

# Constructing a New Image - Korean Popular Culture in Taiwan

Sang-Yeon Sung

---

## Introduction

This paper discusses how the recent influx of Korean popular culture in Taiwan has dramatically influenced a transformation in image construction of South Korea. South Korea and Taiwan share a similar historical past from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as both underwent Japanese colonial rule and became independent after Second World War, both have been under the control of authoritarian governments at various times but have now transformed themselves into nations with two party political systems and both have achieved democratic reform through economic strength. Although South Korea and Taiwan share similar past and are geographically very close to each other, Taiwanese did not had positive image of South Korea mainly because South Korea broke their diplomatic relationship with Taiwan in 1992 in order to have a new relationship with Mainland China. According to an article published in the *Taipei Times* on 29<sup>th</sup> of June, 2000, Taiwanese have a love-hate relationship with South Korea, and South Korea's severing of ties with Taipei did not help diplomatic relations. The article, however, emphasized the influence Korean popular culture in Taiwan and the role it is playing in sweetening the once-bitter relationship. The author of the piece argued that, with the burgeoning Korean fever to Taiwanese society, Taiwan could not longer hold onto long-held negative views of South Korea (*Taipei Times*, 29, June, 2000).

Through several visits to Taiwan between 1999 and 2003 for my research, I have experienced dramatic changes in the ways that Taiwanese perceive Koreans and Korean society after the emergence of Korea popular culture in Taiwan; the so-called ‘Korean Wave’. Through this presentation, I would like to focus on the ways by which the influx of Korean soap operas and music have contributed to the rebuilding of the image of Korea in Taiwan. This paper is based on research conducted from 2001 to 2003 in Taipei, Taiwan, and continuous research through the internet, a website, and email until recently. This project relies primarily on individual ideas expressed through 30 personal interviews, emailed questionnaires, and website interviews. The subjects of my interviews were professors, professional radio disc jockeys, sales managers at CD companies, people who work at CD shops, television producers, students, journalists, and music critics.

## What is *Hanliu*?

Beginning in 1999, the term *hanliu* (韓流) / 한류(*hallyu*), meaning ‘Korean wave, trend, or wind’, has become very well-known in Asian countries, beginning with Chinese-speaking areas such as the People’s Republic of China (mainland China), the Republic of China (Taiwan), Hong Kong, and Singapore, and later spreading to Japan, Thailand, Mongolia, and Vietnam. *Hanliu* refers to the phenomenon of Korean popular culture, disseminated primarily through the mass media, enjoying a broad popularity outside of Korea. The *hanliu* phenomenon includes television dramas, movies, popular music and their associated celebrities that are identified as Korean. It is not clear exactly when the term *hanliu* started to be popular among Asian people, but the public media began recognizing Korean popular culture in mainland China in 1997, when the national China Central Television Station (CCTV) aired a Korean television drama *What is Love All About, ?* which turned out to be a big hit and follow by that another Korea television

drama *Star Is in My Heart* (별은 내 가슴에) was broadcasted in both China and Taiwan and became a big hit in both countries. Since then, people started to recognize the popularity of Korean popular culture in Asia and the term *hanliu* became more intriguing topic in Asian societies.

According to many scholars who have written about this flow, *hanliu* owes its existence mostly to the media liberalization that swept across the Asia in 1990s (Shim 2006: 28) and due to the recent economic crisis in Asia has made Asian buyers to prefer the cheaper Korean products compared with Japanese and Hong Kong product at that time. According to Strait Times published 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2003, Korean television dramas were a quarter of the price of Japanese ones, and a tenth of the price of Hong Kong television dramas as of 2000. The producer of GTV station in Taiwan Lili, also told me through her interview that the main reason that they first introduced Korean soap opera to Taiwanese is because of its cheap price compared to Japanese products. According to her, Korean soap operas were of a much better quality than Taiwanese local products but were cheaper than other foreign products. The soaps were dubbed in Mandarin and aired. These initial imports deeply impacted Taiwanese audiences primarily because of the popularity of the music. One group in particular, the pop duet ‘CLON,’ can be said to be *hanliu* pioneers in Taiwan as they were among the first musical groups to reach mass audiences in Taiwan. The initial popularity of the music in soap operas and music groups such as CLON eventually influenced the popularity of Korean soap operas in Taiwan.

After CLON’s first concert in Taipei, Taiwan, “Nanxing 101” (南港 101), in 1998 CLON obtained so much fame that Taiwanese fan clubs often visited Korea to show their love for CLON. According to ROCK Records Company, its first album sold more than 400,000 copies in Taiwan—many more than competing foreign and local albums at that time. According to people in the music industries with whom I spoke, CLON had not previously been marketed in Taiwan,

but caught on quickly because of their strong masculine image and powerful dance skill. CLON provided very strong impression of South Korean popular music to be powerful and fun to listen to. CLON's music was also "easy listening," danceable music, Taiwanese audiences could listen effortlessly, without understanding the lyrics. In Taiwan, interest in CLON led to interest in Korean pop artists in general, and CLON's success is considered the starting-point of *hanliu* in Taiwan. The success of CLON and soap operas influenced the decision to actively import Korean popular culture. From 1999 to 2004, Taiwan became one of the biggest of importers of Korean dramas, importing even more Korean products than mainland China (Kim, 2004).

## Why Korea?

Taiwan had long favored Japanese pop culture primarily due to Japan's post-war economic power. Taiwan also was actively involved in the active cultural flow among Chinese-speaking areas such as Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and Singapore (Guy 2002; Iwabuchi 2002; Yang 2002). By 2000, however, Korean popular cultural forms began taking positions in Taiwanese society alongside, and often replacing, long-beloved Japanese soap operas and Hong Kong pop music.

While I was doing research in Taiwan and after I had talked with many Taiwanese, a thought that repeatedly came to mind was "Why Korea?" Why did the Taiwanese suddenly become interested in Korean popular culture? Interviews with numerous Taiwanese and observations I made independently suggest several answers. Although I previously cited media liberalization and economic drop of Asia as reasons for the beginning of *hanliu*, I would suggest three intangible factors often raised by my interviewees as important to the popularity of Korean popular culture in contemporary Taiwan and how these factors have contributed to constructing a new image of South Korea from the old negative image.

Confidence, a vivid display of cultural and manufacturing competence, was identified as a primary factor regarding the appeal of Korean popular culture. According to Taiwanese informants, the high quality of Korean material and cultural exports have combined to influence Taiwanese perceptions regarding South Korea. Many Taiwanese consider South Korea an advanced and modernized country, which has claimed an honorable position in the global world. According to an editorial piece in the *Taipei Times*,

Taiwanese must admit they are slow to implement reforms and craft new social policies. The South Koreans are much more brave and determined about seeking innovation, and accepting challenges. (*Taipei Times*, 12 December 2002)

The term *confidence* (自信感/자신감) was often mentioned by respondents when they characterized South Korean popular culture. Most used the term when they described the performance of South Korean pop singers. Taiwanese see in South Korean pop music a confident character, even if it is only the confidence of energy expended in singing and dancing. Many Taiwanese interviewees said South Korean confidence has recently made them curious about Korean society, and this curiosity has led them to learn more about Korean culture. According to Lai, a journalist for the gossip magazine *Apple*, “Korean music is very strong and projects confidence. Just like their nationalism. They are strong and confident” (interview with author, 3 May 2002). As Lai points out, this may be one reason why performers who project exaggerated masculine or sexy attitudes are favored in Taiwan.

The second factor that emerged through interviews and media reports in Taiwan concerned a strong sense of group identity and nationalism evident in the intense unity displayed at international events such as the World Cup in 2002. After the World Cup match in 2002, many people reported that they admired the solidarity Koreans showed by cheering for the South Korean national team. According to Professor Lin, a professor at Academia Sinica,

During World Cup season, I was in Ganneng, Korea. Some Taiwanese may say that Korea did some trick to make Korean team benefit. But I was just fascinated by the atmosphere and their national solidarity. I wrote a postcard to my niece and told her that this is Korean nationalism. We have to learn from this World Cup. It was quite impressive, and I learned a very important message from Koreans. (Interview with author, 1 April 2002)

Taiwanese are fascinated by South Korean nationalism because they believe it is something Taiwanese need and something to learn from. Many interviewed Taiwanese claimed that Koreans are more nationalistic than Taiwanese.

With the political and economic transformations of the 1980s and 1990s, such as the process of democratization and economic growth, Taiwanese identity changed dramatically: it became increasingly inclusive, proud, and nationalistic (Brown 2004:13). However, most Taiwanese respondents said Taiwanese long for a more unified national identity. Many noticed a connection between *hanliu* and Taiwanese searching for their national identity. Journalist Lai says that “The Taiwanese accepting Korean popular culture connects this relationship with the recognition of Taiwanese searching for their identity” (interview with author, 15 February 2002). The nationalism projected by South Koreans during international events motivated Taiwanese to experience more South Korean popular culture. The confidence and nationalism shown by Koreans in their popular culture and international sports inspired many Taiwanese to look into their cultural identity as well (Lai, interview with author, 15 February 2002).

Many Taiwanese claim they get a sense of the nationalism of the Korean people from South Korean popular culture. Mally said, “I think Koreans are very proud of their culture and tradition. When I look at Korean soap operas or movies, I am always so amazed. They try to express ‘Korea.’ Look at all these ancient dramas? *Dae Jang Geum* for example: I could just feel how Koreans are proud of their tradition and culture. The clothes, food, history, and all those things explored—it still doesn’t feel like old past. Korean people still feel so confident about themselves” (interview with author, 15 June 2004).

A third factor related to South Korean popular culture's thriving presence in Taiwan concerns a connection many Taiwanese express to an "East Asian sentiment." The connection Taiwanese audiences feel with Korean dramas and images in Korean pop music videos appeals to a sense of East Asian cultural identity; a connection that extends beyond the physical boundaries of Taiwan. In interviews, individuals expressed that the values and sentiments they see in Korean soap operas are much more acceptable than Western products because they derive from Confucianism and are the real sentiments of real Asian lives such as family values and respecting elders. In this sense, some Taiwanese have developed a sense of empathy for Koreans due to ideas regarding shared core cultural values. According to Cho Hae-Joang, "although the products that have recently been called the Korea wave are said to possess are similar to American products, they are said to possess the distinction of evoking a sense of familiarity among people in Asia" (Cho 2005:177). She also added that the non-West people who have so far confirmed their existence only through the West are finding new opportunities to construct an alternate consciousness through the sharing of popular culture.

## Old to New Image Transformation

*Hanliu* has played an important role in the transformation of the Taiwan and South Korea relationship. The *hanliu* boom inspired a mutual interest that has led many Taiwanese to remark on the influence of Korean dramas and pop music in renewing their relationship with South Korea. Some can point to a time (arguable still existent) when Taiwanese maintained an image of Korea as "filled with roughness, violent tendencies, and lack of material and cultural refinement" (Kim 2005:189) or as a country ruled by political unrest and male-centrism" (Kim 2005:189). According to scholars such as Kim Hyun-mi, the image of Korean society took a sharp turn with the trendy dramas, which satisfy "the tastes of the video generation,"

“emphasizing visual imagery,” “with fast tempo and cheerful background music,” “following the latest fashion” (Kim 2005:189). Images formerly provided by Korean dramas and the Taiwanese perception of Korea as an “impoverished country” have been replaced by images represented by trendy dramas, furnishing the satisfaction of “material brilliance” and “simultaneity of desires” to match the capitalist economic development of both countries (Kim 2005:194).

Through the interviews with 30 Taiwanese and several feedbacks from the website interview I have conducted, I have realized that Taiwanese have gained much more positive image of South Korea through *hanliu* phenomenon. The connections they made among music videos, music, and dramas on the one hand and cultural identity on the other suggests that the Taiwanese fascination with Korean popular culture reflects a combination of admiration and desire to emulate it. For the Taiwanese, Korea stands out as a country that has successfully negotiated a space within global and East Asian society. Longing for internal unification and resistance to Westernization provided a chance for Korean culture to penetrate the Taiwanese market. Therefore, the negative image of South Korea now transformed as a nation with the confidence and strong sense of nationalism and nation that has successful cultural development whom skillfully blended Western and Asian values to create its own.

The influence of Korean pop culture that penetrated the Taiwanese popular cultural market led many Taiwanese to visit Korea or motivated them to study Korean history, economics, language, and culture. According to the website KOFACE (Asia Cultural Industry Exchange Foundation), the number of Taiwanese people learning Korean has increased. Until *hanliu* became popular, many Taiwanese used to learn Japanese and English only, and there was hardly anywhere to learn Korean; but according to the cultural language center in Wenhua University (Culture University) in Taiwan, about 1200 Taiwanese study Korean every year, and the number studying Japanese totals only 800 per year..

The *hanliu* phenomenon has provided an opportunity for Taiwan and Korea to build positive relationships after the breakup of diplomatic relations and provided a new image especially to Taiwanese about Korea. Through my research in Taiwan, I have also met with Taiwanese who still contains hostile attitudes towards Korea and who strongly criticized the quality of Korean popular culture as an imitation of Japanese and American product, and commented that in order to sustain its popularity in Taiwan, Koreans popular culture must constantly develop their quality and provide something new. However, to most of the Taiwanese, Korea was never a nation they wanted to look for. Through *hanliu*, Korea became a nation that many Taiwanese want to assimilate with. Therefore, I argue that *hanliu* in Taiwan reflects cultural similarities—and through it, Taiwan and South Korea are likely to continue building mutual understanding.