

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

KOREA AS THE WAVE OF A FUTURE:
THE EMERGING DREAM SOCIETY OF ICONS
AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

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Asians are surfing Hanryu—the ‘Korean Wave’

Asia is awash in a wave of popular culture products gushing out of the Republic of Korea (ROK). Youth in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Japan, as well as Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, are agog at the sights and sounds of performers and groups such as H.O.T., S.E.S., Shinhwa, god and J.T.L. *Time Asia* reported on 29 July 2002 that:

K-pop has broken across borders: teenagers from Tokyo to Taipei swoon over performers such as singer Park Ji Yoon and boy band Shinhwa, buying their CDs and posters and even learning Korean so they can sing along at karaoke. BoA this year became the first solo artist in more than two decades to have a debut single and a debut album reach No. 1 in Japan ... “Korea is like the next epicenter of pop culture in Asia”, says Jessica Kam, vice-president for MTV Networks Asia.

Before the pop stars, Korean movies led the overseas export of Korean popular culture. *Swiri*, the first Korean-made blockbuster movie, earned millions of dollars in Japan and elsewhere. The sound track from the movie was “snapped up as soon as it hit the shelves” in Japan (*Trends in Japan*, 19 May 2000). More than a million Japanese watched *Joint Security Area*, which was also very popular elsewhere overseas. Another movie, *Friends*, was “a huge hit in China” (*Hyundai heavy industries report*, 2004). Certain South Korean television dramas have also become so popular that organised tours bring Japanese to their filming locations in Korea. *Trends in Japan*, 22 February 2004 reported that “Chiyako Inoue, 43, a homemaker from Matsue, in western Japan, said she became so enthralled by one South Korean drama that she began studying Korean. According to Japan’s Ministry of Education, the number of

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Korean language programs in high schools was 163 in 2000, compared with 73 in 1994 and 7 in 1986.” In China and Taiwan as well, Korean dramas are among the most favourite TV programmes. “Stars of such dramas have become shining idols in those nations and fans there emulate the fashion, hairstyle or makeup of Korean stars” (*Hyundai heavy industries report* 2004).

And as for pop groups, according to the *Korea Herald* of 11 September 2001, “Korea’s platinum dance group H.O.T has emerged as national idols of teenagers in China, as indicated by the hundreds of thousands of young fans who stormed the group’s concerts in China. Korea’s ‘techno princess’ Lee Jung-hyu has become a nationwide sensation in China and Hong Kong, with her Mandarin versions of her hits heard on every street corner and her powerful choreography shocking local music fans.” *Trends in Japan*, 2001, reported that “H.O.T.’s signature costumes and outlandish fashion coordination has fueled brisk sales of Korean-made clothing. Despite their exorbitant prices, boots priced at 200 US dollars and jeans retailing for 100 dollars are selling like hotcakes” in China. *China Daily’s* Hong Kong edition for 8 November 2001 claimed that:

[L]earning the Korean Hip Hop dance has become a fashion at Beijing’s universities, with many students choosing to join in the wave of receiving training on weekends. F1, a professional Hip Hop group in Beijing that got its start at Beijing Institute of Clothing Technology, was warmly received there at a performance in mid-October. During the promotional performance on the university’s playground, they attracted many students who immediately applied to take Hip Hop lessons.¹

Trends in Japan for 11 February 2001 reported that “Chinese girls wear character badges featuring their Korean idols, decorate the dormitory walls with their photos and ... study the Korean language in order to better understand the meaning of the songs and to enable them to say hello to their stars in Korean.” Even more dramatically, some Chinese women “reportedly ask plastic surgeons to change their faces to look like the Korean stars.” Even “eating Korean food, so often featured in Korean TV dramas, has become a new fad among youngsters in many Asian nations. Some even thought kimchi was a cure for SARS and traditional Korean barbecue restaurants are mushrooming around Asia” (*Hyundai heavy industries report*, 2004). The *International Herald Tribune* of 31 May 2002 noted that “South Koreans are only just starting to realize that food can be just as profitable an export as semiconductors.”

The Korean Wave has also swept across much of Southeast Asia. On 2 February 2004, Arirang TV reported that:

In Thailand, the Korean wave is evident on both the small and big screens. Korean dramas are now programmed regularly on TV and enjoy high ratings. The Korean fever is definitely hot at the Bangkok International Film Festival. Hundreds of stargazers and

reporters crowded around top Korean celebrity Son Ye-jin, who was there to greet her fans and sign her autograph. One fan described the encounter with the South Korean actress as a dream come true.

In Vietnam, as noted by *Korea Herald* for 11 September 2001, “Korean heartthrob actor Chang Dong-gun and actress Kim Nam-ju have been adored as national celebrities—to the degree that the Korean government invited them to an official dinner on August 23 [2001] for Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong during his state visit to Korea.” AP Breaking News on 3 February 2002 reported that “[i]n the streets of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, fashion-conscious young Vietnamese have adopted the darker makeup colors, thinly shaved eyebrows, body-hugging clothes, and square-toed shoes of Seoul fashion.”

In Singapore, claimed *The New Paper in Singapore* on 22 December 2002, “K-drama is even hotter than Japanese drama, with Channel U’s *Winter Sonata*—a South Korean production—scoring high in the ratings war here. South Korea is now one of the hottest destinations for Singaporeans. The Korean pop music, or K-pop, scene was also given a boost here by the performance of rap group G.O.D. at the MTV Asia Awards 2002. Many Korean stars—like Harisu—and aspects of Korean culture are gaining a place here.”² The Korean Wave has even washed over Myanmar. *Weekly Chosun*’s cover story of 10 March 2004 rounded up several reports, such as an article in the *Myanmar Times* that quoted Ma Khaing, an ardent fan of Korean TV dramas, as saying: “I don’t want to do anything, and I am very angry when somebody visits me or I have to do something while a Korean drama is on the air.” He went on to say he does not even eat dinner when a Korean drama is showing. According to the Myanmar Market Research & Development Company, approximately 80 per cent of the population of Myanmar watches TV at night, and Korean TV dramas are among the most viewed. Aung So, a staff member at Myanmar Broadcasting, confirmed that “Korean TV dramas are extremely popular in Myanmar. Wherever people gather—at cafes, at the market, and at schools—people discuss the storyline of the Korean dramas or the actors and actresses that were seen the night before.” He went on to say that “most of the calls to the broadcasting station are inquires about Korean dramas.”³

In recent times, online games exported from the ROK have been enjoying “sensational popularity” in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam (*KOCCA News*, 3 September 2003). In fact, Korean online gaming is overwhelming the other aspects of the Korean Wave in terms of export amounts. *Weekly Chosun* of 10 March 2004 (as quoted above) reported that the Korean firm NC Soft, said to be the biggest online gaming company in the world, earned royalty income of \$25 million from foreign countries in the year 2003, and was forecasting \$40 million of overseas sales (mostly from Asia) in 2004.⁴

Indeed, the overall rise of pop culture in Korea is so dramatic that one culture critic, writing in *Joong-Ang Ilbo* on 25 February 2004, complained that “all the best young people have moved into movies, leaving the literature circles barren. The era of letters has ended, and has been replaced by the era of images”, about which more will be said later.

Why is there a Korean Wave?

Until recently, the United States and Japan have dominated the Asian pop culture scene. So why is this Hanryu sweeping across Asia?

The *Hyundai heavy industries report*, 2004 recorded the views of some that

Korea’s dynamic young generation is the engine behind the success story. Their creativity and imagination is blossoming as a result of the country’s newfound economic prosperity and political democracy. As Korea’s living standards improve, people look for ways to enrich their lives culturally and spiritually. Particularly younger Koreans, with no memory of poverty or hunger, are exploring the new world of pop culture, taking full advantage of their wealth.

Others, according to the Hyundai report, say that the increased “democratisation” in Korea has also played a role. “In movies and music, full-fledged freedom of expression is guaranteed. Previously taboo subjects such as ideological struggles have been allowed, and a full degree of freedom is granted in depicting such subjects. In pop culture, old authoritarian rules and traditional values can be ridiculed without fear of censorship.” Other experts, in the view of the *Korea Herald* of 11 September 2001, “attribute the phenomenal success and advance of Korea’s mass culture in Asia to a set of its unique qualities—its characteristic dynamism (as displayed in Korean dance music), highly entertaining nature, admirable production quality, and niche market position.”

While there is no doubt these factors are contributing to the phenomenon, they don’t seem to be the main reason. There must be more to it than this.

A passing fad?

Of course, fascination with Korea could be nothing more than a passing fad that has no special meaning at all. Pop culture promoters and venders are constantly in search of new material. For the moment, that new material might be coming from Korea. It may be popular only because it is new—and very well produced. But how much ‘kim chic’ can one endure before it becomes old hat indeed? There are already signs that the trend may be coming to an end as culture vultures look for something even newer and hotter.

Moreover, it is important to realise that the Hanryu did not just spontaneously

emerge. Grungy Korean teenagers, screeching and moaning away in their parents' garage, didn't just happen to be 'discovered' by a passing pop culture promoter. To the contrary, all of the major Korean pop groups were carefully imagined, funded, instructed, created and promoted by culture entrepreneurs (*Time Asia*, 29 July 2002). And they were promoted by the Korean government at precisely the moment when the Korean market was being opened to Japanese pop culture, legally for the very first time.⁵

Indeed, perhaps the entire phenomenon is nothing more than an attempt by Korea to protect its culture from further contamination by American, other Western, and especially Japanese cultural imports. There is some evidence for that, but we do not think that is the main story either.

A flowering of a Pan-Asian culture?

Perhaps the Korean Wave is the long-awaited flowering of post-colonial Asian artistic expression—the creation of a regional 'Asian' cultural manifestation against the erstwhile domination of American/Western culture. There is considerable support for this position as well. Dean Visser, reporting for AP Breaking News on 3 February 2002, quoted the opinion of Zhang Jianhua, the 24-year-old owner of a Beijing video and music shop stocking Korean products, that "Korean pop culture is seen as fresh and edgy, but non-threatening because 'they're Asian and look like us. So it's easy to identify with them.'" Sociologist Habib Khondker, also quoted by Visser, agrees. "The Korean fad is part of a region-wide 'reassertion of Asian identity' ... It's kind of a pan-Asianism. You can look for alternative cultures, not necessarily European or American."⁶ In this case, to quote the *Korea Herald* of 11 September 2001:

what makes Korean mass culture attractive is its merit of faithfully dramatizing Asian sensibilities, including family values, and traditional emotive delicacies that are warmly embraced by local fans in some Asian countries where full-fledged industrialization has yet to arrive. Korean industry veterans argue that, even though these countries are ready to accept Western values, the people may still find Japanese and American mass culture irrelevant to their reality and are uncomfortable with the foreign cultures' emphasis on violence and sex. "Korean pop culture skillfully blends Western and Asian values to create its own, and the country itself is viewed as a prominent model to follow or catch up to, both culturally and economically", said Lui Mei, a Chinese resident in Seoul of three years.

In addition, the emergence of an affluent middle class in Asia has provided a clientele for Korean pop culture. Iwabuchi Koichi's analysis (Iwabuchi 2002: 270) of Japanese pop culture in East Asia applies equally well to the Korean Wave. According to Iwabuchi:

[U]nder the globalizing forces, cultural similarities and resonances in the region are

newly articulated. It is also an emerging sense of coevalness based upon the narrowing economic gap, simultaneous circulation of information, the abundance of global commodities, and the common experience of urbanization that has sustained a Japanese cultural presence in East Asia ... For audiences in East Asia, Japanese popular culture represents cultural similarities and a common experience of modernity in the region that is based on a ongoing negotiation between the West and the non-West experiences that American culture cannot represent.

A *China Daily* article of 10 June 2003 support Iwabuchi's argument:

The changes in media culture, especially in TV culture since the late 1990s, have resulted in a new aesthetic in Chinese popular culture. One feature of this new aesthetic is that cities have replaced the countryside as centres of cultural imagination ... The lives of middle income city-dwellers today have nothing in common with those of rural Chinese. They are born into the web-like societies of bustling metropolises that are part of the globalization process. Examples of this trend are the overwhelmingly popular pop idol soap operas and Japanese cartoon series, as well as TV game shows, clothes and hairstyles "imported" from countries and regions such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. In Japanese, Korean and Chinese pop idol soap operas, viewers find similar love stories, similar depictions of luxurious lifestyles, pretty faces, chic clothes, big houses and flashy sedans, all elements of the city life Asian youth dream of today.⁷

We are certain that these factors are important in explaining the acceptance of Korean pop culture in Asia. But they are not enough. We need to understand why pop culture itself has so recently begun to flourish. And for this we need to turn to a recently-articulated perspective on social change and the future.

A Dream Society of icons and aesthetic experience?

One of the most persistent theories favoured by futurists describes the recurrent transformation of societies as new technologies make new behaviour, values and lifestyles possible while rendering previous behaviour, values and lifestyles, based on earlier technologies, no longer necessary or desirable. (One of the best applications of such theories is Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave*, 1980.)

In their most aggregate form, these theories have been used to describe and explain the transformation from small, nomadic hunting and gathering societies, to larger, sedentary agricultural societies, to even larger and more dynamic industrial societies, and most recently (from the mid-20th century) to superfluid information societies. Each society is 'labelled' by the dominant economic system of the time—dominant in terms of the percentage of the population engaged in the economic sector, and 'dominant' in terms of wealth and/or power accruing to people in those sectors by comparison with other sectors. Each transformation marginalises, but does not eliminate, the previously dominant sectors. Thus, hunting and gathering

still happen (but generally as a 'sport' or 'pastime' and not for subsistence) in an agricultural society (and even up to the present), while people still eat, and many eat very well, in an information society, though few till the soil or tend farm animals. Most discussion at present tends to focus on continuing efforts to transform societies from agricultural to industrial economies, or on how industrial societies are becoming post-industrial information societies. But we side with those few futurists who believe they have discovered the seeds and early sprouts of the future political economy. Ernest Sternberg calls it "the economy of icons", while Rolf Jensen designates it "the dream society". Joseph Pine and James Gilmore refer to it as "the experience economy" and Virginia Postel writes of "the substance of style" and discusses the rise of aesthetic value in economic life. All four are describing roughly the same phenomenon. Sternberg (Sternberg 1999:5) puts it this way:

It is still widely believed that we live in an information society in which the most valued raw material is data, production consists of its processing into information, efficiency depends on computing and scientific reasoning, knowledge and rational calculation underlie wealth, and society is dominated by an educated elite. These were revealing ideas when they were proposed almost thirty years ago, but as we begin the twenty-first century, the concept of the information economy has become a kind of collective wisdom, obscuring another economic transformation that has already overtaken us. The driving force in this newer economy is not information but image. Now the decisive material is meaning, production occurs through the insertion of commodities into stories and events, efficiency consists in the timely conveyance of meaning, celebrity underlies wealth, and economic influence emanates from the controllers of content.

Rolf Jensen (Jensen 1999:vii) says: "The sun is setting on the Information Society—even before we have fully adjusted to its demands as individuals and as companies. We have lived as hunters and as farmers, we have worked in factories, and now we live in an information-based society whose icon is the computer: We stand facing the fifth type of society: the Dream Society." He goes on (*ibid*:2f):

The Information Society will render itself obsolete through automation, abolishing the very same jobs it created. The inherent logic of the Information Society remains unchanged: replacing humans with machines, letting the machines do the work. This is reflected in the three waves of the electronics industry. The first wave was hardware. The second wave was software (where we are now). The third wave will be content; that is, profit will be generated by the product itself, not by the instrument conveying it to the consumer.

Very importantly, Jensen (*ibid*:40) sees society finally moving from a dependence on writing to the dominance of audiovisual images: "Today, knowledge is stored as letters; we learn through the alphabet—this is the medium of the Information Society. Most likely, the medium of the Dream Society will be the picture." He concludes that

Henry Ford was the icon of the Industrial Age, while Bill Gates is the icon of the Information Age.

The icon of the Dream Society has probably been born, but she or he is most likely still at school and is probably not the best pupil in the class. Today, the best pupil is the one who makes a first-rate symbolic analyst. In the future, it may be the student who gives the teacher a hard time—an imaginative pupil who is always staging new games that put things into new perspectives ... He or she will be the great storyteller of the twenty-first century ... Steven Spielberg [is] the closest we now have to a Dream Society icon (Jensen 1999:121).

Similarly, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore (Pine and Gilmore 1999:ixf) assert that:

Experiences represent an existing but previously unarticulated genre of economic output. Decoupling experiences from services in accounting for what businesses create opens up possibilities for extraordinary economic expansion—just as recognizing services as a distinct and legitimate offering led to a vibrant economic foundation in the face of a declining industrial base. And a new base is emerging. Ignore the familiar hype: Information is not the founding of the ‘New Economy’ ... Recognizing experiences as a distinct economic offering provides the key to future economic growth.

More recently, Virginia Postel (Postel 2003:39) has commented on the transformation:

We are now at a tipping point. Small economic advances that have built bit by bit for more than a century are reaching critical mass ... At the same time, recent cultural, business, and technological changes are reinforcing the prominence of aesthetics and the value of personal expression. Each new development feeds others. The result feels less like the culmination of a historical trend than the beginning of a new economic and cultural moment, in which look and feel matter more than ever.

Finally, even such a mainstream journal as the *Harvard Business Journal* in February 2004 included a small item by Daniel Pink about the urgent importance of aesthetics and creativity rather than quantification and control in the future world economy:

An arts degree is now perhaps the hottest credential in the world of business. Corporate recruiters have begun visiting the top arts grad schools in search of talent ... [M]ore arts grads [are] occupying key corporate positions, the master of fine arts is becoming the new business degree ... In many ways, MBA graduates are becoming this century’s blue-collar workers: people who entered a workforce only to see their jobs move overseas ... At the same time, businesses are realizing that the only way to differentiate their goods and services in today’s over-stocked, materially abundant marketplace is to make their offerings transcendent—physically beautiful and emotionally compelling

... [L]isten to auto industry legend Robert Lutz. When Lutz took over as chairman of General Motors North America, a journalist asked him how his approach would differ from his predecessor's. Here's what he said: "It's more right brain. I see us as being in the art business. Art, entertainment, and mobile sculpture, which, coincidentally, also happens to provide transportation." General Motors—General Motors!—is in the art business. So, now, are we all (Pink 2004:21f.).

Nothing new?

As the quotation from Postel makes clear, we are not arguing that the dream society of icons and aesthetic experience is emerging from nowhere, or is completely dominant now. To the contrary, humans have been image-makers from their earliest origins, while modern advertising from the early 20th century onward has relied more and more on image projection and less and less on providing useful and accurate information about the product being advertised. Similarly, Hollywood has been big business since before the Second World War (with Bollywood and more recently Hong Kong kung fu films following on), and the development and diffusion of television, videos and electronic games has inundated everyone with powerful and attractive images. It goes without saying that the United States has been the major producer of most images of the good life and the future for the past seventy-five years, and that it clearly colonises all minds it touches everywhere today. Mickey Mouse was one of the first (but not the first) 'character product', while DisneyWorlds and DisneyLands are everywhere. 'Hello Kitty' simply carried the concept to new heights. Now Aibo and Asimo suggest that a new era of warm, caring, adoring "evocative machines" (in the words of MIT theorist Sheryl Terkle) are going beyond mere artificial intelligence towards simulated but satisfying personal companions, caregivers and lovers.⁸

Korea as a Dream Society of icons?

What we do want to suggest, however, is that the ROK may be the first nation *consciously* to recognise and, more importantly, then to form official policy and take action towards becoming a dream society of icons and aesthetic experience. The global dominance of Hollywood and Disney are not the consequence of American national policy. To the contrary, 'serious' people in the United States still view pop culture with disdain—no matter how much they may pay to consume it themselves.

Similarly, while Japanese pop artists and technicians (especially game producers) have been enormously successful as exporters of pop culture, this has not been the consequence of Japanese national economic policy, but of the exceptional entrepreneurial and creative spirit of a few Japanese, aided by progressively cheaper and more powerful digital production technologies. Ichiya Nakamura, a researcher on Japanese pop culture at the Stanford Japan Center, recently stated that "the market

value of media contents in Japan was worth approximately 13 trillion yen in 2001” (Nakamura 2003:5). However, in Japan, Nakamura claims (ibid:9),

The venture aspect is one of the features of the pop culture industry. For both the game and animation industries, their software markets were mainly pioneered by newly-risen small companies ... The game industry currently contains 146 companies and 46% of these companies have less than 1 million yen in capital. The population of the industry is said to be about 18,500, which means the average number of employers per company is approximately 100 people.

Games are so popular in Japan that they have led to the phenomenon of the ‘otaku’, a word literally meaning ‘[your] home’. It is used to designate the growing number of people, mainly young men, who spend all their time at home playing electronic games, often becoming more involved with the characters and situations of the games than with ‘real life’. The same word is used in Korea to describe similar people there.

In an article entitled ‘Japan’s gross national cool’, carried in *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2003, Douglas McGray observed that in spite of the obsessive belief of foreigners that Japan is in a deep recession and should follow various neo-liberal reforms to get out of it, “Japan is reinventing superpower again. Instead of collapsing beneath its political and economic misfortunes, Japan’s global cultural influence has only grown. In fact, from pop music to consumer electronics, architecture to fashion, and food to art, Japan has far greater cultural influence now than it did in the 1980s when it was an economic superpower” (McGray 2003:47). He goes on (ibid:48): “Gradually, over the course of an otherwise dismal decade, Japan has been perfecting the art of transmitting certain kinds of mass culture.” The country “has succeeded not only in balancing a flexible, absorptive, crowd-pleasing, shared culture with a more private, domestic one but also in taking advantage of that balance to build an increasingly powerful global commercial force. In other words, Japan’s growing cultural presence has created a mighty engine of national cool” (ibid:53).

On the other hand, in a further essay (Nakamura 2004:1), Nakamura says that “the Japanese entertainment industry has been shrinking over the last few years. Hollywood’s full scale efforts towards the content business and the speed of growth of Korea’s game and animation industries, backed up by government policy, are also threatening Japan.”

So, might the ROK be in the process of becoming the world’s coolest nation as a result of Korea’s leaders recognising that the dream economy of icons and aesthetic experience is the wave of a future? There is some evidence to suggest that leaders understand this to some extent, but perhaps not to the full extent they might.

President Roh Moo-hyun has declared that “[t]he 21st century is the age of knowledge and the creative mind. A powerful cultural nation will become an

economically strong nation. In particular, the game industry is a high value added cultural industry that has enormous future potential” (*Digital Times*, 25 February 2004).

Moreover, the opening greeting on the website of the Korean Culture and Contents Agency (KOCCA) begins: “Since the advent of the 21st century, the existing industrial society has been transforming rapidly into a knowledge-driven society where human knowledge, sensibility, creativity, and imagination create added value. The knowledge-driven service industry is also emerging as the principal axis of the next generation world economy, with the culture content industry at its core.”⁹

These two quotations suggest that while Korean leaders recognise culture as a valuable new export commodity, and are willing to support its development, they still have not grasped the possibility that the dream society of icons and aesthetic experience is significantly different from a “knowledge-driven service industry”.

Against that, Shin Ho-jo, president of the KOSDAQ securities market, interviewed in October 2003, said: “I think the culture industry can be a breakthrough for a revitalization of the South Korean economy. It is often said that the 21st century is the age of culture. There is a debate regarding the IT industry as to whether it is already at a mature stage or whether it is still in its infancy. The important point is that we should create new sources of supply, such as the cultural industry, with an economy based on the IT industry as its cornerstone” (reported in *Seoul Shinmun*, 7 January 2004).

The ROK Ministry of Culture and Tourism in its Cultural Industry White Paper 2003, as reported by *Seoul Shinmun* of 25 February 2004, estimated the size of the Korean cultural industry market to be about \$350 billion—6.6 per cent of the GDP of the ROK. The number of people who, it is anticipated, will become involved in the cultural industry in Korea is growing rapidly and is expected to reach 200,000 people by 2008. By then, it is hoped, the value of exported cultural goods will reach US dollars 1 billion. In order to achieve these goals, the Ministry proposed the following:

1. To create a promotional subsidy for the effective management of the cultural industry.
2. To systematically cultivate human resources such as talent.
3. To develop cultural content and technologies to promote the growth of the next generation.
4. To modernise the distribution system.
5. To promote regional cultural industries through a cultural industry culture.

Lee Chang-dong, Minister of Culture and Tourism, insisted that “Korea must first build a stronger cultural infrastructure in order to gain a larger piece of the

\$1.4 trillion global cultural industry.” The Federation of Korean Industries has also emphasised the need for entrepreneurs to engage in more culture-related businesses (KOCCA, 18 December 2003). Experts and government officials have agreed to cooperate in fostering the nation’s gaming industry so that it can be ranked among the world’s top three by 2007. The government seems set to earmark 150 million won for that purpose (Arirang TV, 13 November 2003). Hyu Jong Kim, Dean of the School of Cultural Industry at Chugye Art University, writing in *Hankook Ilbo* on 24 February 2004, pointed out that “[t]he development of the cultural industry is not a thing that can be achieved only through the efforts of people and experts in the field. It requires comprehensive approaches with full government support.” He went on:

In addition, we must acknowledge the importance of creative minds and the value-added creation of the cultural industry. The educational system is the source of this creativity. Because of its unique character, the development of the cultural industry requires cross-ministerial cooperation, and a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Industry and Resources, and the Ministry of Information and Technology. In addition, a central agency which consists of government officials and private experts in the field needs to be created very soon.

Contributing factors

THE INTERNET

Among several other factors that have enabled Korea to move quickly towards becoming a dream society of icons and aesthetic experience, the internet has had a great impact. The *Guardian* (23 February 2003) quoted a Western diplomat in Seoul as saying, “[t]he Internet is so important here. This is the most online country in the world. The younger generation gets all their information from the web. Some don’t even bother with TVs.” The *Guardian* went on to report that “almost 70 per cent of homes [in Korea] have a broad band connection compared with about 5 per cent in Britain ... Koreans are said to spend 1,340 minutes online per month. And 10 per cent of economic activity is related to IT—one of the highest levels in the world.”

One of the consequences of this—Roh Moo-hyun’s electoral success in 2002—has been widely heralded and discussed. Skilful internet use is said to have enabled Roh to beat the odds and all newspaper predictions (and desires) and be elected president of the ROK.¹⁰ However, whether that was a fluke or an example of a new force in democratic politics remains to be seen, especially in the light of the Legislature’s attempt to impeach Roh in 2004. Moreover, the rapid burn-out of Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean in the US Democratic Party nomination in 2004 suggests that television may still be more important than the internet, at least in the US. While Dean’s advisors were masterful in using the web to organise grassroots support, Dean himself was too “hot” for TV (to use Marshall McLuhan’s term), and

there are probably still far more television viewers than internet users among US voters.

Still the point to be emphasised concerning Korea is that significant numbers of Koreans have had access to pop culture via the web for some time, and pride themselves on being early and among the world's most prolific users of the most advanced digital technologies.

AGE-COHORT SHIFTS

One of the major theories or methods that many futurists use is age-cohort analysis: the fact that people born during a certain time interval tend to have certain common experiences that mark them from people older or younger than themselves—experiences that they carry with them as strong influences on their beliefs and behaviour throughout their entire lives. Age-cohort analysis has recently been applied very usefully in Korea to identify and explain significant differences of attitudes about the future of Korea (Seo 2002).

While the popular press uses the terms '386 generation', 'New generation', 'April 19 generation', 'R generation', 'Generation 2030' and the like, we believe it is more helpful to distinguish the various relevant age-cohorts in South Korea according to the following six groups: colonial, veteran, democracy, baby boomer, silent, and network.

The members of the colonial cohort were born and grew up in the early Japanese colonial period (between 1900 and 1920). While few of this cohort are still alive, they and their efforts are still revered since they envisioned and rebuilt an independent Korea after the Japanese defeat in the Second World War, only to see the country tragically divided as a consequence of the Korean War. The veteran cohort (1921–33) were born and educated in the Japanese language during the Japanese colonial period. They fought during the Korean War and thus hold very strong anti-Communist feelings. Their lives have been characterised by intense suffering, struggle and eventual victory. Neither of these two cohorts has much interest in, or impact on, current Korean pop culture. It is the subsequent four distinct groups that are significant in this analysis.

The older members of the democracy cohort (1934–53) experienced Japanese colonial rule, while the younger members spent most of their lives under American cultural imperialism. This is the cohort that was educated via the Japanese language, and then was crazy for Elvis Presley's rock 'n' roll music and Hollywood movies while yearning for the wealth and power of America. Accordingly, both the older and younger members of this cohort are swayed by feelings of psychological inferiority of Korea as a cultural periphery. At the same time, this cohort played a leading role in the ROK's economic advance and has a strong 'can do' spirit with a burning desire to leave the periphery and enter the centre. They understand that the Korean Wave

is to some extent the consequence of their 'can do' effort, and appreciate it because they believe that it is the realisation of their long desire for Korea to be prominent on the world stage (Cho 2002).¹¹ The sociologist Gil-sung Park, in his article 'Korean emotions can export',¹² argues that the success of the Korean Wave phenomenon proves the superiority of Korean culture and people. He also asserts that Korean culture can be shared with people around the world. Arguing against this, Cho Haejoang, also a sociologist, points out that Park's article is merely an expression of the inferiority complex displayed by citizens of a nation on the cultural periphery. According to Cho, it is nonsense to interpret the Korean Wave as a source of national pride and superiority, while at the same time arguing that Korean pop culture is an object of envy in Asia (Cho 2002).

The baby boomers (1954–71) are the cohort on the boundary, sharing attitudes towards pop culture with both the democracy cohort and the silent and network cohorts. Most Koreans are boomers and thus dominate Korean economics and politics. They witnessed firsthand the democratisation of the ROK, and played a major role in the information technology revolution. Ko Gun, a professor of Computer Science, writing in *Weekly Chosun*, 23 October 2003, argues that the rapid diffusion of the internet and the mobile telephone in the ROK is largely due to the baby boom generation. According to Ko, its members entered their 20s and 30s during the early and mid-1990s when the internet and mobile technology were sweeping the world. Their young, technology-oriented minds easily absorbed the new technology.¹³ However, the perspective of this cohort regarding the Korean Wave is not much different from that of the democracy cohort. They also view Hanryu with a sense of pride that Korea is finally entering into the cultural centre. This is also the cohort that spent its teenage years enjoying American pop music and Japanese pop culture, even though the latter was prohibited in the ROK at the time. Although they have a complex against the cultural centre, this group consists of the film directors, music developers and producers, and television drama directors who now lead the Korean Wave.

The silent cohort (1972–81) and the network cohort (1982–) share many similarities in terms of cultural perspectives and attitudes toward the Korean Wave. The silent cohort is the first 'otaku' generation in Korea. Unlike the baby boomers, the members of the silent cohort grew up in a relatively abundant material environment, and have no interest in politics. They would rather indulge themselves in computer games and animation. They are more accustomed to using computers and the internet than are the baby boomers, and are always searching for their own character and uniqueness. Most importantly, they are very cynical about nationalistic perspectives on culture such as the notion that "Korean can be global". "Korea can become a genuinely advanced nation when Koreans abandon their nationalistic consciousness," said a recently graduated student quoted in *Weekly Chosun* of 4 March 2004. According to her, nationalistic sentiment is the major hindrance to Korea becoming a more

progressive and developed society. Another graduate, also reported by *Weekly Chosun*, criticised the atmosphere of Korean society which, he thought, stifled diversification. He argued that Korea must become a society that respects variety in order to become a truly advanced nation.

In contrast, the occupational perspectives of the network cohort, as conveyed in the same issue of *Weekly Chosun*, are also very different from those of the previous generations. They want to escape from office work in large companies, and instead of wasting their energy on civil service examinations, they willingly jump into unexplored occupational areas. They are breaking the notions of traditional occupations and are instead looking for futures-oriented and unconventional jobs such as pet apparel designer, lotto designer, avatar designer, and other such occupations. Unlike the older generations who spent their teenage years singing American popular songs, the network cohort enjoys music that was made in their own country and in their own language. And yet, for them nationality and the origin of a cultural product are not important as long as they are satisfied with the sensitivities and emotions. The members of this cohort go crazy for teenage idols regardless of whether they are American, Japanese, Chinese or Korean. This cohort is so globally oriented that they often make cyber community fan clubs and communicate with other fan groups across the world through internet language translators. They are the main consumers of pop culture, and their peers make up the majority of the performers. Many current Korean Wave stars (including BoA) belong to this age-cohort. For them, there is no such thing as a cultural periphery inferiority complex, nor is there a strong desire to enter into the cultural centre. They consider themselves already there.

At the same time, the success and brashness of the network cohort offend many of the older cohorts. Bak Sangmee, writing in the *Washington Post*¹⁴ of 26 January 2003, quoted one of them as saying he felt as though he had been driven out of “his old house”. Some of them are bitter about the sudden power shift between generations. A businessman in his fifties, again, quoted by Bak, said, “My generation has been working hard and waiting patiently for our turn to take charge. But there was no such thing as our turn. Suddenly, the younger ones are in charge.” Access to information technology is reported to vary widely among different age groups. According to a recent survey, discussed by Bak, “58 per cent of South Koreans use the internet. Among these, more than 90 per cent of the the 20-year-olds surveyed use the internet, while only about 30 per cent of the 45-year-old South Koreans use it, and for those who are over 65, less than 5 per cent use it. The generational gap in internet use is much more pronounced in South Korea than in other similarly advanced societies such as the US, where there is virtually no difference in internet use between 20-year-olds and 45-year-olds.” Bak comments:

Cyberspace liberates young Koreans from old hierarchies. To the dismay of many older

(and some not-so-old) South Koreans, the honorifics system of Korean language is often ignored on the Web, and this allows communication between generations on a more equal basis. This has translated into greater political activism among the youth tuned into the Internet.

CONSUMER DEBT

Unlike Japanese and almost more than many Americans, Koreans seem to have embraced credit cards with great enthusiasm, and have run up debts of truly impressive magnitudes. Various ROK dailies commented on this trend in their issues of 7 November 2003. “According to the Korea Federation of Banks (KFB), the number of credit defaulters became a record high of 3.8 million at the end of 2003” (*Hankook Ilbo*). “In other words, one of every five Korean adults faced bankruptcy due mainly to overdue credit card debts and it is likely to continue to surge” (*Chosun Ilbo*). “According to the Boston Consulting Group, 40 per cent of Korean households are incapable of paying their debts as they surpass their assets and disposable income” (*Donga Ilbo*). The *Korea Times* of 26 December 2003 quoted a Seoul analyst as saying that “South Korea’s ratio of household debt, including overdue credit cards bills, to gross domestic product is forecast to reach 80 per cent this year, up more than 50 per cent since 1999” and that the figure is “already greater than Japan’s 70 per cent and similar to the 81 per cent in the United States.”

This seems to us clear evidence that many in the ROK are already quite eager to live in a Dream Society of icons and aesthetic experience, where all of the economic and moral principles of capitalism, based on the Puritan ethic and hard work of industrialism, no longer apply. While this huge level of debt may indeed come back to haunt Korea, it need not, since even so respectable an American fiscal giant as Alan Greenspan, chairman of the Federal Reserve, has urged American consumers to keep consuming—that is to say, to continue going into debt to consume—or else the great engine driving the global economy will come to a halt. BBC News for 23 February 2004 quoted Greenspan as stating in a report to the US Congress that “[t]he huge debt run up by US consumers in recent years is not a threat as long as interest rates stay low.”¹⁵

The only thing Korean credit card distributors need to do when people exceed their credit limit is to raise the credit limit endlessly, or, if consumers do enter into bankruptcy, to allow them easily to go into debt again—and again and again. It can all be done in the name of transforming the nation into the Dream Economy of icons and aesthetic experience. To do otherwise—to pretend the debts are real and to call them in—will bring the current global economic house of cards crashing down. Far better to keep the Dream alive!

But how realistic is any of this?

Perhaps the Korean Wave is just a passing fad and not the wave of a future after all. Is it reasonable to expect that Koreans can continue to be the creative risk-takers they are now? Perhaps their present success is just because of the novelty of it all plus a whole lot of luck. Certainly one can expect Disney, or MGM, or Sony, or Murdoch to gobble up the producers and products of the Korean Wave if they do continue to be successful. Or perhaps the world's next media giant will emerge from within the ranks of Korea's current culture entrepreneurs. Time will tell. For now, we remain optimistic that the willingness (can we say it is their 'national character'?) of many Koreans, compared to Japanese and Chinese, to be "out there", with their emotions barely concealed behind a façade of rationality, will enable Korea to succeed while others might fail. An economy of "aesthetic experience" seems just right for Koreans, who seem to love to treat politics, strikes, demonstrations, ritual suicides and many other aspects of public life as though they were high drama—if not high camp—as the impeachment of President Roh and popular reaction to it seems to indicate. The Dream Society seems a dream come true for many Koreans.

But how in the world can one speak responsibly of a "dream economy" when a billion people go to bed hungry each night and half the world's six billion people are malnourished and in poverty? And what about global warming, sea level rise, and the abrupt halt of the deep ocean thermohaline current? Isn't humanity more likely to spend its time coping with the long-ignored consequences of global climate change instead of being lost in dreams via online games?

And terrorists! Where are they in the economy of icons? Indeed, since many of the terrorists are apparently driven by fundamentalist passions—passions that many Korean as well as American Christians share—how can one presume that pop culture has any future at all in a world whipped into submission by Mel Gibson and Osama bin Laden? And what about the growing threat of war, including war between North and South Korea? Indeed, where is North Korea in all of this?

It seems that many elite youth in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are eager consumers of South Korean pop culture. Kang Chol-hwan, in an article entitled "'Korean Wave' washes into Pyongyang", carried in *Chosun Ilbo* on 30 November 2003, had this to say:

South Korean hit TV soap operas, such as *All In*, *Autumn Rhapsody*, *Winter Sonata*, and *King Taejo*, are popular among young North Koreans. The soundtracks of the dramas, such as 'Like the First Day', from *All In*, are also popular in the North. The spread and popularity of South Korean culture is limited to Pyongyang, Sinuiju, and Cheongjin, areas that are relatively open to outside contact, Chinese sources familiar with North Korea said. South Korean dramas wind up in the three cities about three to six months after being broadcast here [in the ROK] ... The eagerness for South Korean culture is

also spreading to the market where South Korean products are becoming more popular than relatively cheap Chinese products. The conception that South Korean clothes are best, and that South Korean electronics are as good as Japanese electronics, is spreading to North Korea's upper class.

Perhaps young North Koreans are, or could become, talented producers of pop culture too.

Indeed, here may lie a way to break the deadlock between the North and the South. It is already well known that Kim Jong Il is a great movie viewer and an accomplished producer. We propose that North and South Korea join in becoming the Dream Republic of Korea: the first nation consciously to abandon measuring its wealth by its Gross National Product, measuring it instead by that true indicator of a dream society of icons and aesthetic experience, its Gross National Cool.

Notes

1. *China Daily* Hong Kong edition, 8 November 2001, "Hip Hop hits campus"; http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2001-11/08/content_92715.htm
2. *The New Paper in Singapore*, 22 December 2002, online edition, <http://newpaper.asia1.com.sg/printfriendly/0%2C4139%2C11071-1040572740%2C00.html>
3. *Weekly Chosun*, "New Hanryu 2004", cover story, 10 March 2004; <http://weekly.chosun.com/wdata/html/news/200403/20040310000009.html>
4. *Weekly Chosun*, "New Hanryu 2004", cover story, 10 March 2004; <http://weekly.chosun.com/wdata/html/news/200403/20040310000011.html>
5. *Trends in Japan*, 19 May 2000; 22 February 2004, "Long indifferent".
6. Dean Visser, "'Korea fever' is sweeping the pop culture scene in Asia", AP Breaking News, 3 February 2002.
7. *China Daily*, 10 June 2003; http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-06/10/content_168477.htm
8. From a theoretical perspective, this development has not gone unanticipated. Already in the first third of the 20th century, Johan Huizinga was suggesting that "man" was evolving from *Homo Sapiens*, to *Homo Faber*, and finally to *Homo Ludens*—"Man the player" (Johan Huizinga 1950). Somewhat later, two of the major futurists and philosophers of our time, Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan 1951; 1962; 1964; 1967; and 1970) and John McHale (McHale 1959; 1967a; 1967b; and 1969) anticipated the growing prominence and dominance of image and play in society. And of course, postmodern critical theories and the emergence of 'cultural studies' are similarly focused. Important works in this field are by Peters, Olssen, and Lankshear 2003; Stamps 1995; Shapiro 1988, 1999; Appadurai 1986, 1996. For full details see the bibliography accompanying this paper.
9. KOCCA website, <http://www.kocca.or.kr/e/index.jsp>.
10. See Yun 2003:141–63; Han 2000; Rhee 2003.

11. See <http://www.haja.net/users/cho/db4/vi.asp?id=36>.
12. See Park 2001: *Munhwa Ilbo*, 12 June 2001.
13. <http://weekly.chosun.com/wdata/html/news/200310/20031021000030.html>.
14. Bak Sangmee 2003:B01, online edition <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A41403-2003Jan25.html>.
15. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3514817.stm>.

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