THE KOREAN WAVE RIPPLES

When 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 spread to Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The trendy appeal (often of sexually enhanced) good looks and presentation, slick dance tunes and the lack of profanity and sex — as refraining from Confucian morals — have often been cited as the reasons for Korean 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 RBS’s Kyul yong (‘Winter Sonata’) aired on Japan’s NHK and viewers ratings reached 20%. The enormous fan base for Korean dramas is said to consist mostly of women aged 40 and older, some of whom have fallen in love with Kyul yong’s leading character Chunsang, played by Bae Yong joon — due to his good looks, passion, sincerity and good manners.1 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 drama 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 Yachou Zhoukan Yau Lap 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 far more 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.2 On the other hand, BnA, 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 83%.3 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.4 Since the early 1990s, China, in its pursuit of WTO accession, has conceded special packaging to entice customers. Education and public information may actually work as appetisers they seem. Some forms of illegal copies inflict on foreign industries may actually work as appetisers they seem. 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 livelihoods for those who do it for profit, while losses suffered in some areas 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 Hau Fang, a senior manager at News Corp’s Starry Sky TV, as saying: ‘Without piracy, there would be no Korean Wave.’5

This phenomenon of modern technology curbing the sales of physical media is not new, and mirrors developments in Korea where MP3 downloads have dramatically reduced 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 popfad unsustainable, the Korean films I have seen over the past year suggest that complexity in the form of predictable scenarios and too much emphasis on visual appeal may ironically be the biggest threat faced by the Wave.

Notes

4. Chi Honggu. 25 January 2006. Hallyu chiljugokun ’ink’t pohohaseyo’ [Please don’t protect the Korean Wave like this]. Pij yebbye hoon (Broadcasting Producers’ Association Bulletin) 447 at www.pdbm.or.kr