The Journey of Cultural Globalization in Korean Pop Music

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From Rock to J-Pop and the 'Korean Wave': The Journey of Cultural Globalization in Korean Pop Music

Changes in the production and consumption of pop music have shown the Globalization of Culture in its most effective form. The Global expansion of pop music to a trans-national industry from its origins in the USA has come about due to massive change in the demographics and wealth of new markets for the 'rock aesthetic', as well as a certain erosion of tradition among so called periphery states and an envy or yearning for the American way of life. These changes have enabled production companies to expand their operations in to new markets where their products can be adapted to meet the demands of local consumers. The results of this have been seen as both an increasing homogenization of pop globally, combined with more diversity brought about through experiences within national cultures. Pop music is accepted first of all as a foreign influence replacing traditional music, it is then internalized, adapted to the native culture and pushed back into the wider world as a new style of pop which has been culturally filtered. Although this globalization process has brought about more diversity, it is a diversity *"based on cores of shared practices and technologies" [1]* and has been described as a process of hybridization.

Changes in the Korean pop industry are a good example of this process. Although *"Korea is not a traditional powerhouse of Popular Culture in Asia",* [2]recently we have seen numerous reports from the media describing the popularity of Korean cultural products in Asia including Korean pop's (K-Pop) inclusion on the Forbes list of the top 20 most important cultural trends[3]. Throughout its history, Korea has been 'sandwiched' between two more economically and culturally powerful states, China and Japan. It has also been strongly influenced by Cold War politics and has hosted a significant American military presence since the end of the Second World War. The developments in Korea's pop industry can be related to three political events which helped to shape the cultural identity of the nation. Firstly, the 1945 end of Japan's colonization of Korea. It's Imperial troops replaced by Americans whose role was to protect against an invasion from the North. Secondly, the end of the Cold War and the Democratization of South Korea in the late 1980s which enabled young Koreans to embrace foreign influences, particularly Japan's by ending the laws that attempted to block foreign cultural influence. Thirdly the 1997 IMF crisis, characterized within Korea as a 'national humiliation' and used as a spring board to launch the government backed 'Korean Wave'. These three events have been starting points for three distinct phases of cultural domination in the Korean pop music industry. After 1945, the US's dominance brought the technology of production to Korea, displacing the until then dominant, native sounds of Pansori and Ppongtchack. The 1990's brought J-Pop (Japanese Pop) to Korea where it became hugely culturally influential. This was due to Japan's economic advantage and its ability to take the American technology and methods of production and turn them into a product that could be accepted by the Korean youth. Finally, the 'Korean Wave' came about as an attempt to rebuild the Korean economy after 1997. This consisted of Government policies, aimed at pushing Korean music producers to export Korean cultural products which had been developed using the American technology, and Japanese marketing styles that had allowed their previous cultural domination.

It is important to bear in mind that the Korean Wave or *Hallyu* has not totally replaced American and Japanese music in Korea. Rather it has added diversity and depth to the market both in Korea and in other parts of East Asia. It has also led some scholars to ask if this increase in centres of production may be leading to an East Asian cultural

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identity.
'Americanization'

After Liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, American music was introduced to Korea and swiftly replaced traditional Korean sounds with the technology and culture of pop music. This was part of America's cold-war policy to transform the countries that stood against Communism, *"countries affiliated with this bloc were incorporated as part of the global policies of American military and diplomatic efforts, and were simultaneously placed under the influence of a culture infused with American ideologies."* [4] This policy and the fact that the population, at least during the Cold War, welcomed the American presence *"with open arms as the liberator from hated Japanese colonial rule"* [5] and then later, as protection from North Korea meant that the spread of American pop music was made easy. The Korean experience of American cultural hegemony was begun through direct contact with Americans resident in the network of Army bases established throughout Korea. Two elements were crucial to the spread of American culture in Korea. Towns that developed to provide services and entertainment for the GI's *"became hotbeds for mass dissemination of American pop culture in South Korea."* [6] Secondly, American Forces Radio was the first to nationally broadcast music and allowed many Koreans to listen to western music for the first time and also encouraged Koreans themselves to spread their own versions of 'rock' using this new technology. 'Americanization' was specifically identified with being 'modern' by Koreans and especially musicians who studied hard to learn American musical styles and methods of production.

This 'yearning' for the good life of wealth and prosperity that was perceived to be so easy to find in America is key to the 'Americanization' discourse, and was certainly important to the spread of American musical styles as an 'ideal type' in Korea. However, it is important to note that due to the limited economic base in Korea at this time and the presence of so many Americans, feelings towards the pop culture they introduced were much more based on the 'real' experience of musicians than the 'imagined' connection between the two countries populations as a whole. The new middle class that identified America's *"implicit connection with a globalizing consumer culture"* [7] did not exist to the same extent that it did in other places, notably Japan. Whereas in Japan defeat was followed by economic resurgence, Korea's role as the front line of the Cold War meant that as far as the USA were concerned; economic progress was secondary to security. This meant that the role of politics in the Korean experience of American culture was also vital.

At this time the Government's line of official nationalism was based on two key principles: anti-communism directed at the North Koreans over the 38th parallel and; anti-imperialism directed towards Japan. American 'Cultural Imperialism' may not have been welcomed so enthusiastically had it not been for these factors. Musicians who wanted to achieve popularity had to be clearly pro-Government and anti-communist. This policy was so successful that Korea has been described as being 'psychologically dependent' [8] on the image of 'America'. More recently however, as Korea has enjoyed its own 'economic miracle' and the American backed government of Park Chun Hee was discredited by the 'Gwangju massacre', rock music has been identified with *'the 'empowerment' of everyday lives of youth"* [9] and allowed the growing number of young middle class Koreans to express resistance to the military dictatorships that existed in Korean until 1987. This resistance has also led Koreans to turn away from the previously benevolent presence of American culture to embrace other influences.
'Japanization'

"The 1990's was the decade of Japan's gross national cool." **[10]** After Korea's disillusionment with America and its culture, there was a large influx of Japanese cultural products both to Korea and the rest of Asia. The ability of Japan to do this was based on economic dominance that allowed their corporations to adopt American methods of production more quickly and successfully than those of other countries. This was combined with clever marketing of their cultural exports, especially Pop idols (Aidoru), as both culturally odourless and appealing to the universal values of Asian youth, a youth which by the 90's was economically developed enough, and in the case of young Korean's, politically free enough to consume these products on a massive scale. In modern Korea J-Pop is a significant rival to American music although not its replacement.

Scholars have attempted to explain the popularity of Japanese culture through a number of different means. One is the idea of 'Cultural Proximity', that J-Pop is popular in Korea due to similarities between Japanese and Korean

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audiences.   Another is the idea of J-Pop as culturally 'odourless', in effect showing little or no Japanese characteristics, and therefore appealing to universal values rather than purely Japanese ones. It is important to view these ideas as complimentary rather than antagonistic. Korean acceptance and enjoyment of Japanese culture is complex and built on a foundation of economic, political and cultural factors.

Japan's role in the process of cultural globalization has been that of a primary agent of 'glocalization'.   The technology they have used to spread J-Pop is American; and the style of the idols they export is American at least in origin. The Japanese were able to take this global force into their own culture, internalize or localize it to suit their own tastes and then re-package it and export it in an innovative way that could be easily understood by Korean consumers. This feat is made all the more remarkable by its destruction or avoidance of Korean attitudes towards Japanese Imperialism which are still prevalent in other areas of life outside popular culture. The Korean Government's regulations to stop Japanese culture contaminating Korea were not dropped until 1998. However, long before this they had become redundant. Japanese music has been a big seller in Korea throughout the 90's, and further back than this the most globally visible product of 'Japanization', Karaoke, was allowing hip Koreans to copy the moves and sounds of their favourite J-Pop stars. Also, the rise of satellite TV technology enabled Japanese production companies to import their products directly to Korean homes without interference from Korean officials. The consumers of J-Pop have shown themselves to be unwilling to shape their cultural lives around the political events of the past.

Japanese self-awareness of their position in the transnational system of cultural globalization is shown in their efforts to maintain their exports as 'odourless'. *"This strategy indicates a conviction widely held by the Japanese media industries that other Asian countries will sooner or later follow the Japanese experience of absorbing and localizing the American media influence."* **[11]** When this happens, it is hoped Japanese products will be able to maintain their market share if they are not perceived as 'foreign'. The idols that the Japanese music industry produces are given training in other Asian languages and regularly perform in Korean and appear on Korean TV. Furthermore, an important strategy for J-Pop production is the scouting and recruitment of local talents who could then be packaged as J-Pop stars without being Japanese. So, Japanese cultural influence can be seen as a *"mediating element in the chain of transnationalization of American dominated popular culture."* [12]

So, if these products are deliberately non-Japanese in appearance, what values do they represent? Youth, global or pan-Asian values? J-Pop *"has a resonance that is derived from ethnic similarity and from shared values, tastes and traditions."* [13] Some of these may overlap with global values, but global dominance has not been the aim of J-Pop idols. Asia is their sphere of influence and as such they try to connect and sing about generational and regional issues. These include the challenges of the East Asian education system, Confucian social systems and the search for 'modernity' in romantic relationships. J-Pop artists are designed to be the boy/girl next door, as an attainable ideal that can be representative of their social group. These artists represent a lifestyle of modernity that is both more attainable (hopefully) and more recognizable than that provided by American pop. Marketing drives are centered on interactions between star and fans in order to maintain the feeling that the star is 'one of us' and experiencing the same events in their life. There is an attempt by managers and production companies to *"create feelings of peer solidarity and collectivize the growing up process."* [14]

Although J-Pop may strive to avoid any Japanese smell, this seems to be an attempt to avoid accusations of Japanese cultural imperialism and to create a larger market for its products by emphasising those parts of Asian identity that cross national boundaries. J-Pop idols are representative of the hybridity of culture found in Asia. They are neither copies of their original inspiration or modified versions of tradition but something new that has arisen as a result of East Asia's economic and political experience and evolving Korea Japan relations.

The Korean Wave

If the 1990's was the decade of J-Pop, then the 'noughties' especially since 2002 have been the decade of the 'Korean Wave'. The focus of cultural cool in Korea and other parts of East Asia has shifted to Korean popular culture. Like in the previous shift from 'Americanization' to 'Japanization', other cultural influences have not been replaced; instead they have been forced to make room in their customer's lives for this newly powerful influence. The emergence of the 'Korean Wave' follows the 1997 IMF crisis in Korea. After this 'national humiliation', the Korean

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Government's plan to regain its former economic power included the acknowledged need to identify and exploit new markets for its products and also to diversify the range of products exported. The culture industry was one of the keys to this and so, K-Pop was aggressively promoted in East and South-East Asia. *"The Koreans have just begun to realize that culture can be as profitable as semi-conductors or cars."*[15]

The recognition among Koreans of the significance of this export led strategy has led to a feeling of pride in the popularity of pop culture produced in Korea; this phenomenon is seen as marking the transition of Korea from out of the shadow of its traditionally more powerful neighbours, to an object of desire for its neighbours. Koreans abroad are commonly asked if they are Japanese or Chinese; Hyundai, LG and Samsung are often thought to be Japanese corporations; and Seoul, one of the biggest cities in the world is a non-entity to tourists. Koreans want this to change. Whereas Americanization can be viewed as having largely political ends, and J-Pop's distinctive Japaneseness was suppressed, K-Pop and its stars Rain, BoA and Se7en are hailed as ambassadors for Korea. Their success and fame has led them to be tied into advertising other Korean exports. Rain especially is the face of Samsung and the Korean Government's recent 'Korea: Sparkling' tourism marketing campaign. The Korean Wave is viewed by Koreans as more than just a cultural idea. It is closely linked to their own identity as proud Koreans seeking economic power and political security.

We can describe the Korean Wave as a new trend. However, like J-Pop, the technology and style used is still based on American culture. Also, there are many similarities between the way J and K-Pop are produced and marketed. Korea more than any other country has been influenced by Japanese culture, first as a colonised country and then as a willing consumer. This has led to a situation where *"Japanese popular cultural products have also been 'copied', 'partially integrated', 'plagiarized' and 'mixed' and 'reproduced' into Korean Products." **[16]*** Korea has taken the 'J-Pop idol' model and refined it to something that can appeal to a new generation's rapidly changing tastes. Like J-Pop, Korean music appeals to common values rather than purely Korean ones and Korea is viewed *"as a prominent model to follow or catch up, both culturally and economically."***[17]**For its fans *"consuming Korean songs is keeping up with the latest trend in youth culture. They feel cool and modern."* [18] Like in the Japanese model, there is an effort to promote direct links between the performer and the consumer through the use of local languages in songs, and the opportunity for fans to get up close and personal with their heroes. However, in the work or appearance of artists leading the 'Korean Wave', there is no attempt to hide or disguise their origin. In fact, K-Pop has been described as *"entering the Asian cultural market with a 'Made in Korea' sticker displayed proudly on its sleeve."*[19] This seems to be in keeping with Korea's status as a victim of military, political, economic and cultural domination throughout its history. There is no reason to hide its identity from its target market because there is no reason for their consumers to hold any prejudice towards Korea. No lingering anti-colonial resentment or jealousy of their privileged position in the global economy. Korea has suffered as much as anyone else militarily and economically, so their culture is not viewed as threatening to national identities in the way that American or Japanese cultural imports may have been.

Conclusion

So, is the flow of cultural products through and more recently also from Korea producing cultural homogeneity on a global scale, or is the truer picture one of regionalisation? Also, does the Korean Wave represent some new stage in the process of cultural globalization, or is its emergence just a copy of Japan's success as a cultural exporter? While it may be true that if we *"unwrap pop's layers what we are left with is the same old meat and two veg that have kept pop pickers well satisfied."*[20] It is also clear that although the origin of J-Pop and the Korean Wave was American cultural hegemony, the rise of these more recent centres of production into the Asian cultural consumer market has meant the relative decline of the USA's cultural output in the region.

I would suggest that the rise of Asian centres of cultural production is based on the modernisation of Asians themselves. The technology disseminated from the USA is now ubiquitous to the extent that it is no longer recognized as American by those who consume it. In fact, the technology used to play music is much more easily identifiable as Japanese than as emerging from any other area. Also, the emergence of East Asia as an area of economic success has enabled a shift in the source of culture consumers 'yearning'. The lifestyle that young middle-class Asians aspire to is more closely identified with Seoul or Tokyo urban living than New York. Although American

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music is still a powerful cultural presence in Korea's musical marketplace, its fans represent themselves as rebels turning away from mainstream 'cool' culture, as outsiders who are seeking something different from the status quo. In essence then, *"'global localization' replaces 'global standardization'"* [21]as the main form of cultural globalization. Furthermore, the political situation means that Korea is more confidently able to express itself as the fear of both Japan's economic dominance and a North Korean invasion recede and are replaced by growing unease with the remaining US troops stationed in Korea. These factors are leading to an emerging East Asian culture in which*"the circulation of popular culture is narrowing the geographical, social, and psychological distance between Asians.'*[22]

Korea's role in this emerging regional cultural bloc is to have been more vocal about what it is trying to achieve, part of the motivation for J-Pop's odourless products was the underlying conviction among it's producers that Japan was not able to be an agent for regional cultural integration. There was a feeling that this would be unacceptable to the people of Asia both inside and outside Japan, ultimately hurting profits. Whether this was due to unease over former colonial abuses, or a sense that the Japanese were unwilling to accept themselves as part of a greater Asian culture is unclear. What is sure is that Korean stars have had no such qualms in leading the rise of an inclusive Asian popular culture. Obviously well coached by their profit seeking managers K-Pop stars often comment that they wish to take their sound to all of Asia. This attempt at identity construction is a*"conscious ideological project for the producers of East Asian cultural products, based on the commercial desire of capturing a larger audience and market.'*[23]

The 'Korean Wave' represents cultural hybridity in its most advance form. It represents its own national identity but appeals to a regional group with similar desires and troubles. It is important to note that the unified popular culture that K-Pop producers are trying to create is not one that connects along national lines. They connect along generational and class lines. The bonds being formed by the 'Korean Wave' connect young, middle class, urban Asians.

In the journey from 'Americanization' to the 'Korean Wave', we can see that both economic and political factors have played their part. American power, technology and economic might created the conditions for an 'Americanization' of Korean pop music. However, as the political situation changed with democracy in Korea and the end of the Cold War, Japan was able to use its economic strength to overcome its political limitations to a certain extent and be a new regional power. However, it wasn't until Korea's economy was advanced enough to replicate this rise that, Korea being free of any political baggage, was able to use its culture to openly and positively articulate at least the beginnings of a limited and fragile East Asian Cultural Identity among certain sectors of the population. However, it's important to remember the manufactured aspect of this identity. The feelings of similarity between young Asians did not develop organically but are the aim of corporations who see in this growing closeness, a greater and more easily exploitable market for their products. *"Rather than being a product of Korean popular culture's uniqueness or superior quality, the Korean Wave may be a result of the 'ability' of a most secular, capitalistic, materialistic, desire to appease the newly emerging desires and diverse anxieties in the Asian region.'*[24]

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