Falling in Love with/in the Korean Wave?

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Abstract

The Korean Wave, or “Hallyu” in Korean, is a term coined in mid-1999 by Beijing journalists to refer to the increase in the popularity of the South Korean culture in China and the other neighboring Asian countries since the 1990s. Many commentators have noticed that the swift spread of South Korean culture around the world has been driven by the popularity of Korean popular music, television dramas and movies. We are curious about how individual Korean TV series contributes to the shaping of the images of contemporary Korean people and society and boosts the sales of fashion items that have appeared in the drama. The soap opera My Love from the Star is one of the latest additions to K-drama and was extremely popular in Taiwan in 2014. The purpose of this project is to examine the picture of an ideal romantic relationship presented by this TV series and the strategies it has adopted to showcase fashion items which has created a craze in the so-called Cheon Song-yi style.

At the completion of our project, we have become more informed K-drama or even soap opera viewers, gaining a deeper understanding of how soap operas can shape our perception of romantic relationships and prompt us to buy things which seem to hold the promise of a paradise of ideal love or a better self-image.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ....................................................................................................................... I

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................. II

Chapter I Introduction ............................................................................................. 1

1.1 Background of Study and Research Motive ................................................. 1

1.2 Research Question ......................................................................................... 2

Chapter II Literature Review .................................................................................. 2

Chapter III Procedures ........................................................................................... 3

Chapter IV Conclusion ............................................................................................ 3
Background of Study

The Korean Wave, or “Hallyu” in Korean, is a term coined in mid-1999 by Beijing journalists to refer to the increase in the popularity of the South Korean culture in China and the other neighboring Asian countries since the 1990s. Beginning in the East Asia, the Korean Wave has spread to other regions of the world, including Latin America, Northeast India, the Middle East, and North Africa, and has become a global phenomenon. Many commentators have noticed that the swift spread of South Korean culture around the world has been driven by the popularity of Korean popular music, television dramas and movies. Lee observes that the popularity of Korean pop music and television soap opera in China and Taiwan sparked the Korean Wave abroad. According to the entry of “Korean Wave” on Korean.Net, the official site of the Republic of Korea, the first major Korean Wave was primarily driven by the growing appetite for Korean TV dramas, referred to as K-drama, within the Asian continent while the second Hallyu fueled by Korean pop music, also known as K-pop, has rolled over the world. The boom of K-drama and K-pop in these areas has translated into a boom in Korean influence, prompting the consumption of Korean food and fashion and boosting tourist arrivals to Korea. Jian Cai observes that “it is easy to spot girls wearing clothes, makeup, and hairstyles popularized on Korean television” on the streets of major Asian cities. A few weeks ago, there was even a report about how a young Brazilian with blonde hair and blue eyes, who was an exchange student at Dongseo University in South Korea, underwent 10 rounds of plastic surgery to have a Korean face. Learning Korean has also become the latest trend. Even Parisians, who have been notorious for being above speaking any language other than French, are eager to learn Korean. (Well this is admittedly simply a first-hand observation of Professor Jasmine Lin when she traveled in Paris two years ago. We are not able to present information that goes beyond at present.) Business people capitalize on the appeal of Korean popular culture, making money from advertisers. The government of South Korean also takes advantage of the surge in the

4 More details can be found in “The First Taste of Korean Wave in China.”
interest in the Korean culture, developing certain policy guidelines and funding huge budgets to drive the boom of the Korean Wave. In other words, the government uses Hallyu as a tool for the so-called soft power. The images of fashionable entertainers, trendy technological products, and contemporary South Korean lives in TV dramas and movies are especially meaningful for the government since they have effectively abated the impact of the negative national images related to events such as the Korean War.  

Research Question

Not every one of our team members is a fan of K-drama; however, all of us are aware of how Korean popular culture has penetrated our daily life. We are curious about how individual Korean TV series contributes to the shaping of the images of contemporary Korean people and society and boosts the sales of fashion items that have appeared in the drama. We have noticed that the soap opera My Love from the Star has been extremely popular these few months in Taiwan. The purpose of this project is to examine the picture of an ideal romantic relationship presented by this TV series and the strategies it has adopted to showcase fashion items which has created a craze in the so-called Cheon Song-yi style that continues.

Literature Review

According to Jian Cai, the history of Hanllyu can be traced back to 1997, when A Wish upon a Star was broadcast in Hong Kong and its popularity spread to China, Taiwan, and Southeastern Asia. The K-drama-driven Korean Wave reached a new peak in 2003 with the airing of Winter Sonata and Dae Jang Geum. The former aired in Japan and proved to be a huge success. The latter was well received in much of the Chinese-speaking world including China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities in Asia and the US. Numerous papers address the question why K-drama has been so enthusiastically embraced in the neighboring Asian countries, especially the Chinese-speaking ones, namely Taiwan and China. It is said that Hu Jin-tao, the former General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, expressed his pity that he was so busy that he couldn’t watch Dae Jang Geum every day when he met with the leader of Korean’s Uri Party. K-drama has found similar success in Taiwan, which according to T. Rawnsley has been known as the greatest importer of Korean dramas since 2003. Cai thinks that one of the most important reasons for the global spread of the Korean Wave is the intensive government-led investment in the projects of exporting Korean popular culture. He mentions that the late President of

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6 More details can be found in “The Korean Wave: The Seoul of Asia.”
7 More details can be found in “Korean Wave in Taiwan: The Culture Representation of Identities and Food in Korean TV Drama, Dae Jung Geum” by Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley at http://blog.chinatimes.com/minyeh/archive/2014/01/07/8829011.html (valid on June 16th, 2014).
8 We are citing from “The First Taste of Korean Wave in China.”
South Korea, Kim Dae-jung, who informally called himself “the president of culture,” established the Basic Law for Cultural Industry Promotion in 1999 and allocated $145.8 million to this project. The objective of the policy on cultural industries is to transform Korean into one of the top world exporters of cultural products by 2030.9 Another reason for the popularity of K-drama has something to do with the frequent cultural exchanges facilitated by globalization. Asians started to entertain themselves with popular cultural products which contain Asian sentiments and values, as is the case in K-drama, instead of looking exclusively to American pop culture. In Taiwan, the most popular category of K-drama has been the modern idol drama, which features physically attractive leading characters, beautiful scenery, and high production quality. Soap operas that fall into this genre emotionally engage their viewers with the portrayal of romantic, beautiful love between leading characters who serve as ideals role models, demonstrating how to develop romantic relationships. Commentators have noticed how K-drama has replaced Qiong Yao’s love story and Japanese drama, rising as the main model of romance for Taiwan’s TV audience.

Procedures

We have analyzed My Love from the Star to see what kind of love story is presented in this soap opera and how it might shape the fans’ understanding of their own affective lives. We have drawn from Stevi Jackson’s argument that emotions are culturally constructed and examined how My Love from the Star provides a model of love which reverses the traditional assumptions of women being subordinate to their male romantic partners. We have also explored how My Love from the Star, led to fashionable consumption. People want to look as good as the leading characters in TV drama so that they might be able to encounter the ideal lover or simply to feel good about themselves. We have interviewed owners of clothing stores located on Da-cheng Street and Zong-zheng Tai Market in Hsinchu City which sell clothes imported from Korea to see whether fashion items showcased in popular Korean soap operas are particularly popular with customers. We have also gone through the entire series and identified the narrative strategies of My Love from the Star which contribute to the popularization of certain fashion items.

Results and Discussion

The leading male character, Do Min-joon, played by Kim Soo-hyun, is a cold and distant being. He is actually an alien who lives a lonely and isolated life for centuries while waiting to return home. His first impressions of his new neighbor, Cheon Song-yi, a blunt top star, seem to be hopelessly negative. Nevertheless, he falls for her after finding that at a young age, she looked exactly like the girl he once cared about 400 years ago. The love relationship between Do Min-joon and Cheon Song-yi

9 We are citing from “The Korean Wave: The Ab-seoul-ute Asia!”
is one that counters the ideology of romance which is associated with the subordination of women. For a start, Kim Soo-hyun’s look falls into the category of the so-called “flower boy” and is therefore the opposite of the image of normative masculinity. His character does not attempt to control Cheon Song-yi according to his wishes as is dictated by the traditional relationship model. Instead, Do Min-joon is extremely considerate when it comes to the comfort of Cheon Song-yi. For example, he brings home two portions of noodles to have dinner together with Cheon Song-yi, who doesn’t like to eat alone, even after he has already had dinner with his students. Showing consideration for the beloved one is one of the traits which make him a Prince Charming for the female audience. As an alien, Do Min-joon possesses super powers such as teleportation and extrasensory perception. Therefore, he is always able to run to Cheon Song-yi’s rescue, any place any time. Being there for the beloved one whenever she needs you has thus become part of the definition of an ideal boyfriend.

As Kim Soo-hyun the super star, Jun Ji-hyun showcases a wide variety of designer clothes and accessories in My Love from the Star. Fashion pundits have noticed that Cheon Song-yi’s secret to looking like a goddess whenever she appears in public has something to do with the long coats, high heels, and shades that she wears. Knee-length coats and cat-eye shades are considered must-buys for those aiming for such goddess-like looks. Cheon Song-yi also popularizes the so-called natural makeup. Cosmetic bloggers post entries to reveal what beauty products to use (eg. Iope Air Cushion series, YSL lipsticks) and give instructions on how to put on Kim Soo-hyun’s natural makeup. Cosmetic bloggers post entries to reveal what beauty products to use (eg. Iope Air Cushion series, YSL lipsticks) and give instructions on how to put on Kim Soo-hyun’s natural makeup. Most of the famous brand items may be too expensive for the audience, but fashion manufacturers in Korea produce clothes that look like what Cheon Song-yi wears and are affordable for the audience. Many clothing store owners in Taiwan would import these items from Korea and target at K-drama fans. According to Cheng Tsun-ting, one of clothing store owners we interviewed, fashion items popularized by Cheon Song-yi were definitely among the most coveted ones in her shop.

At the completion of our project, we have become more informed K-drama or even soap opera viewers, gaining a deeper understanding of how soap operas can shape our perception of romantic relationships and prompt us to buy things which seem to hold the promise of a paradise of ideal love or a better self-image.