

CHAPTER III

SOUTH KOREA'S CURRENT RELATIONS WITH THE NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

In this chapter, the writer will describe the current relations between South Korea and its neighboring countries, such as China and Japan. In the previous chapter, the writer has described the historical background of the Korean Wave until it became the most significant phenomenon in Asia starting in early 1999. If we look back to the historical relations between those countries, surely we know that those countries have sensitive historical relations. Thus, in this chapter, the writer will describe the current relations between South Korea and its neighboring countries after the spreading of the Korean Wave.

A. The relations between South Korea and China

In the previous chapter the writer has described the birth of the Korean Wave in China, then in this chapter, the writer fills focus on describing the development of relations between South Korea and China after being affected by the Korean Wave itself. The relations between South Korea and China has evolved at the remarkable rapidity over the last decades. South Korea and China have been in the process of rebuilding friendly relations as neighbors since China began to implement an open door policy and expelled the remnants of the Cold War period. Notably, the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1992 in order to accelerate mutual exchange and cooperation in all fields covering politics, economics, social and culture. The relations between the two countries has not always run smoothly. Despite all improvements, conflicts and frictions may arise

from time to time. In this matter, there are some reasons that the Korean Wave can be useful as the window for this (Hyun, *The Korean Wave and Its Implications for the Korea-China Relationship*, 2012).

Firstly, as a cultural phenomenon, it can have a significant influence on Korean perceptions by Chinese people. The Korean Wave is the main channel where Chinese people obtain information and build the image of Korean society. In this case, Korean Wave has important cultural purposes for the relations between South Korea and China. Secondly, as a phenomenon, the Korean wave is closely related to cultural industries; this will make us see the economic cooperation and competition between muddled Korean and Chinese industries. Thirdly, for cultural politics, the Korean wave is useful as fertile ground. It goes beyond the sphere of popular culture and the economy. Moreover, it often involved with national pride, cultural nationalism, and the like. In this case, it has significant political implications for the relations between South Korea and China (ibid).

Since the Korean Wave affected Chinese people's perception of Koreans, it has important implications for the relationship between South Korea and China. Thus, the writer will emphasize the importance of the Korean Wave based on two perspectives, such as cultural familiarity and cultural synchronization (Hyun, 2012). South Korea itself is still not interested in China even though Korean Wave began to attract attention in the early 2000s. It is true that the story of South Korea's economic miracle after various world events held in South Korea such as the '86 Seoul Asian Games, the Seoul Olympics '88 and the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992 increased the interest of Chinese people in South Korea (Hyun, *Contemporary Chinese Narratives on Korean Culture*, 2003). However, as one of the Chinese scholars rightly said that China does not have free time for neighboring countries because its eyes alone traveled across the Pacific to rest in the

United States (Xinnian, 2002). Economically and politically, South Korea is not important enough to appeal nation-wide attention. In the field of popular culture, it is a different story. Chinese people feel the strong presence of South Korea because they are hit to Korean dramas, movies, and songs in everyday life.

The Korean wave is a comfortable channel where Chinese people gained an understanding of South Korea. Perceptions obtained through pop culture are not always following Korean reality. However, as emphasized by a Chinese scholar that pop culture became a de facto unique window in which the absolute majority of Chinese people understand Korea (Haimin, 2006). Korean drama series gives them a glimpse of Korean family life and society, history and culture, in a more clear and emotionally charged way than through fact-focused news reports. Here, the writer provided data from 2003 up to 2008 about Korean dramas imported to China.

Table 3.1 Korean Drama Series and Episodes imported to China in 2003-2008

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
No. of Series/Episodes	9/175	8/154	29/571	14/245	16/305	28/523

Source: Korea Creative Content Agency (Manseok Gang, 2009)

Both critics and the public are deeply divided in the evaluation of the Korean pop culture. On the one hand, Korean pop culture is seen as a cheap imitation of Western pop culture that has managed to enjoy a temporary surge in popularity; on the other hand, the Korean cultural industry is very pronounced because of its creativity, mixing between Eastern and Western culture with typical Korean colors. Each reaction

to Korean TV dramas, movies, and K-pop is also shared. For example in the case of drama series, some Chinese commend the excellent scenario of Korean drama, delicate and detailed, sophisticated emotion depictions camera work, handsome actors and their star appearance, great soundtracks, and so on.

No matter how Chinese individuals assess Korean pop culture, it has undoubtedly contributed to improve the relations between South Korea and China by serving China to form a sense of solidarity towards South Korea. Although various elements help form solidarity, yet there are two dominant elements. The first element is connected to the past that both countries share. It is what the Chinese call Eastern culture. They argue that Eastern culture with Confucian tradition at its core, surely emphasize the Korean pop culture. The others are connected to the present. They believe that for example, the life portrayed in Korean dramas is quite the same from what they experience every day.

For the Chinese people, Eastern culture is seen in Korean Wave. The form of Korean TV dramas can be Western, yet they believe that the content brings a strong Eastern sense. Korean Wave is a kind of mirror that allows Chinese people to reflect on their own culture. Through the Korean Wave itself, they believe that South Korea is an exemplary Asian country that has succeeded, unlike China, in maintaining its tradition despite prompt modernization (Onishi, 2006). Indeed it also guides them to find the differences between the two countries, such as a patriarchal family culture that is often portrayed in Korean shows, strange and outdated for contemporary Chinese. However, they are also reminded of their vanished traditions and becoming nostalgic for the past, like they see characters in Korean drama that represent the desired Eastern moral values such as respectful towards parents, family ties, and loyalty among their friends. This connectedness leads the Chinese people to establish solidarity towards Korean people.

In the current situation, the Chinese also feel a lot in common with Koreans. For them, what the characters of

drama in everyday life go through, are tormented, seem similar to their own experiences. Every modern society goes through significant changes in relationships and values. Moreover, the Korean dramas are very good at describing problems that occur in the process (Hyun, *The Korean Wave and Its Implications for the Korea-China Relationship*, 2012). It is not surprising that Chinese audiences feel empathy for the character that represents everything that happens in their own lives. Such empathy, together with the same feeling connectedness through Eastern culture strengthen the sense of Chinese people's cultural familiarity with South Korea and Koreans.

Another the significant effect of the Korean Wave associated with the relationship between South Korea and China is cultural synchronization. Currently, Korean Wave is sent to China without much time lag. Not only has the period before the Korean Wave is exported abbreviated, yet it is also possible to consume TV shows, movies, and Korean songs directly thanks to innovations in information and communication technology. The transnational convergence in cultural taste occurs because the consumers of the cultural product are simultaneous. Korean fashion hobbies, beauty treatments, and plastic surgery are good examples of this phenomenon (ibid).

Cultural synchronization is also seen in beauty care and the plastic surgery industry. Throughout the Asian region, Korean cosmetics and makeup brands have been recognized. There are many Korean cosmetics brands are very popular in China, such as *Amore Pacific*, *Hercyna*, *The Faceshop*, *VOV*, and *zone Charmzone*. Those brands already purchased by Chinese women (Haibo, 2007). South Korea has become the "world capital" for the plastic surgery industry. With the spread of the Korean Wave, some South Korea's actresses such as Kim Tae-hee, Kim Hee-sun, Song Hye-kyo, and Choi Ji-woo are maintained as Asian beauty standards. From the perspective of Chinese perceptions about South Korea, the

contribution of the Korean Wave to increase the relations between South Korea and China is enormous. The relationship between the two countries has highly benefited from the great atmosphere built by maintaining a sense of cultural closeness among the Chinese people.

However, in order to appreciate the Korean Wave's involvement in the relationship between South Korea and China, we need to put it in a broader context. In the late 1990s when South Korea and China faced severe challenges, the penetration of Korean cultural products into the Chinese market and other foreign markets began. For South Korea, the economy is chaotic after the Asian financial crisis in 1997, and that means there is an urgent need for economic breakthroughs. While in China, restructuring, downsizing and other repair measures put media companies in fierce competition from each other for relatively inexpensive but high-quality programs that would guarantee high audience ratings. Therefore, the Korean Wave is considered a matter of great economic interest in both countries.

When China became more open since the 1980s, the interests and tastes of Chinese people for new cultures became increasingly widespread. In the cultural industry, This allowed to a prompt development. On starting from reform, the infrastructure of China for cultural industries was weak: black and white television, especially color TV was a rare item for every household. Based on the perspective of the Chinese culture industry, Korean Wave has elements of cooperation and competition. At the initial stage, the cooperative side dominated. Without Chinese TV stations and other companies that are actively importing Korean drama series, music, and other cultural products, the rapid spread of Korean popular culture in the early years is unlikely to run smoothly. The Korean Wave is not a well-planned project in the Korean industrial section. That is more a response to calls from the Chinese market (Hyun, *The Korean Wave and Its Implications for the Korea-China Relationship*, 2012)

The Chinese cultural industry was experiencing structural shifts in the mid-1990s. Under government protection for a long time, so many small, useless and unproductive companies mushroomed. With the economic crisis in the whole world imminent towering above in the late 1990s, the Chinese government launched a reform process in the media industry to encourage corporate mergers and restructuring (Hyun, *Why Does China Embrace Hallyu: A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Chinese Foundation of Hallyu*, 2004). Korean drama, movies, and pop music entered the Chinese market when Chinese media companies desperately needed good programs that could help them to survive in competition.

Korean TV dramas were very well received. When much Korean drama series were introduced initially only to test the response, yet it unexpectedly gained wild popularity. Hence, China's TV stations began competitively importing Korean shows because according to them, Korean tv drama, was not only popular among Chinese audiences but also relatively cheap. However, for the Chinese culture industry, Korean dramas are a double bladed knife.

Broadcasting stations and drama production companies in China have different concerns regarding the case of importing Korean dramas. Very rational for television broadcasts station in boosting imports of Korean dramas because they are in fierce competition for rankings to get high advertising revenue. The enhancements in imports of Korean dramas and other foreign drama series, however, has been a blow to drama production companies that have suffered from poor management conditions. Overall, while the Chinese drama industry is growing, it still has many problems such as reduced production infrastructure and low income (Hyun, *The Korean Wave and Its Implications for the Korea-China Relationship*, 2012).

By signing a contract with a Korean entertainment management agency, it is the most common method of utilizing Korean Wave stars as a prospect in domestic drama. We can take a few examples, Ahn Jae-wook on the drama *Apartment*, Cha In-pyo on *The Four*, Jang Na-ra on *My Bratty Princess*, and most recently, Jang Seo-hee on *Chef Lin in Seoul*. Those are some of the most successful cases. This method uses the popularity of Korean wave stars to get high rankings, still widely adopted.

Another method that has been actively promoted is a joint production company. Providing essential production components, including personnel and investing capital usually carried out by Korean production. For example, *Lostway* is a joint production by Shanghai Media China Group and Samhwa Networks Korea. While the original works provided by the Korean company, the KBS drama series, entitled *My Husband's Woman*, were directed by Chang Yong-woo, and the main characters were Lee Jong Won and Shin Ae. *Love Strategy* was also a series jointly produced with Chinese and Korean investments and, like *Lostway* the core element is supplied by Korea. Even though the series was produced jointly, it was registered as a Chinese product, because otherwise it could not be aired during prime time.

In terms of joint production, South Korea has specific objectives. Because to break down the Chinese market under the current policy of diversification of imports, joint production is an alternative route that can be used to achieve it. On the other hand, for China, China has many advantages from cooperating with South Korea in terms of attracting financing, restoring the product quality, increasing network sales, and so on. The cooperation between the Korean and Chinese film industries started with simple support from the Chinese in finding the location of filming for Korean films. Recently, joint production has become progressively diverse. The two countries worked together on issues such as shooting

locations, personnel, including actors, directors, and staff (the example has given by the writer before), as well as planning, production, investment, marketing a film.

B. The Relations Between South Korea and Japan

For both countries such as South Korea and Japan, pop culture has always been a sustainable battleground. In 36 years starting from 1910 to 1945, the historical past revealed, and Japanese colonial rule in South Korea supported complications in cultural exchange. In 1945 after the Japanese government ended, South Korea preserved their culture by banning the import of Japanese popular culture such as Japanese language theater performances, television and radio broadcasts, pop music, and so on. This was due to the feelings of Koreans about Japanese language education which forced them during the Japanese colonialism. Only in 1998, this ban was entirely revoked by the signing of the Joint Declaration of the New 21st Century Korea-Japan Partnership (Iwabuchi, 2008).

Compared to China, Japanese news frames describe a different attitude about the Korean wave. Remembering how the Japanese colonial government in Korea from 1910 to 1945, and now the sudden Japanese interest in Korean culture and Korean must have been very surprising. After its acceptance which was popular in the realm of China and Vietnam, Korean Wave expanded its reach to Japan which became one of its core markets. Korean Drama *Winter Sonata* run by NHK in April 2003. This drama transforms into a cultural phenomenon with the main male lead, Bae Young Jun, who had become a national star. The drama has also been aired four times at a soared and brought profits of around 3,500 million yen (\$ 3.5 million) to NHK from products related to *Winter Sonata* (ibid).

It has been reported that the Korean Wave has a significant influence in Japan. Besides, the Korean Wave also succeeded in encouraging many fans to imitate the Korean star's dress style, traveling to Korea and learning Korean. By this knowledge, the Korean media had a much more cooperative approach with Japan. Korean newspaper articles had a very different attitude when writing about Japan and China. A lot of Korean journalists are more proud and confident about Korean cultural identity concerning Japan.

An American journalist believed that the Korean Wave affects the changes in South Korea and Japan relationship. Moreover, he emphasized that South Korea, which was a student from Japan in analog technology and cultural products, even proved that South Korea could be more developed than Japan. Of course, this makes Japan feel ashamed to be defeated by its student. Thus, several Japanese mass communication organizations are studying and preparing reports on trends in the Korean IT industry now (Jin, 2011).

Delicately, the Korean waves have been described through emotional and historical perspectives by the US media. Especially for South Korea, Japanese colonial power in Asia remains terrible and painful memories. This lousy feeling towards Japan has expressed a long-term official ban on Japanese cultural content in Asia. Furthermore, the US newspaper coverage studied for this study described the Korean wave dominantly. Compared to Japan, it clearly describes that South Korea as an oppressed country. Stated from an article that said that the fact in 2002 South Korea had emerged as a rival so that it hit many Japanese with full force when these countries hosted together the soccer World Cup and South Korea advanced further than Japan. At the same time, Korean waves such as television dramas, films, and music were able to sweep across Asia and were able to displace Japanese cultural exports (Onishi, Ugly Images of Asian Rivals Become Best Sellers in Japan, 2005).

In order to understand more about the influence of the Korean Wave on the relationship between South Korea and Japan, then a large amount of research has been done on the issue of the rise and influence of the Korean Wave in Japan. The surprise of the success of Korean waves in Japan was mentioned by several researchers, including Joo (2011), Shim (2008) who spoke of the inheritance of historical relations between countries when Japan occupied South Korea from 1910 up to 1945. Especially in 1998, South Korea banned the import of Japanese popular culture into South Korea. However, Japan did not implement similar restrictions in its turn because it considers South Korea to be inferior both economically and rationally. Therefore, it was shocking to find such success of Korean popular culture in Japan when Japan itself accounted for 43.8% of the total Korean film export income in 2002 (Joo, 2011).

Besides, several groups of scholars believed that the Korean Wave gave its influence on the relationship between South Korea and Japan. The first group of scholars is including (Ko, 2009; Shim, 2008; and Cho, 2011) believes that the Korean Wave increased the national image of South Korea and assisted to South Korean public diplomacy. Their arguments are supported by substantiations such as the fact that Korean Wave celebrities have begun serving diplomatic missions, polls, and interviews that show positive trends among the citizens. At the 2005 APEC summit, Korean singer Boa appeared as a guest star. Moreover, in the same year, Korean actor Choi Ji-Woo met with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi marking the "Year of Korean-Japanese Friendship" (Kozhakhmetova, 2012). Supporters of this view highly stressed the words of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon who said that the Korean wave had brought other countries to "respect" South Korea (Joo, 2011).

In 2004, Ko (2009) came up with a survey of the Korea Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) which showed that

pleasant impression of Korea grew by 78.9 percent due to the Korean Wave. He also quoted a Japanese informant in his 50s who acknowledged that before Korea's image was connected with "anti-Japanese sentiment", "poverty" and "cheap and crude products" yet the Korean Wave shows the image of "beautiful men and women", "interesting scenery", and the "fantastic location" that appeared in the drama. While Cho (2011) believes that the Korean Wave is related to East Asian sensitivity which contributed to reassess people who have long looked at each other. He stressed that citizens from various countries who had do not care to each other had now consumed the same cultural content. Admittedly, it helps them to know and understand each other

Another group of scholars including (Ryoo, 2008; Iwabuchi, 2008) believes that although the Korean Wave is not necessarily representations of real public diplomacy because it did not change the actual situation so far yet, it has many potentials to be since it helps to the overall image enhancement. Ryoo (2008) said that aside from the historical differences between Japan and Korea, the current dispute between the two countries is a dispute over the islands of Dokdo / Takeshima. He also explained that perhaps it was still too early to discuss the opportunities for popular culture to influence the relationship between South Korea and Japan at the political level, yet there might be hope that the Korean wave not only absorbed popular culture but it also a measure of positive lifestyles for many Asian people (W., 2009).

Besides, Iwabuchi (2008) focused on soft power the Korean Wave through the attitude of the Japanese to Zainichi (Japanese people of Korean descent), descendants of Japanese colonial heritage and a group of marginalized people who often face discrimination. Moreover, he argued that although there was a decisive shift towards the perceptions of South Korea and Zainichi, it did not change the status quo for people of Zainichi lineage because they were still separated, even

though at this time with a positive attitude towards them (Kozhakhmetova, 2012).

Fundamentally, the Korean Wave has changed the notion and South Korea's national image as a whole. Initially, the Korean wave was only cultural phenomena to specific regions, however, its growth and impact far surpassed expectations by affecting all of Asia, especially in China and Japan as the closest countries to South Korea. Derived from an old cultural heritage that is deeply rooted and has a strong cultural grip on its people, Korea has developed by developing prosperity, democracy, and liberalism. Today, Korea is arguably one of the highest national success stories of the 20th century.

All news coverage frames the Korean wave as a commercially driven and triumphant phenomenon from a nationalistic perspective. Because these three countries each have their sensitive historical ties to each other, it is interesting to make the correlations described by Korean wave journalists in different ways according to their political, historical, and economic relations with each other.