

“KOREAN WAVE” IN CHINA:
ITS IMPACT ON THE SOUTH KOREAN-CHINESE RELATIONS

by

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Abstract

The “Korean Wave” refers to the love of South Korean cultural products. The wave has started in East Asia and swept over Southeast Asia. More recently, it has even landed in the Middle East and part of Europe. In particular, this thesis looks at the Korean Wave in the context of China, where the Korean Wave first started and the term was coined. It aims to answer the following research questions: 1) To what extent the Korean pop culture has influenced the public sentiment in China? 2) How the government and political leaders have responded to the Korean Wave in China? In response, it is argued that Korean soap-operas, in particular, have boosted the Chinese public’s interest in Korea and created positive national images of Korea. This effect can be explained by the Korean media and government’s active support and the timely development of the internet. However, the high-level response to the phenomenon has also reflected the Chinese government’s concern over foreign cultural imports and their unwillingness to utilize the Korean Wave as a tool of promoting South Korea-China relations. Finally, this thesis also argues that the Korean Wave has a potential to become the cornerstone of “soap-opera diplomacy” based on the cultural familiarity that could improve the declining state to state bilateral relations.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Since the end of the 20th century, Northeast Asia has encountered the rapid growth of a new, unprecedented cultural phenomenon affecting the entire region – “Hallyu.” Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, refers to the love of South Korean cultural products. The wave first swept over China and Japan, and then widely spread into Southeast Asia. It has recently even landed in the Middle East and part of Europe. Not surprisingly, the economic ripple effect of the Korean Wave is tremendous. For example, in 2004, the economic effect of a single Korean soap-opera, “Winter Sonata,” reached USD 3.1 billion in South Korea and Japan. The Korean Wave has extended the cultural understanding and interaction between South Korea and the rest of Northeast Asia. However, there has been a lack of discussion about the policy or political implication of the phenomenon. Therefore, this thesis aims to answer the following research questions: 1) To what extent the Korean pop culture has influenced public sentiment in China? 2) How have government or political leaders have responded to the Korean Wave in China? This discussion focuses on China, where the Korean Wave first started and the term was coined. It is argued that Korean soap-operas, in particular, have boosted the Chinese public’s interest in Korea and created positive national images of Korea. This effect can be explained by the Korean media and government’s active support and the timely development of the internet. However, the high-level response to the phenomenon has also reflected the Chinese government’s concern over foreign cultural imports and their unwillingness to utilize the Korean Wave as a tool of promoting South Korea-China relations. Finally, this thesis also argues that the Korean Wave has a potential to become the cornerstone of “soap-opera diplomacy” based on the cultural familiarity that could improve the declining state to state bilateral relations.

In order to support these arguments, the first section provides an overview of the Korean Wave phenomenon. This section highlights the key characteristics of Korean soap operas that have attracted the Chinese audience. It also explains how the Korean government’s strategy to include the Korean Wave in its soft power agenda as well as the development of the internet/social networking has helped the spread of the Korean Wave. The next section focuses on various challenges to the Korean Wave in China – in

particular, it illustrates the negative response from the Chinese government and political elites, who pay little attention to the phenomenon or view the Korean pop culture as a threat to their regime stability. The last section explores the prospects of “soap-opera diplomacy.” This section discusses the recent decline of the South Korea-China relations and suggests a number of ways that the Korean Wave could improve the bilateral relations between South Korea and China. Finally, the thesis is concluded by identifying some challenges in the research.

It is important to note that this paper focuses on South Korea’s soap operas exported to China as the main research object. The soap opera and k-pop (Korean pop music) have been the two main sources of the Korean Wave in China. While k-pop has attracted mostly the teenage generation, the Korean TV dramas have generated various reactions from a relatively wider range of the Chinese audience. Moreover, there are more data and research available for the soap opera phenomenon as compared to the pop music issue. Finally, because the TV dramas reflect elements such as customs, daily lifestyles and socially-accepted ways of thinking, the audience reactions to them have more diverse implications that are worth being analyzed.¹

¹ It is also noteworthy that Korean soap operas have gained increasing popularity internationally as well. Since 2006, the South Korean government has annually conducted a “National Brand Map” research, in which 21 participating countries respond on the national image of South Korea. In 2007, “Korean drama” was ranked the fifth most popular image representing South Korea. In 2008, it climbed up to the 3rd rank, next to “technology” and “Korean food.”

Chapter Two: Overview of the Korean Wave

A Brief History of Korean Soap Operas in China

Before discussing different aspects of the Korean Wave powered by Korean soap operas, the understanding of its brief history should be useful. A number of points brought up in this section will be further explained in the following sections. The Korean Wave in China has its roots back to 1997 when a Korean TV drama, *What Love is All About*, was broadcast on the China Central Television Station (CCTV), the major state television broadcaster in mainland China. This drama was ranked the second-most viewed soap opera in the history of Chinese television. *What Love is All About* was based on a story of an extended family living under one roof. In socialist China, nuclear families and individualism had been strengthened, and thus the story of the daily lives of an extended family stirred up nostalgia in Chinese people. In particular, a main character, the grandfather depicted as a charismatic and patriarchal head of the family, became the object of envy among male viewers.

In November 1999, the Beijing Youth Daily first used the term “Hallyu” or Korean Wave in its report about the unprecedented success of a famous Korean pop group’s concert in Beijing.² Since then, this term has been widely used to describe the popularity of South Korean pop culture abroad. In China, the wave was particularly strong, as the number of dramas imported from Korea sharply increased. By September 2000, at least 24 Korean dramas were broadcast on Chinese television.³ Most of these dramas were centered around stories about romance and conflicts, career building and daily family lives in the urban area. The diverse themes of these Korean dramas attracted viewers of different generations. Since the early 2000s, with a combination of South Korean governments’ financial and policy support and a rapidly growing number of Chinese fans, the Korean drama market in China continued to expand. In particular, a historical drama *Dae Jang Geum* and contemporary dramas including *Autumn in My Heart*

² Lee Eun Sook, A Study of the Popular “Korean Wave” in China, *K.A.L.F(Literature and Films)*, Fall/Winter 2000: 33

³ Lee Eun sook, 37

and Winter Sonata are just a few of many Korean soap operas that have become household names in China.

However, in the beginning of 2006, the Chinese government attempted to bring down the wave by limiting the number of South Korean soap operas allowed on Chinese television. As a result, the total export revenue of Korean dramas declined for the first time, from 101.6 million USD to 85.9 million USD.⁴ Nonetheless, China's love for Korea soap operas has not seemed to cool down. Instead of watching Korean dramas on television, Chinese viewers have turned to video-sharing websites, in which not only Korean dramas but also all other TV programs can be easily accessed. In addition, the overall revenue of South Korean cultural products exported since 1999 has almost tripled, to 1.8 billion USD in 2008, China has continued to be one of the largest markets for the Korean Wave.⁵

Soap Operas: Two Types

There have been mainly two types of the Korean soap opera exported to China – historical and contemporary dramas. The historical dramas are usually centered on the well-known historical figures and events. Within the particular historical time frame, fictional elements are added to complement the unrecorded part of the history and stimulate viewers' interests. The most famous Korean historical drama in China is inarguably *Dae Jang Geum* or *The Great Jang Geum*, which was aired in 2005. It focuses on the life of the protagonist, Jang Geum, who appears in the Annals of Joseon Dynasty as the first female royal physician of the dynasty. The drama's realistic portrayal of the traditional Korean royal cuisine and medicine particularly attracted the Chinese audience. This drama recorded the highest audience rating in thirteen major cities of mainland China. When Chinese President Hu Jintao met Korea's ruling party leader in 2005, he remarked that it was a shame his busy schedule kept him from watching every episode

⁴“Korean Media Reflects on the Korean Wave: Says the Korean Wave is too Weak to Endure Troubles,” *People's Daily Online*, 4 Jan 2007, <http://art.people.com.cn/GB/14759/21864/5243783.html>

⁵ “South Korea's pop-cultural exports: Hallyu, yeah! A “Korean wave” washes warmly over Asia,” *The Economist*, Jan 25 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/15385735>

of *Dae Jang Geum*.⁶ This highly publicized story reflected the widespread popularity of the drama in China.

The other type of the Korean soap opera welcomed in China is the contemporary drama, which is fictional and takes place in the setting of the current South Korean society. Most of dramas in this category portrait daily lives in urban areas. The central themes of the contemporary drama vary from love and family to politics. In China, a study shows that, among 93 Korean soap operas imported between 2002 and 2005, 72% mainly focused on love and romance while family relationship was the central theme in 19.4% of them.⁷ A few of the famous examples of the love and romance dramas that were widely beloved in China include *Autumn in My Heart* (2000), *Winter Sonata* (2002), *Full House* (2004) *My Name is Kim Sam Soon* (2005) and, very recently, *Secret Garden* (2011). These dramas share similar characteristics such as a love triangle, career building and common challenges at workplace, as well as beautiful scenes produced by modern filming techniques. In addition, trendy-looking main characters in these dramas have attracted the younger generation in particular – these celebrities have become the fashion, hair and makeup guides for the Chinese youth and young adults. In terms of family dramas, since *What Love is All About* achieved an enormous success, dramas like *See and See again* (1998), *Miss Mermaid* (2002) and *Be Strong, Geum-Soon* (2005) became very popular in China. All these dramas are based on stories of ordinary middle-class families in Korea – there is usually a three-generation family living together in these dramas. While each generation of the family shows different values and life styles, the dramas focused on how the family members overcome the generational gap and harmonize with each other.

⁶ Song Ui Dal, “The highest audience rating in 31 cities... President Hu is also a fan,” *Chosun Daily*, Sep 29 2005, <http://www.chosun.com/culture/news/200509/200509290320.html>

⁷ Lee Moon-Haeng, “Study on Characteristics of Korean Drama Exports to 8 Asian Countries,” *The Korea Contents Association Publication Series*, vol.7, No.9 :39-40

Reasons for the Popularity

One of the most significant reasons for the enormous success of the Korean pop culture in China is that it has provided alternatives to Hollywood and Japanese cultures. Since China started placing overwhelming priority on the opening of its economy in 1990s, Chinese society was suddenly exposed to the inflow of foreign firms, products as well as cultures. Despite Beijing's tight control over any cultural imports, the spread of the internet and development of social media timely accelerated the encounter. However, the two dominating pop cultures from the US and Japan failed to reach a wide range of audience in China. Although the Chinese society has come to embrace certain western values, the public still feel uncomfortable with and cannot easily relate their daily lives to American and Japanese cultural products, which often contain violent and sexual scenes. Furthermore, widespread anti-American and anti-Japanese sentiments, driven by the historical memories of conflicts and colonization, have limited positive responses the American and Japanese cultures. Although the younger Chinese generation has little or no first-hand experience with the western imperialism or colonialism, accepting the American and Japanese cultures can still create contention with the older generation – “if a young person here [in China] likes Japanese cultures, the parents will get angry.”⁸

On the other hand, “Korean pop culture skilfully blends Western and Asian values to create its own [quality],” which is more familiar and approachable for the Chinese audience.⁹ In China, the May Fourth Movement and Cultural Revolution undermined Chinese traditional culture and Confucian values that emphasize relationships. Instead, individualism manifested itself during the 20th century. However, Korea is known to be one of the most Confucian societies in the world. Korean dramas prove this point by reflecting Confucian values, such as family-centered behaviours, respect for the elders and loyalty to the hierarchy. Therefore, some Chinese viewers of Korean dramas say that the Korean society depicted in these dramas seems to be “more Chinese than Chinese.”

⁸ Norimitsu Onishi, “A rising Korean wave: If Seoul sells it, China craves it,” *The New York Times*, Jan 2 2006

⁹ Jim Dator and Yongseok Seo, “Korea as the Wave of a Future: The Emerging Dream Society of Icons and Aesthetic Experience,” *Journal of Futures Studies*, 9(1), Aug 2004: 33

While Korean dramas act as filters for western values and demonstrate the traditional values that are familiar with Chinese sensibilities, common “rags-to-riches” storylines of these dramas also speak directly to audience who have lived the Asian economic boom of the past two decades.¹⁰ Popular characters in the Korean soap operas often abandon or break out of their monotonous middle-class lives and achieve fame and economic success, reflecting common desires of urban audiences who account for 80% of the total population in Korea. These characters also give Chinese audience vicarious satisfaction. In addition, South Korea’s dynamic younger generation, which has no memory of nation-wide poverty and has fully adapted to rapid technological advancement, has also become “the engine behind the success story [of the Korean Wave].”¹¹ They add new and fresh perspectives to the cultural products, which create images of a modern life style that young Chinese people desire to pursue.

The fourth reason for the popularity of Korean soap operas is a relatively recent factor – there has been an increasing number of cases where Korean dramas depict a positive representation of China. Korea’s historical dramas often hint the regional dominance of Chinese dynasties in earlier centuries – for instance, one of the most popular episodes of *Dae Jang Geum* in China was about the royal reception of a Ming envoy to Joseon. In this episode, the entire Joseon court focuses its full attention on the reception of the Ming envoy, who is depicted as being arrogant yet powerful. Chinese people find traces back to their own traditional culture in the Korean soap operas and regain cultural identity and pride through them. Another interesting example was from a very recently broadcast drama called *Tell Me a Lie*. This contemporary drama scored a low view rating and did not receive much attention in Korea. However, this drama was ranked as the most viewed drama in the two biggest video-sharing websites in China.¹² One of the reasons for its popularity seems to be a main storyline that the two main characters pretend to be a married couple to impress a Chinese businessman and his wife and sign a billion dollar contract with him.

¹⁰ “South Korea’s pop-cultural exports”

¹¹ Dator and Seo, 32

¹² This was observed on Tudou Net (www.tudou.com) and Youku.com (www.youku.com) on Jun 23 2011. These two websites will be revisited later when discussing the effect of the internet and social networking on the Korean Wave.

Throughout the drama, the Chinese businessman is depicted as being powerful and charismatic. In various occasions, the characters even speak in Chinese. In the past, smart and rich characters were mostly set to be educated in or go to business trips to the US, but, recently, China has often replaced the US in many dramas. Accordingly, Chinese viewers feel more connected and interested when watching these dramas.

There is also an economic explanation to the high rising Korean Wave. Some analysts argue that the main reason for the Korean Wave is the media privatization that swept across Asia in 1990s. Especially when the economic crisis hit Asia, private broadcasting firms started seeking cheap and quality products like Korean dramas over American or Japanese products. In the case of Taiwan, Korean dramas were even cheaper than domestic ones, which cost as high as \$20,000 per hour. South Korea's electronics firms like Samsung and LG also contributed to popularize Korean dramas by distributing free copies to Asian broadcasting stations to promote their products in the mid-1990s.¹³ Thus, many Chinese broadcasting companies came to view Korean dramas as low priced but guaranteed quality products. In terms of their high quality, the government's protectionist policy of supporting domestic cultural products is often credited. The South Korean government has limited foreign television shows that can be broadcast on the national television networks to 20%. While this policy resulted in the increasing demand for domestically-produced dramas, the competition among the three largest broadcasting stations caused popular products to emerge.

The Korean Wave as a Soft Power Agenda

The South Korean government has seen the Korean Wave as a tool of soft power, with a high capacity to expand South Korea's profile abroad. For a country like South Korea that lacks hard power (i.e. military or economic capacity), developing soft power of co-option and attraction easily becomes a significant part of its agenda to achieve certain political or economic goals. Especially when the Asian

¹³ Cho Hae-Joang, "Reading the "Korean Wave" as Sign of Global Shift," *Korea Journal*, Winter 2005: 170

Financial Crisis hit the country in the last years of the 20th century, the South Korean government started actively seeking economic opportunities through the Korean Wave phenomenon that had been already growing at a rapid pace. Therefore, the South Korean government has taken numerous measures to support its domestic cultural industry.

In the early years of the Korean Wave, the government targeted the export of Korean popular culture as a new economic initiative, mainly in response to 7% plunge in GDP after the Asian Financial Crisis. President Kim Dae-jung (inaugurated in 1998), who named himself as the “President of Culture,” introduced the Basic Law for the Cultural Industry Promotion in 1999 and allocated \$148.5 million to this project.¹⁴ Under his administration, the South Korean government was at the forefront to promote and sell the Korean cultural products – the cultural sector’s budget relative to the total government budget per fiscal year increased from 484.8 billion won (about 440 million USD), or 0.60 percent of the total government budget in 1998, to 1,281.5 billion won (about 1.1 billion USD), or 1.15 percent of the total government budget in 2002.¹⁵ In this environment, Korean cultural products began to be exposed in larger markets and to attract foreign buyers. For example, the Busan International Film Festival, with the financial and policy support from the government, has grown up to be one of the biggest international film festivals and the most significant marketplace for Korean and other Asian films.

Since 2005, the government has taken a more mercantilist and practical approach. In order to ensure the long-term stability of the Korean Wave, the government recognized the necessity to step back and focus on creating the environment that is favourable to private entrepreneurs of the cultural industry. As a part of the effort, “The Hallyu Policy Consultation Committee,” solely consisting of the academics and non-governmental experts, was established to inform the government about the progress and

¹⁴ Sung Sang-yeon, “The High Tide of the Korean Wave III: Why do Asian fans prefer Korean pop culture?,” UCLA International Institute, Feb 4 2008, <http://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=86640>

¹⁵ Doobo Shim, “Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia,” *Media, Culture & Society*, Jan 2006, 28(1):35

challenges of the cultural industry at the field level.¹⁶ Firms and organizations that introduce or sell Korean culture overseas have also won millions of dollars in government grants. The strategy seems to have worked effectively, especially from the economic perspectives. In 2009, the country exported nearly \$3 billion in entertainment, more than double 2002 exports.¹⁷

More importantly, a number of empirical evidence shows that the perception of South Korea has significantly improved in China and other countries where the Korean Wave is strong. A survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in 2008 found that “Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese (three of the largest markets for the Korean Wave) have high respect for South Korean cultural power. In particular, on the 0 to 100 scale of general feelings towards South Korea, Chinese respondents gave an average rating of 65, higher than ratings they gave the US (61) and Japan (46). Moreover, 79% of the respondents agreed that the spread of South Korean cultural influence is positive.¹⁸ More recently, a 2010 BBC poll also showed that, among 27 nations surveyed in this poll, China was the most favourable to South Korea.¹⁹ In addition, the images and reputations of Koreans and Korean culture dramatically improved in Japan due to the Korean Wave as well. According to an opinion poll, while 51.9% of respondents replied that they had no interest in Korean people before the Korean Wave, 62% answered that they have the positive image of Koreans after the Korean Wave.²⁰ According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan, 57.1% of respondents replied that they

¹⁶ “South Korean Government Working for the Suitability and Expansion of the Korean Wave,” Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (Republic of Korea),

<http://www.mct.go.kr/web/notifyCourt/press/mctPressView.jsp?pSeq=6651>

¹⁷ Lara Farra, “Korean wave of pop culture sweeps across Asia,” CNN, Dec 31 2010, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-12-31/world/korea.entertainment_1_korean-wave-exports-content?_s=PM:WORLD

¹⁸ Christopher B. Whitney and David Shambaugh, *Soft Power in Asia: Results of a 2008 Multinational Survey of Public Opinion*: 21-22

¹⁹ “Global Views of United States Improve While Other Countries Declined,” BBC World Service Poll, 18 April 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/160410bbcwspoll.pdf>: 20

²⁰ Hwang Hye-Kyung, “The Korean Wave Causing Changes in the Perception of Korean and Japanese-Korean in the Japanese Society,” *Journal of the Japanese Culture*, Vol 42, Aug 2009: 273

had a positive image of South Korea – this number was the highest since 1975.²¹ These research results highlight that the Korean Wave has created positive images of South Korea abroad.

Despite the governmental efforts to make use of the Korean Wave in its soft power agenda, some scholars, including Lee Geun, Associate Professor of the Graduate School of International Studies at Seoul National University, argue that the Korean wave is not yet soft power but “soft resources.” Lee introduces five soft power strategies that have been proven practical and feasible. Among them, three strategies are relevant to the discussion of converting the Korean Wave phenomenon into effective soft power. The first strategy is the “manipulation and creation of favourable images of Korea that will lead to the improvement of its national and human security environment.”²² This strategy suggests that the countries where the Korean Wave is present are less likely to consider military or economic policies that are hostile or coercive to Korea, especially since the public opinion has become an important part of policy-making processes internationally. In terms of human security, Lee also explains that the Korean Wave can create less discriminatory environments for Korean nationals in the countries influenced by the phenomenon.

Secondly, the Korean Wave can be used in a “Network Effect Strategy,” which aims to “create a network or an environment within which the actors tend to perceive that the maintenance and expansion of the existing network continuously benefit them.”²³ This strategy is based on the awareness that the Korean Wave is not just limited to the popularity of soap operas or pop music but extends to the spread of Korean sensibilities, behaviour norms and life styles – these factors become more easily accepted and even considered to be positive to the political, economic and social development of the recipient countries. Therefore, the Korean Wave may promote a transnational networking environment within which the

²¹ “Making a Use of the Korean Wave in Global Marketing,” *Press Release*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, <http://www.korea.kr/newsWeb/pages/brief/common/downloadFileForDepart.do?idKey=e5f1d0a07e6040687342d046db3b1044>: 2

²² Lee Geun, “A Soft Power Approach to the “Korean Wave”, *The Review of Korean Studies*, Vol 12, No 2 (June 2009): 134

²³ Lee Geun, 127

actors are bound by the “Korean way” of thinking and behaviour. Lee gives an example of Hollywood movies that have gradually created ideational and invisible influence upon other countries.

The last strategy is called “Heroes and Celebrities” – which is based on a notion that Korean Wave stars have greater powers of influence over the people overseas than most politicians or policy makers do.²⁴ These celebrities are not expected to directly act on behalf of the domestic political actors or impose the national interests; rather, they can promote more general, universal values through charity activities. For example, they may create pressure or support the governments of the countries influenced by the Korean Wave, mainly by mobilizing the public or their fans overseas. This strategy not only projects a positive image of the celebrities as well as the country they are from, but also creates a sense of national pride domestically. For example, after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Jang Nara, a famous Korean Wave star, donated 14,000 USD and more than 30 Korean celebrities produced an album dedicated to the victims.²⁵ However, Lee also warns that this strategy can produce negative backlash if the government explicitly attempts to manipulate the celebrities or be benefitted from them.²⁶

It seems to be still early to conclude whether South Korean government’s efforts to use the Korean pop culture as a soft power tool have been successful, especially considering various challenges that the Korean Wave has been facing in China. The discussion on the Korean Wave as a diplomatic tool will be further elaborated later when the prospect of “soap opera” diplomacy is explored; for now, the following section discusses the limitation of the Korean Wave in China.

²⁴ Lee Geun, 135

²⁵ It is interesting to note that, after Japan’s earthquake in 2011, numerous Korean Wave stars instantly donated almost a total of 5 million USD.

²⁶ Lee Geun, 129

Chapter Three: Challenges to the Korean Wave in China

While it seems to be apparent that the Korean Wave does exist and has a great potential to change certain dynamics of South Korea–China relations, there have been also numerous signals that indicate the challenges the Korean Wave faces in China. This section of the essay identifies three main challenges to the long-term stability of the Korean Wave in China – namely, 1) the clash between foreign cultures and China’s political structure and ideology, 2) the “anti-hallyu movement,” and 3) the limited range of Chinese consumers. While all these factors are interrelated to each other, they expose different political, social and cultural dimensions of the Korean Wave.

Clash between foreign cultures and China’s political structure and ideology

Although China has been rapidly opening up to the outside world for the last two decades, the Chinese government has taken more conservative attitudes towards the influx of foreign cultures than towards foreign capital or technologies. During the early and mid-1980s, Deng Xiaoping’s various reform strategies dominated China’s national and foreign policies. In particular, Deng achieved wide agreement among his supporters in favour of opening to the outside world, meaning the rest of East Asia and the West.²⁷ China’s open-door policy of economic exchange with other countries quickly expanded to cooperation throughout the world in the scientific, technological as well as cultural fields. Concerned about the increasing curiosity and demand of the public for western culture and products, the Chinese government developed key principles of “letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend, weeding through the old to bring forth the new, making the past serve the present and foreign things serve China!” These principles were intended to set up guidelines to “correctly understand and handle all aspects of culture and art, the cultural heritage and foreign culture, science, and

²⁷ Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform* (W.W.Norton&Company: New York, 2004): 132

technology.”²⁸ Among them, the principle of “making foreign things serve China” particularly highlighted the government’s position that China should absorb foreign culture only to the extent that it serves the actual needs of the Chinese people and does not interfere with China’s socialist culture.

In recent years, the Chinese government has reiterated its determination to strengthen ideology building and to safeguard the socialist system. For instance, upon the consolidation of his political power, Hu Jintao has elucidated that the Chinese Communist Party would never permit any actions threatening China’s socialist foundation. Moreover, in August 2001, the People’s Daily (Renmin Ribao), the official newspaper of the Communist Party, published an editorial pointing out that “a considerable level of ideological confusion and delinquent behaviours is widespread in the cultural market”²⁹ These statements can be interpreted as warning signs against materialistic and pleasure-centered culture coming from the foreign countries including Korea. In January 2006, China’s State Administration of Radio, Film and Television announced that Korean dramas were to be cut by half.³⁰ The People’s Daily also reported that CCTV’s announcement to expand the spectrum of imported foreign dramas in fact was aimed to reduce Korean dramas imported to China.³¹ The Chinese government has also introduced a policy that promotes more variation in the countries of cultural imports – this policy resulted in more cultural products coming from the US and Japan, which have become strong competitors with Korea in the Chinese cultural market. Through these measures, the Chinese government has expressed discomfort towards the Korean Wave’s influence over the Chinese audience.

²⁸ Bai Liu, “Cultural Policy in the People’s Republic of China: Letting a hundred flowers blossom,” UNESCO, 1983: 18

²⁹ “Tidy up the Cultural Market, Promote the Advanced Culture,” *The People’s Daily* (Editorial), August 17 2001, http://www.ccnt.com/news/news_yinxiang/index1_9.htm

³⁰ Sue Jin Lee, “The Korean Wave: The Seoul of Asia,” *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, Vol.2, No.1 (Spring 2011): 90

³¹ “Korean Media Reflects on the Korean Wave”

The “Anti-hallyu movement”

Closely associated with the first challenge, an “anti-hallyu movement” driven by conservative and nationalist sentiment has also built growing barriers against the Korean Wave in China. The anti-hallyu phenomenon started around in the mid-2000s; numerous reports by the Chinese state media criticizing the Korean Wave have continued every year. Some scholars have argued that anti-hallyu is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural contexts and cannot be viewed as a temporary social phenomenon. Especially since the controversial debates between China and Korea over issues such as China’s Northeast Project, the history of Goguryo, the registration of Korea’s Gangneung Danoje Festival as a UNESCO³² intangible cultural heritage, and the mage representation of China in a number of Korean historical dramas, anti-Korean statements have noticeably increased in China. When the anti-Korean reports first came out, they mainly represented the voice of the Chinese entertainment industry that tried to keep the Korean cultural imports in check and urged self-examination. In particular, since the unprecedented popularity of *Dae Jang Geum* in 2005, some Chinese producers and celebrities expressed much concern about the Korean Wave. For example, in 2005, the People’s Daily referred to a statement of Liu Chang-le, a chairman of Hong Kong–based Phoenix TV, that “it has been seven years since the Korean Wave started to wield its power. This is definitely humiliating to us [the Chinese people], because the Confucian culture of the Korean Wave is nothing but our own cultural heritage.” In addition, the newspaper commented that “we all have to introspect as the Korean Wave rises to power.”³³

Since 2006, such criticism against the Korean Wave has extended to the overall cultural exchange between China and South Korea and has often targeted the protectionist measures taken by the South

³² The Northeast Project refers a government-led research project on the history, geography and people of its three northeastern provinces. Based on this research, the Chinese government publicly announced that Gojoseon, Goguryo and Balhae, ancient Korean dynasties, were parts of the Chinese history. This claim immediately sparked significant government and public dispute between the two countries.

Gangneung Dano-je Festival is Korea’s oldest celebrated folk festival that takes place in the end of sowing season, which was registered as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2006. Dano is a tradition holiday on the lunar calendar – China also has a tradition of celebrating the same day. When the application by the South Korean government was submitted in 2004, the Chinese media criticized Korea of stealing China’s tradition.

³³ Kang Nae-Young, “Study on China’s Anti-Korean Wave: Based on the Analysis of Dramas and Movies,” *The China Study*, Vol 48, Mar 2008: 464

Korean government. These reports pointed out that only a limited number of Chinese dramas had been exported to Korea and none of them was aired on “golden time” or any of the major broadcasting channels. Moreover, the Chinese media has also reported that the Korean Wave started to turn into the “Cold Wave,” considering the decreasing imports of Korean cultural products and increasing anti-Korean sentiment on the internet.³⁴ In 2007, Jing Bao, a Shenzhen-based newspaper in an editorial, suggested three explanations for anti-hallyu sentiment. First, it saw the phenomenon as an explosion of animosity against Korea’s condescending attitude towards China. Second, it argued that the lack of morality among Korean entrepreneurs and their profit-centered behaviours had caused negative reactions from the Chinese public. Finally, the newspaper also criticized that Korean nationalism is too aggressive and Korean scholars had continuously used conservative media as a platform for their “groundless” claims about the Chinese history and territories.³⁵ To what extent these factors have contributed to the growing anti-Korean sentiment in China is subject to discussion; however, it seems to be apparent that the anti-hallyu movement poses a considerable threat to the sustainability of the Korean Wave.

Limited range of consumers

Another challenge that the Korean Wave has faced in China is that it has not reached a wide range of audience across different regions and social levels. According to a study, the Korean dramas are more popular among young, urban, female population with higher living standards. In China, the Korean Wave is often described as a phenomenon that is only applied to “Hahanzu,” a population that loves not only the Korean pop culture but also every other aspect of the country – so they learn the Korean language, buy Korean products and dress up like Korean celebrities. Although it is true that the Korean dramas, movies and pop music are widely distributed and discussions about the Korean Wave are also

³⁴ It is difficult to quantify the anti-Korean statements online, but Kang analyses that the anti-Korean sentiment started becoming visible online in 2004 and 2005 when various historical issues surfaced. Since 2006, anti-Korean statements further increased as they also targeted the Korean Wave or South Korea’s cultural products.

³⁵ Kang, 468

commonly detected, it is often underestimated that the Chinese people accept and consume Korean pop culture at different levels. In particular, Korean academic or media accounts concerning the Korean Wave tend to highlight the “Hahanzu” population. However, on the other end of the spectrum, there is a population that consciously refuses to consume Korean cultural products. In the middle of the spectrum are the people who do not reject and sometimes enjoy the Korean pop culture but are not much interested in further engagement.

In consideration of China’s one-party dominant system with a high level of power centralization at the top, having a limited range of active consumers who go beyond merely watching Korean dramas can be a negative signal to the durability of the Korean Wave. When the elites view the Korean Wave as a temporary phenomenon that is only relevant to a certain part of the population, they do not pay much attention to the utility of the Korean pop culture in their diplomatic policy agenda but only focus on its potential threat to the existing political system. So far, the Chinese government has expressed its concern over the inflow of new ideas that may conflict with the official Party ideology, and thus has taken legal measures, for instance, to limit the air time of foreign dramas. The governmental response to the Korean Wave has been undertaken without analyzing the overall impact of the Korean pop culture or promoting cultural understanding between the two countries. Given the 1.3 billion population of China, the consumption of the Korean cultural goods by a partial population still has considerable economic and cultural implications.

Chapter Four: A New Dimension: The Internet and Social Networking

In recent years, the Korean Wave has been spread through a new, powerful route – the Internet. Despite the government’s attempts to limit the number of Korean soap operas allowed in China, Chinese audiences use online video websites to easily access not only Korean dramas but also virtually all other TV programs and movies from South Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the US and even Europe. Tudou.com (www.tudou.com) and Youku (www.youku.com) are the two biggest online video websites in China – they account for 80% of the market. These websites were launched in 2005 and 2006 respectively and started off as a Youtube-like video sharing websites. While they initially focused on user-generated video contents, unlike western counterparts, they had no time limit to videos that the users upload. Consequently, lengthy videos including famous dramas and movies were quickly shared on these websites. In addition, after the announcement of the 50% cut to Korean dramas in the early 2006, a rapidly increasing number of Chinese audiences turned to these websites to watch Korean dramas. On the video hosting websites, Korean dramas with Chinese subtitles have shown up within 12 hours of primary broadcasting in Korea.

As more and more people visited the online video websites to watch dramas and movies, in the late 2000s, these websites shifted their focus to providing access to domestic and foreign TV shows and movies, rather than UCCs (user-created contents). Moreover, they have come up with various ways to resolve the copyright issues – for instance, Youku signed a contract for strategic cooperation with SBS, one of the three major broadcasting stations in Korea, to purchase more than 200 Korean dramas including the ones that will be produced in the next three years.³⁶ Youku and Tudou.com have also agreed to share video contents with each other to maximize profits and have common ownership over famous video contents. China’s online video websites have continued to rapidly grow; Youku’s revenue reached

³⁶ Jang Gil-Soo, “China Online Video Sites Playing Survival Games,” *Electronic Times*, 24 April 2010, <http://www.etnews.com/news/print.html?id=201004240001>

31 million USD in 2009. Furthermore, according to a study, a number of the users of these websites has reached 240 million, and 40 million of them do not watch TV at all.

Under these circumstances, the Korean Wave has certainly made its own way to survive and even flourish through the Internet. Both Tudou.com and Youku have a “Korean drama” menu on the top of their homepages. The popularity of Korean dramas is clearly visible. On the Youku website, the Korean drama that has the most views in the history is *Temptation of Wife*, which recorded more than 206 million views. Compared to dramas from other countries, this number definitely stands out – for example, the most viewed Taiwanese drama had 154 million hits and American drama had 120,000 hits.³⁷ In addition, the popular Korean dramas on these Chinese websites received as many as 70,000 comments, which demonstrate the Chinese audience’s high level of interest in Korean dramas. There were a number of instances where the Chinese government tried to keep the spread of video contents under control – in 2009, the Chinese government shut down more than 700 websites including 30 video sharing websites that violated copy rights laws or contained illegal pornography. Thus, it seems that government’s tight control over the Internet could easily interrupt the Korean Wave at least in a short term, especially considering most users of the online video websites are youth or young adults who are the main consumers of the Korean Wave. However, it is interesting that both Youku and Tudou.com received government permission to operate in 2008 – with the so-called SARFT (State Administration on Radio, Film and Television) license, these websites have continued to expand their services.

³⁷This information was accessed on July 18th 2011, http://www.youku.com/v_playlist/c_97.html

Chapter Five: “Soap-Opera” Diplomacy?

This section of the essay explores the utility of the Korean Wave as a diplomatic tool that might improve the bilateral relations between South Korea and China, particularly in the contemporary context. In recent years, South Korea-China relations have been going downhill. Especially since the inauguration of President Lee Myung-Bak, one of the most common criticisms against his administration has been his lack of expertise on China. Interestingly these criticisms were not something expected in the beginning of his presidency. Upon the establishment of the Lee administration, the president publicly declared that he would overpass the “era of ideology” and step into the new “era of practicality.” Concerning relations to China, one of the three diplomatic priorities along with North Korea and the US, Lee emphasized closer ties with China would play an essential role in building stability in Northeast Asia. For example, he had a summit with Paramount Leader Hu Jintao right following his first visit to the US, and the two leaders agreed to upgrade bilateral relations to a level of strategic partnership.

However, a few issues have slowly cooled down the South Korea – China relations. One of the most contentious issues has been inarguably the Northeast Project, an academic project implemented by the Chinese government to conduct research on the historical, geographical and anthropological issues of China’s northeast region. At the peak of the controversy, the Korean public has been highly disturbed by China’s assertion that ancient Korean kingdoms of Gojoseon and Goguryeo are part of Chinese history. As domestic opinion quickly turned its back on China, the Korean government was not able to proceed with any “practical” conversation with China. The Lee administration came to be trapped in a dilemma – its open discontent with the project was explicit enough to weaken the bilateral relations but not strong enough to satisfy the Korean public.

North Korean-related issues have consistently undermined the relations between South Korea and China as well. For example, in contrast to the South Korean government’s position, the Chinese government has viewed all North Korean refugees as illegal immigrants and repatriated them back to

North Korea. Furthermore, China has been also walking on a different path from South Korea in terms of North Korea's nuclear issue – Beijing has been reluctant to support any UN resolutions against North Korea for the nuclear test and missile launches. Since North Korea is highly dependent on China for its economic needs, any sanctions against North Korea cannot be effective without China's cooperation. More recently, after a North Korean torpedo sank a South Korean navy ship and killed 46 sailors in March 2010, the South Korea-China relations visibly deteriorated, because the Chinese government avoided supporting the Korean government or blaming North Korea. The Lee administration has fully focused its security agenda on the South Korea-US alliance. This strategy resulted in a communication gap between South Korea and China, when security talks between them were needed the most.

In this situation, whether or not the Korean Wave that has considerable influencing power over the Chinese public can be utilized to reshape the bilateral relations between South Korea and China is an interesting question. So far, as discussed in previous sections, the Korean Wave has not produced any meaningful, positive response from the top party officials in China. However, Korean pop culture has a potential to become modelled after the famous “Ping Pong Diplomacy,” in which sports paved the way to the restoration of Sino-U.S. relations four decades ago. If Korean cultural products can attract a wider range of general audience, a bottom-up process of delivering the public's intention to improve the relationship with South Korea can be expected. Bilateral, governmental-led initiatives to promote the cultural exchange between the two countries can also be an effective way to boost the South Korea-China relations. On that note, the rest of this section suggests a few specific strategies for the “Soap-opera Diplomacy”.

First of all, the South Korean government should become less engaged in advertising Korean cultural products but instead concentrate its resources on diversifying the cultural contents. The Korean Wave has been partially relying on both direct and indirect governmental supports and thus sometimes is perceived as a product of South Korea's cultural imperialism. Promotion of more variety of cultural goods such as traditional music, theater performances and fine arts, which have been hardly introduced to China,

can help by suggesting different aspects of the Korean culture relatively distant from ideological or political concerns. Furthermore, any contentious or sensitive issues, particularly related to the history of the two countries, should be dealt with through separate channels, not in the cultural interactions.

Although Korea's historical dramas introduced to China are usually made by private productions and do not necessarily represent the official view of the government, seemingly insignificant scenes from a number of these historical dramas have caused discontent of the Chinese public.³⁸ In contrast, dramas dealing with family issues or romance have received more positive response from the Chinese audience. Contemporary dramas with more diverse storylines that can highlight the commonality of the two societies will make the Chinese audience feel more comfortable accepting the Korean culture.

The significant imbalance of cultural exchange between South Korea and China should be reduced for the long-term stability of the Korean Wave in China. In 2005, China exported USD 741,000 worth of TV dramas to South Korea, while imports of Korean dramas marked USD 10.9 million.³⁹ The trade imbalance has been consistent; China has imported 10-15 times more cultural products from Korea than it has exported. Under the circumstances where the Korean pop culture dominates the majority of the cultural exchange, the Korean Wave will be eventually alienated from the Chinese public that has strong cultural pride. There has been a number of TV dramas and movies that were produced by joint production between South Korea and China, but they failed to meet the quality expectations and thus did not get much attention from both countries. Bilateral efforts to combine the strengths of each country's production (e.g. South Korea's filming techniques and China's stage production techniques) will generate economic and cultural gains. In addition, a loosening of protectionist measures by the South Korean government and more inflow of the Chinese cultural products into South Korea are essential to broaden

³⁸ For instance, in a Korean historical drama *Queen Seon-Duk*, some costumes of the main characters were criticized by Chinese viewers of copying Chinese traditional costumes.

³⁹ Yang Young-gyun, "History and Prospect of Exchange of TV Drama between Korea and China: Opening and Control," *World Congress of Korean Studies*, <http://www.ikorea.ac.kr/congress/upload/%EC%9E%90%EC%9C%A03-3%EC%96%91%EC%98%81%EA%B7%A0.pdf>: 9

the understanding of each other's culture and form a friendly environment in which the two countries can expand areas of cooperation.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This thesis examined the impact of the Korean Wave phenomenon in China and its cultural and political implications, mainly through looking at the Korean TV dramas exported to China. Since the late 1990s, The Korean soap operas achieved an enormous success in China. One of the main reasons for the popularity of the Korean dramas was that they skilfully blended the Western and Confucian cultures. Deng's open door policy had made the Chinese people eager to explore the Western culture, but the American or Japanese cultural products were too explicit about violent and sexual scenes that the Chinese public did not feel comfortable with. Therefore, the Korean dramas provided a convenient and culturally safe alternative. Moreover, the South Korean government, in the midst of economic crisis, saw the Korean Wave as a "killing two birds with one stone" opportunity that can generate economic gains and be used as a soft power tool. With financial and policy support from the government, more and more Korean dramas flowed into the Chinese market.

However, the Korean Wave has also faced numerous challenges, especially from the top. The Chinese Central Party that plays a dominant role in policy-making has considered the Korean Wave a temporary phenomenon affecting a selected population. Korean cultural products have sparked political concerns among the political elites that the new ideas and culture flowing into China may contribute to weaken the official ideology and power structure. The anti-Korean Wave movement led by the nationalist and conservative factions also reflects this sentiment against the popularity of the Korean pop culture in China. This movement has been strengthened especially since South Korean and China started experiencing conflict over some contentious historical issues.

Despite these challenges, the Korean Wave seems to be still strong and lively. In particular, the timely development of the Internet has contributed to providing an easy access to Korean dramas in China. An increasing number of people has been using online video websites to watch Korean dramas and share their thoughts on them. Under this circumstance, the Korean Wave has a potential to be used as a tool for

“Soap-opera” Diplomacy. In recent years, South Korea and China have failed to reconcile the differences in their opinions on China’s Northeast Project and North Korean-related issues. In efforts to resolve the aggravated relations between the two countries, Seoul and Beijing should consider to promote a more balanced and consistent cultural exchange, which can play an effective role in broadening the mutual understanding and cooperation. Because a great number of Korean cultural products has already arrived in China and reached high publicity, South Korea has good soil to work with – for the long-term stability of the phenomenon, the cultural contents introduced to China need to be more diversified and the contentious bilateral issues sparking the anti-Korean Wave movement should be addressed through separate channels. In addition, the trade imbalance between the South Korean and Chinese cultural products should be reduced to avoid the misinterpretation of South Korea’s hallyu-promoting policy as a part of cultural imperialism.

Before concluding the thesis, it is noteworthy to identify a major challenge in this research. It was difficult to obtain data sets that demonstrate the over-time changes of variables. For example, the data from the Chicago Council or BBC poll on the Chinese perception of South Korea was based on one-time survey, and therefore, it was unable to draw its changes over the years.⁴⁰ In addition, the research could have been further improved with more data on the Korean Wave itself over time. The literature on the Korean Wave in China has been mainly based on Korean scholars’ qualitative research including the analysis of media reports and interviews of some Chinese academics. In order to obtain more precise and useful information on the Korean Wave, it is suggested that the Korean and Chinese academics collaborate in collecting and analyzing quantitative data on the relevant issues such as the numerical or demographic changes in video download of Korean dramas.

⁴⁰ However, the BBC poll evaluated the international opinion on South Korea for the first time in 2010; in a long-term, this annual survey is expected to track the changes.

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