



Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe, eds., *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*

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WITH THE CURRENT popularity of *hallyu* (or the Korean Wave of popular culture) outside the borders of South Korea it is no exaggeration to say that the academic interest that *hallyu* has engendered has become a virtual industry in itself. One particularly fruitful form of research has focused on the reception and consumption of *hallyu* outside South Korea, allowing researchers to combine the study of South Korean cultural products and knowledge of local tastes. Some of the most innovative and enlightening material on *hallyu* has appeared in work from outside the Korean peninsula, such as IWABUCHI and CHUA eds. (2008) and CHUA (2012). These works have focused on contextualizing the rise of *hallyu* within previous transnational cultural flows from outside and inside Asia. One problem with much of the current crop of literature on *hallyu* is that it has a repetitive feel to it, and often seeks to explain the spread of *hallyu* through a series of vague, essentializing generalizations about shared Asian Confucian values or innate Korean virtues. At its worst, recent studies have been more celebratory rather than critical and analytical, with some publications bordering on fandom.

What has not been so well explored in the current literature is the position of *hallyu* within the historical context of twentieth-century Korean popular culture, and this is a gap that *The Korean Popular Culture Reader* fills. The volume moves beyond reception studies and the discussion of transnational cultural flows and focuses on an analysis of form and production. The great strength of the collection lies in the historical analysis that successfully contextualizes changes in popular cultural discourses over the course of the last one hundred years. This contextualization provides an effective platform upon which to understand the recent rise of Korean popular culture. Korean cultural workers have not been working within a vacuum over the last few years or just in response to external influences; rather, there has been an ongoing negotiation between Korean cultural practices of the present and

the past—practices that have been shaped by the colonial experience, ideological and national division, authoritarian government, democracy, economic development, stagnation, and recovery.

The focus of the book is not just screen culture—film, TV dramas, pop music videos, and online gaming that have dominated most *hallyu* discussions, but also other forms of popular culture—graphic novels, food, fashion, and sports that have helped make up the Korean experience. The seventeen essays in this volume are organized chronologically in terms of topic and according to genre, a structure that allows the reader to traverse the past and present in sections organized around one form of popular culture.

There are many highlights in this compendium but notable amongst them is Travis Workman's extensive analysis of heroes in the "hidden-hero" genre (acknowledging the contributions of ordinary citizens to the construction of society) of North Korean films. Workman applies a psychoanalytical approach to the analysis of important examples of the genre from the 1970s and 1980s. He is part of a growing trend in U.S. and South Korean academia to reevaluate North Korean films made in their heyday of the 1970s and 1980s.

Current Western research and some university-level studies of Korean popular culture carried out with little or no reference to original Korean sources have significantly impacted the potential for a constructive, discursive dialogue between South Korean scholarship and that of other countries. To help fill this gap, this collection provides translations of significant South Korean scholarly analyses of popular culture. One notable example in this collection is "Bend it like a Man of Chosun: Sports Nationalism and Colonial Modernity of 1936" which begins with the nationalistic frenzy that gripped the South Korean nation during the 2002 Japan-Korea World Cup. Jung Hwan Cheon's anecdotal and personal view of this remarkable event is provided from the point of view of a football fan and self-confessed nationalist who describes in a state of some disbelief the fever that gripped a nation that hitherto had been at best lukewarm towards the beautiful game. The author traces the roots of this modern sports nationalism to a far more significant and famous Korean triumph, Sohn Kee-chung's victory in the 1936 Berlin Olympics when he was racing under the Japanese flag. In a lively and informative manner, the author argues that this sports nationalism grew with the expansion of the mass media in the colonial state.

Stephen Epstein and James Turnball conduct in-depth analyses of the visual codes of music videos of Korean girl groups from 2007 and conclude by questioning the assumption that the work produced by these groups is empowering or liberating for women. Roald Maliangkay provides a fascinating analysis of the changing public consumption and perception of pop music during the Seo Taiji phenomenon of the 1990s. Seo was a star who blended hip hop and a reggae look with pulling power and arguably represented the first ripples of what would become the Korean Wave.

One definite lacuna in the book lies in the lack of coverage of North Korea, a problem acknowledged in the introduction where Kyung Hyun Kim questions whether North Korea has a popular culture—a question that is addressed in Workman's article on the hero in DPRK cinema. For a Korean popular culture reader, the North Korean

question needs to be a bigger part of the discourse. If North Korea does not have what can be called a “popular culture,” it certainly has something that employs similar forms of popular culture found in the south. Whether we find the cultural scene or cultural policies of the DPRK bland or repugnant is not enough: films, TV dramas, pop music, comics, sports, and food are known by, loathed by, endured by, and perhaps even (as Travis Workman suggests) enjoyed by over twenty-five million North Koreans, and that is reason enough to offer some insight into this culture in terms of both form and production. Fortunately, texts like FRANK ed. (2012) have done much to fill this gap, but there are still many outstanding questions about the comics, pop music, TV dramas, and films of the DPRK; notably, if collectively they do not function as popular culture, then how do they function? Are subversive readings of DPRK art possible, as has been argued by LEE (2000) and EPSTEIN (2003), or not? What of the popular cultural forms that remain common to both north and south—the folk song *Arirang*, amongst others, that appears and reappears in film, theater, and even in sports events: are these common cultural forms identical in both the north and south? The role of Shin Sang-ok in popularizing DPRK film is a point well made by Steven Chung, one of the contributors to this book, but questions remain about the subsequent impact of Shin on DPRK film in the period that followed his flight from the north. These are all legitimate questions for analysis and consideration.

This lacuna withstanding, this is a solid collection of articles on Korean popular culture, which moves beyond *hallyu* analysis and provides important historical background. This book is suitable for postgraduate and undergraduate cultural studies courses but also for the current crop of Korean Studies university students, many of who have developed an interest in Korea largely because of the influence of South Korean *hallyu*. At university level, a true understanding of contemporary Korean popular cultural practice requires an appreciation of the historical context and also some theoretical insight, and this book provides both.

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