

Riding the Korean Wave

Billboards of Korean stars are decked all around Beijing, Tokyo, and Hong Kong. Chinese, Malaysians, and Filipinos have massive Internet forums where fans can download Korean shows, chat about Korean singers, and create subtitles for Korean dramas in their respective languages. This rampant popularity of South Korean popular culture in other countries is called the Korean or Hallyu

wave. The surge of the Korean culture in Asian countries is no small phenomenon; it has grown immensely over the past few years. As the United States experienced the “British Invasion” during the 1960s, the Hallyu wave has had the same effect on other Asian countries; it has sparked “interest” in Korea, “from food to culture and history” (Fong). The secret of its success is the blend of



Fans cheer for pop singer Rain. Credit: the Washington Post Link: <http://media3.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/photo/2006/08/30/PH2006083002878.jpg>

the traditional elements of Korean culture with modern elements of Western influence. With this combination, the Hallyu wave has been taking over Asia ever since the 21st century. While the Hallyu wave brings Korea success, some predict that the wave is just a fad because Korea imports less of other Asian cultures and exports more of its culture. This has caused some countries to decline its imports of Korean dramas (Russell). Even with this small setback, it does not mean that the Hallyu wave is fading away. Through TV dramas and music, the popularity of the Korean culture in other nations, is not waning but is becoming a permanent presence in the rest of Asia.

Korea's prosperous economy and conservative values have allured the rest of Asia as a model for success and wealth (Dator). It is astonishing to think that only a century ago, Korea was under the oppressive rule of Japan with no hope of becoming an independent nation. Yet it broke its mold and became one of the most thriving countries. Not only is Korea an economic model but it also has similar cultural values and traditions to other Asians countries. Some of the core fundamental values that all Asians share are respect, obedience, and honor. These values are derived from Confucianism, a

philosophical system that has had tremendous influence on the culture and history of Asia. Confucianism teaches that these ideals fit into the greatest value that all Asians hold: family. Asians all believe that one should respect his family elders. Every trait one has is a direct reflection of the family, and any wrong deeds would bring dishonor to him and his whole family. Koreans especially have an even stronger family and national pride because throughout history, they had to keep its culture and tradition alive amidst oppression by Japan and China. After centuries of extreme conservation of the Korean culture and pride, Koreans are instilled with an immense amount of family and cultural pride that allows them to hold on to their values in a changing society.



Family bonding through traditional games. Credit: Hi Seoul Link: http://english.seoul.go.kr/today/infocus/specialreport/1217082_5093.php

The values of the Korean culture are shown in Korean TV melodramas which have greatly increased the Hallyu wave. Confucian values of filial piety have set Korean dramas, also known as K-dramas, to become more conservative than TV shows of Western society. They usually consist of “the



"Winter Sonata" main couple expressing their love with the snowmen. Credit: UNIORB Link: <http://uniorb.com/ATREND/Awinter.html>

usual soap-opera grist of incurable diseases, mistaken identities, exotic locales and amnesia” while abstaining from “sex, vulgarity, profanity and politics” (Dickie). Instead, Asians want to see family-centered dramas of true love. Lisa Leung, assistant professor of cultural studies at Hong Kong's Lingnan University, clearly explained that the K-dramas stress “familial values, filial piety, love between siblings, and friendship” (Blume).

Shallow issues prominent in Western society, such as physical lust, are absent in K-dramas. Instead, K-dramas focus on tragic love. Hit dramas such as “Winter Sonata” (2001), “Full House” (2004), and “My Name is Kim Samsoon” (2005) portray all of these characteristics and project them into Asian

countries such as Japan, China, Singapore, and Thailand.

But even more popular than these dramas are ones that have promoted and given a glimpse of the Korean history. Dramas such as “Jewel in a Palace” (2003) and “Jumong” (2007) have been very successful historical dramas; “Jumong” has been exported to over 8 countries and “Jewel in a Palace” has also received just as much popularity (“Popular”). The K-drama “Palace” (2006) steered from the typical historical drama by mixing the historical culture of

Korea with modern society. The story took place in Seoul in which present-day Korea still had a constitutional monarchy. Because of this unique outlook, it became an outstanding hit; it had nearly 30% rating during the



original broadcast in Korea (“Entertainment”) and had more success in countries

“Goong’s” beloved Prince & Princess. Credit: Immeen Link: <http://www.imeem.com/tag/Goong/photos/?p=11>

such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. In addition, the “DVD/VCD sales blew past the quarter-million mark” (Chan). Through the unique culture and history of Korea, K-dramas appeals to Asian masses, leaving them craving for more.

Because of the immense success of K-dramas, some have complained about the unequal cultural exchange between Korean and other Asian countries (Russell). What these critics have failed to realize is that while there are minor differences in culture in Asia, the core values that are expressed in these dramas are values that all Asians hold. The greatest difference in culture among Asian countries are the national differences such as language. Instead of focusing on these minute cultural differences, people should focus on the bigger themes that are presented in these K-dramas.

Even though some might say that K-dramas have receded in viewership, critics seem to forget that K-drama is not the only aspect of the Hallyu wave. An even bigger tool that furthers this wave is Korean popular music, better known as K-pop. Not only has K-pop influenced other Asian countries, but it has also been a tool for a cultural blend between Korea and these countries. BoA is a prime example of this cultural tie. Ever since her 2002 Japanese debut, all five of BoA’s albums have topped

the Oricon Charts, the most influential music chart in Japan (Kae). She has also sold more than 10 million albums, estimated to 31.9 million dollars, in Japan alone (Kae). What is unique about these albums that she released is that they have all been in Japanese. To assimilate in the Japanese culture, BoA and her company decided that she must speak the language fluently. In doing this, she partakes of the Japanese culture rather than only offering her Japanese fans the Korean culture. K-pop ballad singer Kangta took it a step further and collaborated with rapper Vanness, part of the popular Taiwanese band F4. During the summer of 2006, SM Entertainment hosted a special concert for Kangta &



Kangta (left) & Vanness (right) collaborated with immense success.
Credit: AROA Link: tian2.up.seesaa.net/image/Kangta202620Vanness.jpg

Vanness that was suppose to be for about 1000 fans. After sending out e-mail applications, 7000 people replied in three hours (Lee). Because the duo were so popular, SM Entertainment released a couple of singles that had Mandarin, Korean, and English lyrics. These two powerhouses from their respective countries created a cultural exchange that not only joined artists together but countries as well.

Amid these successful Korean artists, Rain is Hallyu wave's biggest sensation. Rain is under JYP Entertainment which was founded by K-pop legend Park Jin-Young (JYP). JYP is “the first Asian producer to establish a record label in the US” and has “collaborated with top artists such as Will Smith, Lil’ Kim and OutKast” (Garcia). With JYP's guidance, Rain has captivated all of Asia with his signature moves, amazing voice, and sexy charisma. His latest *Rain's Coming* World tour, which includes countries such as Singapore, Vietnam, China, and United States, has been a phenomenal success. Tickets were sold out immediately to the millions of fans that wanted to see the Rain’s outstanding show. His Beijing concert drew more than “40,000 fans to a sold-out concert”



Rain: Korea's sensation. Credit: Linh H. Link: <http://mylynniepoo.imeem.com/photo/i8uGqiqP/RjF47wnlJ0XO1/>
Rain's Japanese single "Sad Tango"

(Onishi). Rain is so popular that he was named one of Time Magazine's 100 most influential people in 2006 (Walsh). Rain has become a phenomenal success, bringing the Hallyu wave to another high.

The Korean wave is more than the entertainment culture of Korea. Through the Hallyu wave, many Asian countries are embracing the Korean culture. Celebrities especially have been front runners in promoting the phenomena. "South Korea's trend-setting screen stars and singers dictate everything from what hair gels people use in Vietnam to what jeans are bought in China" (Faiola). The Hallyu



Some of Korea's hottest Hallyu wave stars. Credit: Dae Jang Gum Blog site Link: <http://daejanggeum.blogsome.com/images/200510200koreastars.jpg>

wave not only epitomizes the Korean culture but the culture of a successful Asian country. Most of the Asian countries want to be like Korea so they study and embrace the Korean culture. After so many years of oppression, Korea finally can outshine the other Asian nations through its cultural phenomenon. The

Hallyu wave is not dying and will not die. While it might not always be soaring with success, it will definitely have a strong influence all over Asia. The Hallyu wave is a permanent fixture and will not end anytime soon.

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