

The Cultural Implications of the Korean Wave

: Its Cultural Origin and Impacts on Chinese Lifestyle in Modern Society

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Introduction

From the late 1990s, *Hallyu*, or the Korean Wave, which is represented by a potpourri of Korean TV dramas, songs and dances, games, food, plastic surgeries, and so on, set off a big boom in China. The wave then spread from China to its neighboring countries and regions, and within a few years, swept over much of Asia and some of the Middle East and Russia. The impact of the Korean Wave in these countries and regions has extended far beyond the general sense of cultural popularity to many areas of everyday life, such as food, clothing and people's behavior. In the Chinese case, the Korean Wave has transformed the living habits and lifestyles of some Chinese people, and has come to be regarded as a symbol of modern social lifestyle. Essentially, the Korean Wave is a kind of creative culture that takes traditional east-Asian culture as its base,

mingled with some modern western cultural elements. That is to say, it is traditional in essence and modernized in form. The Korean Wave can thus be viewed as a blending of eastern and western cultures, or of traditional and modern cultures. The Korean Wave itself demonstrates that there is no necessary opposition between traditions and modernity, and that the advantages of two cultures can be exploited and combined to supplement and reinforce each other. The Korean Wave experience tells us that modernization can be achieved only when it is based on the inheritance, development and innovation of traditional cultures of a people.

The Korean Wave as a Carrier of Modern Lifestyle

In his *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, the American sociologist Thorsten Veblen characterized lifestyle broadly as “a prevalent spiritual attitude or a prevalent theory of life.”¹⁾ Different people of different genders, at different ages, in different occupations, from different classes, or in different periods of time have different living conditions and lifestyles. In the modern society focusing on individuality, people tend to follow their own will and choose lifestyles consistent with their own aesthetics and values. Therefore, the lifestyle issue can be really individualistic.

In the past decade, the Korean Wave has dramatically influenced the lifestyle of some Chinese people, especially their leisure and consumption habits. For instance, many Chinese families have grown accustomed to

1) Thorsten Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, trans. By Cai Shoubai, The Commercial Press, 1982, P.16

watching Korean TV dramas in their spare time. Korean TV dramas have a wide appeal to the Chinese audience, young and old. A recent survey conducted by SINA reveals that 83.12% of the Internet users liked “Korean TV dramas”; when asked about the preferred movies of different countries or regions, 54.55% of them chose “Korean movies.”²⁾ Young people seem to have easier and readier access to Korean TV dramas. They simply go on the Internet or buy VCDs/DVDs to watch Korean TV dramas, often without a break. Topics of Korean TV dramas are popular among people at their leisure. Korean TV dramas also play an important role in helping the Chinese people understand Korea and its culture, in that both the modern and neatly-manicured cities and beautiful natural landscapes hold a strong allure to the Chinese. According to the statistics of the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, from 2000 on, hundreds of thousands of Chinese tourists have been traveling to Korea every year. In 2009 particularly, Korea received over 1.34 million tourists from China, or 19% of all inbound tourists.³⁾ Chinese teenagers mimic the singing and dancing of Korean stars, and make themselves up in the same fashion by dyeing their hair and wearing baggy trousers & platform shoes. Some of them even take the pictures of their favorite stars to plastic surgeons; Korean restaurants and beauty salons are often packed with Chinese customers, who are eager to have a Korean experience; Korean cosmetics, costumes, apparel, cell-phones, cars and electronic household appliances all tickle their fancy. Every year, a large number of Chinese students go to Korea to study; and as of 2009, there had been 57000 Chinese students in Korea, making up 60% of all overseas students in

2) <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/40555/4154221.html>

3) <http://www.mcst.go.kr/main.jsp>

Korea. All these show that the Korean Wave has become a carrier of lifestyle for some Chinese, and has assumed an important position in their lives.

The Korean Wave, as a pop culture, is highly distinctive in that it should have won the hearts of many Chinese within a short period of time. Why, then, do Chinese people prefer the Korean Wave instead of others, and take it as one of their lifestyles?

Firstly, the Chinese people are more apt to accept the Korean Wave, which tends to evoke emotional affinity and cultural identity in them. This is very important because from the perspective of cultural communication, a culture must possess some advantages for mutual exchanges, i.e. the so-called cultural identity, if it is to be transmitted to another culture and influence it. Obviously, the Korean Wave possesses such an advantage. Both Korea and China are part of the east-Asian cultural sphere, and share with each other a high degree of homogeneity. The Koreans and the Chinese have much in common in emotional expressions, values and thinking patterns, and tend toward each other in cross-cultural communication. This cultural affinity lays a foundation for the prevalence of the Korean Wave in China. Moreover, the Koreans and the Chinese are similar in height and looks, and have similar living habits and customs. In contrast to the European and American cultures, the Korean culture appears more elegant and genteel to the Chinese, which is congruent with traditional Chinese values, aesthetics and ethics. Here, Korean TV dramas can be taken as a representative of the Korean Wave, since they have the largest audience and are the most influential in China. In terms of content, almost all Korean TV dramas display such traditional virtues and ethics as commitment to family, filial piety, order of seniority, brotherhood, and

many other elements of traditional Confucianism. All these are what the Chinese used to cherish, but are missing now. In Korean TV dramas, they find intimacy with what they see, and give an understanding smile at the used-to-be-familiar conversations among the characters. Still, the smart settings, enchanting scenes and natural performance of Korean characters all underlie the reason why Korean TV dramas take to the Chinese so much.

Secondly, the new, modern, fashionable and avant-garde elements contained in the Korean Wave have a great appeal to the Chinese people, especially young people. The clothing and decorations of the characters in Korean TV dramas are properly designed and matched, characterized by brightness, boldness and high individuality. These have produced a profound influence on the aesthetics of the Chinese audience, and tempted them to follow up in an unconscious way. Korean stars look popular and avant-garde in their make-up and dress-up, and their songs and dances are full of vigor and look modern. All these elements are highly appealing to the Chinese youngsters.

Finally, as a fashionable pop culture, the Korean Wave concurs with people's demand for fashion and individuality, and thus becomes a carrier of people's lifestyles. With the improvement of living conditions, many people begin to put more emphasis on individuality in their daily life and consumption. Thus, they try to express their personality and tastes through the pursuit of a fashionable, popular and individualized culture. In this sense, the Korean Wave chiefly represented by Korean TV dramas successfully combines traditional and modern elements into a fashionable pop culture, which echoes the demand of the people for a new culture, and the particular demand of the youngsters for a new and individualized culture.

The Cultural Origins of the Korean Wave

An overview of the Korean history reveals that the Korean culture is a hybrid one which combines traditional Korean cultures and foreign cultural elements. By character, it is distinctively diversified and integrative.

First of all, the Korean culture owes its source to traditional east-Asian cultural conventions represented by Confucianism. Traditional virtues such as commitment to family and education, filial piety, order of seniority and brotherhood are pervasive in the Korean Wave, especially in Korean films and TV dramas. Although these works are westernized in narration and representation, and modern in settings, they remain essentially traditional, centering on eastern ethics and social norms. Situated in close proximity to each other, China and Korea boast of an ancient history of cultural exchanges. With the introduction of the Chinese language during the Three Kingdoms period, Chinese Confucianism was spread over to the Korean peninsula, and after some compromise and intermingling with Korean social norms, eventually became the ideological mainstay of the ruling class and a source for the Korean culture. The influence of Confucianism on Korea is enormous, as can be seen from the fact that all Korean dynasties drew largely on Chinese Confucianism and tried to domesticate it. As such, many of the Chinese cultures and traditions are preserved and upheld in Korea. Indeed, although Japan had exercised an imperialist rule in Korea for 36 years, which all but destroyed Korean traditions and resources, although the 3-year Korean War had severely devastated the Korean peninsula, and although Korea has now achieved a higher degree of modernization, Korea seems to have preserved more Confucian cultural traits than China, the source country of Confucianism.

For instance, Confucius memorial ceremonies are held every year in strict accord with ancient Chinese rituals, which have lasted in Korea for over 1600 years. In China, however, such activities have largely disappeared. Korea is also well known for its strong atmosphere of traditional festivals. On each festival, Korean families will come together for re-union meals, pay tribute to their ancestors or hold worshipping ceremonies. So Korean festivals are generally acclaimed for their strong traditional atmosphere, whereas Chinese festivals tend to be simplified, and are widely blamed for a lack of atmosphere.

In addition, the official selection culture and ideas of loyalty, filial piety and commitment to education in Confucianism, are also highly valued in Korea.⁴⁾ For instance, Confucianism embraces the idea that people show filial piety to their parents and loyalty to the nation. This Confucian system characterized by loyalty, filial piety, big families and order of seniority has been established in Korea as a set of self-disciplinary ethics based on social customs and values, after a long time of experience and education. As can be seen from Korean films and TV dramas, many folk customs and traditions such as weekend reunions, consultations among family members and various ceremonies held in accord with ancient rituals are still well preserved in modern Korea. In much of Korea, the male still dominates the family, whereas a patriarch assumes an absolute position in his family. "Patriarchal" families are still the most prevalent and widely recognized ones in modern Korean society. Wives are expected to abide scrupulously by chastity, wait upon their parents-in-law, and support their husbands and raise children. The family is the basic unit of consumption,

4) Li Mingwei, Korea: A New Mode of Combining Tradition and Modernity, Expanding Horizons, Vol.2, 2003,P.79.

income, distribution and social welfare, and modern Koreans still think, behave and view things in terms of family life. The demand of a family precedes that of an individual, which is the essence of the Korean family system, specifically of the Korean traditional system of big families. Today, the deeply-entrenched Confucianism is playing a positive part in the political system, economic model and social life of Korea. It can thus be said that Confucianism lies at the traditional foundation of modern Korean culture, and motivates the progress and development of the Korean culture.

The second reason has to do with the impact of the Japanese colonization. During its colonial rule in the Korean peninsula for 36 years, Japan had influenced the formation of modern Korean society and construction of modern Korean culture in the following three aspects. First, in the compulsive implementation of its colonial policies, Japan imposed its modernized models of operation and other modern things on Korea, which has objectively shortened the Korean course of modernization. Besides, the modern sense of legal system, tax system and even water conservancy projects were also carried out in the form of orders and commands. Japan's colonization demolished the old feudalism of the Korean society, resulting in rapid economic development and dramatic social changes in Korea. Second, the Japanese colonization actually transformed the old Korean social system, political traditions and traditional cultures by uprooting the disadvantages, although it severely destroyed the Korean economy, plundered many resources, and caused great misery to the Korean people. Toward the end of the Korean kingdom (1392-1910), there was widespread corruption, nepotism and persecution of people in the Korean government; intellectuals were

generally conservative, focusing solely on idle theoretical talk and moral preaching. The whole society was thrown into decadence and despair. The Japanese military-style and efficient model of governance actually wiped out the existing weaknesses in the old Korean institution and traditional cultures, hereby speeding up the economic and social transformation of Korea. In other words, it was just the demolition of Korean feudalism that enabled the transformation and renewal of traditional Korean cultures.⁵⁾ Third, the Japanese invasion and colonization was a total disaster and trauma to the Korean people. Japan's extremist policies, including replacing the Korean language with Japanese, and replacing Korean names with Japanese ones, fuelled violent Korean nationalism among the Korean people, which later developed into a strong sense of national pride and crisis. The strong sense of national pride and crisis has found its way deep into the Koreans and has persisted till this day. Therefore, as soon as it threw off the yoke of Japanese colonization on August 15, 1945, Korea began to enforce a complete and strict ban on Japanese culture, such that "for as long as 50 years, no Japanese films or TV dramas were ever released in Korea. More than that, Japanese songs were also on the blacklist banned from singing or playing."⁶⁾ The cultural ban adopted by the Korean government, mingled with its endeavor to develop economic and trade relations with Japan to learn its advanced technologies and management ideas, is astonishingly paradoxical. The national spirit and consciousness has enabled Korea to create the world-famous "Han Kang Miracle," establishing Korea as one of the emerging industrialized powers

5) Li Mingwei, *Korea: A New Mode of Combining Tradition and Modernity, Expanding Horizons*, Vol.2, 2003, P.79.

6) Feng Yuzhong, *The Way I View Korea*, Beijing: China friendship publishing company, 1996, P.19.

in the world. In order to promote economic development and construct new cultural values, President Park Chung-hee adopted a series of policies and measures in his reign, drawing greatly on the Japanese practices. Thanks to the implementation of these policies and measures, Korea soon overcame the inefficiency of traditional bureaucracy; its economy was soon recovered and began to develop rapidly; and new institutions and cultural ideas also began to be established or improved.

In general, the Japanese culture has largely remained outside the Korean culture, whether in terms of the leadership of modern ideas, inspiration of nationalism, subjective economic exchanges or actual cultural transformation.⁷⁾ This notwithstanding, the Japanese cultural values have, undeniably, insinuated into the Korean culture, and are influencing the Korean politics, economy, society and culture in some degree.

Third, modern western culture can be viewed as another important source of the Korean Wave. The Korean films and TV dramas not only highlight traditional oriental cultures, but highlight those modern ideas that are characteristic of modern western cultures, such as civility, stress on the fate of common people, as well as those ideas advocated by western culture, such as democracy, liberty and individuality. These are the elements that stem from the western culture. Moreover, the narration and representation of Korean TV dramas are actually westernized; Korean films follow closely the Hollywood model, from screenwriting to shooting, and from packaging to promotion and sales. Other Korean elements, including Korean stars, songs and dances, clothing and apparel, also

7) Sun Xueyan, The Origins of Korean Wave: on the Cohesion Culture of Korea, Journal of Liaocheng University, Vol.1, 2009, P.81.

display the modernized lifestyle and pursuit of fashion and individuality. These elements can also be traced to modern western culture. It is known to all that for historical reasons, Korea was once under the influence of modern western culture represented by the American culture. The modern western culture, as represented by Christianity, has brought along advanced science, culture and education to Korea, and has played an important role in the Koreans' reception of western ideas like humanism and liberal nationalism.⁸⁾ Lee Kwang-su, a Korean writer, believed that Christianity has contributed to the Korean society in the following eight aspects : 1. Introduction of Western civilization; 2. Rearmament of a decaying morality; 3. Promotion and popularization of education; 4. Enhancement of the social status of women; 5. Rectification of the early marriage system; 6. Popularization of the Korean alphabet and vernacular literature; 7. Modernization of traditional values and philosophy; 8. Stimulation of individualism.⁹⁾ In this sense, the Christian culture has played a critical role in the development of modern Korean society and formation of the Korean culture.¹⁰⁾

In addition to the above-mentioned cultural sources, the domestic Korean culture, such as traditional witchcraft, shamanism, hwarang culture and sacrificing culture, are also important sources of the Korean Wave.

It becomes apparent that the Korean Wave is a combination of traditional oriental culture (as represented by Confucianism) and modern western culture (as represented by Christianity). It is basically a

8) Li Zhengkui, The Evolution of Korean Modern Society and Christianity, Journal of Yanbian University, Vol.2, 2001,P.95.

9) Song Byung-Nak, *The Rise of the Korean Economy*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p.48.

10) Sun Xihui, An Analysis of the Culture Drive in the Course of Korea's Modernization, Theory Journal, Vol.1, 2007,P.111.

traditional oriental culture, mingled by modern western culture. In its course of modernization, Korea managed to preserve good Confucian traditions, but was not confined to them. Rather, it transcended them and assimilated other cultures (typically the western culture, including Christianity) to its advantage.¹¹⁾ Hence the formation of a unique Korean culture, with Confucianism as its base and western Christianity as its form.

The Korean Wave Experience and Its Cultural Implications

In the above, we have pointed out that the Korean Wave is a new hybrid culture that combines traditional Korean culture with modern western culture, highlighting both traditions and modernity. It draws on some good elements from western culture, and integrates them with the traditional Korean culture in a rather creative way. The integration has resulted in a competitive advantage of modern Korean culture. As noted by Bae Jhong-shin, Vice Minister of the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, “The success of the Korean Wave lies in that it takes advantage of other cultures while highlighting its own distinctiveness.”¹²⁾

The Korean Wave experience shows that in the process of developing a modern culture, we should attach importance to the inheritance and development of traditional cultures. The traditional cultures of a nation are those cultural heritages of material and spiritual civilizations that have been accumulated in its long history of social practices and development.

11) Luo Feng, Korean Culture and the Transformation of Modern Politics, Journal of Northeast Asian Studies, Vol.3, 1998, P.26.

12) <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/27296/3851923.html>

They are national and peculiar, reflecting the most essential and distinctive things of that nation. In other words, they are a mental pillar and an important source of a country's national revival and modernization. If we can make good use of these traditional cultures, we will carry modernization on more smoothly.

Meanwhile, we should also lay stress on the introduction and integration of modernity. As a form of civilization originating in Europe, modernity embodies the universal attributes of human beings, marking the existence and progress of man. In a sense, it represents the direction of human development in a particular period of time. That is why it has been accepted by the east and the whole world. In the course of modernization, Korea was not caught up in the conflict between traditional Confucianism and foreign modernity. Instead, modernity was tolerated and reinforced by Confucianism.¹³⁾ The Korean experience demonstrates that traditions and modernity are not necessarily opposed to each other. Since modernity marks the progress of humans, it can be culturally combined with those good elements in traditional cultures. Actually, any modernization must base itself on traditional cultures, otherwise it would be as groundless as water without a source and a tree without root. As put aptly by Chen Yinke, "A real innovative and self-contained system must introduce foreign doctrines while maintaining its own national status."¹⁴⁾

Finally, the Korean Wave also owes its success to Korea's insistence on good traditional cultures and its critical selection and innovation of western culture. Actually, all cultures, be it eastern or western, have their own advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, we should not totally

13) Liu Changlin, Reflections on Confucianism, Korean Wave in China and Modernity, Journal of East Asian Social Thoughts, Vol.15, 2007,P113.

14) <http://wenda.tianya.cn/wenda/thread?tid=4f00c99455bff46b>.

repudiate eastern or western culture, nor should we copy indiscriminately the experience of one or the other. Rather, we should incorporate the advantages while eliminating the disadvantages of both cultures. It is thus unscientific and inadvisable to deny national traditional cultures without critical analysis and follow mechanically the practices of foreign cultures, regardless of the advance of the times.

In conclusion, the Korean Wave experience tells us that in the course of modernization, we should lay as much stress on the inheritance and development of traditional cultures as on the introduction of modern foreign cultures, so as to create a more advanced culture that concurs with the advance of times and the progress of human society.

(Translated from Chinese by Wang Wen'e)

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<中文摘要>

论韩流对现代社会生活方式的影响及其文化根源

朴光海

自20世纪90年代末开始在中国兴起的韩流,对一部分人的生活方式产生了一定的影响,以至于韩流成为了他们生活方式的一种载体。韩流之所以能够影响进而成为人们的一种生活方式,主要是因为韩流中蕴涵的传统文化因素容易被中国人认同和接受。另外,韩流中蕴涵的现代、时尚元素也是吸引人的一个重要因素。追溯韩流形成的文化根源,我们发现韩流文化是由以儒家文化为代表的东亚传统文化和以基督教文化为代表的西方现代文化构成,其基础是东亚传统文化,同时吸收融合了西方现代文化。因此可以说,韩流是传统文化和西方现代文化相融合的产物。韩流的成功经验表明,传统性与现代性不是必然对立的关系,它们的融合能够迸发出更加巨大的力量,从而创造出一种更新、更符合时代潮流的文化。

关键词: 韩流, 生活方式, 文化根源, 东西方文化, 传统与现代

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