

The Korean Wave in Southeast Asia: The Case of Singapore*

SHIM Doobo**

I. Introduction: Globalization and the Korean Wave

The rapid transformation of communication technologies and cultural market openings around the world have made consumption of foreign culture and information more commonplace and convenient than ever. Accordingly, people have begun to refer to globalization as a frame through which they understand these new conditions(Hafez 2007). Whereas the general understanding equates globalization with Americanization, its outcomes and meanings are in fact complex per different localities(Lechner & Boli 2012). One example that deserves close attention is the unfolding and significance of globalization in Korea in the late 1990s.¹⁾

The Kim Young Sam government introduced the concept of globalization to bring about a new era in which Koreans would continue

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** Professor, Department of Media Communication, Sungshin Women's University

1) In this paper, South Korea is referred to as Korea.

to embrace socioeconomic development. The government and globalization were both blamed for the 1997 Asian financial crisis, however, in which millions of local people swiftly became unemployed. Globalization took a positive turn and was welcomed among Koreans when it began to introduce “resources” that served to comfort the country’s broken heart. Advances in media technology brought about easier access to the stellar performances of national sport heroes such as golfer Se Ri Pak(박세리) and baseball player Chan Ho Park(박찬호) who were distinguishing themselves on the international stage. One unforgettable image that restored national pride was of Se Ri Pak, during the 1998 U.S. Women’s Open, hitting a shot from the edge of a water hazard—after removing her shoes. Koreans, who were enduring possibly the most dismal era in modern Korean history, empathized with Pak when she approached this difficult shot with intelligence and determination. When she won the championship, Koreans took her success as a reason to hope for a better future.

Globalization also opened up media markets in the rest of Asia, and Korean pop stars became all the rage in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The foreign media began to call this phenomenon “Korean Wave,” news that was widely reported in Korea(Shim 2006). That the Korean Wave began during a period of national ups and downs, in the era of globalization, contextualizes the plethora of nationalist sentiments around Korean Wave discourse in Korea. Some have praised the Korean Wave as the most proud accomplishment in the nation’s 5,000-year history(한형조 2006); others have said that the Korean Wave symbolizes the rise of the Korean nation in the modern era(조한혜정 2002). Surrounded by these discourses, the phenomenon has become

understood to provide a condition of advancing national interests.

With such a nationalist sentiment, the Korean media's coverage of Korean Wave has tended to focus on powerful nations. For example, whereas the flash mob staged by European fans of Korean popular culture in Paris, France, in 2011 made headlines for days in the Korean media, similar happenings in Jakarta, Indonesia, only a few years earlier went unnoticed. *Chosun Ilbo* reported on the K-pop themed concert in Paris in 2011:

A new history of Korean pop music was written on 10 June 2011, with the SM Entertainment-affiliated musicians' successful concert in Paris, France ... *The K-Pop Invasion* has just started(송혜진 2012) (emphasis mine).

The mainstream media attaches a special meaning to a mere concert. By coining the term "K-Pop Invasion" taking its cue from the British Invasion of the 1960s, *Chosun Ilbo* wishes to compare Korean musicians' concert with the achievement of the Beatles and Rolling Stones. This reporting style is in sharp contrast with that on Indonesia. More than 800 people convened a flash mob for Psy's "Gangnam Style" in Jakarta on 9 September 2012; this was one of the largest flash mobs in the world so far(*Jakarta Post* 2012). The mainstream media in Korea, however, gave only passing mention to this event.

When the Korean media reported, with much anxiety and in great detail, that the Korean Wave was beginning to wane in 2007, the stories were referring to the Korean Wave in China and Japan; the Korean media did not take note of the fact that Korean Wave fever was in fact expanding in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Brunei. Since that time, the

Korean Wave syndrome in Southeast Asia has gotten stronger than anywhere else in the world. As of 2010, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines ranked among the top ten countries in views of K-Pop videos on YouTube(Shim and Noh 2012: 191).

The tendency to undervalue cultural trends in Southeast Asia is not confined to journalism, however, When I examined Korean literature on the Korean Wave, I found that research on the Chinese and Japanese cases have received disproportionate attention from academics while the research on Southeast Asia has been sparse(김수정 2008; 김영찬 2012; 손승혜 2009). This tendency is confirmed by scholars outside of Korea, as shown by the CFP (call for papers) for a recent international symposium on the Korean Wave in Southeast Asia, which states that studies on the Korean Wave “have to date concentrated almost exclusively on its reception in proximate East Asian markets such as Japan, China and Taiwan as well as in North America.”²⁾

The Korean Wave in Southeast Asia is an interesting transnational phenomenon. Considering the increasing importance that Southeast Asia poses to Korea economically, culturally, and in terms of international politics, this neglect of Korean Wave research in Southeast Asia is problematic. Being aware of the problems involved, I have conducted research on Korean Wave in Southeast Asia for the past few years. Due to space constraints, however, I will focus my discussion on

2) From the CFP of The ‘Korean Wave’ in Southeast Asia: Consumption and Cultural Production. An International Symposium, which was held at the University of Nottingham, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 10 January, 2013. The symposium was co-organized by the Centre for Advanced Studies, at the University of Nottingham (UK) and the School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Nottingham(Malaysia) (H-Net Online, 2012).

the Singapore case.

Singapore is an interesting place to do research on cultural flow; while it is located in Southeast Asia, it has characteristics of Northeast Asia due to the domination of ethnic Chinese residents there. Therefore, conducting research in Singapore, arguably the center of diverse forms of trade and traffic in Southeast Asia, has an implication of encompassing traits and practices of Korean Wave in both Northeast and Southeast Asia. In addition, the fact that its citizens are communication technology-savvy based on purchasing power makes Singapore a suitable place to examine the role of the Internet in cultural traffic. The next section examines how the current trend of Korean Wave research has interfered with duly qualified scholarly interest in the Korean Wave in Southeast Asia.

II. “Cultural Proximity” and the Korean Wave Research

When the Korean Wave first manifested in China and Taiwan in the late 1990s, many scholars in Korea were perplexed by this unexpected phenomenon. Media scholar Joseph Straubhaar's(1991) “cultural proximity” theory was found to be a perfect solution to this problem. Originally developed to explain the popularity of *telenovela*, a TV drama genre specific to Latin American countries, this theory explains that audiences in culturally “near” countries tend to prefer foreign television programs based upon languages or cultures that are similar to their own. Not only did many Korean academics resorted to cultural proximity in their research on the Korean Wave(유세경·이경숙 2001;

허진 2002), but also many cultural commentators doubted that Korean Wave could spread beyond Northeast Asia(백원담 2005; 김형준 2012).

Despite the claims of cultural proximity, however, the Korean Wave has later developed in places where their dominant cultures were assumed to be disparate from that of Korea. In addition, cultural proximity theory lost its theoretical relevance when it could not be used to explain why “culturally proximate” Chinese and Japanese television dramas do not command wide popularity among Korean audiences. As Koichi Iwabuchi(2002) noted, cultural proximity “is never a given attribute [that is] equally embodied in cultural products in a specific region” (p. 49). The following anecdote is quite insightful: A Korean boy, who came across a McDonald’s in the United States, exclaimed, “Look, they also have McDonald’s here!”

It is not that I simply dismiss cultural proximity as a theory. Reviewing related literature, cultural proximity is one of the reasons for foreign audiences to find pleasure in Korean popular culture. My argument, however, is that the dominance of *essentialist* cultural proximity theory in Korean Wave research has led to a theoretically barren situation. Instead, scholars should carefully examine relevant theories, pursue in situ research, and investigate the arbitrary conditions of reception in each locale. For this, researchers must closely examine the following three factors that influence a country’s reception of foreign popular culture.

First, they must examine the historical context of foreign media reception. Each country experiences foreign culture asymmetrically. Some countries have a long history of foreign cultural reception, whereas exposure to foreign television in others may be quite recent; for

example, broadcasting of foreign television programming began in Bhutan in 2000. Such asymmetry of foreign media exposure differently conditions audiences' attitudes about foreign media reception, in terms of openness to foreign cultures in general, standards of cultural literacy, and imagery about a foreign country and its own media products.

Second, they must examine the technological aspects of foreign media reception. Technological transformations, including the use of the Internet as well as cable, satellite, and mobile devices, have revolutionized the volume and speed of media flow. How these changes influence the way local audiences consume foreign media and interact with other audiences is a question that must be addressed.

Third, they must examine the political economic relations in media production and reception. Specifically, this means investigating governmental policy in terms of regulating domestic media and controlling the inflow of foreign culture that concurrently affects domestic audiences' media consumption experiences. In addition, a country's level of media industrialization affects domestic audiences' evaluation of the entertainment quality of a TV program. I would argue that when a country has not developed export-caliber cultural industries, its audiences tend to be more appreciative of foreign cultures.

In addition to the examination of the above intranational conditions of foreign cultural reception, researchers should take into consideration various forms of transnational media flow. Aside from the Korean Wave, there are cultural exchanges originating from Japan, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, which directly or indirectly influence Korean Wave reception(심두보 2012). When the research of Korean Wave is multi-layered and multi-dimensional, it can be understood from a more

objective perspective and in an in-depth manner.

III. Research Methods

The primary research method I used for this paper was focus group interviews with active members of Korean popular culture fan clubs in Singapore, conducted in July and August 2010 and June 2012. I chose this research method because it allows interviewees to express their attitudes, opinions, and perceptions about the Korean Wave in a more natural and easy setting (i.e., in the presence of their acquaintances) than a one-on-one interview(Stokes 2003).

I hired a local research assistant who was a female graduate student at a local university.³⁾ By contacting local fan clubs of the then most popular Korean stars or K-Pop bands(Lee Min-ho, Super Junior, Wonder Girls, and 2ne1), she found interview participants.⁴⁾ She also accompanied me during the interview sessions to help me resolve possible communication problems. Although the interviews were done in English, the sometimes unintelligible local dialect known as Singlish necessitated her presence.

For starters, I asked each fan club to send out its executive members such as president, vice-president and web site administrator, regardless of age, gender and ethnicity. Then, I conducted 4 sets of focus group

3) She was an ethnic Chinese.

4) The selection of four stars/bands was made based on an informal survey on my acquaintances in Singapore, who were media professionals and scholars. Lee Min-ho, best known for his leading role in a television drama *Boys over Flower*(꽃보다 남자), enjoyed an immense amount of popularity in Southeast Asia.

interviews in Singapore in July and August 2010. Each focus group was composed of 3-5 people who all belonged to the same local fan club. Of the total 18 interviewees, six participants were teenagers, eight in their 20s, two in their 30s, and another two in their 40s. The gender ratio of participants was thirteen females and five males. Except for two Malays, all the rest were Chinese Singaporeans. With the exception of ten students who were in their 10s and 20s, the rest of the participants were mostly office workers.

After this initial round of research, I did follow-up focus group interviews with some of the original participants in June 2012. I also did follow-up e-mail interviews with them to answer some unresolved aspects. Focus group interviews were complemented by my participant observation of local shopping districts in Singapore, Jogjakarta(July 2010), and Manila(February and August 2010) where I gained access to various Korean cultural artifacts popularly exhibited to, sold to, and used by local people in Southeast Asia. In order to better map the contours of the Korean Wave phenomenon in Singapore, I read research literature and media reports on Singapore and Southeast Asian media.

Each focus group interview session was composed of two parts. During the first part, the participants answered the survey questions by supplying demographic and personal information(e.g., occupation, number of years of fan club involvement, etc.). The second part consisted of the main interview session, during which these fans shared their experiences and opinions about the Korean Wave phenomenon and their fandom activity. For example, they discussed when, why, and how they enjoyed K-Pop and Korean TV shows, their opinions of transnational cultural flows, and other relevant topics.

Each session lasted for about two hours. My research assistant tape-recorded all of the interviews, with the participants' consent, and transcribed the tapes. I analyzed the transcripts as well as notes I made during the interview sessions and e-mails that some of the Singapore fans had sent, to find important issues and themes. To guarantee the privacy of the interviewees, I am using their pseudonyms in this paper. When I cite remarks made by interviewees, their age information will be given in parentheses. When the cited interviewee is Malay, it will be noted in parenthesis.

IV. Mapping the Korean Wave's Introduction to Southeast Asia

According to my research, Northeast Asia, the front-runner of the Korean Wave syndrome, has played an intermediary role in the distribution and consumption of Korean popular culture in Southeast Asia. Singapore, particularly, is heavily influenced by the media industries of Hong Kong and Taiwan—and, increasingly, China, because more than 70 percent of its population is ethnic Chinese.

Lianhe Wanbao (聯合晚報), a daily Chinese afternoon newspaper in Singapore, is well known for reproducing stories originally published in tabloids and gossip magazines in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In addition, many magazines from Taiwan and Hong Kong are circulated in Singapore. Jeannie (21), one of my interviewees, became aware of Dong Bang Shin Gi(동방신기) while she was browsing a Taiwanese magazine, which prompted her to become interested in this boy band. The Korean television drama VCDs (video compact discs) that

circulated in Singapore in the early 2000s were also imported from Taiwan and Hong Kong, where Korean dramas are dubbed and subtitled for home viewing and distribution throughout the “pan-Chinese cultural sphere.”

Since the 1920s, there has appeared a transnational popular cultural network encompassing ethnic Chinese living across Northeast and Southeast Asia, creating what I would call “pan-Chinese cultural sphere.”⁵⁾ Because of the political insecurity in mainland China, artistes and production staff in diverse cultural industries left the country, gradually gathering in major cities in Asia, particularly Hong Kong. After the communist takeover of China in 1949, Southeast Asia has become a primary market for Hong Kong film and music industries, which were financed by overseas Chinese capital from Singapore and the Philippines. In the 1970s and 1980s, cultural production began to further concentrate in Hong Kong and Taiwan, coining a term “Gangtai” (港台), an abbreviation for Hong Kong (香港) and Taiwan (台湾). The recent opening up of China market, however, precipitates a radical transformation in this relatively well-integrated cultural structure (Chua 2012; Liew 2010; 심두보 2012).

Many interviewees reported that they had to resort to Internet discussion fora based in China and Taiwan (e.g., Baidu and Tudou) for information about K-Pop because no such forum existed for Korean culture fans in Singapore in the mid-2000s, when they first became fans. After finding that a number of fellow Singaporean fans were posting in these fora, they began to set up separate fan clubs for Singaporeans.

5) Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat calls this sphere “Pop Culture China” (Chua 2012).

Despite these reports, it would be a mistake to assume that the Northeast Asian influence upon the Korean Wave flow in Southeast Asia is restricted to the pan-Chinese cultural sphere. With its food, fashion, anime, manga, and TV dramas, Japan has long been considered the “superpower of cool”(Faiola 2003). In fact, Southeast Asian fans’ familiarity with Japanese culture also facilitated the influx of Korean culture into the region: Many of my participants confessed that they were often confused about the difference between Korean and Japanese cultures and that their apparent similarities had stimulated the fondness of Korean culture among audiences in Southeast Asia. This situation reminds us of the development pattern of Korean Wave fandom in France: According to Hong(홍석경 2012), many of the Korean TV drama fans in France were originally Japanese manga and anime fans. While searching the Internet for Japanese dramas based on manga, they came across Korean dramas and gradually became fond of them(홍석경 2012: 194).

As noted, Straubhaar’s(1991) theory of cultural proximity has successfully explained a host country’s preference for its own proximate culture. However, I found a different aspect of transnational cultural flow that I would call a “continuum of foreign cultural proximity” that influences cultural importation. In other words, a culture whose style and content is similar to a foreign culture that is already familiar or popular in another country has a strong possibility of becoming popular there. Citing another example, the Taiwanese TV drama *Meteor Garden* was hugely popular in Indonesia and the Philippines in the early 2000s; many of my informants there indicated that this show laid a foundation for them to appreciate “Oriental [read: Northeast Asian] looks” in

Korean TV dramas. All these cases testify that Northeast Asian popular culture helped make way for Korean culture to take hold in Southeast Asia.

V. The Growth of Korean Wave Fandom in Singapore

As previously discussed, Korean Wave developed in Southeast Asia later than in Northeast Asia. According to Shim(심두보 2006), the Korean Wave in Singapore has grown to the extent of which scale comparable to that of Japan or Taiwan, only with the popularity of *Jewel in the Palace* (대장금) in 2004 - 2005. In a similar vein, Liew Kai Khiun, professor of media studies at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, remarks that *Jewel in the Palace*(대장금) turned the “trivial” Korean Wave in Singapore into a “cultural tsunami.”⁶⁾ Not surprisingly, however, this phenomenon was largely limited to middle-aged housewives.

On the other hand, youth in Singapore became fans of Korean culture largely after being exposed to another TV drama, *Boys over Flowers*(꽃보다 남자), in 2009. About that time, Korean dramas such as *The First Shop of Coffee Prince*(커피프린스 1호점, 2007) were gradually changing the perception of the “Korean drama” genre as weepers that appealed only to middle-aged housewives, and *Flowers* capped this change. *Boys over Flowers* featured new faces, including real-life

6) During his lecture at Asia Research Institute, Singapore (2011/May/19) (see, Shim and Liew 2011).

musicians, for its lead roles; it turned out that their acting was good—especially for first-timers. Impressed by the artistes it starred, who were both multi-talented and stylish, local audiences increased their embrace of other Korean TV dramas that featured “idols,” such as *You’re Beautiful*(미남이시네요, 2009), *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* (성균관 스캔들, 2010), and *Secret Garden*(시크릿 가든, 2010). Katy(25), a long-time Korean Wave fan, made a revealing remark about the recent development of K-Pop fandom in Singapore:

I started quite early before the Korean Wave was very big and popular right now... sometimes I get a bit angry that before *Boys over Flowers* nobody really knew about Korean stuff so after that show, everyone is like suddenly so crazy about Korean stuff and we have an influx of fans then I will go like “Why don’t you not like them before *Boys over Flowers* came out? Why like them only after that thing came out?”

The popularity of new-school Korean dramas synchronized with the rise of K-Pop in Southeast Asia. In particular, the Wonder Girls’ hit song “Nobody”(노바디) made a great stir with its catchy tune and viral dance moves. Originally released in September 2008 in Korea, it topped charts in Korea, Japan, and other Southeast Asian countries. When this girl group smash entered the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 charts at number 76 in October 2009, it only added fuel to the fire. In the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia, the “Nobody” craze was so pervasive that it was humorously called a “national song.”

Against this backdrop, a bizarre incident occurred when, in Manila in August 2009, a passerby on the street asked a group of people who were singing along to “Nobody” to tell him the name of the song. Outraged by

his ignorance, the gang punched and stabbed him to death(아츠뉴스 2009). As late as October 2010, I was reported from my informants that the song could still be heard on every corner of the shopping districts of Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, and Jakarta. The prolonged, extreme attention paid to “Nobody” facilitated the popularity of other girl groups such as Girls’ Generation(or, SNSD), 4Minute, and Kara in Southeast Asia. High school student Jane(17) provided an insightful account of the progress of K-Pop fever in Singapore:

I was the only K-Pop fan in my class... when I talked about K-Pop, they just like don’t really care about what I said... But then, when “Nobody” came out, then they started liking, like slowly slowly liking. Then after that, “Gee” came in. Then a lot of people were like, “Oh, I like SNSD” kind of thing.

The local audiences’ evaluation of media programming was conditioned by the media structure to which they belong. It was interesting to observe how my Singaporean interviewees commented on the competitiveness of Singaporean, Hong Kongese, and Taiwanese media industries in relation to the Korean Wave. Due to its small ethnic Chinese population (slightly more than 3 million), Singapore has long accepted its status as a location for the reception and consumption of media imports from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Since the early years of the TV industry in the 1960s Singapore has depended on production staff and actors from Hong Kong.

Despite more active government support beginning in the late 1980s of its domestic film industry, film production in Singapore has never surpassed 10 releases per year (Uhde and Uhde 2010). In 2001, the

Singaporean government attempted to introduce a competitive media environment by launching a second TV station, MediaWorks. However, the small market was again a sticking point. In the end, the government integrated MediaWorks into MediaCorp in 2004, in order to resolve the “unhealthy” competition between the two companies(심두보 2006). Since then, Singapore government has changed its media industry priority to developing interactive digital media such as video games and animation.

In addition to the small market size, government censorship has also long been an obstacle to the development of competitive media production in Singapore. According to Chua(2012), the country’s TV dramas are typically

concerned with local themes, heavily ideological and didactic, often in conjunction with government promotion of public policies and equally often sponsored by government agencies and government-linked commercial enterprises to dramatize industry-related concerns(Chua 2012: 26 - 27).

Against this backdrop, my interviewees disparaged their own domestic media industry:

Kevin(24): If Singapore were to make *Boys over Flowers*, nobody would watch it.

Tom(23): I don’t think Singaporean drama really appeals to us youth.

In the end, the weak competitiveness of local media industry in the era of market opening became favorable conditions for the Korean media’s

advance into Singapore. At the same time, based on their long history of importing and consuming media products from Hong Kong and Taiwan, my interviewees confidently evaluated the entertainment quality of Korean media as opposed to the Gangtai products (see below).

VI. Evaluating the Merits of K-Pop

In general, my interviewees praised Korean dramas for their “very good acting skills” and “very different storylines” (Justine, 40).

Julie(35, Malay): I feel that something special about Korean dramas is that their dialogues are very emotional in especially romantic scenes.

Tammy(32): Whenever there is a new drama they change their cast. I mean new faces, but they do act very well...

Irene(20) extended this remark when she spoke about K-Pop.

I like it when they keep repeating the chorus because usually it is the chorus that is very nice and ... very addictive and you keep thinking about it and it is easy to sing along also. Their ballads are also very nice. And they have a lot of different genres, like there is techno and they mix a lot of stuff inside, like breathing noises.

As a “newcomer,” Korean media products have competed for Singaporean audiences with the entrenched Gangtai products from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Therefore, the Singapore fans’ evaluation of Korean popular culture was often made in relation to the Gangtai output.

Michelle(19) shared her opinion of K-Pop bands:

Their dance steps are very well coordinated and their steps are all almost the same. And they can sing live, that is why, that is the most important thing I like because you see, when some Taiwanese sing live, their voices are already so weak.

As such, my interviewees kept comparing Korean TV programs with those of Taiwan. The following conversation provides a revealing insight into how Korean media products are viewed by audiences in Southeast Asia.

Brenda(45): For me it's that, I enjoy Korean variety shows. Cos I find American variety shows have reality shows that are much scripted. One reason I like *X-Men* (X맨 일요일이 좋다), *Love Letter* (이소라의 러브레터) and *Strong Heart* (강심장) is I think the usage of honorifics. Cos I find Taiwanese variety shows a bit low class. They are very vulgar. But Korean variety shows use honorifics and even informal speech had this. And the whole show goes smoothly without any trouble. It makes me happy to watch.

Interviewer: But have you heard the rumor that even Korean variety shows are scripted?

Brenda: Yeah, I know *X-Men* is partially scripted. It's not scripted fully, but just like a guideline for the artistes to follow.

Judy(20): It doesn't really matter cos they really look very natural doing it. My mom always praises Korean actors and actresses. She says that the intensity in their eyes is very good. So if there's like a Taiwanese show and a Korean show airing at the same time, she'll go and watch the Korean show. She just thinks that Korean shows are more professional.

Kevin(24): Actually, we see a lot of like, Taiwanese shows and even Singaporean shows, they are actually like copying the concept of

Korean shows. Like you know recently Channel U, there's this panel of like foreigners. They actually copied from KBS *Chit Chat with Beautiful Ladies* (미녀들의 수다) or something like that.

Tom(23): It doesn't really matter if it's scripted. Because sometimes the emcees are the major part to make it entertaining. People like Kang Ho-Dong (강호동) and Yoo Jae-seok (유재석), they are very professional in handling situations. So it doesn't really matter if it's scripted.

I was astonished at the level of knowledge that these Singaporean fans had about the Korean entertainment industry. As I will discuss later in this paper, they kept abreast of progress in the Korean media industry. At the same time, the scope of the Korean popular culture they enjoyed was not very different from that enjoyed by Korean fans. They confessed that they were thrilled to see the real-life personas of Korean artistes in variety programs such as *X-Men*, *Running Men* (런닝맨), and *One Night and Two Days* (1박2일). According to Irene (20):

Normally if you watch Western or local Singapore TV, you can't see variety shows with idol groups. On Korean TV, you can see that the idols really show their personalities through variety shows.

Many interviewees said that while stars from Japan and Taiwan were trying very hard to maintain their privacy, they appreciated Korean stars' humble and easygoing manners as revealed in the Korean variety shows. According to Carol(18):

I became a big fan of Super Junior because of their charismatic performances onstage. But I was fascinated by their human personae with many faults shown in variety shows.

My interviewees also said that they prefer the “democratic approach” of the Korean boy bands in which every member is given an equal opportunity to garner public attention. According to Jeannie(21):

While one or two members are under the spotlight in usual Taiwanese boy bands, every member of a Korean band has a knack for something. If you look at Super Junior, Kyuhyun(규현) is not only a singer but also a good MC; Lee Teuk(이특) is a good leader; Siwon(시원) an actor; and Heechul(희철) a comedian... Every member has some reason to be loved.

Justine(40) expressed a similar reason for liking K-Pop when she said that “nobody is actually overshadowed in a band.” Whereas we Koreans overlook many aspects of our national media industries because we are used to them, overseas fans take note of and confer their own meanings to them. In a sense, they practice defamiliarization in enjoying the Korean media. Certain relevant topics are beyond the scope in this paper; nonetheless, the fierce competition for audiences home and abroad, the development of systematic star management and training, and the industry’s ability to finance expensive productions have all contributed to the high standards of production within the Korean popular culture industry(Shim 2006).

VII. Appreciating All Things Korean

According to my research, Southeast Asian fans’ encounters with

Korea do not stop at the level of popular culture. Instead, their consumption of K-Pop and TV drama has led them to learn and enjoy more about things Korean. My interviewees revealed their desire to learn Korean, and in fact the number of Korean learners abroad has increased for the past decade. According to the *Korea Times*, the number of foreigners taking the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) has been on the rise. For example, the number of applications for the 15th session of TOPIK, held on 18 and 19 April, 2009, was 96,141 from 25 countries around the world, a huge jump from 2,274 applicants in 1997 (Bae 2009).

My interviewees' consumption of Korean dramas has also instigated their desire to try Korean dishes; as a result, Korean restaurants such as "Dae Jang Geum," a name following the popular TV drama, are now found in every major city across Southeast Asia. Likewise, fans also want to buy and wear the clothes they see on the dramas; "Dongdaemun" is a common name for Korean Wave-themed clothing shops located in shopping malls frequented by young people in Southeast Asia. Many interviewees also spoke of their desire to experience life in Korea. Amanda, a 19-year-old Super Junior fan in Singapore, was learning Korean when I met her in 2010. She then went to Seoul and stayed for 9 months to learn more Korean and enjoy K-Pop-related events. As of December 2012 she was working in Singapore, but wrote to me that she continued to prepare for job-hunting in Korea.

There have been many media reports that the Korean Wave stimulated a backlash ("Anti-Korean Wave") in Northeast Asian countries such as China, Taiwan and Japan (Yang 2008). However, this strong sentiment is

rarely found in Southeast Asia because the region has not traditionally been in the position of direct political and economic competition with Korea. Many interviewees of mine remarked that they welcome the introduction of Korean popular culture into Singapore because it expands the spectrum of cultural choices in Singapore. The positive view of the Korean cultural influences was shared by other Southeast Asian people. According to a research by the Korean Institute of Southeast Asian Studies(한국동남아연구소) on 10 Southeast Asian countries' perception on Korean Wave, majority of respondents answered that the Korean Wave was contributing to media development in their countries(KISEAS 2011).

However, we should not assume that there were not any negative sentiments on Korea in Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, the rumor that “The Koreans committed more atrocities than the Japanese during the Second World War” has persisted. Apparently this rumor was initially spread by the Japanese in the Philippines, to save themselves from Filipinos who would seek to take revenge for Japanese atrocities during the war. According to Yu-Jose(2012), this baseless rumor “turns up in casual conversation ... when the topic is the Second World War” (p. 327) and has led to negative image-building about Koreans. After all, the Korean Wave has improved the Korean image, according to a former president of the United Korean Community Association in the Philippines, who has lived there for over 30 years.⁷⁾

Jane(17), a high school student in Singapore, confessed that her classmates jeered at her by calling a “Korean wannabe” or a “fake Korean” when K-Pop fever was not strong. Mary(20) said that some

7) Personal interview in Makati City in February 2010.

friends of hers once said Koreans were the most vulgar people in the world. All of these negative perceptions of Korea, however, subsided with the spread of the Korean Wave. According to Brenda(45), the perception of Korean products in general has improved as well.

Brenda: Previously before the Korean Wave, we always think that made-in-Korea items are not that good.

Interviewer: How do you find these days?

Brenda: Now department stores like OG, Robinsons this and all that, when they have promo on something, you know, they will tell you it is made in Korea... Sometimes you pass by a shop, a clothing shop, they will tell you all this from Korea. Everything Korea, you know?

My interviewees expressed fascination with the Korean custom that dictates younger people show respect and good manners to older people, images often shown in Korean dramas. According to them, Singapore is already westernized and has lost all the good traditions and courtesies, and family bonding is not as strong as in Korea.

Kevin(24): I like the politeness of Koreans.

Interviewer: How about in Singapore?

Tom(23): Not...

Kevin(24): Not at all.

Tom(23): Not so practiced here. On the other hand, Koreans greet, for example, even if it's just 1-2 years older they have to greet them, call them *hyung*(형) all that, but in Singapore it's just, call them by their names.

Brenda(45): Kids in Singapore treat their parents as if they are friends. In Korea, they really like respect their parents, they don't treat them like friends.

As they watch Korean television shows and music videos, fans in Southeast Asia envision life in Korea. This conversation is possible partly because they are ethnic Chinese who used to practice Confucian values. Out of nostalgia of what is disappeared, these fans share positive views of Korean society. In other words, while the Asian fans are fascinated by the innovative and “Western” styles in the Korean popular culture, they also find pleasure in identifying nostalgic values inherent in the same Korean cultural text.⁸⁾

VIII. Re-understanding Fans

Fans of popular culture have long been labeled as emotional, irrational, and reckless (Fiske 1989). Fans of Korean Wave were no exception to this stereotyping that the mainstream media across Asia often described them as silly housewives who chased after Bae Yong-joon(배용준), Kwon Sang-woo(권상우) and other male stars(Yang 2008). Transformations in communication technology and the new demographic make-up of Korean Wave fandom have changed these fan practices. Now, foreigners can easily acquire news about the Korean media industry; for example, websites such as soompi.com or

8) The analysis of the immense popularity of *What is Love All About*(사랑이 뭐길래) in China in 1997 may have to be revised. Many reports and papers ascribed it to the fact that the Chinese audiences identified the same Confucian values in the drama. In fact, older generation men mainly found pleasure in the patriarchal power practiced in the drama, which had been disappeared in China after long years of gender equality policy under the Communist regime.

kpop.com provide up-to-the-minute information in English on the Korean Wave.

An hour or so after its original broadcast, almost every Korean TV program is being subtitled in Chinese, English, and sometimes other languages by Korean Wave aficionados around the world, and uploaded to diverse online sites, including peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing sites. My interviewees reported that they made it a rule to download *Music Bank*(뮤직뱅크), *Inkigayo*(인기가요), *Running Men*(런닝맨), and *Ultimate Challenge*(무한도전) about an hour later than their original broadcast in Korea. YouTube also allows viewers around the world easy access to popular Korean TV shows.

As a result, fans are well cognizant of the circumstances and happenings in the Korean media industry. They can recount the names of major TV stations and music productions in Korea without any difficulty and keep abreast of up-to-date news on the Korean Wave. Therefore, they make informed judgments about those happenings. For example, in relation to the controversy about Han Geng's(한경) withdrawal from Super Junior and filing a lawsuit against SM Entertainment, Irene(20) remarked: "I feel that it's not just a contract alone, contractual problems, it's human rights. They are abusing the human rights of their own artistes and ... refuse to let him stop and rest." Mary (20)'s opinion took on a different tone:

But at the same time, SM is the one who brought him into popularity so because now SJ-M⁹⁾ become so popular, so he thinks that it is the right time to act because no matter how, probably SM would want to

9) SJ-M is shorthand for Super Junior Mandopop. It is a Mandopop boyband branched off from Super Junior.

hold on to China market so I think it could be...that is why I said it is both sides, he could be quite cunning in that sense to plan in that situation to come out at this time.

My interviewees' knowledge of K-Pop was so wide that they discussed K-Pop legend Seo Taiji(서태지)'s musical style and mentioned lesser-known musicians such as V.O.S, Chaeyeon(채연), and Claziquai(클래지콰이). In my interviews in 2010, some Singaporean fans tried to correct the Korean media's tendency to report that the Korean Wave was weakening overseas. According to Justine (40): "It's only in China and Japan. Korean Wave is getting bigger here in Singapore. We are different!"

Communication technology is transforming fan practices, particularly in Singapore. Above all, the relatively small size of K-Pop fandom there has facilitated personal contacts among fan club members. According to Jane(17), after becoming acquainted with other fan club members, she has begun to engage in hour-long dialogues with them using MSN Messenger services and Facebook accounts. Most of my interviewees even confessed that they felt closer to each other among fan club members than to their friends and acquaintances that they have met offline.

Given the small size of the local fandom, K-Pop fan clubs in Singapore are eager to affiliate with fan clubs in other Asian countries. For example, the Wonder Girls' fan clubs in Singapore and Thailand became sister organizations so that Thai club members provide accommodation to fans from Singapore when they visit Bangkok to attend Wonder Girls' concerts. Fan club members also ask their fan-friends in other countries to buy fan paraphernalia for them. In fact,

internationalization of fan activities is a new characteristic in the globalization era(Jung 2011). As such, rapid development of communication and transportation technologies now enables fans to reach out to each other across time and space, leading to the formation of much larger, transnational fan communities.

IX. Conclusion

The Korean media's coverage of the Korean Wave overseas has been incomplete and even inaccurate. Domestic news reports have tended to focus on the vicissitudes of the Korean Wave in China and Japan, or on Western reception with much fanfare, while ignoring or incorrectly presenting the situation in Southeast Asia. For example, the coverage took on a nervous tone when the Korean Wave seemed to be waning in Japan even though it was actually growing throughout the Southeast Asian region.

By focusing on the case of Singapore, this paper has attempted to provide alternative, and more objective, perspectives to the current Korean Wave literature. By having focus group interviews with active fans of K-pop and Korean TV programs, we have understood why and how Korean media are consumed and enjoyed in Singapore, and what meanings are conferred on this cultural practice. In addition, by examining historical, technological and political-economic factors within the recipient side which influence the cultural importation, we have contextualized Southeast Asian fans' appreciation of Korean media products, which we Koreans are familiar with and thus often

disparage(김수정 2012; 심두보 2007).

Compared to Korea, Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries are more porous and receptive to foreign cultures throughout their histories, spanning from Indian, Chinese and Islam civilizations to more recent Western colonization and Japanese influences(신윤환 2008). Therefore, they have seen many ups and downs of foreign cultures. While this condition has provided Southeast Asian people with an openness and tolerance to foreign cultures, it has also made incoming foreign cultures look banal to them. In this environment of what I would call the “banalization of foreign cultural reception” in Southeast Asia, the Korean Wave there developed very slowly compared to in Northeast Asia. For example, while *Jewel in the Palace*(대장금) was a TV drama to revitalize the weakening Korean Wave in Northeast Asia, it was *the* Korean drama which ignited the Korean Wave in Southeast Asia.

The political-economic conditions of Singapore also influenced the development of Korean Wave there. Singapore’s small media market size and the government’s emphasis on media’s role as an ideological apparatus put media industries in a straitjacket. On the other hand, the long years of Gangtai culture consumption allowed the local audiences to develop discerning eyes on foreign popular culture. In the end, the weak competitiveness of local media programming conditioned the Singaporean audiences to further appreciate the Korean media products, suggesting the high entertainment quality as a main reason for their liking of Korean culture.

What this also implies is that Korean Wave was not born in a vacuum, but must be understood with a perspective of a continuum of cultural traffic within East Asia. With this perspective in mind, this paper

demonstrated that Inter-Asia popular cultural exchanges have always existed throughout the 20th century. For example, Hong Kong films swept the whole Asian theaters in the period between 1970s and early 1990s. Japanese manga and anime have filled children's hours on television in most Asian countries. These, including *Meteor Garden*, the Taiwanese version of *Boys over Flowers*(꽃보다 남자), laid a foundation for Southeast Asian audiences to embrace Korean TV dramas. In recent years, communication technologies are expediting the growth of Korean Wave fandom. Therefore, I would suggest that Korean Wave research be done with an understanding of what I would call the “cumulative practices of reception” in Southeast Asia.

주제어: Korean Wave, Singapore, Southeast Asia, K-Pop,
Popular Culture, fandom

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<국문초록>

동남아시아의 한류: 싱가포르의 경우를 중심으로

심두보

(성신여자대학교 미디어커뮤니케이션학과)

한류에 대한 기존 언론보도 및 연구 경향은 다음과 같이 요약된다. 중국·일본 및 서구에서의 한류 현상에 대한 편중된 관심과 한류 분석틀로서 문화근접성 이론에 대한 지나친 의존이다. 이러한 상황은 한류 현상에 대한 객관적인 인식과 경험적인 분석을 방해하고 있다. 이러한 문제의식에 기초한 본 연구는 동남아시아, 특히 싱가포르의 한류 현상에 대한 분석을 통해 보다 객관적이고 다각화된 한류 연구를 모색한다. 지리적으로 동남아시아에 위치하고 있지만 문화적으로 동북아시아적 요소를 포괄하고 있는 싱가포르는 아시아 내 초국적 대중문화 교동을 연구하는 데 있어 전략적으로 중요한 공간이다.

본 논문은 싱가포르의 한국 대중문화 수용자들에 대한 포커스그룹 인터뷰, 문헌조사와 참여관찰을 통해 한류 형성의 이유 및 한류 팬덤이라는 문화적 실천이 갖는 의미를 탐구한다. 수용자에 대한 분석은 그가 배치된 싱가포르 미디어 구조에 대한 역사적, 기술적, 정치경제적 맥락화를 통해 보다 체계화된다. 본 연구를 통해 동남아시아에서 발견되고 있는 “외래문화 수용의 진부화”(banalization of foreign cultural reception)라는 상황이 동남아시아 내 한류 전개에 중요한 영향을 끼쳤으며, 동남아시아 미디어산업의 저개발 상황이 한국 대중문

화 수용에 우호적 조건으로 작용했음을 확인할 수 있었다. 마지막으로, 연구자는 동아시아 내 문화교통의 연속성 (continuum of cultural traffic within East Asia) 안에 한류 연구를 배치할 것을 제시한다.

주제어: 한류, 싱가포르, 동남아시아, K-Pop, 대중문화, 팬덤

