What are the principal reasons for the interest in Korean culture?<sup>1</sup> These are the problems that I will explore in this paper.

Although there has been impressive development in the field of Korean studies in post-socialist China, serious discussions on Korean culture are still rare. Therefore this paper is not a thorough examination of well-developed scholarly views, but a rough reading of the dominant views running through a wide variety of Chinese narratives on Korean culture. In particular, it will focus on the impressionistic characterizations of Korean culture by the Chinese media, travelers, visiting scholars and students, and other observers who have had chances to experience Korean culture, either directly or indirectly. They are important, because the images they create substantially define and limit Chinese cultural imaginations about Korea.

1. Here the term “Korean culture” may mean either South Korean culture or Korean culture as a whole, depending on the context within which it is used. But the focus is placed on South Korea, because the southern part of the Korean peninsula is where China’s main interest lies in the era of globalization.

Before jumping to the main subject, let me first take a brief look at the traditional Chinese view on Korea. Contemporary concerns and views can only be properly understood when they are pitted against the conceptual framework of traditional times.

#### Traditional View: Subordination and Inferiority

According to the traditional Chinese conception of the world, Koreans were a barbarian people, politically subordinate and culturally inferior: political subordination was formally expressed by a tributary system; cultural inferiority was prescribed in the political philosophy of “all under Heaven” (*tianxia*).<sup>2</sup>

The tribute system defined the formal political relationship between China and its neighboring peoples in East Asia—such as Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Ryukyu Islands, and other tribes and states of Inner Asia—in the premodern period. The rulers of these non-Chinese states sent missions to the imperial court to perform appropriate ceremonies as vassals (*fan*) and to present local products and other gifts as tribute. In return they were given political approval and support, imperial gifts, and certain trade privileges. The Chinese Empire combined this tribute system with a “loose reign” (*jimi*) policy (Yang 1968), under which it avoided militarism and direct rule without losing its outward political dominance. This meant that non-Chinese states were actually independent, while formally remaining subordinate to China.

The Sino-Korean political relationship was an exemplary case of the tribute system. Except for certain transitional periods of dynastic change or the military conquest of China by outside peoples, Korean states earnestly fulfilled their tributary duties<sup>3</sup> and adhered to the position of a political subordinate, for the tributary relationship with

2. For a more detailed discussion of the Chinese world order, see John K. Fairbank (1968).

3. See Chun Hae-jong’s analysis (1968) of Joseon’s tribute missions to Qing.

China, more than anything else, helped the rulers and the upper class maintain their status and power (Kim 2000).

According to the traditional Chinese ideology of “all under Heaven,” the world consisted of the “Middle Kingdom” (zhongguo) and the “barbarians of the four quarters” (siyi).<sup>4</sup> China was the center of the world and all non-Chinese states were ruled by its emperor, the “Son of Heaven” (tianzi). In contradistinction to China, the ultimate symbol of humanity, these states were portrayed as “distant savages hovering on the edge of bestiality” (Dikötter 1992, 4). Cultural relativism was denied in this Sinocentric worldview. It conceptualized a world of cultural hierarchy within which all outer peoples and states were graded according to their cultural proximity to China. That is to say, the more Sinicized they turned, the more civilized they were.

The ruling elites of Korean states were deeply influenced by this hegemonic conceptualization of the Sinocentric cultural hierarchy. Apart from certain exceptional situations, they regarded Confucian China as the center of the world. To them, imitating Chinese culture was to become civilized. Their admiration of Chinese culture reached its peak in the Joseon dynasty, which chose Confucianism as its ruling ideology. When the Manchus took the seat of the Son of Heaven in the seventeenth century, the ruling elite of Joseon lamented the contamination of Chinese civilization by barbarians and refused to accept the newly imposed political order. They claimed that Joseon was “Little China” (xiaozhonghua), a cultural miniature of China (Kim 1999, 648-658, 788-797; Choe 1997). In their imaginations, Koreans were the most exemplary and culturally sophisticated barbarians in the Chinese world order.<sup>5</sup> This belief was also acknowledged by Chinese ruling elites.

From early on, the rulers of Korean states made ample effort to learn about Chinese culture: they sent promising young scholars to

4. Korean states were called dongji, the “Eastern Barbarians.” Yet, this term was not exclusively used for them. See Chun Hae-jong (1970, 9-24), for more on this.

5. Koreans were “noble savages,” so to speak, to the Chinese people, for they were considered to have reached an exceptionally high level of cultural sophistication that few other barbarian peoples could attain.

China and let them study its advanced scholarship and civilization; they imported large volumes of books, clothes, technologies, and institutions. As a result, Koreans gained recognition among the Chinese as a culturally sophisticated people. For example, when Chinese emperors appointed envoys to Korea, they carefully checked their scholarly abilities, because they feared that they might not be able to counterbalance their Korean counterparts.

Nevertheless, the cultural inferiority of Korea as “outer barbarians” (waiyi) seems to have been deeply engraved in the cognitive map of the Chinese people. Although they admitted that Korea was a Sinicized tributary, they still found its Korean customs and institutions barbaric. Goryeo dogyeong (An Illustrated Book on Goryeo) written by Xu Jing, an imperial envoy to Goryeo during the Song dynasty provides a good example. Although he spoke very highly of Goryeo and its culture in many parts of the book, he also expressed contemptuous feelings toward its barbaric customs:<sup>6</sup>

Outwardly it imitated Chinese institutions, but the customs are coarse and it could not change barbaric customs to the end. Initiation, marriage, funeral, and ancestor worship are rarely performed according to proper ritual. [Volume 22, Miscellaneous Customs]

. . . they set up government offices and named them in Chinese ways, but when they work they continue to follow their barbaric customs. Proper only in form, not in reality. [Volume 16, Government Offices]

Although the traditional Chinese world order was rather “a myth backed up at different times by realities of varying degrees” (Yang 1968, 20),<sup>7</sup> it constrained the lens through which the Chinese saw the world and their neighboring peoples like Koreans. In Chinese cultural imaginations Korea was not equal to China, despite its high scholarly

6. Quoted in Kim (1999, 434). Translation mine.

7. The Middle Kingdom could not always firmly control “outer barbarians.” It often had to suffer a reversed fate, when it was defeated and forced to take the seat of a vassal by strong outside forces.

achievement and cultural assimilation. Korea was, after all, politically subordinate and culturally inferior.

The Sinocentric political myth began to be shaken in the late nineteenth century when China was put under heavy pressure from modernized Western powers and Japan. Chinese people realized that their country, far from being the center, was an ailing old lion in East Asia and just one country in the world. Yet, the Sinocentric worldview continued to constrain their perception of other countries including Korea. Moreover, despite some criticism by reform-oriented intellectuals against Confucian traditions, the belief in China's cultural superiority was not much shaken.<sup>8</sup>

#### Divided Nation, Polarized Views

As Korea was divided into two opposing states after liberation and the Korean War, Chinese views on Korea were also polarized during the Cold War period. North Korea was considered a blood-sharing friend by Communist China, for the two had fought together against South Korea and the United States in the Korean War. So many Chinese soldiers died in the war, including Chairman Mao's son. After the war, China continued to assist North Korea by providing political support and economic aid. It is interesting that a metaphor of brotherhood was used to conceptualize such an intimate relationship. According to this view, China was like an elder brother who helped a poor and helpless younger brother.<sup>9</sup> In a sense, a paternalistic familism lay behind the facade of equal relations between the two socialist allies.

It is in this context that some scholars argue that the Chinese

8. Many intellectuals at the turn of the century, for example, believed that the great tradition of Asia, the essence of which was Chinese culture, was fundamentally superior to Western culture (Baek 2000, 18-21).

9. The relationship of Han Chinese with national minorities is also often called brotherhood. Refer to Stevan Harrell (1995) for a more detailed discussion on the dominant discourses on national minorities in China.

Communists inherited traditional Sinocentric conceptions and attitudes (Im 2002, 56). Although Communist China institutionalized a revolutionary break from the past in many important areas, it failed to sever ties with the traditional worldview. Formally, it was on equal terms with other nations. But, its strenuous pursuit to be the leader of the Third World countries, often accompanied by heavy gift-giving in the form of economic aid, shows that the cultural conception of the Sinocentric world order was hard to erase.

South Korea was, more than anything else, an enemy to the Chinese people. The Korean War and the killing of so many precious Chinese lives by "American imperialists and South Korean puppets" were collectively memorized through memoirs, history textbooks, war movies, and so on. Its image as a poor agricultural country recovering from the damages of the war was emphasized in Chinese media reports and books. As the divide between the two countries was frozen until the end of the Cold War period, there was little information available and building a more realistic sense of Korea was impossible. In the reform period, the whole situation dramatically changed. When Communist China opened its gate to the world, a completely new South Korea was waiting to meet them as the country known for the "miracle of Hangang river."

The two countries started unofficial economic exchanges via Hong Kong at first. As China's economic reform progressed, their relationship also rapidly developed. In 1992 they finally agreed to normalize their diplomatic relationship and this signaled the beginning of a new era. Now they have become important trade partners to each other. The way the Chinese perceived South Korea also changed. It was no longer seen as a powerless state in the periphery with a dilapidated economy, but a newly industrialized country with a booming economy. The Asian Games and the Olympics held in South Korea in 1986 and 1988, respectively, also helped change the image. People saw on TV how prosperous, modern and energetic Korean society was. They were impressed by the modern buildings, streets packed with beautiful cars and good consumer commodities. The former tributary or "younger brother" country became a model

to emulate and pursue.

On the other hand, images of North Korea were mostly negative. It was known that this old political ally had been facing economic trouble since the 1980s. The recent famines and the subsequent massive deaths and border-crossings left particularly bad impressions. Such a grim situation was sharply contrasted with the images of South Korea as a prosperous and dynamic country. North Korea's authoritarian political culture, the quasi-religious worship of Kim Il-sung and his heir, further deteriorated the image. During my fieldwork in the early 1990s and afterwards, for example, I met many ordinary Chinese who derisively talked about this form of a cult. They invariably pointed to its anachronistic backwardness, comparing it to the similar practice of worshipping Mao during the Cultural Revolution period. This view seems to be widely shared by contemporary Chinese.

In short, Chinese views on Korea were polarized during the Cold War period, as the Korean Peninsula itself was divided into two antagonistic states reflecting the ideological divide between capitalist and socialist states. Whereas North Korea was a friend, ally, and younger brother, the South was an enemy with a poor economy. After the post-Mao reform, however, a complete turnaround took place. The North is now seen as a poor, backward and authoritarian country. In contrast, the South is a prosperous neighbor with a modern and dynamic culture.

### Globalization and Chinese Views on Korean Culture

Economic topics dominate recent Chinese writings on South Korea.<sup>10</sup>

10. Of the eighty papers on Korea reported by China's major newspapers in 1993, 90 percent dealt with the Korean economy (Im 2002, 315). The overly sensitive interest in South Korea's economy was, on the one hand, a reflection of the shock that the Chinese felt about their own economic backwardness. More importantly, however, it seems to have been generated by the frantic wind of reform that Deng

Accordingly, despite the intensification of scholarly exchanges since the early 1990s, serious scholarly explorations into Korean culture have been limited in both quantity and quality.

Recent concerns about Korean culture are concentrated on three problem areas. First of all, Confucian cultural traditions have received considerable attention from both scholars and ordinary people. Secondly, there is a notable tendency to attribute South Korea's success or national strength to certain features in the Korean national character. Finally, there is deep interest in the phenomenon of the "Korean Wave" (hallyu), the surprising popularity of Korean mass culture in China.

### Confucian Cultural Traditions

Many Chinese feel a sense of cultural familiarity toward Korea. They know from their school education that Korea was strongly influenced by traditional China. Those who have had opportunities to visit South Korea reaffirm this image of a culturally familiar Korea.<sup>11</sup> Through media reports, South Korean movies and TV dramas, personal visits, and other channels of information, they learn that Koreans use Chinese characters and possesses similar architecture, arts, religion, and Confucian traditions.

In both scholarly writings and popular narratives South Korea is usually portrayed as having preserved basic Confucian values despite its long exposure to Western culture. This is in sharp contrast to China where Confucian traditions were radically eliminated as a legacy of feudalism.

Although Westerners may believe that both Chinese and Korean

Xiaoping and his reformist allies had given rise to. Everywhere people talked about reform and economic development. This shows a definite break from the dominant milieu of the "politics-in-command" under Mao's rule. The ideology of modernization and national strength advocated by China's reformist leadership shaped people's cultural imaginations about others.

11. One visitor even confessed that he felt almost at home in South Korea (Im 2002, 239).

society have a collectivistic culture,<sup>12</sup> Wang (2002a, 2002b) finds fundamental differences between the two. According to Wang, South Koreans are much more group-oriented than the Chinese. She argues in her cross-cultural observations that group identity and intra-group solidarity are extremely important in South Korea. In comparison, the Chinese put more emphasis on dyadic, person-to-person relations. Intra-group personal relations also greatly differ in the two societies. Thanks to the revolutionary transformation of the social structure and culture under communism, the hierarchical social order was replaced by a more egalitarian one in socialist China. In contrast, the influence of Confucian ethics remained strong in South Korea. It maintained rigid divisions between men and women, the elder and younger, teachers and students, white-collar workers and blue-collar workers, and so on. Conformity to the authority of the male, elderly, and the senior in status remained very important in South Korea.<sup>13</sup>

Chinese scholars stress certain Confucian traditions—among others, praising knowledge and education, collectivism, and authoritarianism—as cultural prerequisites to South Korea's economic success.<sup>14</sup> Thanks to these traditions, they argue, South Korea could create a miracle out of the debris of the Korean War and become one of the “four little dragons of Asia.”<sup>15</sup>

“Respect for teachers and emphasis on education” is one of the cultural characteristics that Chinese visitors to South Korea first notice. Many of them consider this a contributing factor in South Korea's economic success:

12. See Gudykunst and Matsumoto (1996) and Gudykunst and Lee (2002) for discussion on the differences between individualism and collectivism.

13. See Cui (2002) for a similar argument.

14. In addition to these Confucian traditions, Chinese scholars often list favorable international market conditions, export-oriented development strategies, active intervention by the South Korean government, and good entrepreneurship as critical factors (Im 2002, 131-164).

15. This argument is in line with the theory of Asian values that emphasizes Confucian values as a cultural prerequisite to Asian economic development. Refer to Hahm Chaibong (2001) and Phillip Wonhyuk Lim (2001) for more on the theory.

Our neighboring country South Korea has long emphasized knowledge and education. Comparatively speaking, its educational level is relatively high in both Asia and the world. This laid a good foundation for the rapid development of the South Korean economy and its remarkable accomplishments. After World War II, especially from the mid-1960s on, the South Korean economy rapidly grew and created the “miracle of Hangang river” that surprised the whole world. In the past two years, Asia has undergone a period of economic crisis. South Korea could, however, rapidly escape the difficult situation. All these have an inseparable relationship with the fact that the South Korean government has continuously emphasized knowledge, stressed education, and strenuously developed human resources. (Miao 2000, 85)

According to this view, Confucian tradition led the South Korean government to invest heavily in education to produce well-educated workers, which in turn supplied cheap but well-trained workers for the expanding industries. In short, such an educational policy was a contributing factor to the economic success (Im 2002, 149-156).

The collectivistic, authoritarian culture of Korea has received considerable attention in a similar context. Xu (2002), for example, points out that Korean society is deeply penetrated by Confucian ethics. The Confucian influence is expressed in the form of familism, emphasis on education, and strong state: by emphasizing family values, the Confucian ideology laid the foundation for collectivism; emphasis on education enabled South Korea to have a sufficient supply of cheap but well-trained laborers; thanks to Confucian traditions, which stress such values as intra-group harmony, loyalty, and obedience, the authoritarian government could secure loyal citizens willing to work hard and obediently for the good of the nation.

Han (2002) presents a similar argument, albeit with a different focus. She argues that corporate culture in South Korea was deeply influenced by Neo-Confucian ethics stressing such values as loyalty, patriotism, responsibility, intra-group harmony, consensus, cooperative harmony, emphasis on education, and respect for talent. South Korean corporate culture portrays the company as a family, and the

owner as a patriarch. In a family-like company, employees are expected to show loyalty, obedience, integrity, and diligence. Group interests are much more important than private interests. Since the fate of individuals is closely related to that of the company, employees dedicate themselves to the company to prove their loyalty. Furthermore, Korean companies emphasize the educational background of their employees and invest a great deal in continuous education. Han concludes that these cultural characteristics greatly helped Korean companies adjust to the ever-changing socioeconomic conditions and achieve tremendous success.

Of course, Confucian cultural values are not always portrayed in a positive light. With the intensification of economic and other exchanges in recent years, there has emerged a growing awareness of the negative aspects of Korean culture. For example, many Chinese harbor ill feelings about the tendency of South Koreans to form exclusive communities and minimize social interactions with local Chinese, which they attribute to the strong sense of group identity and solidarity rooted in Confucianism.<sup>16</sup> As one scholar observes with a critical view, "South Koreans live in China, but lead a Korean-style life almost identical with that in their home country, and contact with the local Chinese is restricted to language teachers or maids" (Bak 2003).

The collectivistic, authoritarian culture of Korean companies has also engendered plenty of negative narratives. Chinese employees feel uneasy about the tendency of Korean companies to put more emphasis on team achievements than on individual achievements. Also, there is widespread criticism of their authoritarian management style. During my field research on Korean companies in Qingdao, for example, I heard many complaints about Korean managers who commonly resorted to verbal abuse and compulsory measures to control

16. Jin Runtai (1998, 176-179) finds this problem among South Korean businesspeople in Shandong. An article in *JoongAng Ilbo* ("Bibimbap, jjimjilbang . . . yeogi bukgyeong maja?" 23 August 2002) describes life in a Korean community in Wangjing, Beijing.

Chinese workers. By Chinese standards, Korean managers were too overbearing, authoritarian, and discriminatory. Korean corporate culture was surely too oppressive to Chinese employees who grew up in a milieu of socialist egalitarianism.

#### Mental Toughness and National Strength

Chinese people often associate South Korea's national strength with the mental toughness of its people. Patriotism, a strong sense of national identity and independence, a do-or-die spirit, tenacity, fortitude, perseverance, and diligence are some of the most frequently listed characteristics of Koreans.

More than anything else, Koreans are known for their strong sense of national identity and patriotic zeal.<sup>17</sup> This is commonly attributed to the history of Korea, which was ridden with foreign invasions and resistance (Shen 1992; Wei 1996; Yi 2003). In particular, Chinese people are impressed by the unyielding spirit with which Koreans resisted Japanese colonial rule. Living through fierce challenges, confrontations, and colonial oppression, Koreans realized the importance of national strength, strengthened their national identity, and gathered together around the national leadership. Such historical experiences are thought to have cultivated mental toughness among them. Thanks to their tenacity, perseverance, diligence, or a do-or-die spirit, Koreans could cope with so many national hardships and accomplish remarkable economic success.

Some observers find strong patriotism and nationalistic sentiments in Koreans' loyalty to national brands. One of the first things Chinese visitors notice about Korea is that there are very few imported cars on the streets. They attribute this to the patriotic zeal of the people (Wei 1996; Zhao 2000). Others find patriotism in the voluntary, enthusiastic participation in donation drives for the victims of

17. According to Chinese students, for example, one of the most outstanding impressions about Korean students is their strong sense of national identity (Su et al. 1996).

national disasters such as floods, famine, and accidents (Wang 2002a). According to them, such movements are unlikely to arouse such enthusiastic responses in China.

Many of them also praise the zeal with which South Koreans responded to the government call for national cohesion and solidarity during such important sports events as the 1988 Seoul Olympics. To many Chinese, this event was not only a showcase for the rise of South Korea as a new economic power, but also an occasion through which the Korean national character could be seen. They were deeply impressed by the fact that South Koreans agreed to stop domestic disputes and confrontations for the successful hosting of the significant international event. They interpret this as evidence of their strong national solidarity (Shen 1992).

The 1997 economic crisis surprised the Chinese in two ways. On the one hand, it reminded them of how vulnerable a national economy can be in the era of globalization. They began to raise doubts about South Korea as an economic model. It no longer looked so strong as they had imagined. On the other hand, it nevertheless strengthened their image of Koreans as a mentally strong people (Yang 2000; Lu 2001; Im 2002, 222-225; Wang 2002a, 149).

After the financial crisis broke out in the late 1990s, South Koreans faced tremendous hardships and agony. Nevertheless, they enthusiastically responded to the government's call for cooperation in accumulating foreign exchange. Realizing the dire situation the nation was in, they tried to reduce consumption, save money in banks, and participate in national movements to cope with the crisis and to help its victims. When the so-called "Gold Collection Drive"—a national movement to accumulate gold—was launched, many people enthusiastically responded and participated. They turned in large amounts of gold jewelry, even some important rings and bracelets that carried special meaning for their owners. Chinese people were impressed by these acts of self-sacrifice, which reconfirmed their perception of Koreans as a patriotic people. Seeing Koreans successfully cope with the crisis in so short a time, they once again strengthened their belief that Koreans are a mentally strong people. They praise

the national pride, the do-or-die spirit, tenacity, perseverance, and diligence that South Koreans showed during the crisis. These are the same characteristics that they cited as the reasons for the country's economic success.

A similar view underlies Chinese discussions on South Korean soccer. Although China dominates Asian sports, there is one outstanding exception—soccer. In soccer matches, the Chinese national team has thus far failed to surpass its South Korean counterpart. Since it suffered repeated losses in close matches, the media even diagnosed the team as suffering from an "illness of fearing South Koreans" (*konghanzheng*). To Chinese soccer fans this is a big blow, for soccer is not a simple sporting event, but a symbol of national strength; victory in a soccer match means growing national pride (Meong 2002, 184-187; Bak 2003).

The starkly contrasting performance of the two teams in the 2002 World Cup makes Chinese fans even more frustrated. Whereas the Chinese team lost all its games by large margins, the Korean team reached the semifinals by defeating stronger European teams, including Portugal, Italy, and Spain. Chinese media reports and other writings show two completely different attitudes toward this almost miraculous feat by the Korean soccer team.<sup>18</sup> The majority carry a negative tone. Making insulting remarks, soccer commentators and fans attribute the victories to critical mistakes by referees or even insinuate the bribing of referees.

In contrast, some articles ask fans to accept the results as they are. They emphasize that it is more important to analyze what caused the wide gap between the two teams and why Korean soccer was able to make a strong showing in the 2002 World Cup. Interestingly, they invariably point out that Korean soccer players far surpassed Chinese players in mental toughness. For example, an Internet article titled "Where Did We Lose?" lists the negligence of mental education as one of the three fundamental diseases of Chinese soc-

18. Refer to articles on such Internet sites as [www.sina.com.cn](http://www.sina.com.cn), [www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn), and [www.sohu.com](http://www.sohu.com).



cer. The writer contrasts this to the mental strength that the Korean national team displayed in the World Cup games:

In this year's World Cup every match the Korean team played was the best textbook. Not one player gave up. Every player was desperate. All eleven players glued together like one person. Consequently, no one dared to take them lightly. What is holding them together? It's a sense of responsibility! A sense of honor! And patriotism! . . . What we lack is a spirit of unity and a desperate fight to the end.

In a similar vein, the strong national pride of the Korean soccer players is brought to the fore by another Internet article titled "South Korea Is the Real Champion of This Year's World Cup." According to the author, the Japanese national team had better skills and mid-field strategies than their South Korean counterpart, but the Japanese players lacked the strong national pride of the South Korean players.

According to this view, the success of Korean soccer had much to do with the Korean national character. A journal editor, for example, argues that the spirit of unity, sense of responsibility and duty, and self-confidence he sees in the Korean soccer players are expressions of the relatively strong unity possessed by Koreans as a nation consisting of a single ethnic group (Zhang 1998). This suggests that in the Chinese imagination Korean soccer represents all the good mental qualities that contributed to the creation of the miracle of Hangang river, the successful hosting of the 1988 Olympics, and the rapid recovery from the financial crisis in the late 1990s.

#### The "Korean Wave" and Cultural Creativity

The term "Korean Wave" was first coined by the Chinese mass media to refer to the explosive popularity of South Korean dance music among Chinese youths in the late 1990s. Soon its reference was geographically extended to include the same phenomenon in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and then Vietnam, Mongolia, and other Asian countries. Korean pop singers such as H.O.T, An Jae-uk,

N.R.G, Babyvox, and Yi Jeong-hyeon captured the eyes and ears of many young Asians with their urbane appearance and powerful dance moves. Some movie and TV drama stars also began to create passionate fandoms.<sup>19</sup> Subsequently, there emerged devoted consumers of various cultural commodities from South Korea, including pop music, television dramas, movies, hairstyles, clothes, food, books, game software, and animation. Now the term is commonly used to refer to the enthusiastic pursuit and consumption of everything from South Korea.<sup>20</sup>

Its emergence as a strong power in at least the Asian cultural market was good news to South Korea, which was undergoing hard times during the financial crisis. The Korean Wave could be interpreted as an indication that South Korea had joined the ranks of advanced nations whose economies relied heavily on high-tech cultural industries. Furthermore, the Korean Wave in China was a surprising development in the history of cultural exchanges between the two countries: at no other time in history were such varied genres of Korean culture enjoyed by so many Chinese (Sin 2002, 6). These are perhaps the main reasons why the South Korean mass media and scholars have shown tremendous interest in this phenomenon.

The Korean Wave helps shape Chinese views on Korean culture in two different ways. First, movies and television dramas have become significant channels through which the Chinese acquire images and information about the way of life in South Korea. Second, the remarkable penetration of South Korean mass culture into Chinese society stimulates interest in the strength of Korean culture.

Since *Sarang-i mwogillae* (What is Love?) was first broadcasted by Chinese Central TV in 1997, a considerable number of South Korean television dramas have been introduced to Chinese audiences.

19. Some of the popular names are Kim Hui-seon, Song Seung-heon, Song Hye-gyo, Jeon Ji-hyeon, Cha Tae-hyeon, and Jang Dong-geon.

20. For a fuller understanding of the hallyu phenomenon in general, see Yi Eun-suk (2002) and articles by Sin Yun-hwan (2002), Yi Min-ja (2002), Kim Seon-ho (2002), Jeon Seong-hong (2002), Yi Han-u (2002), Kim Sang (2002) in *Donga yeongu* 42.

Though less popular than TV dramas, Korean movies have also stimulated considerable interest. Chinese audiences may be somewhat selective in receiving information (Heo 2002), but these media are by far the most important sources of information on Korean culture for ordinary Chinese.

Among others, the image of Korean society as apparently modernized but ethically traditional has caught the attention of the Chinese audience. They see on the television or movie screen a modernized society filled with capitalistic commodities like modern buildings, cars, restaurants, and fancy clothes. At the same time, however, they observe behavioral patterns that accord with Confucian traditions, including emphasis on the family, male-dominance, patriarchy, strong hierarchy, spirit of self-sacrifice among males, and female obedience (Yi 2003).<sup>21</sup> Of course they know that what is presented through these cultural forms may differ from real life, but their views on Korean society are nevertheless heavily influenced by the images portrayed in them.

A quick look at Chinese media reports reveals that the Korean Wave left a substantial impact on Chinese cultural consciousness. Although media narratives differ considerably in their assessment, ranging from utmost praise to disapproval and criticism, the great majority of the reports display genuine surprise. For example, newspaper articles with such titles as "Why Are We Caught Up in Korea-Mania and Japan-Mania?" (Beijing Qingnianbao, 6 August 2001), "Why Is There Korea-Mania?" (Renmin Ribao, Huadong Xinwen, 10 August 2001), and "Before a Wave Calmed Down, Another Wave Has Invaded Again: A Rear Korean Wave Pushes a Front One" (Beijing chenbao, 26 October 2001) carry a sense of shock at the popularity of South Korean mass culture in China. Even in articles that emphasize its limited audience ("The Korean Wave Drives Only the Youths Crazy," Guangming Ribao, 21 May 2001) or its weak foundation ("The Taiwanese Wind Has Blown Away the Korean Wave," Beijing

21. Popular TV dramas like *What is Love?* and *Mogyoktangjip namjadeul* (Men of the Public Bathhouse) were especially influential in forming these images.

Qingnianbao, 28 October 2001), the sizable magnitude of the impact is also palpable. Since Korea is only a peripheral country in the Chinese cultural imagination, the surprisingly strong penetration of Korean mass culture seems to have caused quite a stir.<sup>22</sup>

Chinese interest in the Korean Wave is dominated by questions concerning the reasons why South Korean mass culture could become a significant element in the cultural inventory of contemporary China. Many commentators find the answer in the Korean cultural products themselves: attractive stars, dynamic dancing, familiar life stories, beautiful background music, and such. But, some attribute the success to the strength of Korean culture as a creative mixture of or effective mediator between Western and Asian culture. For example, Professor Yin Hong of Qinghua University argues that whereas European and American culture are difficult to directly accept due to stark cultural differences, Chinese people have little trouble in accepting Korean culture, because "it is something that was remade through a fusion with Asian culture" (Beijing Qingnianbao, 3 August 2001). He continues:

If one culture is to affect another culture, they should have a common foundation for mutual exchange and the imported culture should be superior to the receiving culture to some degree. Korea and Chinese culture have a common foundation for mutual exchange as Asian cultures. Korean culture is somewhat superior to Chinese culture, for it accepted Western culture earlier. We believe European movies are good, but feel a sense of distance due to cultural differences. When we watch Korean movies, we feel a sense of freshness. Chinese people can easily accept them, because, though wrapped up with Western culture, they are based on Asian culture.

22. South Korean mass culture is not the first to invade China's cultural market. Before the Korean Wave, pop songs, movies, and TV dramas from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan had already captured the hearts of many Chinese people. Yet, the Chinese media seems to have been especially sensitive to the Korean Wave. Since they considered Taiwan and Hong Kong as parts of China, their cultural invasion was not something to fuss about. Considering Japan's status as a world-class advanced country, Japanese cultural influence was also almost expected.

Koreans possess the creative ability to accept Western culture and redesign and wrap it up with an Asian view.<sup>23</sup>

This emphasis on cultural creativity, the ability to create something unique by combining Asian and Western cultures, is repeated in many other media reports on the Korean Wave. Similar arguments can also be found in various impressionistic writings about South Korea. Chinese visitors are commonly surprised by the coexistence of Western modernity and Asian traditions in South Korea. Chinese scholar Sun Junzheng, for example, finds the uniqueness of Korean culture in the dynamic effects that the two supposedly opposite cultures generate together: modern college facilities and an ancient matriculation ceremony; spectacular city buildings and Buddhist monks; women wearing traditional costumes and driving cars on highways; Buddhist monks using computers; MTV and folk songs; and so on (Sun 1996, 18). In the cultural imagination of the Chinese, then, the ability to combine the essences of the past and the present makes South Korea powerful, both economically and culturally.

### Conclusion

When China's door finally opened after a long period of closure, Chinese people were shocked to find the striking distance between them and the four little dragons of Asia. It was a humbling experience and in a sense an epistemological shock. They began to raise serious doubts about the China-centered world map in which neighboring countries like South Korea were viewed only as subordinate, peripheral states with inferior cultures.

23. From a different angle, literary critic Kuang Xin-nian questions the creativity of Korean mass culture. He does not find critical differences between China and South Korea, for both of them lack any fundamental cultural creativity; he considers Korean mass culture as also basically an imitation of Western mass culture. This is why he argues that the popularity of Korean mass culture is no more than a temporary phenomenon (Kuang 2002, 46).

Korean culture itself seems to have been of little interest to contemporary Chinese and few serious studies have emerged. Instead, such eye-catching events or phenomena as the miracle of Hangang river, the Asian Games, the Olympics, the financial crisis, the World Cup and Korean soccer, and the Korean Wave have received special attention. They have tried to identify the reasons why South Korea could achieve economic success, successfully host global events, cope with enormous hardships relatively easily, gain excellent results in sporting events, and produce powerful cultural products. One line of argument brings to the fore the positive effect that Confucian cultural traditions, such as the emphasis on knowledge and education, collectivism, and authoritarianism, had on its rapid economic development. Another view points to the mental toughness of Koreans—a strong sense of national identity and independence, patriotism, do-or-die spirit, perseverance, and diligence—as a contributing factor to the success. On the other hand, those who are interested in the successful penetration of Korean mass culture into China stress the creative marriage of Western and Asian culture within Korean culture.

These popular narratives on Korean culture are basically positive in their approach. But, contemporary Chinese do not always wonder at South Korea's strengths and seek the secrets of success in its culture. There also exist negative views. Many Chinese harbor ill feelings about the exclusiveness of Korean communities in China. The collectivistic, authoritarian culture of Korean companies comes into conflict with China's egalitarian culture, resulting in negative attitudes towards Koreans.

Finally, it should be noted that although South Korea has certainly become a household name in contemporary China, it is not a principal target of attention for the Chinese media and academia. As one scholar has pointed out, China has shown relatively little interest in neighboring countries like Korea: "China's view is set on the U.S. across the Pacific and it has no time to carefully consider the neighboring countries" (Kuang 2002, 47). There is still a long way to go before more serious, systematic explorations into Korean culture will be significantly produced in China.

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## GLOSSARY

<i>fan</i> (Ch.)	藩	<i>tianxia</i> (Ch.)	天下
<i>Goryeo dogyeong</i>	高麗圖經	<i>tianzi</i> (Ch.)	天子
<i>hallyu</i>	韓流	<i>waiyi</i> (Ch.)	外夷
<i>jimi</i> (Ch.)	羈縻	<i>xiaozhonghua</i> (Ch.)	小中華
<i>konghanzheng</i> (Ch.)	恐韓症	Xu Jing (Ch.)	徐兢
<i>siyi</i> (Ch.)	四夷	<i>zhongguo</i> (Ch.)	中國

(Ch.: Chinese)

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