

Hallyu in Singapore: Korean Cosmopolitanism or the Consumption of Chineseness?

Kelly Fu Su Yin and Kiew Kai Khiun

Kelly Fu Su Yin is Goldsmiths College, University of London
Department of Sociology
Email: richard_88@pacific.net.sg

Liew Kai Khuin, University College London, University of London
Email: liewkk56@hotmail.com.

Abstract

*The export of Korean dramas in the late 1990s sparked off a palpable craze for Korean cultural commodities in early 2000. This popular cultural phenomenon known as hallyu has seen a surge in interest in Korean culture expressed through study of the Korean language and understanding of the culture through travel. Heterogeneous in nature, this phenomenon **re-invents** itself to suit local taste cultures and **pre-existing** modes of consumption and distribution. In this paper, a case study of Korean popular culture consumption in Singapore demonstrates the complexities of hallyu as it intersects with and challenges the **pre-dominance** of “Chinese”-based popular culture, while remaining at the same time, very much a form of “Chinese” consumption.*

*When President Roh Moo-hyun invited Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and his delegation for a luncheon meeting last September, something unexpected happened. After a moment of calm, the Vietnamese officials stood up one by one and started to line up in front of a woman, asking her to sign their menus. The woman was actress **Kim Hyun-joo**, heroine of the SBS TV drama Yuri gudu (Glass Shoes), which had been shown on Vietnamese television in May 2003. The actress had become well-known in Vietnam after the drama became a big hit there. The commotion settled down only after a Korean general promised the actress’s autographs for everyone after lunch. The center of attention during the luncheon apparently was not President Roh or Prime Minister Khai, but the actress, Kim, showing that perhaps the “Korean Wave” is stronger than diplomacy (Korea Wave Crashes on Asian Shores, 25 August 2004).*

Mr. President, I must acknowledge that, today, many Singaporeans come into contact with Korea in their daily lives—from the Mass Rapid Transit lines constructed by Korean companies to Korean-made mobile phones and Korean dramas they watch on television, which, I am told, are increasingly popular among young Singaporeans. More Singaporeans are also taking their vacations in Korea, attracted by its beautiful autumn and excellent ski resorts. We hope that more Koreans will also visit Singapore. While we do not have such romantic autumns and ski resorts, I am sure many Koreans will find other attractions in our **multi-cultural** surroundings (Nathan 2003).

Address by Singapore's President S. R. Nathan to President Roh Moo-Hyun

Introduction: “Korea in Daily Life”

The **following quotes** attest to the popularity of Korean popular culture in Southeast Asia, a substantial part of the estimated 100 million Asian consumers of South Korean dramas, movies, and concerts daily (*Sunday Times*, May 1, 2005). Sparked off by the regionalization of Korean television serials in the late 1990s, *hallyu* (the Chinese word for the “Korean Wave”), manifests itself through the consumption of Korean popular culture, visits to Korean television filming sites, and study of the Korean language.

Hallyu arose as part of the historical milieu of **de-colonization**, economic development, and the **re-assertion** of “Asian” identities that function as a social and cultural response to the global hegemony of the West. In terms of popular culture, this was embodied in the dialogic media flows and exchanges of media products between countries in Asia that displaced the “white” and “Western” with a multiplicity of accents, voices, and identities. Conceptually, these mediums also challenged the **bounded-ness** of geographical location and the primacy of nation-state as “the key arbiter of important social changes,” offering instead, the opportunity for the articulation of new hybrid identities in the face of discrimination and alienation (Appadurai 1996, 4).

Unique to *hallyu* and other media products (Asian or otherwise) that are consumed outside of their location of production is the unsettling of epistemic boundaries concerning the definitions of “diasporic” consumption. The interest in Korean popular

culture outside of Korea today, is kept alive by a flexible citizenry of consumers who comprise both ethnic Korean communities and non-Koreans (see Aihwa Ong's *Flexible Citizenship* (1999) for a definition of the term "flexible citizen"). They are similarly dependent upon the speed and availability of media networks and technology, and may gain access to these products through the television or the Internet. Consumers, whether of ethnic Korean backgrounds or not, may also enact the fantasies of these "imagined worlds" through language learning, travel to Korea, and the purchase of Korean popular culture products through e-Bay and web chats on discussion boards.

Where such consumption differs from that of diasporic communities is its sense of urgency against a backdrop of migration and discrimination. *Hallyu* consumers tend to take their consumption as a secondary interest and such movements rarely spur social and physical upheavals from the perimeters defined by their society and the nation-state. Instead, the acquisition of "Koreanness" is regarded by *hallyu* consumers as an array of choices presented in a global mediascape that allows them to "image" new social identities at the level of "fantasy." Consequently *hallyu* is not typically accompanied by the intense development of cultural and institutional ethnoscares (such as food outlets, department stores, and schools) that characterise sojourner communities of "immigrants, students and businessmen" (Befu 2003, 4). However, lest "fantasy" be equated with the superficiality of commercialism, it is perhaps timely to understand the **re-contextualisation** by the non-Korean audiences of Korean popular cultural products.

In this paper, we seek to analyse and understand how the success of Korean popular culture products in Singapore is linked to its ability to platform itself on pre-existing Chinese networks of cultural consumption. These networks are conceptualized by **Tu Wei Ming** (a professor of Chinese history and philosophy at Harvard University) as "Cultural China"—the core of intellectual discourse that is defined by overseas Chinese and the Chinese diaspora, as opposed to those living within the nation-state of China (Tu 1994, 33-34). It will be argued that Korean popular culture in Singapore exists to reinforce the local boundaries of ethnicity by catering to the tastes of the ethnic Chinese majority in Singapore, even as it results in a deeper acknowledgement and internalization of Korean culture.

The Korean Wave as a Theoretical Alternative

From the determinist fixity of civilizations, cultural studies have moved towards the narrative of what is described as the “third space” in the narratives and subcultures from the socially marginalized and geographically peripheral. As opined by Revathi Krishnaswamy, the activities of these groups generally “exceed the boundaries of the nation-state and operate in a detrterritorialized or transnational fashion.” In the process, it creates the platform of engendering a more nuanced process of globalization “premised on the marginalization of the nation, especially in the domain of the cultural and the national.” This “third space” too, provides a more critical analysis of the universal within the particular and the particular within the universal (Krishnaswamy 2002, 106).

Behind these celebratory discourses of global multiculturalism lie critical questions of the power relations determining the regulations and representations of such flows. To begin with, the paradigm of multiculturalism has been accused of being Eurocentric and insular, with a tendency to privilege English language and Anglo American narratives, hence robbing “the rest” of its theoretical aura. As Stam and Shohat noted: “While much recent writing has been devoted to exposing the exclusions and blindness of European representations and discourses, the actual cultural production of non-Europeans has been ignored, a neglect which reinscribes the exclusion even while denouncing it” (Stam and Shohat, 2005: 488). Hence, the unequal distribution of knowledge and prestige points to the necessity of **de-westernizing** and transnationalizing the field. But, as scholars attempt to **de-narrativise** the West, their works also risk being stereotyped, ghettoised, valorised, corporatized, and co-opted to serve or reinforce the pre-existing socio-economic and political interests (Dirlik, 2005: 158-70).

Added to this, such contestations have been traditionally placed within the nexus of postcoloniality between the former colonies and their subjects in the Third World against the continued dominance of their metropolitan masters in the West (Berger 2002, 1-17). This largely explains the primacy of the South Asian and Afro-Caribbean contexts in celebrating and critiquing discourses of globalizations. While these accounts have offered some of the most novel perspectives on cultural consumption, there is a need for new perspectives on that engage the Asian-Pacific context.

In this respect, the experiences of East and Southeast Asian societies should not be merely reflected through the languages of postcoloniality defined through the dominance of pioneering works. Although Euro-American imperialism was stretched across the globe, its manifestations and interactions with indigenous societies were varied. Compared to the comprehensive process of displacement and disempowerment in African, Latin American, and Indian societies, Western colonialism in the Sino-centric realm was limited. Beyond the treaty ports, the East Asian societies of China, Japan, and Korea did not need to engage their Western metropole as colonial subjects. As such, albeit seeking to tailor the modernization of their societies along Western lines, the references to the West as the cultural and literary locus have been less prevalent in East Asian societies. The emergence of East Asian popular culture and its importance to an East and Southeast Asia audience also coincided with an era of rapid modernization and development that have shaped the discourses of media production and its networks of distribution.

For example, **Tzann Li Ding** posits that Hong Kong popular culture challenges the traditional dominant/dominated relations in film between the West and the East and allowed for more dialogical and egalitarian relations (Tzann 1998, 128-36). In this respect, Ding's thesis undermines the strongly entrenched "assumption that the process of globalization is continuous with the long steady, historical rise of Western cultural domination," or a case where globalized culture equals Western culture (Tomlinson 1999, 23-25). Korea has also transformed itself from a passive consumer of American films to becoming an Asian film production hub, with successes in the regional and international market. Likewise, Japanese and Hong Kong dramas and music are immensely popular in Asia, as are Thai films. It is therefore timely for a **re-mapping** of popular culture landscapes across the East and South East Asian region to rediscover the networks and boundaries of interactions.

Hallyu: Understanding its Emergence

"The way the story goes, it all started when an adviser offered Korean President Kim Young-sam an enlightening statistic. The profits from Steven Spielberg's Jurassic Park,

the President was told, equalled those from the export of 60,000 Hyundai cars. Tempting? You bet. So, three years ago the government modified the country's Motion Picture Law, bringing the industry in from the financial wilderness with tax breaks previously denied all but the most important manufacturers” (Dakota and Mason, 1997).

The beginnings of *hallyu* can be traced to the flourishing of artistic expression in Korea following the process of political liberalization and the rise in living standards in the late 1980s. Greater artistic and media spaces resulted in higher standards in the entertainment production as companies sought to **out-rival** each other and the competition from foreign exports. Financial and economic factors in the early 1990s also encouraged the growth of the entertainment industry. In the early 1990s, film industries were able to obtain funding from Korean conglomerates. Economic factors such as the burgeoning middle classes, a result of decades of economic growth, fuelled the demand for entertainment that contributed to an expansion of the pop culture industry. Ironically the Asian financial crisis in 1997, which cut off the established entertainment industry's “traditional” sources of funds, spurred the rise of independent studios and production companies. At the same time, the industry was also keen to follow the state's encouragement of *seggyehwa* (globalization) of their markets (Russell and Wehrfritz 2004).

The earliest industries that took Korean cultural products to a global and regional audience were the film and television industry. The latter benefited from the easing of censorship laws since the 1980s and were also allowed to flourish by the protectionist policies that required cinemas to screen Korean films for an average of 100 to 140 days. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Korean films began to win rave reviews both locally and internationally. According to Lee (1997): “**Park Kwang-su's** film *A Single Spark* (Jeon Tae-il) was a domestic box-office hit and screened in competition at the Berlin International Film Festival. **Jang Sun-woo's** *A Petal* (Kkonnip) and **Park Chul-soo's** *Farewell My Darling* (Haksaeng bugun shinwi) received recognition and prizes at various film festivals.” The high standards of production in the film marked “an evolutionary turning point in South Korean cinema, heralding a move towards a more market-driven industry and the start of the Korean blockbuster era” (Leong 2002, 24). In

1999, the movie *Shiri* (Swiri) became the first domestically produced film in Korean history to break the two million-ticket mark for the Seoul metropolitan area (which accounts for about 25% of the Korean market). It out-grossed Hollywood blockbusters (Is Corean Cinema the New HK Cinema?). The success of *Shiri* was quickly followed by other critical and commercial successes such as *Attack the Gas Station* (Juyuso seupgyeok sageon) (1999), a “national phenomenon amongst Korean youth,” and *Joint Security Area* (Gongdong gyeongbi gyeok) (2000), which took in one million ticket sales within three weeks of its release in Korea (Leong 2002, 27, 41). Korean movies also featured very strongly in international film festivals such as the Cannes Film Festival. Im Kwon-Taek shared the prize for best director in 2002 with *Chihwaseon* (2002). Park Chan-Wook’s *Old Boy* (2003) won the Grand Prix Prize in 2004.

In 1997, Korean television serials also succeeded in going regional by broadcasting in China. Serials such as *Star in My Heart* (1997) became very popular and established an interest in Korean popular culture in China. Around 2000, the publicly owned Korean broadcaster KBS sparked off a regional craze for Korean television serials when it aired *Autumn Tale* (*Gaeul donghwa*) in East Asia and several Southeast Asian countries. This was “the first series to really showcase Korean dramas internationally” (Korean TV Dramas website). *Gyeongju yeonga* (also known as *Winter Sonata* or *Winter Love Song*), the second in a series of installments by director Yoon Suk-ho, also resulted in a tourism boom and an interest in Korean language study.

The success of television serials paved the way for the export of Korean music. The music scene in Korea grew increasingly vibrant in the 1990s with the demand for live entertainment in cafes and clubs and the development of strong alternative music scenes around the youth district of Sinchon, Seoul (Howard 2002, 88-89). Korean youth who were exposed to global popular music genres such as hip hop, reggae, and European dance music re-invented the discourses of such music for a Korean audience. Seo Taiji, one of the most successful pop music performers in the 1990s, used rap and other popular forms of music to discuss the pressures of the Korean educational system and social problems such as “teen runaways and political corruption” (Morelli 2001, 251). In the late 1990s, Korean music production became increasingly sophisticated in terms of music video production, album design, and music technologies. Such better designed and

packaged products wooed audiences in the region, with acts such as Korean singer BoA, CLON, H.O.T, and S.E.S.

Since the late 1990s, the presence of Korean cultural commodities in East and Southeast Asia has increased visibly (Lee 2005). *Hallyu*, as this phenomenon is termed, has also given rise to increasing transcultural traffic and media exchanges in the region, an important part of the [pop cultural diplomacy](#)[\[pop culture diplomacy?\]](#) of *hallyu*. To complement the hosting of the World Cup, the joint mini-series *Friends* was produced through collaboration by TBS Entertainment (Japan) and MBC Productions (Korea) in 2002. Featuring a romance between a Japanese woman and a Korean man, who overcome the prejudices and doubts of friends and family, it was intended to convey the message that “love is the same in every country” (Tokyo Broadcasting System 2002). KBS and China Central Television also collaborated on a drama called *My Love Beijing* to mark the tenth anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries (Joo, 2004).

Production firms and the Korean government have naturally been keen to encourage such global imaginings, not [the](#) least because of its economic benefits. Research into *hallyu* indicates that it has a positive effect on promoting cross-cultural interactions and understandings. According to a *New York Times* article on *hallyu*, “the booming South Korean presence on television and in the movies has spurred Asians to buy up South Korean goods and to travel to South Korea, traditionally not a popular tourist destination. The images that Asians traditionally have associated with the country—violent student marches, the demilitarized zone, and division—have given way to trendy entertainers and cutting-edge technology” (Norimitsu, 2005). In places such as Japan, which has faced issues like discrimination against Japanese-born Koreans, popular culture has helped improve impressions of Korea and its people. According to government statistics, “55 percent of Japanese (now) feel affection for Korea. For Japanese in their 20s and 30s, the figure is over 60%” (Kwan 2004). This has been largely attributed to the Korean drama *Winter Sonata* and the interest in its male lead Bae Yong Jun. The *Winter Sonata* effect has also seen an increase in the numbers of people enrolling in Korean language classes, the sale of Korean language textbooks, and travel to Korea (Kwan 2004).

As the profile of the average consumer of Korean popular culture outside of Korea changes from diasporic communities in New York, Los Angeles, or Sydney to include "non-Koreans" in East and Southeast Asia, this raises interesting questions about these celebratory discourses of global multiculturalism and the portability of the Korean identity (Sassen 1998). As Schein proposes: "One of the outcomes is that media consumers, simultaneously imbibing print, electronic, and satellite communications around the globe, come to imagine themselves as cosmopolitan participants in global commodity culture" (Schein 1999, 345). Certainly, if identity is to be understood as "something continuously negotiated between local actors through social, historical and contextual changes" rather than a set of "cultural attributes transmitted through generations", such consumers are in the process of acquiring "Korean-ness" as they share in **trans-national** imaginings of a cultural Korea (Jo 2002, 90).

However[Now], claimants for a "uniform" Korean cosmopolitanism, in the nationalist sense of the word, are forced to acknowledge the active participation of consumers who incorporate such products into their lives and give them meaning (Jackson 1993,209). For example, in Japan, the television serial *Winter Sonata* is particularly popular amongst middle-aged Japanese women. The appeal is derived from the serial's play on the possibilities of life with one's first love. It appealed to these women who have lived in an era where familial roles were heavily gendered and where the change of an era has made youth the centre of popular culture in Japan. To them, Bae represented "an old-fashioned gentleman: cultured, well-read, and kind— nothing like the shallow pretty boys who seem to dominate Japanese pop culture" (Wiseman 2004). In places such as Vietnam, viewers project their dreams of a better life through the consumption of East Asian popular cultural products. As argued by Iwabuchi:

The coalescence of popular culture with modernity and mass consumption in Vietnam has released a storm of desire for the products and consumer cultures of East Asia. At the same time, the specificities of the engagement of the Vietnamese public with East Asian popular culture indicates that these products are indigenized in culturally meaningful ways to dynamically construct dimensions of a national identity not fabricated by the state, but rather in opposition to the regime (Iwabuchi et al 2004, 7).

Hence, *hallyu* may at times appear to be superficial or may well reinforce pre-existing socio-economic and political arrangements. The exchange of information concerning how *hallyu* functions is therefore also an important part of cultural studies. As it was not possible to analyze *hallyu* consumption in all contexts, the authors have chosen a site that they are familiar with to understand how Korean popular culture products are understood and consumed.

“Intense People”: Cultural Representations of Koreans in Singapore

The understanding of the popularisation of K-pop in Singapore involves two levels, the first, being the heightened and changing representations and imaginations of Korea cultural geographies by Singaporean consumers. As explained earlier, such cultural awareness has been made possible by the regionalization of Korean popular cultural products to the rest of Asia. The second, but more important level is the socio-cultural contexts and medium in which such exports are being framed in the Singaporean market. Given that the Singaporean audience commonly receives K-pop literature, especially that of film and television dramas, through a network of Chinese language-based cultural and media industries in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, how would *hallyu* be translated and mutated? Would Korean artists be recognised as distinctive cultural agents or would they be lumped together as “Chinese” popular culture? Interrogating these questions would in turn involve the examination of Singapore’s cultural politics framed in terms of the issues of ethnicity and language.

Like the cultural products that they represent, Korean celebrities coming to Singapore to promote their productions have been mobbed by Singaporean fans of all ages, faithfully awaiting their arrivals at airports and other promotion venues. Male stars like Bae Yong Jun, **Jang Dong Kun**, and Won Bin have been particularly popular among their Singaporean female fans. Korean men have been portrayed in Korean films and television dramas as having striking facial features and being immaculately dressed and emotionally sensitive, prompting discussions in the Singaporean media of “real” and “reel” Korean men. To a certain extent, Korean stars have acted as Trojan horses in ~~engendering-generating a~~ more sustained interest in Korean products, knowledge of

which was previously limited to electrical products and motor vehicles. With an enthusiasm for South Korean lifestyles arising from an initial infatuation with male Korean celebrities, Singaporean female fans have **been able to identify outlets**[**have sought out consumer outlets**] in the republic devoted to Korean-based food, fashion, and language schools (Chang 2005).

Travel to Korea has certainly been one of the areas where *hallyu* is felt. Korea has become one of the “hottest” new travel destinations for *hallyu* consumers, as demonstrated by the size and volume of advertizements in local newspapers dealing with Korean tours. Initially limited to the *Winter Sonata* tour, which featured film locations such as Nami island, Yongpyeong Ski Resort, and Mount Seorak, it has also expanded to include other serials. Some of these include Sokcho fishing village, the filming site of *Autumn in My Heart*, Muju Resort and the Daehan Tea gardens in Boseong, the set locations of the television drama *Summer Scent (Yeoreum hyanggi)*, and Jeju island, the location for the television serial *All In*. The more heroic and central representation of Korean popular culture, personified in their male artistes, is however a far cry from the earlier impressions that Singaporeans harboured.

Korea-Singapore relations were formally established in 1970, shortly after the latter was separated from Malaysia in 1965. Making regular visits to each others' countries, the political leaders of the two states regarded the bilateral ties as vital to the regional security and stability of Northeast and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the technological and financial muscle of Korean conglomerates has been highly valued by the Singapore government as they embarked on the rapid industrialisation of the island's trading economy. Hence, *jaebeol (chaebol)* have been significantly represented in many of the republic's large scale infrastructure and commercial developments, ranging from the main iconic shopping malls to the train networks or Mass Rapid Transit (MRT). The importance of South Korea in Singapore's political geography has perhaps been symbolized by its inclusion in a chapter in Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs (Lee 2000, 531-42). Serving as Singapore's prime minister for three decades (1959-1990), Lee has been credited with bringing the country “from Third World to First” (used as the subtitle of the second volume of his memoirs, *The Singapore Story*). As such a paramount figure in

Singapore's political culture, his memoirs have been closely read and referred to within Singaporean officialdom and the general public.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the significant visible presence of their Japanese neighbours, many of who came as merchants, sailors, and prostitutes, there were few traces of an ethnic Korean community in the pre-war British colonial port of Singapore established in 1819. Until recent years, cultural memories and impressions in Singapore of Koreans were moulded by not just interactions with the Korean diaspora, but media images as well. Especially for the older generation, the former was represented by male ethnic Koreans who served as military auxiliaries during the Japanese occupation of Singapore (1942-45). As mentioned in the opening sentence of Lee's memoirs, regarding his acquaintance with South Korean political leaders and culture, "I did not have happy memories of the Koreans because the first ones I met were in Japanese uniforms" (Lee 2000, 531).

Singaporeans who grew up in the 1970s-1980s would have remembered ~~them~~ Koreans as male construction workers and engineers involved in the republic's infrastructure projects. This impression continues to be used in recent years to underline the supposedly strong Korea-Singapore bilateral ties as reflected in the dinner speech by Singapore's President S. R. Nathan to Prime Minister Lee Han-Dong who made an official visit to Singapore in 2002. Nathan said:

Let me end with a little-known anecdote. In March 1986, Singapore had its worst ever civilian disaster when the seven-storey Hotel New World building collapsed, killing 33 people. This was our first national calamity arising from a multi-story collapsed building. Our civil defence authorities made an appeal for help in the rescue operations. A group of Korean workers, then working in Singapore on the Mass Rapid Transit project, immediately responded. They came straight from their MRT worksite, with their helmets, tools, and equipment to help cut through the concrete slabs and clear the debris to look for survivors (Nathan: 2002).

However, ordinary Singaporeans of that era may have had less positive recollections of what they perceived as the crass and aggressive male Korean expatriates and workers.

Similarly until the late 1990s, media representations of Koreans in Singapore ranged from the turbulence and tensions stemming from international frictions on the Korean peninsula to violent student and trade union demonstrations. The other

impressions of the Korean peninsula that Singaporeans are still encountering are occasional advertisements in national newspapers by the North Korean embassy in Singapore, praising the leadership of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as part of the commemoration of the communist state's independence day. As Lee remarked in *The Singapore Story* of his observations of the Koreans:

My visit confirmed my assessment that the Korean people were tough and capable of enduring great hardships. Successive invasions~~des~~ swept across the steppes of Central Asia and ~~come-came~~ to a halt ~~in-on~~ the peninsula. They were of Mongolian stock with distinctive facial and physical features, easily distinguishable from the Japanese and Chinese The Koreans are a fearsome people. When they riot, they are as organised and nearly as disciplined as the riot police who confront them. . . . They are an intense people not given to compromise . . . (Lee 2000, 533).

Although images of protesting students in Korea and Korean farmers at World Trade Organisation (WTO) summits still flash across Asian news networks, entertainment channels now present another image of the “intense” Korean man, probably unrecognisable to Lee.

The current, taken-for-granted appearances of Korean pop stars on television sets in Singaporean homes contrasts with the almost total lack of knowledge of the Korean popular culture scene in the republic a decade ago. The only way to watch a Korean movie between 1990-2000 was to purchase tickets for the annual Singapore International Film Festival, which screened **art-house** Korean films. The regionalization of Korean popular culture in the late 1990s only reached the shores of Singapore in 2000 in the form of the television serial *Autumn Tale* (*Gaeul donghwa*). This serial was so popular that the station in charge of its broadcast was “inundated with 1,000 calls and emails requesting a rerun” when it ended (*The Straits Times*, December 26, 2002). *Winter Sonata* established the *hallyu* trend a year later in Singapore.

The demand for Korean popular cultural products has mainly come from ethnic Chinese in Singapore, who make up 75 percent of the population, ~~(fifteen percent ethnic Malays and six percent ethnic Indians)~~ comprising the ethnic majority in the city-state of about three million citizens. Interest in such products from this group has led to a visible increase in the presence of Korean popular culture in the media and in retail

outlets over the last four to five years. Korean serials are aired daily on television. In fact, before such serials were screened on local cable provider Singapore Cable Vision, Channel U (a local channel) relied on the screening of Korean dramas to “carve out and take away a significant size of the audience population” from the more established state-owned Mediacorp station (Chua 2004). There has also been a proliferation of shops selling Korean television serials and movies. Viewers can choose to watch Korean television serials in Singapore by purchasing VCD (video CDs) sets that usually come in the form of 20 discs (one for each episode). Korean films have also become a staple in Korean cinemas with an average of one Korean film being screened in the theatres at any one time. Similarly, Korean music albums can be purchased from major music retail outlets in Singapore.

The consumption of Korean serials in Singapore is premised upon one’s ethnicity and correspondingly one’s ability to speak Chinese. ~~In the past, Shops-shops~~ that ~~sell-sold~~ Korean serials ~~were-in-the-past-retailing-retailed~~ television ~~serials-shows~~ from Taiwan and Hong Kong. When Korean television serials became popular, local distributors obtained Korean ~~serials-shows~~ from Taiwan or China to overcome the linguistic barriers to consumption. Since such products were produced with a Chinese-speaking audience in mind, all other aspects of the packaging of such serials were also “sinicised”, including the plot synopsis and title. As Singapore retailers prefer selling VCDs to DVDs, subtitling possibilities are limited. ~~As a result-best~~, such serials ~~may~~ come with Korean vocalisation, but are ~~still-only~~ subtitled in Chinese.

Korean serials that are aired on television are similarly type-cast as Chinese products. Although television serials aired on the cable networks now come with English subtitles, it is presumed that Korean television serials, the most important component of *hallyu*, ~~are only of interest to selectively-interests~~ a Chinese-speaking audience. Television serials that are aired on non-prime time slots (before 7 pm) usually come without English subtitles. In fact, Korean television serials are so strongly identified with Chinese-ness that Korean television serials have even been used to spur an interest in Chinese language learning. As Lim Tian Min, a teacher at Pioneer Junior College, commented: “We cut ~~the~~ Winter Sonata into various video clips, and students are supposed to expand the story line using their own words ~~[in Chinese]~~” (Forss 2005).

Hallyu and Chineseness in the Singaporean State

The popularity of Korean television serials among Chinese Singaporeans can be understood as an interplay of such positions where essentialist notions of “Chineseness” in local state discourse aids “pan-Chinese” imaginings and social constructions. The label of “Chinese” in Singapore was a product of the postcolonial policies that created dichotomous “ethnic” categories of Chinese, Indian, and Malay, for the purpose of policing ethnic tensions. It followed from the institutionalization of ethnic labels that “one cannot, even today describe oneself as simply “Singaporean”: one must be a Singaporean something—Chinese, Malay, or whatever” (Clammer 1985, 110). Associated with the re-invention of “ethnicity” by the Singaporean state were the educational policies on the compulsory learning of a second language in local schools. While English became the primary language, associated with administration, commerce, and education in Singapore, the learning of a second language was intended to serve as cultural ballast to the dangers of the “Westernization” of Singaporean society (Lee 2003, 238; Gopinathan 1994, 67). Also, the acquisition of a second language in schools was determined by one’s ethnic classification.

Chinese born in the 1970s, or those classified as such on their identity cards, often became the first of their generation to learn “standard Chinese” or the official national language of China. A quote from Rey Chow’s article *On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem* aptly describes this situation: “Whereas the adoption of English in non-Western countries is a sign of Britain’s colonial legacy, the enforcement of Mandarin in China and in the West is rather a sign of the systematic *codification* and *management* of ethnicity that is typical of modernity (Chow 1998, 11). In the Singaporean context, the encouragement of standard Mandarin was accompanied by an assault on Chinese dialects. The result of such policies in a post-independence era has been the delineation of “ethnic boundaries in Singapore . . . even while a ‘national culture’ is emphasised” (Ang and Lee 1996, 61). With greater coevalness between the speaking of Mandarin and one’s state recognised ethnicity, cultural “Chineseness” has gained great currency amongst Chinese Singaporeans, “putting[pushing/pressuring?] Chinese people to become more Chinese-. . .

in their behaviour” (Geoffrey 1976, 118). One example of this was the angry reactions to a survey by Dr. Chang Han Yin of the National University of Singapore, which revealed that Chinese Singaporean youth would have preferred to be white or Japanese rather than Chinese (White Envy Shock Polster, December 15, 1999). Such reactions reflect the strength of state-led definitions of cultural identity, even as the “Chinese” in Singapore who spoke an older dialect become increasingly disenfranchised by ethnic policies that replaced dialects with the use of English and Mandarin.

The strengthening of ethnic identities has proved fertile ground for the development of cultural politics that tends to be associated with a “cultural China”, a term coined by Harvard professor Tu Wei Ming. Tu proposed that regions outside of China such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, would prove to be a “cultural alternative to the Western model” of development and cultural politics (Ang 1998, 230). Cultural alternatives analysed more frequently in relation to “Chinese capitalist networks” are also expressed through the consumption of products from Taiwan and Hong Kong, centres of Sino-centric popular culture production. In the Singaporean context, the availability of Taiwanese and Hong Kong products have been an important “cultural ballast” for local Chinese against the conflicting state policies on “Chineseness”. Although the government formalised ethnic identities and “ethnic” languages, it discouraged the use of dialects among the Chinese and stereotyped dialect use as signifying a lack of education and social standing. In fact, Chinese Singaporeans below the age of forty were even threatened with being “last in the queue (in government departments)” if they used dialects (Barr 2000, 35).

Consequently, cultural patterns in Singapore have mirrored the social engineering of ethnicity by the state, which, by stressing the differences between cultural and racial traits, have further crystallised ethnic boundaries. This has been reflected predominately in the television and radio stations as well as print media, which deliberately reflect the official racial classification of the state. Hence, Indian, Malay, Chinese, and English programmes and literature are neatly segregated among the various ethnic print and broadcast media.

An imbalance favouring the Chinese majority is however revealed in the significantly more numerous Chinese-based TV network channels and newspapers. Even the English language papers have tended to devote greater coverage in their entertainment sections to the popular cultures of East Asia instead of South and Southeast Asia. While quantitative conclusions are not available, it can be speculated that ethnic minorities in the republic would probably demonstrate greater familiarity with East Asian popular cultural icons than their ethnic Chinese counterparts would be with Malaysian celebrities or Bollywood stars. This familiarity is superficial at best, however, as having been pigeonholed into learning their vernacular language by official state education policies, it is unlikely that the ethnic Malay or Indians in Singapore would even have linguistic access to the Chinese-based entertainment scene. Therefore, as long as Korean popular culture products remain packaged and presented through the Chinese cultural medium in Singapore, the other ethnic minority groups in Singapore will not see them as being Korean. With the denial of a more shared multiethnic platform of consumption, the presence of Korean cultural commodities in Singapore serves to reinforce these cultural linkages between the centres of Sino-centric cultural production and the network of Chinese consumers in Singapore.

The filtering of K-pop into local Mandarin media networks in Singapore could also be based on the notions that, in spite of their ethnic differences, both Korea and ethnic Chinese-dominated Singapore are considered Asian economic tigers, ~~which the~~ development ~~of which was were~~ attributed to their Confucian heritage. Even as the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius expressed disdain for enterprise, Confucianism was promoted in the 1980s as “Asian values” by Lee Kuan Yew as the underlying common factor ~~for behind~~ the success of the Asian miracle economies of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore through deference to authority, education, and diligence (Chua 1999). While ~~such these~~ “Asian Values” ~~have been were~~ reinterpreted after the 1997 financial crisis as corruption, cronyism, and nepotism, ~~its this~~ discourse has been internalised at least in the official and public mindsets. This is reflected in Singapore’s President S. R. Nathan (ironically expressed by an ethnic Indian) address to his Korean counterpart on the “Confucian traits” of both countries:

“Our countries share many social values and cultural similarities. We respect the elderly and cherish the family unit as the basic foundation of society. We value education, and recognise that hard work and thrift are vital to improving the living standards of our peoples and the competitiveness of our nations. We pursue outward-looking strategies and are committed to an open and free trade regime” (Nathan 2003)

From “Dae Jang Geum” to “Da Chang Jin”

When Korean serials were first aired in Singapore, they were ~~either~~ obtained from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China rather than from Korea. Korean music albums ~~that are~~ found in Singapore ~~are the versions that are were~~ re-packaged in Singapore for a Chinese-speaking audience. Lyrics and song titles are translated into Mandarin. Following the Taiwanese trend, Korean music is also less popular compared to Japanese music. According to the marketing director of *Playmusic*, top Japanese artist Ayumi sells no less than 10,000 copies in Singapore for every album released (Chang, 2004). In contrast, ~~The the~~ group H.O.T, which has since disbanded, was the only Korean group to sell over 10,000 copies of its album, *Outside Castle*. Korean film is perhaps the only medium ~~which that~~ has been fairly independent, as ~~the~~ cinema screenings demands English subtitling. However, in ~~the~~ recent years, there has also been ~~the an~~ influx of Korean films with Mandarin subtitles from China ~~that are~~ available for sale in local shops.

Compared to Korean television serials which are predicated upon the removal of Korean-ness and its replacement by a discursive and circulatory Chinese framework, Korean films ~~which that~~ are pitched for an international and English speaking audience are less popular in Singapore. Hong Kong and local Singaporean products have consistently out-performed Korean films in Singapore. The top grossing Asian film here is a social commentary on the pressures of the local education system. Directed by Jack Neo, the movie *I Not Stupid* (2002) took in S\$5.84 million, whereas the top grossing Korean film *Wishing Stairs* (1999) only took in S\$840,000 (Ong, 2005). The lack of interest in critical Korean films also limits the range of movies available to the local audience. Films that are rooted in the specificities of Korean history normally perform poorly unless the lead actors are famous personalities ~~that who~~ have acted in television

serials. In the case of *Taegukgi* (2004), a film about the Korean War and its impact on the relationship between two brothers, it was the presence of lead actors Won Bin and Jang Dong Gun, who had both acted in television serials, that was responsible for the movie's relative success.

Although many Singaporeans have become interested in travelling to Korea, long-term or in-depth cultural exchange is limited by the barrier of language. Public educational institutions do not provide Korean language training and hence, it is rare for Singaporeans to ~~tour-visit~~ Korea without ~~tour~~ guides or to seek long-term employment or studies in Korea. As the lack of language training limits cultural exchange, the cultural consumption of Korean popular culture in Singapore becomes predicated on its endorsement by Taiwan and Hong Kong. Such “cultural insiderism”² as Gilroy comments, owes its popularity to “an absolute sense of ethnic difference...Characteristically, these claims are associated with the idea of national belonging and the aspiration to nationality and other more local but equivalent forms of cultural kinship” (Gilroy 2003, 52). For example, the interest in the historical Korean drama, *A Jewel in the Palace (Dae Jang-Geum)*, was generated through ~~the~~ media reports ~~about-of~~ its popularity in Hong Kong. When the series was aired in Singapore, it contained a short introduction ~~into-to~~ Korean food and history, not from a Korean actor but from a Hong Kong personality whom many Chinese Singaporeans would recognise from their consumption of Cantonese television serials.

Conclusion: Singapore and the Limits to Popular Culture/~~al~~? Diplomacy

Imagined cosmopolitanism, then, is about conceiving a tauntingly chimerical world of spatial, class, gender, and racial mobility, where state borders and economic exclusions cease to be intransigent constraints. It is about the sensuous recasting of the globe, instead, as promiscuous in its cultural systems, its logics of style, and the myriad lifestyles it displays. It is about fantasizing community on a world-wide scale where geo-historical and political relations no longer determine one's chances for participation and membership, one's chances for

pleasure, leisure and connectedness (Schein 1999, 369-370).

The phenomenon of *hallyu* is one of “imagined cosmopolitanism.” Through media products, consumers, particularly from the East and Southeast Asia regions, become participants in the globalizing of Koreanness. Where Korean products exist in high concentrations, this is accompanied by the desire to travel to Korea, to learn the Korean language, to dress like Korean entertainers, and to learn the latest in Korean entertainment news. Such global imaginings are facilitated by production companies, distribution firms, television and radio stations, and the media policies of national governments.

The case study of Singapore has shown that *hallyu* can exist to bring about a desire for greater cosmopolitanism, but has in this case reinforced local “parochial” identities structured on rigid ideas of ethnicity and race. Aside from the apparent physiological familiarities of Koreans with Chinese to Singaporean audiences, the sinicisation of K-pop in the republic becomes evident when these products are distributed through the networks of Mandarin/Chinese based distributors, retailers, and media networks in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. Within the latter, *hallyu* becomes further associated as part of Chinese cultural consumption by linguistically-segregated media networks, which conveniently identifies Korean productions as “Chinese” popular culture icons. This is perhaps the final process in the exclusion of K-pop to the other ethnic minorities in Singapore.

-The transformation of Korean cultural products into a Sino-centric form of consumption explains the limited appeal of such products amongst the non-Chinese speaking in Singapore. At the same time, its classification as a Chinese product limits the search amongst Chinese consumers for deeper cultural understanding of the context of production. Hence, travel to Korea has increased as has the sale of Korean popular culture products in Singapore, but this has not accompanied greater public or institutional changes towards the Korean language study or long-term cultural exchange. Within these limits, the image of Korea exists within the safe confines of the television screens in local homes and VCDs in Chinese-oriented retail outlets. Consequently, such consumption

“tends to lack concern for and understanding of the socio-cultural complexity of that in which popular cultural artifacts are produced” (Iwabuchi 2002, 34).

Bibliography

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Ang, Ien. 1998. Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm. *Boundary 2*. Duke University Press. Vol. 25: 3.

Ang, Ien, and John Stratton. 1996. The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/ sian Cultures. *New Formations* 31: 51-66.

Barr, Michael. 2000. *Lee Kuan Yew: the Beliefs behind the Man*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.

Befu, Harumi. 2003. *Globalizing Japan: Ethnography of the Japanese Presence in Asia, Europe, and America*, edited by Harumi Befu and Sylvie Guichard-Anguis. London: Routledge Curzon, [SK: where does this go?]

Berger, Peter, and Samuel Huntington, eds. 2002. *Many Globalisations; Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World*. Oxford University Press.

Chang, Mi-haru. 2004. “Which is Hotter: Kimchi or Wasabi?” *The New Paper (Singapore)*. 3 May.

———. 2005. “Taste of Korea Right Here.” *The New Paper*. 4 January.

Chua, Beng Huat. 1999. “‘Asian-Values’ Discourse and the Resurrection of the Social. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 7.2: 537-592.

———. 2004. Conceptualising an East Asian Popular Culture? *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5.2: 200-221. <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/default.asp> (accessed August 27, 2005).

Chow, Rey. 1998. *On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem*. *boundary 2*. Duke University. Vol 25: 3. 21-24.

Clammer, John. 1985. *Singapore: Ideology, Society and Culture*. Chopmen Publishers.

Dakota, Alison and Whitney Mason. 1997. "On the Road to Recovery: Changing Times for Korean Film Makers." *Asiaweek* <http://www.pathfinder.com/asiaweek/97/0117/feat2.html> (accessed 27 August 2005).

Dirlik Arif. 2005. "Asia Pacific Studies in an Age of Global Modernity." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6.2: 158-170.

Forss, Pearl. 2005. "More Schools Set up Mandarin Reading Clubs to Promote Language." *Channel NewsAsia*. <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/139553/1/.html>, 27 March (accessed August 27, 2005).

Geoffrey, Benjamin. 1976. The Cultural Logic of Singapore's Multiracialism in Riaz Hassan (ed) *Singapore: Society in Transition*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Gilroy, Paul. 2003. *The Black Atlantic* as a Counterculture of Modernity Pp 49-82 in Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (eds) *Theorizing Diaspora*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Gopinathan, S. 1994. "Language Policy Changes 1979-1992: Politics and Pedagogy." Pp. 65-91 in S. Gopinathan, Anne Pakir, Ho Wah Kam & Vanithamani Saravanan in *Language, Society and Education in Singapore: Issues and Trends*. Singapore: Times Academic Press.

Howard, Keith. 2002. Exploding Ballads: The Transformation of Korean Pop Music Pp 80- 95 in *Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia*. London-Timothy Craig and Richard King (eds): Eurospan. University of British Columbia Press

Is Corean cinema the new HK?

www.goldsea.com/Air/Issues/Cinema/cinema.html, 23 February 2003. [A](#)accessed 27 August 2005.

Iwabuchi, Koichi. 2002. *Recentring globalization-: popular culture and Japanese transnationalism*. Durham-; London-: Duke University Press, 2002.

Iwabuchi Koichi, Stephen Muecke, and Mandy Thomas. 2004. "Introduction: Siting Asian cultural flows", in *Rogue Flows: Trans-Asian Cultural Traffic* Pp 1-10 in Kōichi Iwabuchi, Stephen Muecke and Mandy Thomas (eds) (eds) Hong Kong University Press.

- Jackson, Peter (1993) “Towards a Cultural Politics of Consumption” Pp 207-208 in Jon Brid et al (eds) *Mapping the Future: Local Cultures, Global Change*, London: Routledge.
- Jo, Hye-Young. 2002. “Negotiating Ethnic identity in the college Korean language classes”, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, Vol 9: 87-115.
- Joo, Sang Min. 2004. “Viewers Lap up Chinese TV Dramas.” *The Sunday Times (Singapore)*. 7 June .
- Kawn, Weng Hin (2004) TV love tale stirs passion in Japan for S. Korea, *The Straits Times*. 19 April.
- Korean Television Dramas, <http://www.koreanfilm.org/tvdramas/> (accessed August 27, 2005).
- Korean Wave Crashes on Asian Shores, 25 August 2004 http://www.korea.net/News/News/NewsView.asp?serial_no=20040825022 (accessed August 27, 2005).
- Krishnaswamy, Revathi. 2002. “The Criticism of Culture and the Culture of Criticism: At the Intersection of Postcolonialism and Globalization Theory.” *Diacritics* 32.2: 106-126
- Lee, Guan Kin. 2003. “Singapore Chinese Society in Transition: Reflections on the Cultural Implications of Modern Education.” In *Chinese Migrants Abroad: Cultural, Educational and Social Dimensions of the Chinese Diaspora*, edited by Michael Charney, Brenda Yeoh, and Tong Chee Kiong, 229-252. Singapore University Press and World Scientific.
- Lee, Kuan Yew. 2005. *From Third World to First World; The Singapore Story, 1965-2000*. Singapore: Times Academic Press.
- Lee, Tee Jong. 2005. “Korean Wave” Lifts Economy. *The Sunday Times*. 1 May.
- Lee, Yeon-Ho. 1997. “Mapping the Korean Film Industry” <http://www.asianfilms.org/korea/mapping.html> (accessed 27 August 2005).
- Leong, Anthony. 2002. *Korean Cinema: The New Hong Kong*. Trafford.
- Liew, Kai Khiun. 2003. “Limited Pidgin-type Patois? Policy, Language, Technology, Identity and the Experience of Canto-pop in Singapore”, *Popular Music*. Cambridge University Press. Vol 22 (2): 217-233.

Morelli, Sarah. 2001. "Who Is a Dancing Hero? Rap, Hip-Hop and Dance in Korean Popular Culture." In *Global Noise. Rap and Hip-Hop outside the USA*, edited by Tony Mitchell, 248-258. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Nathan. S. R. 2002. "Speech in honour of Lee Han Dong, Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea." 17 April (Istana: Office of the President of the Republic of Singapore).

———. 2003. "Speech in honour of Roh Moo-Hyun, President of the Republic of Korea. 22 October (Istana: Office of the President of the Republic of Singapore).

Norimitsu, Onishi. 2005. "Roll Over, Godzilla: Korea Rules." *New York Times*, June 28.

Ong, Aihwa. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: the Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. London: Duke University Press.

Ong, Sor Fern. (2005) Asia Major. *The Straits Times*, 20 July.

Otake, Akiko and Shuhei Hosokawa (2005). "Karaoke in East Asia: Modernisation, Japanisation or Asianisation?" in Ackbar Abbas and John Nguyet Erni (eds). *Internationalising Cultural Studies: An Anthology*. London: Blackwell. pp. 51-60

Russell, Mark and George Wehrfritz. Blockbuster Nation. *Newsweek*, 3 May 2004.

Sassen, S. 1998. "The *de facto* transnationalizing of immigration policy", Pp 49- 85 in Joppke, C. (ed.) *Challenge to the Nation-State: Immigration in Western Europe and the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schein, Louisa. 1999. "Of cargo and satellites: Imagined cosmopolitanism", *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol 2, No 3: 345-375. <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/default.asp>, accessed 27 August 2005

Sonwalker, Prasun. 2001. "India: Makings of Little Cultural/Media Imperialism", in *Gazette*, 63(6): 505-519.

Stam, Robert and Ella Shohat (2005). "De-Eurocentricising Cultural Studies: Some Proposals", in Ackbar Abbas and John Nguyet Erni (eds). *Internationalising Cultural Studies: An Anthology*. London: Blackwell. pp. 481-498.

The Korean wave in Asia

http://www.korea.net/korea/kor_loca.asp?code=K0403, accessed 27 August 2005.

Tokyo Broadcasting System: Friends, <http://www.tbs.co.jp/friends21/en/> accessed 27 August 2005.

Tomlinson, John. 1999. *Globalised Culture: The Triumph of the West*, pp. 22-9 in Tracy Skelton and Tim Allen (eds) *Culture and Global Change*. London, New York: Routledge

Tu, Wei Ming. 1994. "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center." In *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, edited by Tu Wei Ming, 1-34. **Stanford University Press**.

Tzann, Li Ding. 1998. A Colonised Empire; Reflection on the expansion of Hong Kong Films in Asian Countries in Ong Aihwa and Hsing Chen Kuan (eds) *Trajectories; Inter-Asian Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge.

White Envy Shock Polster. 1999. The Straits Times (Singapore), 19 December.

Wiseman, Paul. 2005. "Korea's Romantic Hero Holds Japan in Thrall." *USA Today*. http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2004-12-09-korean-actor_x.htm (accessed August 27).

