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**Citation**

Maliangkay, R. (2006). When the Korean wave ripples. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12766>

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# WHEN THE KOREAN WAVE RIPPLES

*Pop culture has become a major South Korean export. Only superlatives seem to apply to its popularity and sales in Asia. Superlatives also describe the scale on which illegal copies are sold, and the speed with which they appear.*



An image for free use on websites to show support for the anti-Korean Wave campaign

From the Japanese 'We Don't Want Something Like the Korean Wave!' website, <http://anti-korea.jugem.jp/>

Roald Maliangkay

## Beautiful faces

The 'Korean Wave' began in the late 1990s when Korean pop bands and talents became popular among teenagers in Japan, China and Taiwan, their popularity later spreading to Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The blend of (often surgically enhanced) good looks and presentation, slick dance tunes and the lack of profanity and sex – as befitting Confucian morals – have often been cited as the reasons for Korean pop stars' wide appeal across Asia. Films, television series and games followed the pop bands and talents and also did extremely well abroad, appealing to a much wider audience for more or less the same reasons, though the latter may also owe their success to more general pop culture-related factors such as the level and effective application of technology and the quality of the scenarios and actors.

The Wave gained true momentum in July 2004 when Korean KBS's *Kyōul yōn'ga* ('Winter Sonata') aired on Japan's NHK and viewer ratings reached 20%. The enormous fan base for Korean dramas is said to consist mostly of women 40 and older, some of whom have fallen in love with *Kyōul yōn'ga*'s leading character Chunsang, played by Bae Yong-joon – due to his good looks, passion, sincerity and good manners.<sup>1</sup> While Japan continues to be by far the most important market for this and other forms of Korean pop culture, the hype fuelled a phenomenon of Korean dramas throughout Asia.

The popularity of Korean cultural products has helped raise South Korea's

image abroad. A 2005 survey by the Korea Trade Centre showed that the country's image in China and Japan had improved considerably. I would, however, argue in favour of conservatism in assessing the extent of the hype. Yet, for editor of *Yazhou Zhoukan* Yau Lop Poon, the popularity of 'Winter Sonata' in Japan has the potential to warm the chilly feelings of the past. He argues that it is a new era for Korea-Japan relations, and that people are talking about the magic of the beautiful faces.

## Backlash

The hype has also provoked a backlash, some even calling for a ban on the import of Korean pop culture. Last year, Zhang Guoli, one of China's top television actors, branded the Korean Wave a 'cultural invasion' and urged his countrymen to buy Chinese products instead. In January 2006, China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television announced that Korean dramas were to be cut by half, while the government of Taiwan, where Korean dramas are by far the most popular, was reportedly considering a ban on foreign dramas.

In Japan, blogs and manga began to express frustration over the Korean Wave's 'cultural imperialism' and Korean nagging regarding the war period, targeting above all Prime Minister Roh Moo-hyun and actor Bae.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, BoA, a Korean female vocalist who has also had enormous success in Japan – the youngest singer ever to sell 10 million records in both Korea and Japan – hasn't become the focus of criticism, perhaps due to her ability to speak Japanese. In 2005, new rows between Korea and Japan over compensation

and territorial claims fuelled animosity that by the end of the year undermined some of the newly acquired interest and understanding.

## Piracy

The Wave may be short-lived for an entirely different reason: the violation of laws protecting cultural and intellectual property. With advances in digital media, copyright infringement has become prevalent and difficult to prevent. Despite, or perhaps because of, the sales potential the Chinese market promises, Korean entertainment companies face an uphill battle. Foreign products are subjected to stringent censorship and high import tariffs while piracy is estimated to be as high as 85%.<sup>3</sup> The latter led last year to Korea's national radio and television channels KBS and MBC cancelling their contracts with their Chinese counterparts after large numbers of illegal copies were intercepted before the official launch.<sup>4</sup> Since the early 1990s, China, in its pursuit of WTO accession, has conceded several judicial changes that provide a reasonable legal framework for protecting cultural and intellectual property but, as Andrew Mertha shows, effective enforcement is another matter.<sup>5</sup>

A recent report by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) calls for greater market access for foreign record companies, to allow them 'to play a better role as partners in the fight against piracy.'<sup>6</sup> Yi Yōngnok of South Korea's Copyright Screening and Settlement Committee's Research Institute maintains that Korean companies should work with local companies, as they could then file

lawsuits together. Korean companies also count on their government's support. In August 2005 the South Korean government announced plans to invest approximately 100 billion won (some € 86.4m) to open 15 cultural centres across Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe to promote the Wave, which will also likely increase diplomatic efforts to thwart piracy. Chi Honggu, a reporter for the Broadcasting Producers' Association Bulletin, suggests the Korean government should follow Japan's example and draw up a strategic plan specifically aimed at counterfeit products and piracy.<sup>7</sup>

Preventing the illegal exchange of digital media will be difficult. Although legislation may succeed, the formation of peer-to-peer (P2P) networks will prove difficult to stop. The French ruling of 8 December 2005 in favour of the user now allows French internet users to freely exchange large files with 'friends' abroad. Banning 'iso' format extensions might help reduce the number of illegal copies of digital media in circulation, as the remaining, mostly compressed files are less attractive. But problems will remain as the latter are more easily exchanged. Education and public information may have some effect, but if the real item is expensive and comes from overseas, warnings of the damage illegal copies inflict on foreign industries seem futile. At a forum on the Korean Wave held in Hong Kong last November, Chinese and Korean panel members agreed that more co-operation and cultural exchanges were necessary, and that Chinese-Korean co-productions would have greater chances for receiving legal support.

But perhaps things are not as bad as they seem. Some forms of illegal copying may actually work as appetisers while losses suffered in one area may be made up for by gains in others. Rowan Pease argues that illegal publishing in China has been a major driving force behind the marketing of Korean culture. Rather than through record sales, Korean companies make money through sponsorship and advertising deals. She quotes Hao Fang, a senior manager at News Corps' Starry Sky TV, as saying: 'Without piracy, there would be no Korean Wave'.<sup>8</sup>

This phenomenon of modern technology curbing the sales of physical media is not new, and mirrors developments in Korea where MP3 downloads have dramatically decreased CD sales since

1999. Korean 'talents' often have a shelf life of no more than a few years during which they are used as accessories in every possible medium. For two years before central Seoul's largest street-level store went bankrupt in spring 2005, the majority of the top ten records sold at Music Land came with small gifts and special packaging to entice customers. While these 'limited editions' may help sales of products associated with a popular star in Korea, they are unlikely to work for software or uninspired music and films. Although the pool of local talent waiting in the wings would seem to make the Korean pop fad unsustainable, the Korean films I have seen over the past year suggest that complacency in the form of predictable scenarios and too much emphasis on visual appeal may ironically be the biggest threat faced by the Wave. <

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## Notes

1. See Onishi Norimitsu. 23 December 2004. 'What's Korean for "Real Man"? Ask a Japanese Woman'. *The New York Times*.
2. See Thompson, Nevin. 29 July 2005. 'Inside the Japanese Blogosphere – The Anti-Korea Wave'. Harvard University's *Global Voice* blog website at <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu>; Norimitsu Onishi. 19 November 2005. 'Ugly images of Asian rivals become best sellers in Japan'. *The New York Times*.
3. International Federation of the Phonographic Industry. *The Recording Industry 2005 Commercial Piracy Report* at [www.ifpi.org](http://www.ifpi.org)
4. Chi Honggu. 25 January 2006. Hallyu chōjakkwōn 'irōk'e pohohaseyo' [Please protect the Korean Wave like this]. *PD yōnhap hoebo* [Broadcasting Producers' Association Bulletin] 447 at [www.pdnet.or.kr](http://www.pdnet.or.kr)
5. Mertha, Andrew C. 2005. *The Politics of Piracy: Intellectual Property in Contemporary China*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp.76 and 133.
6. IFPI. Op. cit.
7. See Chi Honggu. Op. cit.
8. See Rowan Pease. 'Internet, Fandom and K-Wave in China'. Howard, Keith, ed. 2006. *Korean Pop Music: Riding the Wave*. Dorset: Global Oriental, p.177.