

The rising Korean wave among Chinese youth

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Abstract

With the developing of globalization, a popular culture so called Korean wave has generated much attention among Chinese people recently, especially youngsters. It is an undeniable fact that Korean wave has been prevalent in China for many years. And in recent years, there is an issue on whether this wave will end soon. But the fundamental question to be asked before anything else is: why is there such a wave in China? The purpose of this paper is to sketch out a framework for understanding the causes of the Korean wave. Broadly, this paper will try to offer four possible causes of Korean wave among Chinese youth in terms of two countries policies, cultural proximity, historical reasons and Korean indigenous superiority. This paper will also try to argue how Chinese people should treat this wave. And it takes a strong position that people should respect this wave, not treat it as a cultural invasion.

The rising Korean Wave among China's youth

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in interest in the Korean language, Korean cuisine, Hanbok, and the traditional Korean dress. For instance, Chinese brides are choosing traditional Korean robes for their wedding photos. Matchmaking services promise to find Korean husbands, and many have plastic surgery to look "more Korean." And according to the statistics given by Nick Wreden, an international branding, brand metrics and customer loyalty expert, about 150,000 people attended a Korean wave Expo in China. It may well be asked: what is Korean wave all about? Why is there such a wave? Why are so many people influenced by this wave? This paper will try to interpret these phenomena caused by Korean wave, especially the causes of the Korean wave.

Definition

Korean wave, a term coined by a Chinese journalist in 1998, refers to the growing popularity of South Korean culture and South Korean products sweeping China. From clothes to hairstyles, well-packaged television dramas to slick movies, popular music to comic books, video games to electronic appliances, mobile phones to automobiles, South Korea has been defining the tastes of many Chinese and other Asians for the past half decade. While its popularity mainly concentrates in the Asian and South East Asian region, such as China, Japan, Philippine, Vietnam, some of the products reach as far as Europe and Latin America. It has influenced a lot of people in their daily life. And even the president of China Hu Jintao, known for his formality, reportedly gushed to a South Korean dignitary that he was chagrined to have missed some soap opera episodes. Like the president of China, some fans of Korean wave just watch the movie, and drama; listen to the music, and use Korean electronic products. But some indulge in Korean romances day and night. And others, most of them youngsters, fill photo albums with celebrities' pictures, cut out all the news about Korean stars, write fan mail, memorize all their song lyrics and even travel across China to see them in person.

Taking those things into consideration, a question hangs in the air: what leads to the Korean wave? It is an undeniable fact that Korean culture is very charming but why is it so popular especially among Chinese youth? Why is the wave from Korea, not other countries? What is so special in Korean culture?

Causes of Korean wave

To answer those questions, this essay will analyze those causes in terms of the policies of China and Korea, cultural proximity, historical reasons, and Korean indigenous superiority.

Two Countries' Policies

As far as policies are concerned, there are three aspects in terms of Chinese, Korean and mutual policies.

First and for most important, since china reopened its door to the world after decades of isolation in 1978, it has begun to develop bilateral relationships with other countries, including South Korea. China entered into indirect trade with South Korea in 1979. Later, the trade agreement, which went into effect in February 1992, applied most-favored-nation status to South Korea and lowered the tariffs imposed on South Korean goods by 5 percent to 30 percent. "Since the establishment of the PRC-ROK diplomatic relations in 1992, friendly exchanges in political, economic and cultural arenas have been continuously developing between the two nations," said Zhang Guoliang, the President of Wen Wei Po daily. Under the harmonious environment, Korea has the opportunity of exporting its cultural product. The open-door policy is the precondition of Korean wave.

Secondly, the widely spread of Korean wave also contribute to Korean policies raised by Korean President Roh Moo-hyun. Zhang Guoliang argued that Korea President Roh Moo-hyun's had done a lot of efforts to make a democratic social system take root through his post-authoritarianism, continuous innovative thinking and paradigm shift and free discussions during his past few years in office. Without efforts to improve such areas as respecting the creativity of individuals, allowing a transparent cultural market structure, and establishing a soundly critical culture, Korea's culture industry may have not had such strong

vitality and such creative and talented human resources as we are now witnessing. By this token, it is apparent that President Roh places great importance on the culture industry associated with the Korean wave as one of the nation's growth engine industries. Furthermore, the Korean government plans to foster the country's music industry as Korea's core cultural industry by subsidizing it with up to 40 billion won of support by 2007. Another notable feature is that the Korean government plans to invest 2 trillion won by 2008 to create the "Korean wave Hollywood" on a 1 million-pyeong site in an effort to establish East Asia Culture, comparable to Hollywood in the United States. Such measures reflect President Roh Moo-hyun's ambitious plans to transform Korea into a global cultural power.

Last but not least, in 2003, during the summit meeting between Chinese President Hu Jintao and South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun in Beijing, the two leaders agreed to promote the bilateral good neighborly friendship to all-round cooperative partnership. Both countries confirmed the target for the development of economic and trade relations, establishing a target of \$200 billion worth of trade by 2012. And the two countries also formulated the "Medium and Long-Term Development Plan for China-Korea Trade and Economic Cooperation," in which they agreed on 5 investment and trade liberalization measures and defined 12 key areas of cooperation. Overall the close trade ties between China and the ROK are based on the principles of equality, mutual benefit and complementarity.

In conclusion, China and ROK regard the other side as an important partner and make friendly cooperation in politics, economy, culture, science and technology, which is the fundamental reason for Korean wave.

Cultural Proximity

The civilization of ancient China has a profound impact on Korean culture. In other words, Korean culture and Chinese culture have much cultural proximity in many ways. For example, the national flag of Korea is called "Taegukgi" (太極旗), and its design was from the Taichi (太極) and Eight Trigrams (八卦) of ancient Chinese philosophy. And in the popular Korean drama *Jewel in the Palace*, the heroine learned Chinese classics and Chinese characters as a child and later studied traditional Chinese medical science acupuncture to be a physician. It also frequently uses camera shots of Chinese calligraphy, mention China's "Period of the Three Warring States" and the famous Confucian philosopher, Mencius. Yin

Hong, a professor with Tsinghua University explained, “The Chinese culture and the Korean culture overlap in many ways, which lays the foundation for mutual communication. On the other hand, compared with Korean pop culture which had early on borrowed good elements of Western culture, Chinese pop culture lack originality, a weak point at which Korean pop culture breaks through.” South Korea acts as a filter for Western values, some experts say, making them more palatable to Chinese and other Asians. Others say that the common themes of Korean drama – the struggle between filial piety and emotional love, the arrival of rich and kindly Prince Charming, and the importance of family-centered Confucian values which also come from China – appeal to Asian tastes more than the sex and violence associated with Hollywood. Yet for all the imports of western products, to most Chinese, it is difficult to accept the western culture directly which was full of sex and violence. And according to a survey conducted by New York Times, many Asian people think that although American dramas show the similar kind of lifestyles in Korean dramas, it is easier for them to accept the lifestyles in Korean dramas because of cultural similarity. And unlike the stories on American soap operas, which can continue for years, Korean dramas usually end after 16 or 20 episodes.

Historical Reasons

Compared to Japan, Korean wave advantages are not because of the differences in the culture, but because of history, Chinese policies and attitude. The success of Korean culture owes something to deeper political sensitivities among the three dominant Asian countries. China and Korea share a longstanding animosity toward Japan for war crimes by Japan's army before and during World War II. That is one reason mainland China and Taiwan have been eager to promote Korean programs and stars as a counterweight to Japan's cultural influence. “And there is no obstacle to our accepting South Korean culture, unlike Japanese culture,” said Ms. Jin, who has studied both Korean and Japanese. “Because of the history between China and Japan, if a young person here likes Japanese culture, the parents will get angry.” With the wide spread anti-Japanese sentiment that permeates Asian nations, it’s difficult to accept Japanese pop culture for Chinese people.

In addition, many TV networks initially bought Korean productions because the glossy productions were comparatively cheap at first. For instance, seven years ago, Gala TV

here paid \$1,000 for one hour of a South Korean drama, compared with \$15,000 to \$20,000 for a Japanese one, said the network's vice president, Lai Tsung Pi.

Korean indigenous superiority

It is Korean indigenous superiority of culture and products that really sets Korean wave apart from other countries. With regard to Korean indigenous superiority, people can see a direct link between the wide spread of Korean wave and the high quality of Korean products.

To say that the talent in the Korean entertainment business contributes a lot to the Korean wave is not revelation. There has been so much talk for so many years about the high quality of Korean products. Still, the extent of creative and original movies, TV dramas and music can be cited as the main cause of the successful Korean wave. Korean wave's success in indigenous superiority is based upon four factors. The first factor is creative and original scripts which owe to the enhancement of creativity through free-thinking and the young generation's indomitable spirit of challenge in Korea. A political scientist Lee Jung Hoon pointed out Korean wave has been very successful, because the scripts are so good that they really touch the core of sentimentality of many Asians. In addition, the stories are all different, but a common thread to these dramas seems to revolve around a central character, often female, who overcomes adversity and numerous obstacles to achieve moral success, physical or material. In other words, the themes are fairly universal. The second factor is the good look (often surgically enhanced) popular stars and professional staff. The Korean Prime Minister once said in a televised interview with CCTV that "Korean TV producers regard TV dramas as refining artistic works. They pursue every bit of perfection." The third factor is family values. The traditional cultural atmosphere feature truth, goodness, fidelity, solidarity and patriotism which fulfill all the Korean products. The fourth factor is the development in the last 50 years of the global television industry and the televisual technique.

Youth

The youth refers to teenagers who are born after 1978. These youth grew up in a relatively abundant material environment and are not interested in politics compared with people born in 1960s. They prefer to indulge in Internet, computer games and animation. And they are more willing to be fashionable and find their own characteristics. A Chinese

psychology said that youth are easily influenced. This is especially so in the case of Korean wave. There is a general consensus that Korean products mean fashion, so youth follow it. In addition, youth are the cohort who not only follow the fashion but also lead the fashion.

There are also other causes: the world's best IT infrastructure, the innovative and successful online game industry, the domestic market for online and mobile music and the widely use of Internet.

Will This Wave End Soon?

Over the past seven years, Korean entertainment has grown into a pop phenomenon around Asia. But now many people think that the entire wave may just be a fad that already is fading. This view seems to be supported by the fact that Korean films suffered a 68% drop in international sales in 2006, according to a report released on Thursday by the Korean Film Council (KOFIC).

Compared to the past few years, nowadays Korean products are not so popular as before. It seems safe to say Korean Wave is just a passing fad. True, there are some who regard the claims of the end of Korean wave as overstated, and argue that Hollywood has had bad years too, but its influence continues and Korean wave still continues in many aspects, such as mobile and electronic games. For instance, the Korean Broadcasting System -- Korea's largest terrestrial broadcaster -- says that it is doing at least as well as last year, and officials at Korea's other major broadcasters report similar situations. But some people raise warning flag of the flowing of the Korean wave, noting that there is a backlash of this wave and showing great concern about the end of this wave.

If Korea hasn't taken the necessary steps to solve the problem, the situation will become worse and the Korean wave will end soon. It is an undeniable fact that Korean wave was flowing, but the problem is not lost on Korean, who is now trying to update Korean wave to keep fresh and growing. But it seems that Korea is haunted by the past success. To continue Korean wave, Korean agencies must take unprecedented step on finding ways and means to tackle this problem. The bottom line is that no cheap short-cuts to fixing all that has

gone wrong. There are different ways to achieve this aim. In order to make sense of what happened to Korean wave, it is necessary to adopt an approach quite different from that of traditional cultural theory. Instead, to make sense of what went wrong Korean need to focus on two aspects normally neglected in traditional cultural theory: long-term strategies and a broader sense. Korea must focus on the core issues, namely: Korea should pursue its localization. “The best way to continue Korean wave in China and other economies is producing dramas in China with Chinese staff and supply them directly to the country,” said Kim Tae-won, a managing director of drama production company Olive 9. Korea should then pass on its cultural contents and production skills.

The point is that while any model Korea may make of the past success will surely miss some crucial features of the growing of this wave to come along, it will still be helpful. Korea should continue promoting what is “truly Korean” and improve the image of Korea and its people. . Korea also should prevent low-quality cultural exports by adopting a prior examination and recommendation system for movies, dramas, etc. prior to export. A Chosun editorial from earlier this week takes a rather gloomy view of the situation: if the Korean wave is to continue, Korea’s cultural industry must wake up and realize the significance of content.

Treatment

Opinions are mixed with regard to whether such a wave is positive or negative. Some take the position that the Korean wave is a cultural invasion. For example, Zhang Guoli, one of China's top television actors, recently dismissed the Korean wave as a “cultural invasion” and urged his countrymen to support homegrown productions. He said China is becoming “a giant in importing foreign culture” and watching Korean TV dramas is tantamount to “selling out the nation.” Others share the view that it set an example of successful culture. Xia Xueluan, a sociologist at Peking University, has a somewhat different opinion and argues that the popularity of the Korean series is a challenge to Chinese counterparts. It shows how Korean wave is a double-edged sword: while it conquers a large market in China, it also helps Chinese people to set an object to learn from.

On the surface, it would appear that Korean wave is cultural invasion as a one-sided cultural import. In fact, from the perspective of government, it plays a constructive role in strengthening the friendship and expanding exchanges between the peoples of the two countries which strengthen mutual understanding and trust, forges good-neighborliness and friendship as well as win-win situation. For example, in an interview, Chinese premier Wen Jiabao also said, “The Chinese government will continue to encourage cultural exchange activities between the two countries.”

Furthermore, the Korean wave is not simply a matter of cultural exchange; it represents the first move toward a Pan-Asian culture that will unite Asian countries around common values. “Asians were able to truly exchange their cultures through the Korean wave. The wave will be helpful in recognizing the Asian cultural identity and shaping the cultural community in the region,” said Bak Beom-hoon, who runs the first "Korean wave academy" in Korea in Chung-Ang University.

While Korean conquers a large market in China, China should recognize and give credit for its own culture and entertainment business. What we have actually seen is just an extraordinary cultural phenomenon. It must be emphasized that although Chinese people should have confidence in themselves, they should also be vigilant of Korean cultural power. And China should set itself formidable targets to catch up with Korean wave. While it remains to be seen if the targets of catching up with Korean wave can be achieved, one thing is clear—China will not lose its own cultural market. To achieve this, concerted efforts should be made by China in recalling its own culture and ameliorating its products’ quality. This will go a long way towards catching up with Korea. Compared to Korean programs, the difficulty of Chinese television programs entering foreign markets is that Chinese television shows focus narrowly on national and local affairs, instead of taking a broader view of humanity. Chinese entertainment business brims over with Chinese dramas which are mainly concerned with conspiracies, corruption, crime and indecent affairs, or emperors and princes' lives in ancient dynasties. What’s more, Zhang Xinjian, the deputy director of the culture market department with the Ministry of Culture (MOC), said China is not sophisticated in developing and marketing its cultural products. China should face the realities and spare no efforts to catch up with Korea.

Yet this paper takes the uncompromising position that China should respect the cultural phenomenon—Korean wave, learn from it and try to catch up with Korean entertainment industry to spread Chinese culture. A Hong Kong current affairs magazine Asian Week says, “A backlash against the Korean wave rushing through China in the country’s broadcasting and entertainment industry is narrow-minded and short-sighted. China should rise above anti-Korean sentiment. It should understand the significance of the cultural industry and learn from Korea’s strategies for developing the industry.”

Conclusion

The rising Korean wave is a popular cultural phenomenon which has generated much attention in recent years. It has many influences in people’s daily life. It also contributes a lot to Korean economy, given that the size of South Korea's entertainment industry, which began attracting heavy government investment only in the late 1990s, jumped from \$8.5 billion in 1999 to \$43.5 billion in 2003.

This is one of the conclusions of this paper. Summarizing the main points of the causes of Korean wave, this paper identifies four common factors that contribute to the successful Korean wave. The factors are: 1) two countries’ policies; 2) cultural proximity; 3) historical reasons; 4) Korean indigenous superiority. More reasons such as the world’s best IT infrastructure, the innovative and successful online game industry, the domestic market for online and mobile music can be offered and the widely use of Internet. Among the many possible explanations the most compelling is cultural proximity.

Some people may ask will this wave end soon. Actually, it’s pretty clear that the Korean wave is not at its peak any more, but it will still continue if Korea takes some actions to promote this wave.

In discussing about the Korean wave, one can easily think of pluses and minuses. Overall, it seems that the positive aspects of the Korean wave outweigh the negative aspects. Some suggestions on how to treat this wave can be offered. The basic idea is that China should respect this wave, instead of treat it as a cultural invasion. Even better still China can learn from this wave and produce its own high quality products.

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