



The Korean Wave: Creating Their Model for the 21st Century?

A Global Lesson Plan

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Table of Contents

- 1. Introduction to Korea**
- 2. Education: Korean Style**
- 3. Religion in South Korea**
- 4. The Korean Economic Miracle**
- 5. Culinary Delights: Food in South Korea**
- 6. Korean Pop Culture: Entertainment for a Globalized World**
 - a. History of Korea's Popular Culture**
 - b. First Korean Wave and Television**
 - c. Second Korean Wave: K-Pop**
 - d. Critique of the K-Pop Music Industry**
- 7. South Korea Wrap Up**



The Korean Wave: Creating Their Model for the 21st Century?

Korea is asserting itself as a major force in the world! If you don't know much about Korea, please take notice, in more ways than one, it is a rising star on the world stage.

Introduction to Korea

Koreans have often thought of themselves as victims and indeed the 20th century has not been kind to the Republic of South Korea, a small country on a peninsula near China and Japan. In 1910 it was invaded by Japan, which continued to occupy and exploit Korea until its defeat by the US and its allies at the end of World War II, when the Japanese were permanently expelled from the peninsula. Soon after the end of World War II, a brutal civil war broke out in 1950 between North Korea, loyal to communist Soviet Union and China, and South Korea, who sided with the United States and its allies. At the end of the war in 1953, the country lay in ruins with the 38th parallel line dividing the north and south, a division continuing today. The U.S. was instrumental in helping to rebuild its ally in the south, establishing the Republic of Korea, commonly known as South Korea, but much of the credit should be attributed to the future-looking and hard-working people of Korea.



ing to rebuild its ally in the south, establishing the Republic of Korea, commonly known as South Korea, but much of the credit should be attributed to the future-looking and hard-working people of Korea.

I visited the country, called simply Korea, for a 10-day study tour, sponsored by the Korea Society. The mission of the tour was to provide a glimpse of modern Korea to

educators and curriculum writers from around the world. From my brief observations it didn't appear that Korea is a victim anymore. It is riding high on its economic miracle that has transformed the country from a per capita income of just \$100 (US) in the 1960s to a per capital income of \$40,000 (US) today. Indeed, it ranks as the 12th largest economy in the world, an astonishing accomplishment considering its historic situation. How could this small country (South Korea is about the size of the US state of Indiana) have transformed itself from a country mired in poverty and misery to a prosperous nation in just a short 60 year time span?

I pondered this question as I toured the country of Korea. The more I saw of the country and met its people, the more I felt that its story needed to be told to an American and global audience. Korea's rise, at least in the US, has remained somewhat of a secret. Its achievements have been overshadowed by its much larger and more familiar neighbors—China and Japan. Or the bizarre escapades of their Korean neighbors to the north. In fact, I told a knowledgeable friend about my trip to Korea and mentioned the global reach of the Korean Samsung Conglomerate and she responded: "Oh, I thought Samsung was from China."

Koreans have touted their economic miracle, and indeed it is true, but how did it happen? How can they export their wildly popular Korean bands—K-pop—to the rest of the world? How have they catapulted their economy from manufac-



turing “junk” to highly sophisticated consumer products ranging from cars to electronics? How do their students consistently place at the top of academic achievement across the world? But this success has come at a price: Korea also ranks at the top of youth suicides. The pressure to succeed in an increasingly competitive world takes its toll among those students in Korea who aren’t a match for such brutal competition. These are just a few of the questions and issues I want to address. I plan to use a big picture, holistic approach in studying this country. This means I will look at how major economic, social, political, religious, and business factors interact to produce the “Korean Miracle.”



The Korean Wave, photo Denise Ames

I will examine their economic system, known as the Miracle on the Han River (a river flowing through Seoul), where the country experienced rapid economic growth. The economy has a close relationship to Korea’s tumultuous political system that has since evolved from a dictatorship in the early 1960s to a stable democracy today. The Korean Wave, the phenomenal growth and appeal of popular Korean cultural products since the late 1990s, include K-pop music, cinema, and television dramas. In fact, I will give special attention to the Korean Wave—the incredible rise of Korean pop culture to become a global phenomenon. This should give a sense of the strategy the government and business use to develop and market a particular product. But I won’t just sing the praises of the ascent of Korea onto the world stage; I will talk about its blemishes as well.

Education: Korean Style

South Korea is known for its high educational achievements. It would not be an overstatement to say that South Korea is an education-obsessed country. Children must get into the right kindergarten, so that they can attend the right elementary school, then be accepted into the right middle school and high school, and finally into the right college, which gives them a springboard in landing the right job and marrying the right spouse. I am not exaggerating!



A Girl Studying

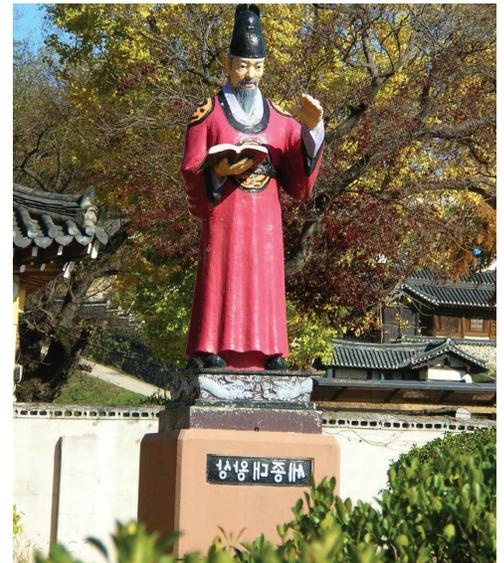
This fervor for studying is reflected in helping South Korea consistently rank at the top of the developed world in reading, math and science scores, but studies also show that Korean students come in last in a survey of student happiness at school. They also have the highest suicide rate in the developed world. The high-stress focus on education seems to have a downside. South Korea’s unhealthy preoccupation with exam results has deep roots—in particular, Confucian roots. Confucius, a 5th century BCE Chinese philosopher, extolled students to improve oneself through education, and the passage of the civil service examination, which has existed for over a thousand years. During this long history, the only means by which a male (no females took the exam) could socially advance was to pass the exam.

In reality, the odds of exam-success favored those high-status families who had the means to lavish money on instructors for the intense preparation needed to pass the rigorous exams. But there still remained a very slight possibility that a brilliant boy from a poor family could be mentored and pass the exam. High status and glory awaited the privileged few who scored well on the exam.

After the end of the Korean War in 1953, the country faced desperate conditions—a bombed-out infrastructure, few natural resources, and one of the lowest GDP's in the world. Once again, drawing on its Confucian heritage, the way to get ahead in these dire circumstances was via education. Koreans realized that the only true resources they had were the intellectual resources of its citizenry, and these resources had to be cultivated through education.

Today students are living out the legacy of the Confucian emphasis on education. Not only do students put a full day in attending regular classes, but the vast majority of teenagers do a double shift: they go to hagwons for after-hours study. A hagwon is a for-profit private institute, academy or “cram school” that helps students improve scores on the standardized exam, for a fee, sometimes a very hefty fee.

Increasingly, online hagwons are replacing traditional brick-and-mortar cram schools. One instructor at a hagwon, now has about 300,000 students take his online class at any given time, paying \$39 for a 20-



Statue of Confucius by a school, photo Denise Ames

hour course (traditional cram schools charge as much as \$600 for a course). He teaches them tricks for taking the timed exams, including shortcuts that students can take to solve a problem faster. Many of the instructors at hagwons are making more money than teachers, and some even crack the million dollar range! The hagwons have become a \$20 billion industry.

There are critics of the Korean approach to education. Former minister of education Lee Ju-ho, states “All this late-night study could lead to problems in enhancing their other skills, like character, creativity and critical thinking. Hagwon is all about rote learning and memorization.” Lee and others cite problems



Hagwon in Korea

with the college admissions procedures, which have been slow in looking beyond test scores to other criteria such as extracurricular activities and personal essays, as is common in many Western countries.

Obsession with education goes deeper than merely college admission procedures. From my observations, the Korean educational system is a reflection of the society at large. It is a relatively small country competing in a world of highly developed economies. Koreans have to develop and draw on their strengths in the global economy and these include a diligent and hard-working work force, preciseness, and taking an already existing product, such as the Apple I-phone, and copying and/or improving upon it, such as in the wildly successful smart phone creation: Samsung Galaxy. They have achieved success on the world stage because they have carved out a “success niche” in which they emphasize memorization skills, sheer endurance, and compliance to a prescribed path.



Hagwon in Korea

As the political leaders promote a “creative economy” as the

key to taking South Korea to the next level in its development, many analysts say the country would do well to take a more creative approach to education. Perhaps there will be a change in the educational focus from rote memorization to creativity and critical thinking, but it will also mean that the standardized tests, as they currently exist, would need serious revamping. I wonder what Confucius would say about that!

Religion in South Korea

“Koreans never met a religion they didn’t like.” Our tour guide made this pronouncement during my travels to the country. I thought that was an interesting remark! It certainly was better in my estimation than hating all religions except your own. I was a convert to our tour guide’s impression when I began to notice that public spaces were filled with Christian crosses, Daoist symbols, shamanistic stone settings, Buddhist temples, Confucian historic sites, and even a mosque that had recently been built. Religion was and is a very important part of Korean society.

First, I will define the term religion using the abbreviated version in my book *Waves of Global Change: A Holistic World History*. Religion is a system through which people interpret the nonhuman realm as if it were human and seek to influence it through symbolic communication. It often contains a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs. I will interpret religion broadly and include the belief systems found in Korea such as Buddhism, Christianity (both Protestant and Catholic), and even Confucianism and shamanism. This should give us a broad representation.

Let’s start our study of religion with shamanism since it is the oldest tradition and people probably know the least about it. Even though there are practicing Buddhists, Christians, and atheists, about 80% of Koreans adhere to the ancient beliefs of shamanism in some form. Koreans don’t seem to see a contradiction in holding dissimilar religious beliefs. Shamanism is the basic belief that all happiness stems from harmony with nature. It is linked to animism, the belief that everything has a spirit rather than the idea of a transcendent God. Koreans revere the mountain spirit, since the country is blanketed with mountains. Shamanism can take the form of simple rituals, such as a ceremony to cleanse the evil spirits from a new residence or initiate a new car. Some Koreans, especially women, visit their favorite shaman on a regular basis and ask for guidance in everyday life or have their future told.



Shaman carvings, photo Denise Ames



Korean Christian Church

There are now 55,000 practicing shamans in Korea more than the clergy of all the other religions put together. Shamanism is not carefully organized; there are no written texts, no established leaders, and most of the followers and practitioners are women. Now that is a recipe for officials to belittle it. But it is alive and well and continues in Korea today.

In recent decades the biggest foes of shamanism have been some of Korea’s fervent Christians. Christianity has exploded in South Korea with about 5.4 million of its 50 million people becoming Roman Catholic and

about 9 million more Protestants of many stripes. There are two divisions in Christianity: the elite and Evangelical. Elite Koreans find the Presbyterian style most appealing but lately charismatic Evangelical churches are growing at a full clip. The Yoido Full Gospel Church's 1 million members form the largest Pentecostal congregation on Earth! The noisy, emotional, form of worship at the church has led some observers to remark that it is the "shamanization" of Christianity.

Why the sudden popularity of Christianity? Although many reasons are cited, I find the recent explosive economic growth usually accompanies the rise of Protestant Christianity. Max Weber's Protestant ethic states that worldly success connotes God's blessing. The popularity of the Prosperity Gospel, widespread in the U.S. as well, seems to attest to the economic connection.

Buddhism has deep historical roots in Korea, arriving around 372 CE (common era) from China. Buddhism was/is like a great sponge, absorbing native shamanistic religions and blending them into Buddhist beliefs, a practice that continues today. Thus, the mountains that were believed to be the residence of spirits in pre-Buddhist times became the sites of Buddhist temples. As evidenced by the number of Koreans trekking to remote Buddhist mountaintop temples, such as the beautiful Haeinsa Temple, the intermingling of mountain spirits and Buddhism continues today. Unfortunately, fundamentalist Protestant



Gate to the Buddhist Temple, photo Denise Ames



Confucian ceremony, photo Denise Ames

antagonism against Korean Buddhists, who make up about 23% of the population, has increased in recent years. Acts of vandalism against Buddhist temples and prayers for the destruction of Buddhist temples has amplified the tension between Buddhists and Korean Protestants.

I would like to include Confucianism as an influential tradition that has shaped Korea today, although many do not consider Confucianism a religion per se. Neo-Confucianism, in which the older teachings of Confucius were blended with Daoism and Buddhism, became the official religion of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), offering an alternative to the influence of Buddhism. The legacy of Confucianism remains a fundamental part of Korean society, shaping the moral system, the everyday life, and social relations between old and young, and it is the basis for much of the legal system. The traditional Confucian respect for education remains a vital part of Korean culture. Our Korean tour guide mentioned that some of the Confucian family traditions were beginning to ebb. One of the reasons she stated is that because women do most of the work, such as preparing food, and do not get to participate in the ceremonies. This type of gender inequality is not appealing to most modern Korean women.

Daoism is thought to be the earliest state philosophy for the Korean people spanning several thousand years. However, its influence waned with the introduction of Buddhism during the Goryeo Kingdom as the national religion beginning in 918 and the dominance of neo-Confucianism during the Joseon Kingdom (1392-1897). Daoism permeated all strata of the Korean populace, integrating with its native animism as well as Buddhist and Confucian institutions, temples, and ceremonies. Until recently, Daoism in Korea received little attention from scholars, and has been soundly rejected by Confucian and Buddhist elites. However, Daoism has recently attracted more attention from scholars and acceptance by the general population.



Daoism

Aside from the occasional fundamentalist Protestant attacks against Buddhism, South Koreans seem to respect and accept the diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the Korean ethnic group accounts for approximately 96% of the total population of the country. It may be easier to accept your neighbors' different religious beliefs if they are practiced by members of your own ethnic group. The increase of foreign laborers, often practicing Muslims, from different ethnic groups and countries may tell a different and less tolerant story. But, hopefully, the Republic of Korea can provide an inspirational ideal for the rest of the world to follow, a nation whose citizenry accepts or tolerates a variety of religious beliefs and practices.

The Korean Economic Miracle

How could they do it? That is what I and others wondered as our travel group toured the POSCO Steel Plant in Gwangyang, South Korea. We were experiencing first-hand what the world called the Korean Economic Miracle. It was an enormous plant, dredged from the swampy lowlands next to the East Asia Sea and forged into a first-rate facility, shipping enough steel to world-wide customers to make it the 4th largest steel company in the world. In promotional videos we viewed at the Visitors' Center, they announced that they had "reclaimed the promised land" and "POSCO is creating the tomorrow of the world." After viewing the facilities, I agreed they had reason to be proud.



POSCO, photo Denise Ames

POSCO is a recent project, especially compared to the U.S. steel companies that date back to the 1800s. POSCO was born in 1968, and its father was the visionary, but autocratic, President Park-Chung-hee. He concluded that self-sufficiency in steel was essential to economic development. It was a government-run project, for which his administration arranged financing from Japan and the U.S.

POSCO CEO Park Tae-joon was quoted as saying, "You can import coal and machines, but you cannot import talent." He realized that Korea needed a pool of well-educated youth who were proficient in science and technology to ensure that Korea would be a leader in high technology. Park founded, with government support, the Pohang University of Science and Technology (POSTECH) in 1986, and it remains a top university in its field today.

U.S. and global institutions, such as the World Bank, pressured South Korea to privatize POSCO, and gradually full privatization was realized in 2000. The company has since expanded its operations to countries such as

India, China, Indonesia, Cameroon (Africa), Mexico, and Vietnam. With 30,000 employees earning good wages, POSCO symbolizes South Korea's economic success and long-term planning.

In many different instances, POSCO represents what has economically happened in Korea, whether it is Hyundai, Samsung, or many other lesser known companies. For example, China and Korea dominate shipbuilding today. There has been remarkable economic growth as a result of a close connection between government and industry and careful strategic planning to achieve impressive results.



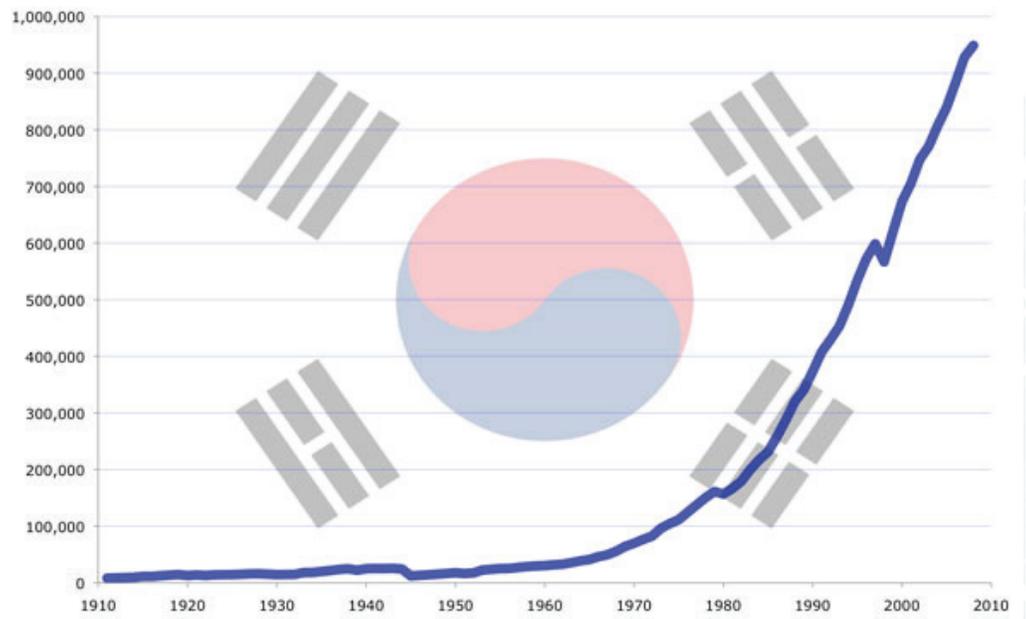
Miracle on the Han River, photo Denise Ames

South Koreans refer to this growth as the Miracle on the Han River. It has a market economy, even though there is government involvement, which ranks 15th in the world according to GDP (gross domestic product) and 12th according to purchasing power. It is a developed country with a high-income economy.

The Korean War, which ended in 1953, shattered an already fragile South Korean economy. However, after the end of the war the United States aided its development by locating supply bastions for American troops stationed on the Korean peninsula. Having almost no natural resources and always suffering from overpopulation in its small territory, South Korea adopted an export-oriented economic strategy. Once again, the U.S., not wanting South Korea to go the communist route, was a major consumer of Korea's exports, mostly eliminating import tariffs. But credit is due to the hard-working people of Korea, who were dedicated to achieving economic success and a better standard of living.

A rigorous educational system and the establishment of a highly motivated and educated population have spurred the country's high technology boom and rapid economic development. In 2012, South Korea was the 7th largest exporter and 7th largest importer in the world.

In 1980, the South Korean GDP per capita was \$2,300, about one-third of nearby developed Asian economies such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan. Since then, South Korea has attained a GDP per capita of \$30,000 in 2010, almost thirteen times the figure 30 years ago. These are remarkable achievements considering its humble beginnings just over 50 years ago.



South Korea's GDP Growth

I learned a lesson about the South Korean economy while touring and studying the country: there is very close cooperation and strategic, long-term planning between government and business. I want to emphasize this cooperation and planning because it is in stark contrast to the philosophy of anti-government-business

among many people and politicians in the U.S. today. On my short tour of Korea, I recognized that the rest of the world is moving toward more government/business cooperation, and it behooves the U.S. to realize the benefits of this arrangement and not be left economically adrift in an increasingly complex and competitive world.

Culinary Delights: Food in South Korea

As I sat down to eat my first meal in Korea, I couldn't help but wonder about its food. Perhaps because I spent many years living in Illinois, one of the agricultural heartlands of the world, I always like to know where a country gets its food. I was in for a shock when I found out that South Korea is mostly self-sufficient in food production! I was amazed that this small country with 50 million people could produce all the food its



Korean cabbage gardens, photo Denise Ames

citizens could eat. Once I saw rows and rows of endless greenhouses splattered across the landscape and small gardens dotting urban centers, I came to appreciate the effort the Koreans have taken to raise healthy, plentiful food. South Korea supports its agricultural sector in order to have an abundant food supply. This includes price supports for crops and tariffs that protect domestic producers from foreign competition, which results in high prices for consumers but a reliable food supply.

Korean cuisine has its roots in ancient agricultural and nomadic traditions in the Korean peninsula and southern Manchuria; hence, beef is a prized and expensive foundation to Korea's culinary delights. The sheer number of Korean barbecue eateries around the country and the ubiquitous individual grill situated at the end of the table in many restaurants show this love of beef. Even though beef is a prized food, rice and vegetables form

the bulk of food eaten. Since Korea is a peninsula, some form of seafood, no matter how exotic, is a mainstay at every meal.

Korean meals are noted for their lavish number of side dishes (banchan) that are crowded onto tables leaving no visible space in between the dishes. One of the most popular side dishes is kimchi, which is served at almost every meal. Kimchi is a traditional fermented Korean side dish made of vegetables with a variety of seasonings, most noticeably spicy red chili. I would describe it as both spicy and sour. Early kimchi was made of cabbage and beef stock; red chili was not available until Europeans brought it back from the Western hemisphere. Japan introduced red chili to Korea during one of its invasions (1592–1598,)



Korean cuisine - Banchan

and it became a staple ingredient in kimchi. In traditional preparation, kimchi ferments in jars for months at a time. From the number of gardens I saw growing cabbage in Korea, I would venture to say that cabbage is the most commonly used ingredient in kimchi.

One of the most interesting observations I made in Korea was their communal way of eating. It was customary for all those at a table to dip their spoons into a big bowl of soup and slurp away until it was gone. Once again, the collective nature of Korean society was on display—one big communal bowl. I will have to say that as first my cultural conditioning set in, I was reluctant to eat this way with others, but once I shook off the idea of germs and started to partake, I enjoyed it. It made for more sharing conversation and the feeling that we are all one despite cultural differences. After all, in my mind, that was the intended purpose of the trip!



Communal Eating, photo Denise Ames

Korean Pop Culture: Entertainment for a Globalized World



“Let me entertain you,” sang Gypsy Rose Lee, a burlesque singer and dancer, in the finale song in the 1962 movie of the same name. The South Korean government has taken this refrain to heart and is focused on developing, from the top down, an unsurpassed and profitable Korean Wave of entertainment. They are bent on becoming the Gypsy Rose Lee of the entertainment world!

The Korean Wave refers to the increase in the popularity of Korean pop culture since the 1990s and takes several forms: films, television dramas, video games, and K-pop music. This chapter examines Korean society through a pop culture lens.

From this lens we will see how different dimensions of Korean society interact together to create a contemporary pop culture—the Korean Wave. We will analyze how other dimensions of Korean society influence this phenomenon—involvement of the government, the economy, the relationship with the U.S., and historical background. We will also evaluate whether K-pop music is culturally authentic. Let’s start our study with a historical look at how the Korean Wave emerged into a tidal wave sweeping the world.

History of Korea’s Popular Culture

The permanent U.S. military presence in Korea as a result of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War exposed Korean society to U.S. popular culture. In 1957, the military established the American Forces Korea Network (AFKN) to provide American military personnel stationed overseas with American TV and radio broadcasting. AFKN is in fact Korea’s oldest broadcasting station. From the 1960s to the 1980s, when Korean television and radio offered mostly domestically produced programs, AFKN broadcast a variety of Western entertainment. Korean viewers enjoyed television shows, films, music, cartoons, and sports programs that were absent from local stations. This influenced early Korean popular culture as local youth, musicians, and actors

began emulating American television and music stars.

President Park Chung Hee had tremendous influence on all facets of Korean society. In fact, his first-born daughter, Park Geun-hye, is the former President of South Korea. Park, a former military general, seized power through a military coup in 1961. In 1963, he was inaugurated as the authoritarian president of the Korean Third Republic. Since Korea had long been buffeted by the whims of larger, more powerful nations, such as Japan, China, and the U.S., they were eager to shed their most recent national humiliation at the hands of Japanese colonizers and improve Korea's power and stature. The division of Korea into North and South heightened this desire.



American Forces Korea Network, stage

As a result of Korea's troubled history, President Park ushered in a well-received national aspiration: be "Number One." In particular, Park relentlessly pursued economic growth. He was obsessed with economic data that could be used to measure how the country stacked up against others. His took this Number One refrain and applied it to an enthusiastic and willing country; Korea embarked on a period of astonishing economic development and a rapid increase in GDP. In an event that shocked the country, Park was assassinated by his own security chief in 1979.



Park Chung-Hee and daughter, Park Geun-hye.

After President Park's death, many Koreans worked to establish a democratically elected government that would replace Park's authoritarian rule. Instead, in 1979, General Chun Doo Hwan installed another authoritarian government, one that became infamous for its violent suppression of democracy movements. Fearing resistance against his regime, President Chun implemented a cultural policy to divert Koreans' attention from the tense political situation by promoting sports programs and easing censorship of television and film content. For example, in 1981 baseball was elevated to a Korean national sport, and the Korean Professional Baseball League was established in 1982. In 1980, the Chun government took control of the television broadcasting networks, eliminating all but two. As part of its cultural policy, the government allowed sexually-oriented (not nudity) content to be shown on television and in movies. However, political content perceived as critical of President Chun or his government was banned.



In 1987, only a year before the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Roh Tae-woo won a democratic election to the presidency. President Roh eased censorship restrictions on political content and opened the Korean market to products from foreign companies. For example, movie scripts no longer required governmental approval, allowing movie makers freedom to explore social and political themes. Also, Korea joined the World Trade Organization in 1995. As a member of the WTO, the organization, and in particular the U.S., pressured Korea to "open" its economic markets—including film and television—to free trade and greater competition.



As a result of President Roh's removal of restrictions on the Korean media market, Korea emerged as one of the top ten foreign markets for Hollywood films. In response, the market share of Korean films plummeted from 33% in 1986, to 15.9% in 1993. Throughout most of the 1990s, Korean films com-

prised only 20% of film market revenues. The commercial success of foreign films made government officials fear the demise of its domestic film industry.

The turning point for the Korean film industry was the unexpected success of *Sopyonje* in 1993. It became the first movie in the history of Korean cinema to attract more than a million viewers. In the wake of *Sopyonje*'s success and the release in the same year of the U.S. movie *Jurassic Park*, the government began to realize how a strong domestic film and television industry could benefit the Korean economy. The science and technology governmental advisory board calculated that *Jurassic Park*'s global profits equaled the sale of 1.5 million Hyundai cars. This comparison indicated the economic potential of a successful Korean movie industry and, subsequently, the government targeted the cultural sector as a prime area for growth.



Sopyonje

The National Assembly enacted the Motion Picture Promotion Law in 1995, which provided tax and investment incentives for the cinema industry. In 1998, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism developed a five year plan during which colleges were encouraged to start programs to educate new entertainment talent, and funding supported Korean movies and promoted their export. Furthermore, the government encouraged privately owned conglomerates (chaebols), such as Samsung, Daewoo, and Hyundai, to invest in the film and television industries, helping them become more globally competitive.



Shiri

Globalization forced the Korean culture industries to become domestically and globally competitive and laid the foundation for the “First Korean Wave.” Because of the initial investment in the film industry, after 1995 film became one of Korea’s first worldwide popular cultural products. For example, Kang Che Gyu’s spy thriller *Shiri* (1999), which looks at Korea’s North and South division, reached the top of the Japanese box office in January 2000 and became one of the most profitable Korean films ever. In years to come, Korean film remained a successful export product, with films such as *Joint Security Area*, *Oldboy*, *My Sassy Girl*, *A Moment to Remember*, and *April Snow* becoming foreign box-office hits.

First Korean Wave and Television

In June 1997, China Central Television (CCTV) aired the Korean television drama *What is Love?* It became a huge success in China. The popular series centered around two families with contrasting values: One conservative and patriarchal, the other modern and progressive. It portrayed the troubles that arise as these two families become in-laws, while also delivering



What is Love?



Dae Jang Geum (Jewel in the Palace)

a message about the importance of balancing traditional and modern values. The Chinese audience, who had mostly watched TV soap operas from Europe, America, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, were now hooked on Korean dramas and pop cultural products.

The popularity of *What is Love?* paved the way for *Dae Jang Geum (Jewel in the Palace)* in 2003. The drama is about a woman who rose from the lower class to the position of master chef in the royal palace during King Jungjong’s reign in the Joseon dynasty (1506-1544).

Jewel in the Palace sparked an even bigger craze for Korean popular culture in the pan-Chinese region. In May 2005, the show's final episode became the most watched television show in Hong Kong's broadcast history with more than a 40% audience share.



Bae Yong-joon in *Winter Sonata*

After its enthusiastic reception in the pan-Chinese region, Korean television expanded its popularity to Japan, which became one of its core consumer markets for film, television, and pop music. In April 2003, Japan broadcasting ran the Korean drama *Winter Sonata*. This drama turned into a cultural phenomenon with the male lead, Bae Yong-joon, catapulting to national stardom. For example, during his first visit to Japan on November 25, 2004, almost 3,500 fans mobbed Bae Yong-joon at Tokyo International Airport. A police force of 350 men was needed to control the crowd.

Winter Sonata was not just a commercial success; it also changed the way Japan looked at Korean society, and Bae Yong-joon became the ideal man for many Japanese women. Tour agencies in Japan used the popularity of the drama to provide tour packages to Korea. The hotel suite that was used in the drama had a months-long waiting list, and autographs of Bae Yong-joon commanded \$150. Bae Yong-joon, estimates showed, was responsible for an increase of \$4 billion in revenue between South Korea and Japan during that time period.

With the global success of film and television, Korean policy makers saw that the export-oriented economy had captured a new overseas market. The government designated cultural technology and the content industries (the technologies that produce television drama, film, pop music, computer games, animation, etc.) as one of the key technologies to drive the Korean economy into the 21st century. The government pledged financial investment and administrative support to domestic cultural industries and established the Korea Culture and Content Agency in 2001. The Korean Wave, according to the government, not only supported its economy but was a cultural diplomatic and soft power tool. Film, television, K-pop, and online gaming are actively used to promote South Korea as a brand. The government maintains that Korean popular culture creates a positive image of South Korea in the world.



South Korea as a Brand

After reaching a peak in 2005, the demand for Korean television shows diminished, but the demand for pop music took over in China, Japan and the rest of Asia. In this next phase, K-pop performers such as TVXQ, Super Junior, and Girls' Generation burst into Southeast Asia and Japan markets, emerging as key players in spreading the Second Korean Wave in the region and eventually the rest of the world.

Second Korean Wave: K-Pop

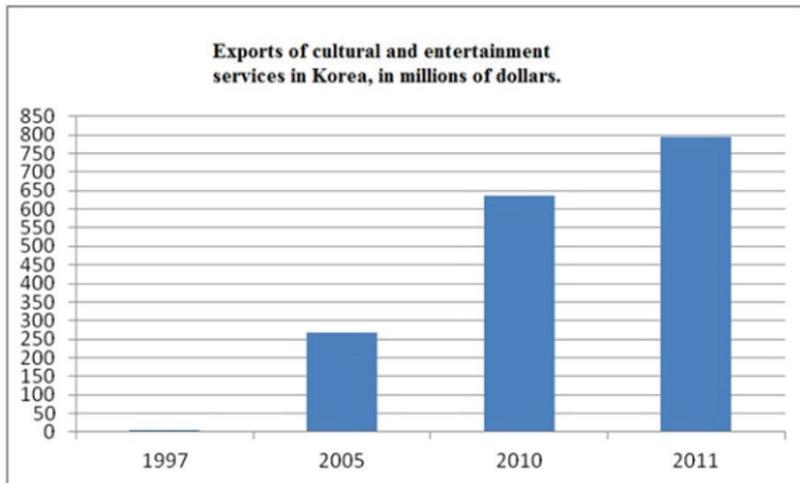
Korea's digital infrastructure and the industry's use of digital information and communication technology have largely contributed to the Second Korean Wave. For example, most people used social media like YouTube when watching a K-pop music video for the first time. The K-pop industry has made the Internet and social media fundamental elements of K-pop marketing and global distribution. Using social media in the marketing and distribution of K-pop encourages a "snowball effect" via hyperlinks. SM Entertainment has stated: "Social Network Media has enabled non-Western music to reach the world in a single click ... Korean

artists are bypassing traditional outlets like radio and television, aggressively steering their efforts to go international via the Internet.” Indeed, the Internet is important because K-pop is largely driven by online fandom and digital sales. K-pop artists also actively use their social media accounts to connect with fans, sometimes circumventing the controlling power of their talent agencies.

K-pop is created for visual (digital) media, which explains its telegenic appeal: Vibrant set-styling, fashion, performers’ “perfect” physical appearance, and synchronized dance routines. K-pop’s visual foundation can be traced back to the 1990s to the same events that gave rise to the First Korean Wave. Prior to the 1990s, the Korean music industry had been characterized by a state-controlled media monopoly. State



S.M.ENTERTAINMENT



South Korean cultural exports

approved composers, arrangers, and lyricists wrote songs that singers performed in state television broadcasters’ studios with their bands and choreographers. During this time, ballads were the most popular type of music genre. With the media markets liberalizing and opening to foreign competition after the 1990s, the networks turned to visual music and took advantage of television as an outlet for its marketing efforts. Thus, television networks provided the K-pop industry with a medium to promote their products—both the performers and the K-pop music.

The reliance of the K-pop industry on television networks meant that it was no longer sufficient to produce just good-sounding pop music; they had to offer the music as part of a “telegenic package.” This meant an emphasis on the performer’s personality, appearance, stage and television performance skills, as well as the visual appeal of music videos. In turn, television programs were created that allowed K-pop performers to showcase their personality and their latest music, and establish personal connections with their fans.

The three biggest talent agencies in terms of revenue are SM Entertainment, founded in 1989, YG Entertainment, founded in 1996, and JYP Entertainment, founded in 1997. Talent agencies are responsible for recruiting, financing, training, marketing and publishing new artists, as well



Girls' Generation



4 Minute Volume Up

as managing their activities and public relations. In exchange, once trainees debut, they often sign restrictive and long-term contracts, which award them little pay and often contain a no-dating clause. Part of the agencies’ charge is to develop performers or idols through an elaborate and grueling trainee system. Korean talent agencies train idols from a very young age in dancing, singing, and media presence—sending them out into the world as polished professionals.

K-pop is extremely popular among Korean youth and there is no shortage of aspiring stars. For example, a staggering 4% of the population of South Korea auditioned in 2012 for Superstar K, Korea's televised singing competition. Talented young people are carefully culled and undergo grueling training for the distant hope of future stardom. The youth in very few other countries would put up with such a punishing, star-making process. Korean youth, meanwhile, are used to intense academic pressure, extreme discipline, constant criticism, and zero sleep. The talent agencies seem intent on drawing on the Korean people's strengths of hard work and organizational skills, the close collaboration of government and private industry, and the government's deep pockets.



Big Bang

South Korean music producers have found that large groups acting and dancing in unison are popular to fans. The strong collaborative values of South Koreans lend themselves to this collective entertainment form, which is not as popular in the individualistic West. K-pop band members must dance in perfect sync; like clockwork, they must have split-second precision. The bands are assembled while the members are still young and hold off their debut until they've learned to act as one. The powerful inner drive to succeed and not let others down pushes them to perfection. They'll do it if it kills them.

K-pop training is an education of the whole person. Band members are taught etiquette and steered away from drunk-driving, drugs, or sex scandals. Companies want to project a "clean" image and steer away from what they consider the raunchy behavior of stars in the West. K-pop labels love stars, but not superstars: they don't want to get into a situation in which one band member become indispensable. Performers often enter



Wonder Girls

the trainee system in their early teens and live together in a house (dorm). They attend school during the day and take singing, acting, dance, and English, Chinese, and Japanese language classes at night. The training aims to strengthen the performer's vocal ability and build stamina for performances. Agencies often use the training period to test whether the trainees can handle the intense lifestyle of a K-pop idol. Therefore, an important part of the training period is to challenge how serious and passionate a person is about becoming an artist.

Lee Soo Man, founder of SM Entertainment, perfected the K-pop trainee system. It is a 3-step process of exporting K-pop overseas, creating international collaborations, and globalizing the product to create a global brand. Part of Lee's method is to create different images and styles for the trainees, depending on the nation that they perform in—allowing the agency/group to target specific audiences.

Trainees spend an average of 2-5 years preparing for their debut, yet training has no fixed length. Sometimes the training process is documented as part of a reality television series. This allows fans to connect with idol groups right from the start—it personalizes idols as fans "grow up" with them. For example, YG Entertainment produced an eleven episode television reality show following the training and 2006 debut of the group Big

Bang and WINNER's Who Is Next? in 2013. Once a group is ready to debut, it will make its first appearance on a music shows' special "debut" stage! For example, Girls' Generation's had its debut stage in 2007.

The K-pop industry makes active use of cultural diversity as part of its global marketing strategy. K-pop groups often include members from different countries; Korean entertainment agencies often recruit idol-trainees through global auditions and many idol groups have members from different countries. To make the songs universally appealing and overcome language barriers, 99.9% of K-pop songs contain English phrases or words.



Girls' Generation

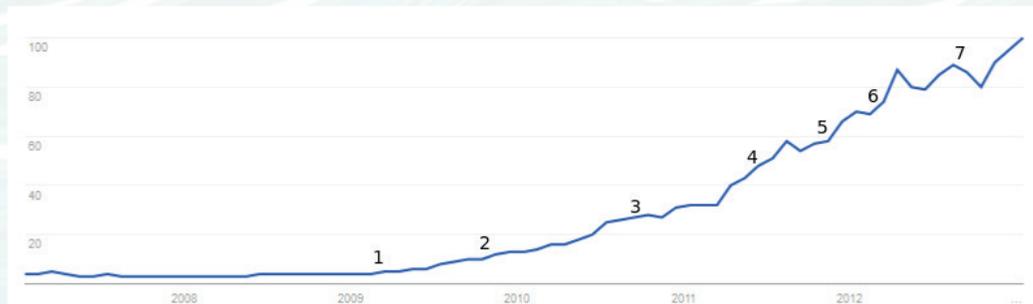
K-pop is a manufactured or industrialized process; there is no other way to describe it. For example, some K-pop bands follow a specific color theme. Each band has its own color-coordinated outfits, such as dramatic blue, dynamic black, mystic white and dazzling red. The bands are prefabricated and treated like a consumer product right from the beginning. The industrialized idol system largely defines the K-pop industry. Consumption of music is intertwined with the consumption of persona, image, and spectacle.



If you are from the U.S., you are probably surprised to read that the government has a hand in developing South Korea's pop culture. I know I was. The U.S. entertainment scene prides itself on organically producing stars that rely on their innate talent to rise to the top, without government help. How many stars do you know who have climbed to the very pinnacle of stardom from very humble beginnings? But South Korea is pursuing a different model from the U.S., and has poured billions of dollars into its "entertainment investments." So far, the investment in K-culture appears to be paying off.

Critique of the K-Pop Music Industry

Culture was such a high priority for the former President Park that shortly after taking office in early 2013, she upgraded the pop culture division with a \$1 billion investment fund. Korea also has the financial resources and organizational skills to turn the stars into world exports. The K-pop model requires music companies to invest a lot of money upfront for a very distant return. K-pop is a 5 to 7 year plan, and the U.S. model, which requires profits quickly from impatient investors, can't do that. Lee Soo Man stated in 2011, "The U.S. couldn't establish a management system like ours. Picking trainees, signing a long term contract, and teaching trainees for a long period of time, this just can't happen in the



Search volume for K-pop since 2008 according to Google Trends

U.S.” He continues, “U.S. agencies are hired as sub-contractors after an artist has grown and gained popularity on their own. As a result, the agencies only play roles of sub-contractors and can’t make long-term investments in singer-hopefuls.”

Critics (mostly from the West) have said that the Koreans are not good at creativity, and pop music is all about creativity and producing something new. But, as we have seen, there is a reason for the lack of an original Korean sound: the Korean pop scene got off to a late start because of censorship that stifled musical talent and creativity. For a critical period during the 1970s, rock music was banned in Korea. Also, compared to the West, the late start in economic development and trauma of war meant that the deep roots of historical musical fermentation did not have time to germinate into an authentic musical sound. For example, jazz with its deep cultural roots, is considered to be an authentic form of American music. Folk music traditions in Korea have deep roots but they were not able to blend with the rapid modernizing influences in the second half of the 20th century to produce an authentic musical sound.

Part of the concern about cultural globalization and cultural imperialism is the idea that a culture’s “authenticity” disappears. Cultural authenticity can be uniquely tied to a particular geographic location. It means an analysis of the extent to which a cultural object reflects the worldview of beliefs and values and depicts the details of everyday life and activity of a specific cultural group. However, the definition reveals the problem with analyzing cultural authenticity by recognizing that there is never just one image of life within a group. Also, the homogenizing influences of modern society make it difficult for cultural authenticity to exist. From my point of view as a Westerner, K-pop reflects the global consumption of music that is entangled with the consumption of persona, image, and spectacle. The industrialized idol system largely defines the K-pop industry. The music is a reflection of the global marketplace, and the point of the music is not a deep reflection of culture and the human soul but a way to make money.



The Boy Band Look

This marketing focus of K-pop music is found in the visual nature of the industry. The artists are expected to be physically flawless. Plastic surgery is used to attain what the industry has determined to be the “perfect” physical appearance. The popularity of K-pop idols has made plastic surgery increasingly popular among young Koreans and turned Seoul into one of the top plastic surgery capitals in the world. In Korean society, K-pop flawlessness has also crossed gender lines; Korea has become the number one market for male cosmetics. The look of the “flower boy” as seen in boy bands, graces billboards throughout Korea. Perhaps the inability of everyone to conform to this ideal leaves many youth alienated and depressed, contributing to the epidemic of teen suicides ravaging Korean society. Yet, it is another very profitable enterprise associated with the K-pop industry.

Can K-pop conquer the United States? In my opinion, the cookie-cutter style of K-pop does not seem an ideological fit for U.S. consumers, who prefer the bawdy antics and individualistic behavior of their favorite stars. Others don’t see why breaking into the US market is even a goal. With an adoring Asian market in their backyard, why worry about the U.S. market. After all, South Korea has been wildly successful in developing its own economic model, and, now its brand of culture, as well.

South Korea Wrap Up

This brief glimpse into Korea will, I hope, spark your curiosity to learn more about the country. For example, we didn't even discuss what Koreans think about their erratic communist neighbors to the north. Do they live in constant fear of a nuclear attack by the unstable regime or do they merely dismiss the saber-rattling threats as highly improbable? From my observations, South Koreans seem to be dismissive of the North Koreans and regard their leader, Kim Jung Un, as desperate for attention and money. He will do and does whatever it takes to gain both.

I want to include a brief note about the politics of South Korea. It emerged as a dictatorship after the Korean War. Although the dictators repressed political dissent, they did have the foresight to build an economic infrastructure and political institutions for a future democracy and vibrant economy. In 2013, South Koreans elected their first female, President Geun-hye Park, despite having the highest level of gender inequality in the developed world.



Kim Jung Un



Park Geun-hye meeting with Barack Obama

Park is the daughter of former Korean President (and dictator) Park Chung-hee. However, in just four years South Korea's president Park Geun-went from being a trailblazer to a figure of controversy linked to a deepening corruption scandal. An angered Korean public called for her resignation and she has now been removed from office after the supreme court backed a parliamentary vote of impeachment.

Korea is active in foreign relations but has taken a more behind-the-scenes role. Perhaps they will step-up to a greater leadership role in world affairs that reflects their wealth and strategic location in the Pacific arena.

The Korean model that I explained at the beginning has emphasized several important developments that distinguish it from the US model. South Korea freely encourages a close government/business relationship. Although it prides itself in claiming to be a market economy, it has more of a planning aspect to its economy than the US. This has benefitted them in developing high wage technical jobs, building high-tech, sophisticated manufacturing and industry, providing ample food for its people, and now creating cultural exports with the potential for lucrative returns.

I found in my travels to the country that South Korea is a fascinating country with a long and intriguing history. I hope you have been able to gain at least a cursory look at the country today and that you will feel inspired to continue your study of the country.

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