

The Commodification and Reduction of Korean Culture in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT: The dramatic spread of Korean pop culture within the past thirty years has contributed greatly to the phenomenon of commodification of culture in the United States. This obscures the multidimensionality of Korean culture and largely projects elements that are easily consumable. This situation did not develop suddenly but has deep ties to Orientalism, immigration quotas, and American films in the early 1900s. The modern commodification and reduction of Korean culture can manifest from K-pop industries, the diminishing value in traditional wear, and a lack of a holistic viewpoint when choosing a Korean partner. This study aims to bring light to this reduction of Korean culture.

KEYWORDS: Stereotypes, Korean, Commodification, Asian, American, K-pop, K-dramas, Pop, Culture, Hallyu.

■ Introduction

Over the past thirty years, South Korean popular culture has spread dramatically throughout the globe. China, Mexico, Thailand, the U.S., and Vietnam have tens of millions of Korean television drama streams.¹ The popularity of the music group BTS has led them to contribute \$3.5 billion annually to South Korea's economy by 2020, according to the Hyundai Research Institute.² This phenomenon is called the "Hallyu", defined as "the increase in international interest in South Korea and its popular culture, esp. as represented by the global success of South Korean music, film, television, fashion, and food" by Oxford English Dictionary.³ This sensation has allowed people from every continent to gain positive insight into Korean culture. However, in the process of being popularized, aspects of Korean culture can become commodified, a commodity being a product that can be bought, sold, or traded. Instead of being exposed to genuine contact with Korean culture, consumers of Korean dramas and music across the world only see a surface view of South Korea. The popularity of these media can lead companies and organizations both inside and outside of Korea to exploit the superficial elements of these interests for monetary gain. Edward Said's theory of Orientalism (1987) claims that Asia is a concept produced by the European imagination.⁴ While the West, or the "Occident", was "normative", the "Orient" East (Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa) was the "other". The "othering" of certain groups perpetuates the idea that the "normative" group must be righteous and rational. Therefore, the "Orient" can only be seen in a positive light when it is acknowledged or associated with Western society.

Korean pop culture intrigues the U.S. The U.S. became the second highest consumer of K-dramas during the COVID-19 pandemic⁵ and is ranked second globally in the top 100 K-pop artist streams at 9.2 billion streams as of 2023.⁶ This allows American organizations to take advantage of this phenomenon. In effect, Korean culture, including food, music, traditional

dress, and media has been commodified in the U.S. and reduced in its authenticity. The reduction of Korean culture in the U.S. is not a sudden phenomenon but a part of a larger trend of Asian cultures being diminished to a few representative elements throughout the century.

■ Methods

In this paper, I will offer historical context of anti-Asian immigration quotas and early 20th century films that contributed to the larger scope of the reduction of Asian culture in the U.S. I will provide examples of Korean pop culture industries playing into the power dynamic that Orientalism formed in which companies have self-perpetuated stereotypes of Asians for the western world. Then, I will provide a case of a traditional dress being reduced in original cultural value. Last, I will present a study conducted by a Korean-American researcher on why Western women chose to visit South Korea.

American Anti-Asian Immigration Laws:

The Page Act of 1875 was one of the first restrictive immigration laws in the United States. It prohibited the entry of unfree laborers and women with "immoral" purposes, although it was mainly enforced to limit Chinese immigration. This legislation perpetuated the notion of Asian women being hypersexual and indecent, which is what led to their sexualization throughout American history.⁷ The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first and only major law to restrict immigration based on nationality. Americans believed the influx of Chinese immigrants would take their jobs and were alarmed by the racial composition of the U.S. The number of Chinese immigrants decreased by around 40,000 people from 1880 to 1920 due to this legislation.⁸ The Johnson-Reed Immigration Act in 1924 prohibited immigrants from an "Asiatic Barred Zone". This banned immigration from several Asian countries, with the exclusion of Japan due to the Gentlemen's Agreement and the Philippines due to the fact that it was a U.S. colony.⁹

The concept of race is not truly a part of our biologies but was developed to reinforce social hierarchies.¹⁰ Immigration restrictions based on ethnicity contributed to the establishment of new racial categories during a period of American imperialism¹¹ and promoted the “othering” of these newly formed groups. This phenomenon and the U.S.’ century-long power dynamic over East Asia¹² contribute to the disreputability of East Asian culture to the U.S. Therefore, East Asian culture only becomes “worthy” when Americans give value to it. Because of the decrease in Asian immigrants, xenophobia and stereotypes were able to develop, diminishing Asian culture to these simple assumptions.

20th Century American Films:

American media in the 1900s capitalized on reinforcing one-dimensional stereotypes of Asian women, such as the “Dragon Lady”, “Lotus Blossom”, or “Madame Butterfly” characterizations. The “Lotus Blossom” and “Madame Butterfly” characters depict Asian women as submissive, oversexualized, and often subservient to white men. The “Dragon Lady” character type is vicious, evil, and seductive with a mysterious aura that serves as the antagonist for many film plots. This archetype stemmed from and reinforced the idea of Asian women being deceitful prostitutes, and it could have condoned the xenophobic legislation that was passed in previous decades. Films that exemplify these stereotypes are *The Toll of the Sea* (1922)¹³ where the main character, Lotus Flower, displayed subservient and docile traits that were expected from an Asian woman, and *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931) where the Asian Princess Ling Moy was an antagonist that perpetuated the “Dragon Lady” characterization.

Because of the strict anti-Asian immigration laws and xenophobia in the U.S., there was a lack of genuine Asian representation in the media. The few roles that did feature Asian characters limited their personality into harmful stereotypes that only pushed the narrative between the “rational Occident” and “irrational Oriental”. However, Americans were entertained by this characterization in films. This led to the production of many films with similar motifs, thereby commodifying, generalizing, and reducing Asian culture.

K-Pop Industries’ Self-Commodification:

The Hallyu has caused, the Korean entertainment industry to push the narrative of “perfect” K-pop idols because it maximizes profit.¹⁴ South Korea also recognizes the global influence that the U.S. holds, so their companies strategically market their media towards Americans to gain their acknowledgment.¹⁵ South Korean entertainment companies continue to perpetuate certain stereotypes held by Americans, such as the oversexualized Asian woman. In effect, it is difficult for both Korean idols and non-idols to escape from this viewpoint in the eyes of the West. The case of the popular K-pop soloist idol Kwon Boa, or BoA, exemplifies the lengths Korean companies would go to appeal to the West. When she first debuted in 2000, her stage name, BoA, stood for “Beat Of Angel”. However, when she was promoting in the U.S., her company changed the meaning of her name to a slogan, “Best Of Asia,

Bring On America!” When she released a song called “Eat You Up”, her company, SM Entertainment, decided to release an alternate version of the song for western fans. In the music video, BoA is depicted as the image of the “China doll” luring men into her trap, and then she transforms into the “Dragon Lady” as a reveal of her true character and intentions. This version of the music video was withdrawn because of the backlash it received from fans.¹⁶

Korean girl groups in the 2000s and early 2010s also fit the notion of the typical docile and “China doll” personality.¹⁷ The 2000s group Wonder Girls wore matching outfits in their promotional photos and were not differentiated by their company manager, Jin Young Park (also known as JYP), who also had extensive experience in the American music industry. It seemed as if he were trying to reinforce the idea that Asians looked alike and that Asian women fit the Westerners’ stereotype of being passive.¹⁸

The capitalization of K-pop idols reinforces the one-dimensionality of stereotypes about Asian women. Because the industries strive to appeal to the U.S. with its large K-pop fanbase,¹⁹ Korean music begins to increasingly include English,²⁰ and fans claim that K-pop has become overwhelmingly “Westernized”.²¹ As K-pop continues to be catered to the U.S., its original sound and style may be overshadowed.

Korean Traditional Clothing:

The hanbok is the traditional clothing of Korea. The women’s hanbok is comprised of a wrap-around skirt and jacket. The men’s hanbok is comprised of a short jacket and pants which are baggy and bound at the bottom. Both versions of the hanbok can be topped by a long coat of similar fabric.²² The elements of traditional hanboks were usually solid-colored and did not contain many intricate patterns. As Korean culture has spread in the U.S., taking social media pictures in hanboks has become popular. Many businesses in the U.S. have been established to rent out hanboks. However, the styles of the ones they provide are not completely identical to traditional ones. For women’s hanboks, the colors are often lighter, mainly consisting of pastels. There are lace designs of flowers, butterflies, and complex patterns. Men’s hanboks also have become brighter, often implementing intricate designs. These hanboks are catered towards the younger generation, which is the demographic in the U.S. that consumes the most Korean pop culture.²³

This situation can seem harmless at first glance. However, by tweaking the designs of traditional dress to satisfy Americans, these hanbok businesses are supporting the commodification of authentic clothes. The term “hanbok” was originally created to distinguish the difference between Korean clothing and Western clothing in the late 1800s.²⁴ The alteration of the original dress into what is acknowledged by the West, leads to an aspect of Korean culture becoming diluted.

Objectification of Korean People:

Many young Americans are engaged in K-pop and K-dramas where idols and actors look and act “perfect”. This can lead Korean pop culture consumers to assume Korean peo-

ple to be similar and attempt to seek out Korean partners. A Korean-American researcher from Indiana University Bloomington conducted surveys of around one hundred tourist women mostly from North America and Europe in South Korea to gain insight into the effect the Hallyu was having on international consumers.²⁵ The women responded with claims that watching K-dramas led to their infatuation with Korean men; they associated the men with the traits “gentlemen, polite, charming, romantic, fairytale-like, chivalrous, respectful.” In 2019, ten million women traveled to South Korea, almost four times as many as fifteen years prior. This mindset is harmful not only to Korean men but also the women themselves as different types of people exist in every country.

The “flawless nature” of K-pop idols and actors contributes to the romanticization of a Korean partner. Instead of being seen for their entire personalities, Koreans may be subject to being reduced to only their physical features.

■ Conclusion

While the Hallyu has facilitated the recognition of Korean media in the United States, it has also led to the commodification of the culture. Korean culture, like any other culture, has a deep and significant background that should be respected. The growing one-dimensional view of this culture promotes Said’s concept of “otherness”. The growing commodification of culture, something originally non-commodifiable, leads to the upholding of Orientalist views. When aspects of culture can be monetized, they are also diminished from their original value. Although it can become palatable to a wider range of people, the losses it suffers outweigh the interests of consumers.

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