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Marginalization of Chosŏn Buddhism and Methods of Research

A PROPOSAL FOR AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF CHOSŎN BUDDHISM

MARGINALIZATION OF CHOSŎN BUDDHISM AND ITS MARGINALIZED HISTORY

History is often written from the theoretical, methodological, political or social centre of the author, a practice which creates artificial margins that do not exist in and of themselves but are the product of the centring process. In the historiography of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910), Buddhism is in many cases cast to the margins as a heresy and the target of the Neo-Confucian polemicists. In addition, it is portrayed as a popular religion practiced mostly among the masses in the periphery and distant from the main centres of society. As much as Buddhism may have been marginalized at the time, these notions reflect also a certain academic approach to the study of Chosŏn Buddhism.

In the historiography of the Chosŏn dynasty, Buddhism has generally been discussed within the orthodoxy-heterodoxy discourse of Neo-Confucian polemics. Accordingly, Buddhism has been described as an object of polemical and political attacks and, as a result, as a tradition that had degenerated. This article re-examines this discourse and discusses the role Chosŏn Buddhism played and the manner in which it maintained its religious significance

under supposedly oppressive conditions. The sangha appears to have striven actively to revive itself institutionally, maintain its religious role, and increase its social legitimacy in the latter half of the Chosŏn period, not least through a complex and interdependent relationship with the Confucian literati and officials. Despite the diminution of its economic and political power, its influence and activities were not confined to the uneducated masses, but extended to the élites, who proved to be important patrons as well.

Because Korean Buddhism has been approached mostly within a dichotomous framework of orthodoxy-heterodoxy, élite-popular, or Buddhism-Confucianism, with a focus on political and state affairs, integrated examinations of Chosŏn Buddhism are few and far between. In attempting to broaden and synthesize a more integrated approach, this article takes its cue from the line put forward by Boudewijn Walraven, namely, that compartmentalized approaches do not do justice to the complex social and cultural interactions that Buddhism has maintained with the broader society throughout the Chosŏn period, which included the social élites and ruling class.¹ It joins Walraven's attempt to apply a "comprehensive framework

1 This line of thought is clearly articulated in the following two articles by Boudewijn Walraven: "A Re-Examination of the Social Basis of Buddhism in Late Chosŏn Korea", *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 20: 1 (2007), 1-20, and "Buddhist Accommodation and Appropriation and the Limits of Confucianization," *Journal of Korean Religions* 3: 1 (2012), 105-16. Of course, there have also been academic works by Korean scholars that have discussed the two traditions, Buddhism and Confucianism, in a more integrative framework. However, Walraven has problematized this issue and has clearly articulated the continuing need for an integrated approach. For works by Korean scholars, see for example, Kim Yongjo (金容祚), "Chosŏn hugi yujaüi pulgyogwan" 朝鮮後期 儒者の 佛教觀 [Confucianists' views of Buddhism in the late Chosŏn period], *Nonmunjip* 論文集 22:2 (1983), 229-40; Kim Yŏngmi (김영미), "18segi chŏnban hyangchŏn yangbanüi salmgwa shinang: Yi Chunüi 'Tojae ilgi'ül chungsimüro" 18세기 전반 향촌 양반의 삶과 신앙 - 李潛의 '導哉日記'를 중심으로 [Life and religious practices of an 18th century provincial yangban: the case of Yi Jun's 'Travel Diary'], *Sahak yŏn'gu* 사학연구 82 (2006), 81-119; Im Chonguk (임종욱), "Hö Kyunüi hansie nat'anan pulgyo" 許筠의 漢詩에 나타난 佛教 [Reflections of Buddhism in Hö Kyun's poems], *Onji nonch'ong* 온지논총 14 (2006), 99-129.

that includes a more sophisticated acknowledgement of social differentiation.”² Furthermore, it finds in his argument concerning the “rapprochement” of Buddhism and Confucianism a sophisticated approach to understanding the complexity of the socio-cultural dynamics involving Buddhism and Confucianism in the late Chosŏn period. On this basis, the article represents an attempt to draw an integrated picture of Chosŏn Buddhism within the given socio-historical and religious framework.

DOUBLE MARGINALIZATION: THE PROCESS AND THE NARRATIVE OF DEGENERATION

1. The Narrative of Degeneration

Reports of the early Western visitors to Korea in the dying days of the Chosŏn period tell us of a pauperized and degenerated Buddhism, mixed with superstitious practices and patronized mostly by women.³ Such ideas of degeneration seem to be largely shared by modern scholars of Korean Buddhism when characterizing Chosŏn Buddhism. It is not uncommon that Chosŏn Buddhism is described as “Buddhism of the masses” (*min’gan pulgyo* 민간불교), “Buddhism for seeking fortune” (*kibok pulgyo* 기복불교), and “skirt Buddhism” (*ch’ima pulgyo* 치마불교). In other words, the perception of Chosŏn Buddhism reflected in these labels was that Buddhism had lost its function in providing spiritual guidance and fallen into a state of degeneration characterized by superstitious practices for the lower echelons of society.

This narrative of a degenerated Chosŏn Buddhism has long been continued. To a certain extent it was based upon the recorded fact that with the policy of “uphold Confucianism and oppress Buddhism” (*sungyu ōkpol* 崇儒抑佛) of the Chosŏn rulers, the economic resources and political power of Buddhism were drastically reduced and Buddhism was driven out of the capital and into the mountains, which initiated the period of “isolation in the mountains” (*sallim ch’ongnim* 山林叢林). This meant that Buddhism was removed from the centre of society and its influence significantly diminished.⁴ During this time of oppression Buddhism lost the patronage of the state and the society’s élite, which it had once enjoyed. Moreover, because the agricultural land of the temples and temple-slaves were confiscated, the sangha’s finances were critically weakened. In order to subsist, Buddhist monks adopted folk practices and thus Buddhism became mostly a popular religion.⁵

It is also assumed that unlike in the previous Koryŏ period there were no philosophical and doctrinal developments during this time.⁶ Buddhism was so much debased that the social status of monks became no different from that of slaves and butchers, the narrative concludes.⁷

This narrative is problematic for several reasons.⁸ Cultic practices had always been an integral part of Buddhism from the time Buddhism first landed on the peninsula some 1700 years ago and cannot be regarded as

2 Walraven, “A Re-Examination,” p. 4. I have also argued for a comprehensive approach to the study of Chosŏn Buddhism in my examination of the revival of Chosŏn Buddhism in the 17th century: Kim Sŏngŭn, 조선후기 禪佛敎 政 體 性 的 形 成 到 大 變 遷 的 研 究 : 17 世 紀 高 僧 碑 石 을 中 心 으 로 (Chosŏn hugi sŏnbulgyo chŏngch’esŏngŭi hyŏngsŏngŏe taehan yŏn’gu: 17segi kosŭng pimunŭl chungsimŭro [The emergence of Buddhist identity in the later Chosŏn period: focusing on the steles of eminent monks]), PhD dissertation, Seoul National University, 2012.

3 Particularly in chapter 30 of *The Passing of Korea*, Homer B. Hulbert discusses how Buddhism has become mixed with folk beliefs; *The Passing of Korea* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1969). Also, see Charles Allen Clark, *Religions of Old Korea* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1932). Frederick Starr, who repeatedly visited Korea starting from 1911 onwards, noted as well that due to the temples being driven into the mountains they became impoverished and fell to the lowest “ebb”. Interestingly, however, Starr also talks of the vitality of Buddhism in Korea and says regarding his visit in 1918 that “Buddhism appears to-day to be very far from dead in Korea. It shows signs of active life and there may be prospects of its future growth and large development”; Frederick Starr, *Korean Buddhism* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1918), p. 34.

4 Ch’oe Pyŏnghŏn (崔炳憲), “Han’guk pulgyosaŭi chŏn’gaewa yŏksajŏk sŏnggyŏk” 韓國佛敎史의 展開와 歷史의 性格 [Developments in the history of Chosŏn Buddhism and its historical character], in *Han’guk hyŏndaesaron* 韓國現代史論, ed. by Han’guk sahakhoe 韓國史學會 (Seoul: Ŭryu munhwasa 乙酉文化社, 1986), p. 36.

5 The narrative of “degenerate Chosŏn Buddhism” has become generally accepted to the extent that it is usually presented as part of the background information before a specific argument is made. For example, Jorgensen accepts that “Buddhism was relegated to insignificance as a despised ‘heresy’ that survived on the margins of élite society, particularly among women, and in the lower classes. Therefore Confucianism was the overwhelming determinant of Korean social and moral values, leaving Buddhism to the realms of ignorance and superstition.” John Jorgensen, “Conflicts between Buddhism and Confucianism in the Chosŏn Dynasty: a preliminary survey,” *Pulgyo yŏn’gu* 佛敎研究 15 (1998), 145–89 (pp. 189–90).

6 Nam Hŭisuk argues that the “policy of uphold Confucianism and oppress Buddhism” (崇儒抑佛政策) reduced the political and societal influence of Chosŏn Buddhism so much that it was barely able to keep its tradition alive. In the face of such oppression, Chosŏn Buddhism relied on rituals and cults for its survival, implying that popular practices rather than philosophical and doctrinal developments were essential to it. Nam makes a very strong argument based on the flourishing of publication of ritual texts during the 16th and 17th centuries. Nam Hŭisuk (남희숙), “16–17segi pulgyo ūshikhibŭi kanhaenggwa pulgyo taejunghwa” 16–17세기 佛敎儀式集의 간행과 佛敎大衆化 [16–17th century publications of Buddhist ritual handbooks and the popularization of Buddhism], *Han’guk munhwa* 韓國文化 34 (2004), 97–165 (p.97).

7 This narrative continues in present day scholarship. In his long summary of Buddhism during the Chosŏn period, Hwansoo Kim explains that through the centuries of societal oppression, the Buddhist clergy became largely marginalized and even considered as “outcasts” and of the “lowest” class. He explains that, “Due to their status as outcasts and with an ambiguous monastic-yet-layperson identity, Buddhist monastics joined many peasant revolts and insurrections....” Kim also argues later, “The only way Chosŏn monasteries could escape paying taxes, serving in the military, or being a laborer was if they disappeared from society by becoming hermits deep in the mountains. Yet, because monks were fully integrated into the productive life of society, yet denied a legitimate social status, monks came to be thought of as one of the lowest social status groups of Korean society.” Hwansoo Kim, *Empire of the Dharma: Korean and Japanese Buddhism, 1877–1912* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 30–31, 36. Earlier Jae-ryong Shim, an internationally recognized and highly respected scholar of Korean Buddhism also referred to these notions of ‘degeneration’ of Chosŏn Buddhism in his book *Korean Buddhism: Tradition and Transformation* (Seoul: Jimoondang Publishing Co., 1999), pp. 161, 165–166.

8 A typical instance of such a narrative is presented by Chai-Sik Chung, who states, “Even after this formal severance of the state’s relations with Buddhism, it continued to survive as the religion of the masses.” Chung continues, “In contrast, Confucianism was the state cult and the *yangban* status ethic. To the *yangban*, Buddhism, Taoism, and shamanistic beliefs and practices were heterodox religions suitable only to the masses and credulous woman, who were prone to be superstitious.” Chai-Sik Chung, *A Korean Confucian Encounter with the Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Institute of East Asian Studies, 1995), pp. 22–23.

evidence of popularization. To equate the notion of the popular with the masses, which implies dissociation from the *élite*, is also dubious. So-called popular practices stretched across social class boundaries and were practiced within all the classes. Buddhism certainly did not lose *élite* support. Rather there was continued patronage from the *élite*, and not least from the royal family, throughout the Chosŏn period.⁹

It seems *élite* patronage continued through to the end of the Chosŏn period in a relationship of interdependency. A careful nuancing of this process and a more accurate characterization is needed. Moreover, although so called degeneration, inasmuch as it really took place, was in large part due to Chosŏn state policies, Buddhist marginalization was furthered in modern times in the scholars' re-creation of the past. Twentieth-century methods of research and perspectives on Chosŏn Buddhism have led to another form of marginalization—in our books and classrooms.

2. Methods of Research and the Marginalization of Chosŏn Buddhism

In the history of Korean Buddhist studies there has been a sustained influence on modern day Korean scholars of a Christian-centred perspective, which ironically started with the pioneering works of Japanese scholars. There were early contacts with groundbreaking Western scholars in the new field of the scientific study of religions, such as Max Müller and E. B. Tylor. As a result, Japanese scholars came to adopt nineteenth-century Western ideas of religion that were heavily based on Christian notions.¹⁰

Thus, there has been a consistent application of conceptualizations such as the sacred versus the profane, transcendent versus the mundane, or religious versus superstitious.¹¹

Japanese scholars of Buddhism had an approach that was similar to that of their Western counterparts. Giving primacy to textual and philological studies in their methodology is but one instance of this and it played a fundamental role in shaping the scholarship of Buddhist studies.¹² It was once again a reflection of the Christian idea that religions are embodied in their scriptures. This went back to the 16th-century Christian Protestant notion that the “word” of God is where the truth is located. Therefore, it was thought that the textual meaning of scriptures was where “true religion” was to be found. On the other hand, objects, icons, and rituals were denigrated as adulterated and impure expressions of religion.¹³ Such attitudes are well represented by traditional philology, which has argued that the true meaning of a text should be obtained by deciphering the original meaning from the text itself.¹⁴

The western logic of giving primacy to textual studies and to transcendent notions of religion determined the perceptions of the Japanese scholars of Buddhism at the start of the 20th century, and when it was in turn applied to Korea, providing the foundation for the academic study of Buddhism in Korea, it resulted in the judgment that Chosŏn Buddhism was mostly “vulgarized” Buddhism. Pioneering Japanese scholars of Buddhism in Korea such as Takahashi Tōru (1877-1966) or Nukariya Kaiten (1867-1934) argued that Korean Buddhism was strongly characterized by belief in the help of the bodhisattvas,

9 Walraven makes this point by stating, “. . . the social basis on which Chosŏn Buddhism depended for its survival was perhaps broadened, but did not radically shift from the *élite* to the commoners. . . .” He proves this point by tracing the patronage of Buddhism by the royal court, the *yangban* *élite* and educated commoners. Walraven, “A Re-Examination,” p. 4.

10 Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 245-59.

11 For example in a lecture given at the Royal Institution in 1873, Max Müller states “Religion is a mental faculty which, independent of, nay, in spite of sense and reason, enables man to apprehend the infinite under different names and under varying disguises.” F. Max Müller, *The Hibbert Lecture 1878: Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion, as Illustrated by the Religions of India 1878* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1878), p. 23. In his *Double Exposure*, Faure explains that the Western conceptualization of Buddhism is often as a transcendent religion that is beyond time and place. Faure argues that this is a result of a misunderstanding. He argues that, rather, Buddhism is a historical tradition with all the trappings of a religion that is grounded in a certain culture. Bernard Faure, *Double Exposure*, trans. by Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. iv-x.

12 The history of Western study of Buddhism as originating from a focus on texts as the starting point is evident from the fact that the formal study of Buddhism coincided with the creation of a chair for the study of Sanskrit at the Collège de France in Paris in 1814. It was held first by Antoine-Leonard de Chézy (1773-1832) who was succeeded by Eugène Burnouf (1801-1852) known as the father of Buddhist studies in the west. Subsequently, in the 20th century there was the founding in 1926 of a chair for *philologie bouddhique*, again in Paris, for Jean Przyluski (1885-1944). It follows that, as De Jong has stated, “The study of Buddhism in Europe has been mainly concerned with its philological aspects. Since, in the field of Asian studies, university chairs were established only for Asian languages, it was often a Sanskritist or a Sinologist who specialized in this study.” J. W. De Jong, *Buddhist Studies* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 15, 22.

13 Schopen reveals how in the understanding of De Jong, one of the key figures in the establishment of Buddhology, there was an overriding primacy given to textual sources without even considering that particular Buddhist “texts” may have been entirely unknown by both the monks and the laity. Schopen points out that there is a blind assumption that a certain text was important and implemented in actual practice. Schopen points to the examples of the early Buddhologists Rhys Davids and de la Vallée Poussin (early 20th century), who chose to describe Indian Buddhism and Indian Buddhist practices solely based on canonical texts and ignored archeological finds and epigraphy that told a different story. Gregory Schopen, “Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 31: 1 (1991), pp. 4-5.

14 Gomez goes one step further: “Such claims are indeed a rare combination of Protestant models of scripture-centred theology, colonialist presumptions of cultural privilege, and a misuse of rationality as a key to understanding the non-rational. This exotic combination creates a scholarly fundamentalism that asserts that only texts, and only ‘old’ or ‘primary’ texts should have authority, that texts have fixed, immutable, ‘original’ meanings which inhere in the text itself, and above all that there is a sharp distinction between textual truth and the truth of daily superstition.” Luis O. Gomez, “Unspoken Paradigms: Meanderings through the Metaphors of a Field,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 18: 2 (1995), p. 194.

fortune-seeking practices or *kibok pulgyo*, and lacked doctrinal or philosophical developments.¹⁵ Eda Toshio (1898-1957), too, a representative and authoritative Japanese scholar of Korean Buddhism during the Japanese colonial period, viewed Chosŏn Buddhism as degenerated. He argued that it had abandoned philosophy and scholarly pursuits and turned into a system of folk belief that was practiced among the masses and by women. He referred to these trends as the cause of the decline of Buddhism in Korea.¹⁶

This description of Korean Buddhism as a congeries of adulterated, decrepit, and popularized practices and the reasoning that it does not warrant serious academic attention seem to have much to do with normative judgments about what constitutes “true Buddhism.” The notion of the popularization of Buddhism, in particular, carries with it powerful prejudices that distract us from objectively portraying the various facets and activities of Buddhism during the Chosŏn period.

The second reason for the double marginalization of Chosŏn Buddhism is the state-centredness of the historiography of the Chosŏn period. This approach resulted in heavily privileging the official perspective of the Chosŏn state. Following from this, researchers contented themselves with describing Buddhism mostly in relation to the state. It is obvious then that the characteristics of Buddhism that were highlighted were those that showed that it was a heretical teaching and therefore the object of state oppression and restrictions.

Naturally this narrative is evident also in the official records of the state, written in most cases by anti-Buddhist Confucian officials. In the *Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (*Chosŏn wangjo shillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄) much of the writing about Buddhism consists of blatant descriptions of the social ills that Buddhism has inflicted on society and the people. The anti-Buddhist tenor of official discourse is an obvious outcome of the attempt of the ruling élites to make Neo-Confucianism the ruling ideology of the state.¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, this narrative nicely suited the rhetoric of the Japanese colonial government, which

also considered Chosŏn Buddhism to be degenerate and therefore in need of assistance from more developed Japanese Buddhism.¹⁸

The above tendencies in the traditional methods of research are compounded by the fundamental divisions in our academic disciplines and, particularly, by the separation in our studies between the fields of Buddhism and Confucianism. Academic disciplines that touch on aspects of Buddhism are still very much divided along traditional academic lines, in the independent disciplines of philosophy, religious studies, history, and anthropology.

Adding to this lack of an integrated approach, it has been a recurrent criticism that the tradition of Buddhist studies has been too specialized and isolated. Traditional Buddhology has been found to be too narrow in its scope and blind to the multivalent aspects of Buddhism. Cabezón highlights this point by arguing that Buddhology is “...in its hyper-specialization, unconcerned with broader, comparative questions and unable to enter into dialogue with the wider intellectual community.”¹⁹ This is most evident when Buddhism is examined in parts, as in the oft-repeated claim that Buddhism is a system of philosophy.

The tendency to compartmentalize the study of Buddhism has led to forgetting that Buddhism is a religious tradition that has become manifest through cultural practices in a historical and social setting. As a result, an integrated view of Buddhism is not commonly adopted. For example, the significance of the whole of the collected works of Chosŏn eminent monks has yet to be examined within their proper socio-historical and cultural contexts, aside from being used as a source of biographical information.

Lastly, as mentioned above, a division is created because of our separation of disciplines. Buddhism and Confucianism are in general considered as separate and independent traditions and are discussed separately and not in a synthesized or an inter-relational framework. There seems to be a deeply rooted assumption or an acceptance that there was very little interaction between

15 Kim Yongt'ae (金龍泰), *Chosŏn hugi pulgyoüi imje pöpt'onggwa kyohak chönt'ong* 朝鮮後期 佛敎의 臨濟法統과 敎學傳統 [Linji dharma lineage and the scholastic tradition of late Chosŏn period Buddhism], PhD dissertation, Seoul National University, 2008, pp. 2-5.

16 Eda Toshio 江田俊雄, *Chosŏn bukkyo shi no kenkyü* 朝鮮仏敎史の研究 [The history of Chosŏn Buddhism], Tokyo: Kokusho Kankokai 国書刊行会, 1977, pp. 355-56.

17 Anti-Buddhist polemic was promoted by the Neo-Confucian literati arguing that Buddhism was a degenerate practice. A representative figure in this polemic was Chŏng Tojŏn (鄭道傳, 1343-1398) with his famous work *Pulssi chappŏn* 佛氏雜辨 which, together with *Chŏkpullon* 斥佛論 and *Shimgirip'yŏn* 心氣理篇, provided the foundation for the anti-Buddhist polemic (斥佛論) of the Chosŏn period. He was also a key figure in the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty. See for example, Chai-sik Chung, “Chŏng Tojŏn: ‘Architect’ of Yi Dynasty Government and Ideology”, in *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*, ed. by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Jahun Kim Haboush (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

18 Wi Jo Kang explains that the line of reasoning for the implementation of the Japanese imperial government policy towards Korean Buddhism was purportedly “to rescue Korean Buddhism from its demise.” Kang, *Religion and Politics in Korea Under the Japanese Rule* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), pp. 45-8.

19 José Ignacio Cabezón, “Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 18:2 (1995), 231-68 (p. 234).

monks and Confucian intellectuals and officials. In other words, the general approach has been to analyze Confucianism and Buddhism as two separate systems of philosophies or religions, and if they are discussed in an inter-related manner, it is largely at a conceptual and abstract level. For example, these discussions are mostly about the “Buddhist thought” of a certain eminent literatus.²⁰

Thus, the result is that discussions of Chosŏn Buddhism have been dominated by a discourse of separation and the objectification of Buddhism as the “other,” a heterodoxy in relation to Confucianism. What is lacking is how these two traditions were played out or “lived” by the people in their everyday lives.²¹ There existed an integral and a symbiotic relationship between Confucian literati and officials with Buddhist monks that involved mutual adoption of ideas and dependence on each other. It is this particular area of their lived lives that needs to be examined with an integrative framework.

On account of the foregoing, I argue for a shift in the methodological approach by suggesting the following:

a shift towards defining Buddhism as a system of socio-religious practices that is contextualized within the socio-historical setting,

a greater focus, in particular, on the interaction between monks and Confucian literati and officials in their everyday lives,

and the use of non-mainstream materials including 1) steles of eminent monks (*kosŭng pimun* 高僧碑文) and 2) popular Buddhist texts usually identified as apocrypha (*wigyŏng* 偽經). Their socio-historical and cultural significance need to be examined by contextualization and interpretation.

Depending on the source material that one employs, interpretations and conclusions vary. So far in the study of Korean Buddhism, steles have been largely ignored

due to the tendency of modern Buddhist studies in Korea to privilege doctrinal textual studies. Of course, Buddhist steles have been used but mostly as a source of biographical material for certain eminent monks. They have not been used as main source material for analyzing the socio-historical situation of Chosŏn Buddhism.²² Similarly, apocryphal Buddhist texts have been usually studied in the field of folk studies in connection to folk ritual studies and relatively ignored in mainstream studies of Korean Buddhism.²³ However, these texts are invaluable in gaining insight into the everyday religious concerns and practices of the people. These source materials will be discussed further below.

BUDDHIST INTERACTION WITH CONFUCIAN LITERATI

1. Buddhist Dependence on Confucians for Legitimacy and Support

Buddhist steles are erected to commemorate the life and deeds of eminent monks upon their death. It is a tradition which began in the Shilla period and continued into the Koryŏ period, when Buddhist steles were raised for State Preceptors (*kuksa* 國師) and Royal Preceptors (*wangsa* 王師) to commemorate their lives and work, especially in relation to the state. Through the interpretation of the text on these monuments, the social, historical, and political situation that surrounded the sangha at the time can be examined.²⁴ Moreover, and equally importantly, the relationship between the sangha and Confucian literati and officials can also be explored.

Though the tradition of erecting steles for eminent monks was commonplace in previous periods, during the Chosŏn period the tradition of erecting steles for the State Preceptors and Royal Preceptors was abolished and state sponsorship was discontinued. After the end of the Koryŏ period the last stele raised with state sponsorship was in 1410 for the eminent monk Muhak (無學, 1327-1405).²⁵

20 For example see, Yu Hosŏn (유호선), “Kim Ch’anghŭbŭi pulgyojŏk sayuwa pulgyoshi” 김창흠의 불교적 사유와 불교시 [Kim Ch’anghŭp’s Buddhist thought and poems], *Han’guk inmulsa yŏn’gu* 韓國人物史研究 2 (2004), 87-113 and Yi Hŭijae (이희재), “17segi Pak Sedangŭi yubul hoet’ongjŏk pulgyogywan” 17세기 박세당의 유불회통적 불교관 [17th century Confucian-Buddhist syncretic thought: Pak Sedang], *Yugyo sasang yŏn’gu* 儒教思想研究 25 (2006), 5-30.

21 There are some valuable studies by Korean scholars that examine the interplay between Buddhism and Confucianism in the lives of the people. See for example the earlier mentioned Kim Yongjo (1983), Kim Yŏngmi (2006), and Im Chonguk (2006). There is also a recent article in English, Kim Daeyeol, “The Social and Cultural Presence of Buddhism in the Lives of Confucian Literati in Late Chosŏn: The Case of Tasan,” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 25: 2 (2012), 213-41.

22 Although it is not unproblematic to use these steles, as they are a record of eminent monks and cannot be said to represent ordinary Buddhism, they are nonetheless a window on the sangha of the period when they were produced. The state of the institutional sangha during the Chosŏn period can be gleaned from analyzing and contextualizing information from the steles erected during that time.

23 An example of a well-known folk study of the Buddhist cult of the afterlife is, ‘yŏn Mŭyŏng (편무영), *Han’guk pulgyo minsongnon* 한국불교민속론 (Seoul: Minsogwŏn 민속원, 1998), in particular chapter 5: Han’gugŭi mubul sŭphamnon (1) – Shiwangshinangŭl chungshimŭro 한국의 무불습합론 (1) – 시왕신앙을 중심으로 [Musok-Buddhist syncretism in Korea (1): focusing on the cult of the Ten Kings], pp. 271-313

24 A good example of using steles as the main historical source material is by Sem Vermeersch. At this point his work is the only monograph in English to take such an approach. See Sem Vermeersch, *The Power of the Buddhas: The Politics of Buddhism During the Koryŏ Dynasty (918-1392)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2008). I have taken this approach in my PhD thesis: Kim Sŏngŭn (2012).

25 Pyŏn Kyeryang 卞季良, *Yangju Hoeamsa Muhak wangsa Myoŏm chonjat’ap pimun* 楊州 檜巖寺 無學王師 妙巖尊者塔碑文 [Yangju Hoeam Temple royal preceptor Muhak stupa inscriptions], (1410), in *Han’guk kosŭng pimun chŏngjip: Chosŏncho kŭnhŏndae* 韓國高僧碑文總集 – 朝鮮朝 近現代. (Seoul: Kasan Pulgyo munhwa yŏn’guwŏn 伽山佛教文化研究院, 2000) ed. by Yi, Chigwan (李智冠), pp.33-6.

However, starting from the beginning of the 17th century the erecting of steles for eminent monks was revived by the sangha on its own, with no indication of state endorsement or of sponsorship. Curiously, the tradition of having the text composed by Confucian literati or officials was continued during the entire Chosŏn period, even though it was one of the most oppressive times for Buddhism.

Simply from the erection of the steles, a custom that was revived after two centuries of disuse, it can be inferred that steles were part of a resurgence of the sangha in the late Chosŏn period.²⁶ Moreover, the simple fact that raising a stele involved high costs and large-scale logistical and organizational skills indicate that the sangha possessed a certain level of institutional strength, both financially and organizationally. Thus, steles give us clues about the social stature and the activities of the sangha.

Among the information that steles provide is an insight into the significant level of involvement of the Confucian literati and officials with matters of the sangha. Interestingly, stele texts were mostly authored by famous Confucian literati and high-ranking officials. This tells us that certain segments of the sangha were not as isolated and suppressed as often assumed, but rather active in their dealings with the rest of the society, and even well-connected to Confucian élites.²⁷ The writing of the stele texts by prominent Confucians of the time is an indication of support from the Confucian literati and officials and is evidence of the prestige and the social connections that the sangha possessed. It is clear that the authority of the stele would increase the higher the position and status of the composer of the inscription would be. This is because having a person of high social standing compose the text lent a seal of approval and validity to its contents and thus raised its social significance. Thus having literati or high officials compose the text was part of the attempt by the Buddhist sangha to gain authority for their claims of social legitimacy.²⁸

Furthermore, as noted, these steles are invaluable as a reflection of the network that the sangha had with the outer world. The sponsors who are listed on the back side of the steles are an indication of a sangha whose net-

work was by no means isolated and limited only to the Buddhist world. Their names show that its social interconnections extended into the high ranks of the *yangban* class, and even to the royal family. When it came to sponsoring the raising of steles of eminent monks, despite the state's oppressive policy towards Buddhism, a diverse range of people, from the members of the royal family to Confucian scholar-officials, made contributions and were not ashamed to have their names inscribed on the steles.

Out of the steles that were raised during the 17th century, there are 10 steles with the records of the sponsors on the backside of the 51 steles that are still extant.²⁹ The number of sponsors for a single stele range from three, to as many as 452 people. In the case of the Ch'ŏnghödang Stele (1630) of P'yohun Temple (表訓寺), 452 sponsors were recorded who were all identified as officials. Given that such a large number of officials took part in the raising of the stele does not give any impression that Buddhism was an institution oppressed by the state. In another instance, that of the stele for the masters Tosŏn and Sumi (道岬寺 道誥守眉兩大師碑, 1653), there are listed high officials who were most likely also the sponsors and among them was Inp'yŏng (麟坪, 1622-1658), the third son of King Injo (r. 1623-1649).³⁰

Given the list of mostly high-ranking officials, it is difficult to reconcile this fact with the understanding that this period was one of severe oppression. In view of the public nature of the steles, one has to conclude that the situation at the time allowed persons of high social and political rank to have their names inscribed as supporters of Buddhism. This suggests that support from Confucian literati of all ranks, including the aristocratic office-holder (*sadaebu* 士大夫) may have been more common than previously assumed.

There are further implications of this relationship of Confucians and the sangha. The benefits were had not only by the sangha. There were benefits as well for the composers of the stele texts. There were, of course, Buddhist merits accrued by taking part and contributing to the raising of Buddhist steles. Other than that, writing an inscription may have been one of the greatest achieve-

26 This corresponds roughly with the concluding of the Imjin war against Hideyoshi's armies in 1598. Fourteen years later the first eminent monk steles were raised for the famous monk-general Yujŏng (惟政, 1534-1610). Fifty more steles were constructed during the 17th century, while only one stele had been raised during the previous 200 years. Kim Sŏngün, "Chosŏn hugi sŏnbulgyo", p. 3.

27 Of the 51 steles that were erected during the 17th century, the inscriptions of 4 steles were anonymous, 7 were authored by monks, and the remaining 40 were composed by Confucian literati or officials. *ibid.*, p. 52.

28 I argue this especially in part 4 of chapter 3 in my PhD dissertation *Chosŏn hugi sŏnbulgyo*.

29 Yi Chigwan, ed., *Han'guk kosŭng pimun ch'ongjip*.

30 On the back side of this stele for Tosŏn and Sumi, there are listed a total of 83 sponsors of which 6 were Sŏn masters. Yi Kyŏngsŏk 李景奭, *Togapsa Tosŏn Sumi yangdaesabi* 道岬寺 道誥守眉兩大師碑 [Togap Temple stele of eminent masters Tosŏn and Sumi], (1653), in *Han'guk kosŭng pimun ch'ongjip*, ed. by Yi Chigwan, pp. 166-71.

ments in the career of a literatus; it would add to the fame of an official to have one's composition engraved into stone to last for eternity. This fact seems to be verified by the list of preeminent Confucian literati and officials who were the authors of the stele texts. For example, it was the famous literatus Hŏ Kyun (許筠, 1568-1618), at the height of his official career, who composed the stele text of the famous monk-general Yujŏng (惟政, 1534-1610). Similarly, the stele text for Ch'ŏnghŏ (淸虛, 1520-1604), the most eminent monk of the Chosŏn period, was authored by Yi Chŏnggu (李廷龜, 1564-1635) who not only had an illustrious career as an official, but was also one of the best known literary composers of classical Chinese during his time.³¹

It is clear that the Buddhist sangha was active in reaching out to the community of the Confucian literati and officials in order to increase the legitimacy of the steles, and in turn of themselves. This was also a way of increasing the legitimacy of the sangha as a whole in society, through the connections with and the legitimating power of illustrious Confucian literati and officials. The continued tradition of having Confucian literati or officials compose the text of the steles indicates the extent of the social network and social power that the sangha possessed. That the monks were able to maintain such a strong network makes one wonder if the relationships with the Confucians also were cemented in other ways. In the next section I will argue that the relationship of dependence was in the opposite direction as well, Confucians also depended on Buddhism.

Confucian Dependence on Buddhism: the Issue of Death

The aim of this section is to further explore the relationship between Buddhism and Confucianism in order to expand our understanding of how Buddhism functioned in society during this period and in what capacity. At the

same time, this section questions the focus of previous research and in doing so suggests a shift towards a different understanding of Buddhism and the problem of how it maintained its social significance in the Chosŏn society. It is also an attempt to use sources of popular Buddhist practices and to insert them in the mainstream discussions.

For illustrative purposes, I will discuss a popular Buddhist text, an apocryphon, that was popular during the Chosŏn dynasty, *Siwanggyŏng* (十王經) or the Sutra of the Ten Kings.³² It is a Buddhist scripture on the cult for the dead and the afterlife.³³ Though this text was originally introduced from China, its popularity in Korea indicates that the Buddhist role in dealing with the afterlife seemed to have been one of the central roles of Chosŏn Buddhism. It provided the means through which the people of Chosŏn dealt with death.³⁴ By examining the *Shiwanggyŏng*, we are able to get a closer view of how the ineluctable issue of the finite nature of human life was dealt with in Chosŏn Buddhist beliefs related to the afterworld (*myŏngbu shinang* 冥府信仰).

The cult for a good rebirth related to the *Shiwanggyŏng* was a product of syncretism between the Kṣitigarbha cult and the cult of the Ten Kings. With their arrival on the Korean peninsula, Kṣitigarbha and the Ten Kings became objects of worship as mediators who could be called upon to assist the souls of the deceased or even promote one's own passage to paradise after death.³⁵ The synthesis of the two cults is well depicted in the *pyŏnsangdo* (變相圖), the pictorial illustration in the *Shiwanggyŏng*. The depiction of Kṣitigarbha and the Ten Kings reflects their division of labor, with Kṣitigarbha as the compassionate savior of souls and the Ten Kings as the judges who determine the fate of the dead.³⁶

Remaining materials, including the published sutras or the paintings of Kṣitigarbha and related paintings

31 Kim Sŏngŭn, *Chosŏn hugi sŏnbulgyo*, pp. 58-63.

32 The text is a description of the stages of judgment by the individual ten kings. It is not at all a philosophical or doctrinal discussion but an admonition regarding death and the afterlife. Its structure suggests that it was used for reciting, as during the performance of the ritual.

33 The Sutra of the Ten Kings was not the only apocryphon popular during the Chosŏn period. There were others, including the *Pumo ūnjunggyŏng* (父母恩重經), which is equally valuable in characterizing Chosŏn Buddhism's attempt to associate itself with the Confucian value of filial piety. *Siwanggyŏng* 十王經 is an abbreviation of *Yesu shiwanggyŏng* 豫修十王生七經. It is sometimes referred to as *Pulsŏl yesu shiwang saengch'ilgyŏng* 佛說豫修十王生七經.

34 Of course, Buddhism was not the only means of dealing with the afterlife in Chosŏn Korea. There were also shamans who were religious specialists of the afterlife during this time. The difference with regard to the afterlife and the patronage of the two traditions in relation to social class would make for an interesting future research paper.

35 The *Siwanggyŏng* entreats one to perform the ritual of the Ten Kings for earning merit. Otherwise, merit can be gained through virtuous deeds such as alms giving. This merit can pass on to the soul of the deceased who may be lingering in the purgatory of the Buddhist hells. It can also help one's own soul to pass without trouble to paradise when one dies. Han, Pogwang (韓普光). "Han'guk pulgyoe issŏsŏ Chijang-ūiryeyū yŏkhal" 한국불교에 있어서 지장의례의 역할 [The role of Kṣitigarbha rituals in Korean Buddhism], in *Hyŏndae sahoe issŏsŏ Chijang shinangūi chaejomgyŏng* (현대사화에 있어서 지장신앙 재조명), ed. by Ch'ae Inhwan 채인환 (Seoul: Unchunsa 운춘사, 1991), pp. 104-106.

36 This synthesis was reflected in the new style of paintings and the shrine of the underworld of the Chosŏn dynasty. The paintings came to depict both Kṣitigarbha and the Ten Kings and their assistants, different from Kṣitigarbha cult paintings from the Koryŏ period. Kim Chŏnghŭi (김정희), *Chosŏn shidae Chijangwangdo yŏn'gu* 조선시대 지장시왕도 연구 [Kṣitigarbha-Ten Kings paintings of the Chosŏn period]. (Seoul: Ilchisa 일지, 1996), p. 129.

throughout the Chosŏn period, point to the continued practice of the Buddhist cult for the afterlife. The popularity of Buddhist votive temples among the royal family and the society's elite, too, confirms the role of Buddhism as specializing in the issue of death and the afterlife. Though the afterlife seemed to have been one of the main foci of Chosŏn Buddhism, attention in Korea to this particular function of Buddhism has been marginal in Buddhist scholarship.

As mentioned above, the popularity of this cult and its importance to Buddhism can be inferred from the consistent reproduction of the paintings and scriptures related to the cult of Kṣitigarbha and the cult of the Ten Kings. Of the materials produced during the Chosŏn period, Kim Chŏnghŭi counts altogether 183 paintings of Kṣitigarbha and 39 paintings of the Ten Kings. Of the Kṣitigarbha Sutra, she lists 26 separate years when it was published during the period from 1453 to the 18th century. The *Sutra of the Ten Kings* was published in ten separate years during the Chosŏn period.³⁷ Obviously mortuary rituals were an important part of the Buddhist religious culture of that time. Apart from mortuary Buddhism represented through the tradition of votive temples dedicated to deceased individuals, ritual paintings known as Sweet Dew paintings (*kamnode* 甘露圖), representing monks performing rites for the dead, also indicate that being a mediator to the afterworld or future existences was an important function of Chosŏn Buddhism.³⁸ Mortuary practices were a key element in maintaining Buddhism's societal relevance during this time and thus should be regarded as an important defining aspect of Chosŏn Buddhism.

Placating and ensuring the safe passage of the souls definitely seems to have been an important task especially after the Imjin war (1592-1598) and the invasion by the Manchus (1636-1637). A ritual that fulfilled this role for society was *suryukchae* (水陸齋), which was performed for the souls of people who had suffered an

unnatural death. With the many unnatural deaths suffered during the two wars, Buddhism must have played a central role in assuaging and sending off errant spirits to the next world.³⁹

3. Mutual Dependence: the Tradition of Votive temples

The votive temples (*wŏndang* 願堂) mentioned above constituted an extension of the cult of the dead that was of obvious social importance. The issue of death and the afterlife was not only a problem of the masses, but also moved the ruling class to become patrons of Buddhism. Though the building of votive temples by members of the royal family including the king was a constant source of concern for the Confucian court officials throughout the Chosŏn Dynasty, it continued to the end of the dynasty.⁴⁰

Although it may seem paradoxical for a supposedly staunchly Neo-Confucian society, or at least for its ruling class, the culture of maintaining votive temples endured unabated within the royal family up to the very last years of the Chosŏn period. Including the votive temples that were established in the "fully Confucianized" latter half of the Chosŏn period, there were a total of 102 votive temples. Among them, 31 (30.4%) were for deceased former kings and queens, while 32 (31.4%) of them were established for then living kings and queens or their princes and princesses for their wellbeing and long life. The highest number of votive temples established during the rule of a single king was during the reign of King Yŏngjo (1694-1776), when 23 votive temples were established, whereafter the number of votive temples established decreased until the end of the dynasty.⁴¹

The history of votive temples is a demonstration of a mutually benefitting relationship between the Buddhist temples and the royal family and constitutes one of the most consistently practiced forms of Buddhist tradition by the elite. Through this relationship the Buddhist temples were able to gain support and protection from the court or a powerful family. Furthermore, by being desig-

37 Kim Chŏnghŭi, *Chosŏn shidae Chijangwang*, pp. 451-485.

38 See Yi Kisŏn (이기선), *Chiokto* 지옥도 [Portraits of Hell], (Seoul: Taewŏnsa 대원사, 1993), p. 61.

39 Buddhist priests would have been the main ritual specialists to deal with the deceased and perform these rituals and given the two wars such rituals would have been a common sight. In one case, there is a record in a personal diary of a *yangban* who witnesses monks performing such ritual (遷度齋) in public, by a river in Chŏnju in Chŏlla province. It was claimed that after the fall of the nearby castle in a battle during the Imjin war, the river had turned red with the blood of the deceased every July 19th. Kim Yŏngmi "18segi chŏnban hyangch'on", p. 111.

40 As late as 1902, in the last days of King Kojong's rule, Songgwang temple (松廣寺) in Chŏlla Province was made into his votive temple. Sŏkchin (錫珍) ed. *Chogyesan Songgwangsa sago* 曹溪山松廣寺史庫 [The repository of the history of Chogy Mountain Songgwang Temple] (place and publisher unknown, 1939), p. 913, cited in Pak Pyŏngsŏn (朴炳璇), *Chosŏn hugi wŏndanggo* 朝鮮後期願堂考, *Paengnyŏn pulgyo nonjip* (白蓮佛教論集) 5:6 (1996), p. 357.

41 The other 39 votive temples of the 102 mentioned temples, nine (8.8%) were for relatives of the royal family, ten (9.8%) were for the country, and twenty (19.6%) were established for "others". Pak Pyŏngsŏn, "Chosŏn hugi wŏndangŭi sŏllip chŏlch'a mit kujo" 朝鮮後期願堂의 設立 節次 및 構造 [The process of establishment and the functional structure of votive temples in later Chosŏn period], *Kyŏngju sahak* 慶州史學 29 (2009), 53-98 (p. 68).

nated as *wŏndang*, the temples were relieved of corvée duties (*Chabyŏk* 雜役) and instead were made to provide various craft items and natural products such as oiled paper, rope, vegetable oil, and soybean paste. This, too, might put a heavy burden on the votive temples, but it was preferred over having to provide corvée labor.⁴²

From the side of the Confucian élites, the tradition of votive temples is a reflection of the popularity of the Buddhist rituals for one's wellbeing in the afterlife and it shows considerable dependence of Confucian élites on this tradition. Votive temples were used for several purposes, including housing the royal ancestral tablets (*wip'ae* 位牌), royal portraits (*ŏjin* 御眞), royal calligraphies (*ŏp'il* 御筆), and placentas of royal births (*t'ae* 胎). In addition, votive temples were the site of ritual performances including Commemorative Rituals (*ki'ilchae* 忌日齋), the Sending Off the Souls Ritual (*Ch'ŏndojae* 薦度齋), and the Rite for Deliverance of Creatures of Water and Land (*suryukchae* 水陸齋). Additionally, votive temples were places to pray for this-worldly benefits such as long life and the wellbeing of members of the royal family.⁴³ Altogether, it is not an exaggeration to say that Buddhism was an important part of the culture of the Chosŏn élite.

Through the issues of death and the afterlife, Buddhism touches fundamental aspects of human existence. With their rituals Buddhist monks addressed practical problems and concerns that all the people of Chosŏn faced. Buddhism as a practiced religion contrasted with the Buddhism of the canonical sutras that elaborated doctrinal issues and was far removed from the everyday problems that people faced. Thus, Buddhism was able to gain the patronage of the people and gain the support of the elite needed for Buddhism to continue to be institutionally viable.

A crucial element that allowed Buddhism to survive in a supposedly staunchly neo-Confucian and anti-Buddhist society was that its rituals could serve to satisfy the core Confucian virtue of filial piety (*hyo* 孝) as in the performance of Commemorative Rituals for the deceased kings

and queens.⁴⁴ By means of praying for an easy passage to paradise free of punishments for the souls of people's parents, Buddhist monks successfully integrated people's needs into a Buddhist trade. It may seem a paradox that fulfilling one's Confucian virtue of filial piety was done with the help of Buddhist monks. But even Chosŏn kings who were publically anti-Buddhist and instated policies to reduce the power and influence of Buddhism, turned to Buddhist rituals in order to fulfill their filial duties.⁴⁵

Ironically, given the specialty of the Buddhist monks, Buddhist funerary ceremonies became an integral part of properly sending off the dead souls and fulfilling one's Confucian duties. Adding to this irony was that the Confucian virtue of filial piety was adopted, or even appropriated, into Buddhist cultic practices to the extent that it became also the territory of the Buddhist monks.⁴⁶

This was part of a natural process of the accommodation of Buddhism to the then culturally and religiously current practices of the Chosŏn society. Buddhism skillfully adopted the territory of the afterlife and presented it in the authoritative and familiar framework of a legal bureaucratic structure. In visual depictions one observes the legal structure of the ten kings as the judges and their assistant judges (*p'an'gwan* 判官) followed by their assistants, the record keepers (*saja* 使者) and the witnesses (*tongja* 童子).⁴⁷

Different from the Confucian anti-Buddhist polemics, in day-to-day life the two worlds of Confucianism and Buddhism do not appear to have been separate but closely intertwined and even inter-dependent in a symbiotic relationship. With regard to the afterlife, Buddhism was able to create a mutually benefiting situation, of Buddhism providing the service of taking care of its patrons' ancestors for which in return the temples received support and protection as in the case of the votive temples discussed above. By means of adopting core Confucian virtues and the then current values, Buddhism managed to expand and maintain its patronage base. The temples

42 Pak Pyŏngsŏn, "Chosŏn hugi wŏndanggo," p. 357.

43 Pak Pyŏngsŏn, "Chosŏn hugi wŏndanggo," pp. 360-61.

44 Pak makes this argument throughout his article "Chosŏn hugi wŏndangŭi sŏllip."

45 For example, King T'aejong (r. 1400-1418) severely curtailed the number of temples and temple slaves. Yet, during his rule, he allowed state Buddhist rituals to be performed. In one case, King T'aejong asked the advice of a high-ranking official about performing Buddhist offerings for his sick father. The official agreed that if it was for the king's father, it would not be a problem; Mihwa Choi, "State Suppression of Buddhism and Royal Patronage of the Ritual of Water and Land in the Early Chosŏn," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 22, no. 2 (2009), p. 201.

46 Walraven makes the interesting argument that Confucian values became so widespread that they became general social values and were no longer specifically identified as Confucian. Part of this process was the appropriation of Confucian values by Buddhism. Boudewijn Walraven, "Buddhist Accommodation," pp. 110-113.

47 This is colorfully illustrated in the Chosŏn period paintings of the ten hells and their presiding kings and their attendants. National Museum of Korea, *A Journey into the Buddhist Paintings of Chosŏn Dynasty* (Seoul: National Museum of Korea, 2003), pp. 21-61.

were able to receive much needed protection and material support from their patrons, while in return the temples ensured the comfort not only of the patrons' ancestors but more importantly the spiritual comfort of the patrons themselves.⁴⁸

There is no denying that being oppressed by state policies as a heresy during the Chosŏn dynasty deprived Buddhism of much of the official support and status that it had enjoyed during the Koryŏ period. However, it maintained its hold as a religious authority reinforcing its significance in society by adopting Confucian elements. This is to say that the Confucian world of the literati and the officials constituted an inseparable part of the Buddhist world. Not only did the Confucian literati and the officials determine to a high degree whether Buddhism could maintain its social and religious relevance or not since they were politically and culturally the centre of power, but the Confucian worldviews and values were also the goal towards which the monks steered Buddhism.

CONCLUSION: AN INTEGRATED UNDERSTANDING

From the discussions above we can infer how under the pressure of social and political forces, Buddhism came to be remolded and was adapted to a new environment. A consideration of the issue of death and how Buddhism approached it shows that Buddhist ideas and practices were adjusted to agree with what Confucians and society at large regarded as important. The trend of Buddhism to become "Confucianized" seems to have been a needed transformation in Chosŏn in order to maintain its meaningfulness in social life. Accordingly, the society's elite remained an important supporter and patron of Buddhism, along with the commoners who followed popular practices of Buddhism. Though popular practices formed a significant portion of Buddhist practices in late Chosŏn,⁴⁹ elite participation formed an important and integral element of Buddhism as well.

In fact, the recognition and the legitimation by the society's elite were actively sought by the monks, as this provided valuable social capital for the reestablishment of the sangha in society. In this process one could witness

a Buddhist appropriation of Confucianism, which became a broader movement within the Buddhist world towards the latter half of the Chosŏn period. For instance, Buddhist ritual manuals were newly written with the specific intention of bringing the rituals in line with the dominant ideology of the times. Even the funerary codes for the disciples of a deceased master were re-modeled following Confucian prescriptions, such as the mourning period of three years.⁵⁰ This Buddhist appropriation of Confucian elements worked to the advantage of Buddhism and was essential in its efforts to stay relevant in its socio-historical setting.⁵¹

Our discussion has highlighted the complexity of the ways in which Buddhism responded to a situation of oppression, rejecting a simple narrative of degeneration. The multi-dimensionality of Buddhist-Confucian interaction and the interaction of both Buddhists and Confucianists with other traditions is undeniable. For example, it is not a secret that the Confucian elites were interested in and adopted the thought and even the practices of other traditions such as Daoism and *fengshui*, which were also considered to be heterodox. Such interaction obviously characterized the relationship of Confucianism and Buddhism.

Thus, different from the model of separation between Buddhism and Confucianism and the compartmentalization of the various traditions, there was active interaction between the Buddhist monks and the Confucian literati and officials. When we take our Chosŏnites beyond the labels of monks or Confucian literati, it is obvious that there were needs and even associations, which may have interconnected them in various other affiliations that may have superseded our basic labels of Buddhism and Confucianism. While such labels and distinctions are important to us as tools of discussion and research, in the eyes of the Confucian elites, at least in their private lives such distinctions may well have been blurred and not so salient. To them, the *Ritual for the Ten Kings of Purgatory* may have been just another practice of filial piety by a different name.

In other words, though the heaviest blow came from

48 Pak Pyŏngsŏn, "Chosŏn hugi wŏndanggo", pp. 359-60.

49 Hee-sook Nam, "Publication of Buddhist Literary Texts: The Publication and Popularization of Mantra Collection and Buddhist Ritual Texts in the Late Chosŏn Dynasty", *Journal of Korean Religions* 3: 1 (2012), pp. 16-7.

50 Kim Yongt'ae (金龍泰), "Chosŏn shidae pulgyoŭi yubul kongjon mosaekkwa shidaesŏngŭi ch'ugu" 조선시대불교의 유불공존 모색과 시대성의 추구 [The pursuit of a Confucian-Buddhist symbiotic existence by Chosŏn Buddhism and its historical characteristics], *Chosŏn shidaesa hakpo* 朝鮮時代史學報 49 (2009), 5-34 (pp. 26-28).

51 Walraven convincingly makes this argument and further argues that the success of Buddhism in its appropriation of Confucian elements worked to weaken Confucianism as an "institutional faith" and its exclusive claims to the virtues of filial piety and practices such as ancestor worship. Walraven, "Buddhist Accommodation," pp. 105-16.

the anti-Buddhist state policies and high-ranking government polemicists, beneath that there was a complex interplay with various players from a variety of social classes and separate layers within these classes. A complex amalgamation of political, social, religious and historical factors resulted in the formation of Chosŏn Buddhism. It only makes sense that our academic approach of integrated understanding should reflect this interrelated and complex amalgam of various traditions in the lives of the people, including the monks and the Confucian élites. To describe the transformation of Buddhism in the Chosŏn period simply as degeneration and marginalization grossly simplifies the complexity of the situation. We need to broaden our methods and use a larger selection of source materials than has been employed in the past to become more perceptive to the characteristics of Chosŏn Buddhism that have been missing in the mainstream narrative.

South Korean Cultural Diplomacy and Brokering 'K-Culture' outside Asia

KEYWORDS: CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY, CULTURAL DIPLOMACY, K-CULTURE, CULTURAL BROKERING



An all-night K-pop party during the Korean Film Festival 'Project-K' held in Frankfurt. (Photo: Maya Jasmin Szost, MJS Photography, used with permission)

INTRODUCTION

South Korea is a country that takes its image overseas seriously. Not only have state-led cultural policies focused, since the 1960s, on creating a domestic cultural policy aimed at 'inspiring and mobilizing national subject via pride in South Korean national products'², but

especially since the early 1990s there has been a drive to display the nation's cultural achievements overseas as a form of cultural diplomacy.³ Cultural diplomacy, according to Nicholas Cull, is one subset of public diplomacy, and one that represents "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment through making its cul-

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, which raised some key questions on the central arguments presented here.

² Sang Mi Park, "The Paradox of Postcolonial Korean Nationalism: State-Sponsored Cultural Policy in South Korea, 1965-Present", *The Journal of Korean Studies* 15(1) (2010), 67-94 (p. 70).

³ Raymond Williams asserts that displaying cultural heritage is an important part of cultural policy that functions as a form of display in order to boost the credibility of the country as not only an economic but also a cultural power ("State Culture and Beyond", in *Culture and the State*, ed. by L. Apignanesi (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1984), pp. 3-5).

tural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad.”⁴ In this respect, South Korea has faced a particularly challenging task in creating a positive national image despite its spectacular economic development and success.⁵ In Western public imagination, memories of the Korean War have proved surprisingly hard to shed, and the negative images of North Korea that frequently circulate (and occasionally dominate) international media are also difficult to contain. As South and North Korea tend to merge into a singular ‘Korea’, images of abject poverty and military threats by the North have also had a detrimental effect on South Korea’s public image by association. As a result, up until very recently, Kim Jong-il was probably the only Korean many non-Koreans could name, albeit the meteoric success story of the eccentric rapper Psy since 2012 has perhaps now changed that.

Before the sudden popularity of Psy, however, South Korean outward-projecting state-led cultural engagement has by and large consisted of various forms of cultural exchanges, such as promoting Korean cultural products (literature, arts, design, cinema, music and so forth) through autonomous agencies that are state- or privately-funded.⁶ These organisations either initiate cultural events, or provide funding for events, study programmes and cultural activities which are deemed to promote and export examples of Korean culture overseas. The support of Korean Studies overseas has also been an important (and somewhat effective) approach towards improving understanding of (South) Korean culture overseas. Hans Tuch notes that first and foremost, public diplomacy is “a government’s process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about an understanding for [the] nation’s ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies.”⁷ Accordingly, although South Korean cultural policies have particularly before the early 1990s very much focused on building confidence and supporting nationalism domestically, the cultural policies since the mid-2000s have been inter-

twined with considerations of ‘soft power’ and how South Korea increasingly posits itself as a developed, post-industrial middle power with an important role to play on the global stage both as an economic *and* a cultural power. Within the government’s rhetoric this cultural soft power is presented not only in terms of being able to “shape the preferences of others,”⁸ but also in terms of positioning South Korea as a nation that has an important contribution to make to the global community of nations. As a nation that has successfully modernised despite historical tragedies (national division, civil war), South Korea now actively posits itself as a success story and a model that developing nations can emulate.⁹ In addition to this, the government has also sought to enhance South Korea’s image as a reliable and developed business partner and to create an image of a dynamic and developed country with which advanced countries can aspire to do business.

Within this context, the success of Korean popular culture (*hallyu*) outside South Korea (henceforth, Korea) has become another welcome tool for cultural engagement. However, it is worth noting that initially the export of Korean popular culture (and television dramas and pop acts in particular) was not driven by the government’s drive to promote a certain image of Korea, but rather grew out of the necessity to explore new export markets in the wake of the Asian financial crisis after 1997.¹⁰ As the government supported the development of creative industries through favourable tax breaks and grants which allowed the production companies to price their products very competitively compared to Japanese television dramas in markets such as Taiwan and Singapore, the key concern for policy makers in the late 1990s and early 2000s was, as Cho Haejoang notes, “to transform the Korean Wave into a sustainable source of income.”¹¹ However, as the popularity of *hallyu* products grew in Asia (and to a much lesser extent Europe and the US), the government’s cultural agencies began to see promotion of popular culture products as a way to engage with younger overseas audiences in particular. This has led

4 Nicholas J. Cull, “Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories”, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616(31) (2008), 31-54 (p. 33).

5 Regina Kim, “South Korean Cultural Diplomacy and Efforts to Promote the ROK’s Brand Image in the United States and Around the World”, *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* 11(1) (2011). 124-34 (p. 125).

6 Examples of such government-funded bodies include the Korea Foundation, Academy of Korean Studies and Korean Literature Translation Institute. The Daesan Foundation is an example of a privately-funded cultural agency engaged in the promotion of Korean culture (and literature in particular).

7 Hans Tuch, *Communicating with the World. U.S. Public Diplomacy Overseas* (New York: Institute for Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown University, 1990), p. 3.

8 Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), p. 5.

9 Within this context South Korea is increasingly looking to provide not only overseas development aid, but also technical cooperation and educational programmes for developing countries (see a related research programme on Korea’s role as a development partner in Ethiopia and Kenya: <<http://www.afraso.org/en/content/s3-c-cultural-approaches-negotiating-development-korean-african-interactions>>).

10 Cho Haejoang, “Reading the ‘Korean Wave’ as a Sign of a Global Shift”, *Korea Journal* 45(4) (2005), 147-182 (148).

11 Cho, p. 160

to a drive to boost Korea's image as a source for cultural innovation that is in tune with global youth culture, and the 2000s has seen a significant increase in the number of film festivals and K-pop events within and outside Asia.

Yet given that the production of television dramas and K-pop acts is ultimately consumer driven and produced to appeal to consumer desires, the kind of national image that they project outward is difficult to plan and control. This is because of the influence that the consumers and overseas production companies have over the development of the cultural products, which give rise to the very hybrid nature of 'K-culture' (a term I will use in this essay to refer to these hybridised Korean cultural products). This paper will highlight some tensions, limits and possibilities of Korea's soft power (defined as a nation's ability to attract and co-opt) through discussing the role of non-Korean cultural brokers in promoting hybridised forms of Korean culture overseas. The findings of this paper draw on interviews with German university students, second-generation German-Korean volunteers and South Korean consulate staff, who were all involved in organising the film festival ('Project K') in Frankfurt in October 2012 which, in the words of the organisers, aimed to "improve cross-cultural communication between Germany and Korea." By analysing how Korean culture is imagined, consumed and brokered by non-Korean and diasporic Korean cultural brokers of pop culture to local consumers, this paper will discuss how 'authentic' any such cultural representation can be, and whether such notions of authenticity should even matter in the context of effective cultural diplomacy. Moreover, this paper will show how in the context of transcultural consumption of hallyu by European consumers of K-pop and Korean cinema, 'Korea' emerges as a hybrid cultural construct which takes on multiple meanings not necessarily intended or expected by those engaged in cultural diplomacy and in promotion of Korean culture outside Korean national borders. By doing so, I will highlight how this very idea of 'inauthenticity' might both limit and open up new opportunities for those wishing to utilise culture as a form of soft power.

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY, NATION BRANDING AND K-CULTURE OUTSIDE ASIA

The South Korean government has been very candid about the aims of its state-sponsored, outward-projecting cultural policies. In addition to this, cultural industries have played an increasingly important part in the state economic planning since 2001, when the Korea Culture and Contents Agency (KOCCA) was established to oversee and support its development.¹² The Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003-2008) aimed to propel Korea into the league of the world's top five cultural industry nations,¹³ whilst also recognising the role of culture (both popular and traditional) as a tool for "soft power with which to upgrade Korea's image internationally."¹⁴ The Lee Myung-bak administration (2008-2013) took this initiative further by developing a notion of cultural diplomacy as a form of soft power to strengthen its international and domestic legitimacy, and identified 'nation-branding' as a tool to achieve this image.¹⁵ The establishment of the Presidential Council on Nation Branding (PCNB) in 2009 is another clear indication of how seriously Korea takes the necessity to build its cultural soft power. The aim of the PCNB is, according to the statement on their website, "to enhance Korea's national status and prestige in the international community by implementing systematic and comprehensive strategies."¹⁶ Although the concept of nation-branding is still somewhat under contestation as to its usefulness to describe 'branding activities' by nation-states, some scholars have argued that through 'branding' nation-states can potentially achieve a better image overseas, which in turn may have a positive impact on a country in terms of tourism, exports of goods and even political and diplomatic credibility in the wider international arena.¹⁷ Korea's branding drive (in collaboration with the Korean Tourism Organisation (KTO) and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism) has also included the creation of a string of catch-phrases that would capture the 'essence' of what 'defines' Korea as a nation. These slogans have included phrases such as 'Dynamic Korea', 'Korea Sparkling' (which did not get good reception overseas because of its connotations with fizzy

¹² Li-Chih Cheng, "The Korea Brand: The Cultural Dimension of South Korea's Branding Project in 2008", in *The SAIS U.S.-Korea Yearbook 2008* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 2008), pp. 73-85 (p. 83).

¹³ See Ae Gyung Shim, "From the Center of Different Peripheries: Constructing Cultural Content in a New Age Diversity", in *Proceedings of the Korean Studies Association for Australasia Conference 2009* (Sydney: Sydney University, 2009), pp. 301-10 (p. 303).

¹⁴ Sang-Yeon Sung, "Constructing New Image: Hallyu in Taiwan", *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 9(1) (2010), 25-45 (p. 38).

¹⁵ See MOFAT, "Enhancing National Prestige through Advanced Diplomacy", *2010 Republic of Korea Diplomatic White Paper*, <http://www.mofat.go.kr/ENG/policy/whitepaper/index.jsp?menu=m_20_160>

¹⁶ Korea Brand.net: <http://www.koreabrand.net/en/util/util_about_pcnb.do> [accessed 20th September 2012].

¹⁷ Daphnee Lee, "Branding Asia through Public Diplomacy: Structural-historical Factors, Convergences and Divergences", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 8(3) (2012), 209-221 (p. 210)



Entrance to the Student Union building (AsTA): the visual identity of Project K utilised sleek, futuristic designs and LED lights to communicate an idea of Korea's urban modernity. (Photo: Maya Jasmin Szost, MJS Photography, used with permission)

drinks)¹⁸, as well as the current 'Korea, Be Inspired'. Reflecting this culturally-specific reception and its potential for the misreading of intended messages, Simon Anholt asserts that the words 'brand' and 'brand image' are actually two very different things, despite being often used interchangeably, "the former being within the domain of the product and consequently under the control of the producer, and the latter being within the domain of the consumer, and thus outside the direct control of the producer."¹⁹ This is also where the idea of nation-branding runs into trouble in the context of cultural diplomacy since, as Anholt asserts, nations cannot be branded because "countries are judged as they always have been: by the things they do, not by the things they

say."²⁰ It may therefore be helpful then to think of Korea's cultural diplomacy efforts as culture-led 'image-making' activities.²¹

Yet for Korea, it has been surprisingly difficult to 'design' a brand or image that appeals to audiences outside Asia. Whilst the 'cultural odourlessness' (*mukokuseki*) argument that Koichi Iwabuchi coined to explain why Japanese cultural products found a ready market in Asia²² has also been put forward by commentators and scholars to explain the success and popularity of Korean pop culture in Asia,²³ it has been much harder to predict what aspects of Korean culture might appeal to nationals of countries where such cultural affinity does not exist.²⁴ The popularity of K-pop and hallyu in its broader sense as a global cul-

¹⁸ Ines Min, "Korea Needs Unique Promotion Strategies", *Korea Times* (October 14, 2009)

¹⁹ Simon Anholt, "Editorial", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 6(1) (2010), 1-10 (pp. 7-8).

²⁰ Anholt, p. 9. Interestingly Anholt was an advisor for South Korea's not-so-successful nation branding exercise 'Korea Sparkling', which proves his point about the difficulties involved in branding a nation in terms of predicting outcomes of nation branding campaigns.

²¹ J. H. Hertz, "Political Relativism Revisited", *International Studies Quarterly* 25(2), 182-97 (p. 187)

²² Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2002), pp. 70-2.

²³ See for example Sora Park, "China's Consumption of Korean Television Dramas: An Empirical Test of the 'Cultural Discount' Concept", *Korea Journal* 44(4) (2004), 265-90. See also Sang-Yeon Sung, "Constructing New Image: Hallyu in Taiwan", *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 9(1) (2010), 25-45; Samuel Seongseop Kim et al., "Effects of Korean Television Dramas on the Flow of Japanese Tourists", *Tourism Management* 28 (2007): 1340-53; S. Huang (2011), "Nation Branding and Transnational Consumption: Japan-mania and the Korean Wave in Taiwan", *Media Culture Society* 33(3) (2011), 3-18; Jonghoe Yang, "The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in East Asia: A Comparison of Chinese, Japanese, and Taiwanese Audiences Who Watch Korean TV Dramas", *Development and Society* 41(1) (2012), 103-47; and Eun-Young Jung, "Transnational Korean: A Critical Assessment of the Korean Wave in Asia and the United States", *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 31 (2009), 69-80.

²⁴ Doobo Shim contends, writing with hindsight in 2008, that "the Korean government did not have a clear vision for popular cultural exports" when it started, and that "the government only jumped on the bandwagon when the phenomenon became very apparent". See his "The Growth of Korean Cultural Industries and the Korean Wave", in *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*, ed. by Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), p. 30.

tural product has therefore been a welcome development to those engaged in Korean nation-branding and other such 'image-making activities', because it seems to provide a meaningful way to engage with younger audiences outside Asia in particular. There is, however, an uneasy relationship between the government's nation-branding agenda and the economic imperatives and market forces which drive the cultural and creative industries in Korea that churn out K-Pop acts for global consumption. In fact, since the government has only limited control over the content of the cultural exports, even if KOCCA is heavily involved in supporting their development, there is in actuality a great deal of unpredictability involved in using culture as a medium for cultural diplomacy, particularly when the product itself is highly dependent on consumer preferences.²⁵ Moreover, the state-sponsored expressions of traditional Korean culture (*Han'guk munhwa*) also often sit uneasily alongside popular culture products that are created with the global commodity culture in mind. This is because while national state-led discourses of global Korean culture typically present globalisation as a process of exporting the 'uniqueness' of Korean (traditional) culture overseas, the export of Korean popular culture is driven by consumer demand that requires constant reinventing of the product, as well as its hybridisation and localisation.²⁶

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that most of Korea's outward-projecting campaigns appear to have appealed primarily to the domestic audiences. The cultural ministry's campaign to brand Korean traditional culture as 'Han-Style' culture (*hansik* – Korean food, *hanbok* – Korean dress, *han'gŭl* – Korean alphabet, *hanok* – Korean-style housing, *han'guk ūmak* – Korean music, *hanji* – Korean style paper) is an example of such. The idea was to link the 'Han-brand' to a number of everyday cultural aspects with the view of encouraging Korean culture to be eventually integrated into the everyday lives of overseas con-

sumers in a way similar to how, for example, Chinese food has become part of global food culture.²⁷ However, because the Han Style campaign also links the consumption of Korean culture to notions of 'uniqueness',²⁸ it tends to appeal to domestic consumers whilst alienating those who are by definition excluded from that culture by their very 'outsidedness'.²⁹ But even with relatively 'culturally odourless' cultural products such as K-pop, predicting what kinds of pop acts will appeal to overseas consumers and what does not has been particularly challenging with markets outside Asia.

The case of the remarkable success of the Korean rapper Psy is an indication of how remarkably porous the reception of Korean pop culture outside Asia is. In Psy's case, despite the heavy government marketing and investment by private entertainment production companies in cultural products that market researchers deemed potentially more appealing to overseas consumption, it was finally the middle-aged, funny-guy with horse-riding dance moves who became the new 'cultural ambassador' for Korea.³⁰ This shows how successful Korean cultural exports are in reality defined by concerns for marketisation of culture and what Jim McGuigan calls "market reasoning" or "the all-encompassing discourse of market reason on a global scale in alliance with technological determinism; in effect, neo-liberal globalisation."³¹ While the insistence on uniqueness certainly exists in state-sponsored and official discourses of Korean Culture, the overseas audiences, and young people in particular, are more inclined to consume and identify with Psy's act, for this act represents hybrid, globalised 'K-culture' where Korean cultural products are consumed and interpreted in multiple ways that suit the sensibilities or tastes of the receiving culture. The KTO's response to Psy's success in appointing him a cultural ambassador illustrates the government's flexibility in shifting its strategic focus according to what aspects of exported culture become notice-

25 See Daniel Black, "Cultural Exchange and National Specificity", in *Complicated Currents: Media Flows, Soft Power and East Asia*, ed. by Daniel Black, Stephen Epstein, Tokita Alison (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2010), pp. 16.1-16.10.

26 Example of such localisation is the trend by Korean entertainment companies to launch identical manufactured bands in China, Korea and Japan, each singing in their own language to appeal to each target audience.

27 Li-Chih Cheng, p. 85.

28 Goldstein-Gidoni (2005) and Iwabuchi (1999, quoted in Goldstein-Gidoni) make a similar observation in the context of Japanese insistence on displaying aspects that are perceived as unique about Japanese culture (for both internal and external consumption). Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, "The Production and Consumption of "Japanese Culture" in the Global Cultural Market", *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5 (2) (2005), 155-79.

29 This is of course not unique to Korea. Michael Barr notes in the context of discussing China's image campaign that its series of branding exercises as „part and parcel of Beijing's nation building exercises to instil loyalty to the party brand and strengthen Beijing's own legitimacy, amongst both its domestic population and international audience.“ ("Nation Branding as Nation Building: China's Image Campaign", *East Asia* 29 (2012), 8-94 (p. 81). Some observers have also noted that Japan's lack of cultural influence on the world stage (as opposed to cultural super-powers such as the US and China for example), are linked to precisely to this insistence of uniqueness and inward looking insistence on *nihonjinron* (Iwabuchi 1999, p. 178, quoted in Goldstein-Gidoni).

30 See for example, „Psy Stars in KTO Tourism Ad“, <http://www.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/FU/FU_EN_15.jsp?cid=1805554> [accessed 20.07.2013].

31 Jim McGuigan, *Rethinking Cultural Policy* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004), p. 36.

able enough to affect the 'nation brand'. Yet in the context of government-led cultural diplomacy, the limits of the governmentality of K-culture can potentially become rather a concern.³²

The limits of governmentality over promoting a certain form of 'culture' that comes to represent 'Korean-ness' overseas is an issue that will continue to be a key consideration for Korean policy makers who are intent on using Korean popular culture to promote a positive image of the nation-state and its people. Yet within the context of K-culture in particular, one might be tempted to question the extent to which it is possible to 'govern' the Korean culture brand for overseas consumers when despite all the millions of dollars poured into Korea's nation-branding exercises, it is increasingly the likes and dislikes of global consumer markets that direct the development of a hybridised form of K-culture. The following discussion of a Korean film (and cultural) festival called 'Project K' offers an example of such localised promotion, brokering and consumption of Korean popular culture in a non-Asian context, and indicates how Korean culture as a product takes on multiple meanings for the actors involved in its promotion and consumption. I will show how notions of 'cultural authenticity' become, within such a context, less important within this discursively created third culture space. Accordingly, while the culture promoted is neither strictly 'Korean' nor 'local', the hybridised form of the K-culture creates a highly affective, yet unpredictable, space for intercultural communication and exchange.

PROJECT K: PROMOTING K-CULTURE IN A NON-ASIAN CULTURAL CONTEXT

The idea for Project K grew out of what was primarily a teaching and learning exercise for Korean Studies students in Frankfurt. Since Frankfurt already hosts the largest annual Japanese film festival outside Japan (Nippon Connection), the idea was to organise a student-led Korean Film Festival, aimed at attracting university students and young people in Frankfurt. Frankfurt has the second largest overseas Korean population in Europe, and Korea-related events are organised regularly. However, the majority of these events are organised by diplomatic or cultural agencies, Korean societies and religious

groups as well as educational institutes, with the effect that the events are either aimed at attracting Korean families, more mature (German) audiences, or tend to have a smaller turn-out because of their exclusive location and limited reach to the non-Korean general public. Contrary to this pattern, while the initial funding for the event was provided by the ROK Consulate in Frankfurt (and who also continued to invest in the event through funding and other practical forms of support), the remit from the start was to give students an opportunity to design and organise an event that *they* thought would best appeal to a local (German) audience. In April 2012, the German Korean Network (KGN) joined the organising committee and made a significant contribution in organising finances, providing leadership and assisting with attracting corporate sponsorship. Throughout the process the Korean Consulate staff provided support and guidance where necessary, organised the films to be shown, and with the students' assistance took care of all promotional materials and marketing activities. However, the festival was to be first and foremost a collaborative event, where the students and KGN would make key decisions on what to include in the event, as well as on what its final visual identity would be like. In other words, while the consulate's support was crucial, their input into how 'Korean culture' was to be presented during the event was subject to the decisions made by the organising committee.

During the festival, I conducted 15 one-on-one semi-structured interviews (with the exception of one interview where two interviewees took part simultaneously) with the organising committee members, who consisted of students and members of the KGN. I also interviewed two consular staff. The interviewees were all between the ages of 19-35, with all of the students interviewed falling within the 18-25 age group. All of the students were of German nationality, whereas KGN members included one Korean national who had been born and raised in Germany. The Consulate staff were of South Korean nationality. The interviewees were also asked to choose a pseudonym by which their replies could be quoted. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a thematic analysis and selective coding method were applied to analysing the responses. As the aim of the project was to gain understanding on how the project organisers

³² Within this context, the Samsung Economic Research Institute Report 2012 recommended that popular culture and internationally well-known celebrities should continue to highlight their connections with Korea for the benefit of improving the 'Korea brand' (Dong-hun Lee, "'Korea' Nation Brand in 2012". <<http://www.asia.udp.cl/Informes/2013/KoreaEconomicTrends-SERI.pdf>>). Recently, however, there have been few incidents where the linking of Korean pop celebrities with the Korea Brand has backfired. In 2012, for example Block B, was made to release a public apology on YouTube to the 'people of Thailand' for appearing 'disrespectful' during an interview in Thailand. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90BbAdYj1Mg>>



The second floor of the Student Union building was utilised to represent more established cultural symbols for Korean cultural traditions, such as tea ceremonies (above), calligraphy, and an opportunity to try on a hanbok. (Photo: Maya Jasmin Szost, MJS Photography, used with permission)

positioned themselves vis-à-vis their role as cultural brokers and on the Korean government's broader discourses of what constitutes Korean culture, the questions (which were open-ended and invited participants to describe and elaborate on their answers) focused primarily on their individual perceptions and understanding of Korean culture, their choice of what aspects of Korean culture were represented or left out, motivations for organising a Korean culture-related event, and the aspects of Korean culture that they felt best appealed to the festival visitors and organisers.³³

K-CULTURE: PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION AND PLEASURE

Since the purpose of the event was to promote Korean culture in Frankfurt, I was interested in finding out whether the organisers themselves saw 'Korean culture' as a product or a brand. In the interview narratives of the festival organisers, perceptions and descriptions of 'Korean culture' took on multiple meanings depending on their cultural background and age. When asked about their decision to get involved in the organisation of the event, most

students pointed to both their desire to promote Korean culture, as well as to enhance the visibility of the University's Korean Studies programme among their peers. Approximately half of the students confessed no particular affinity to Korean culture as such, but felt drawn to a project that would allow them to organise something for the 'people of Frankfurt' and showcase some of the aspects of Korean culture that they, as German Korean Studies students, felt particularly drawn to:

I'm in the Fachgruppe [student representative group for Korean Studies] and so I volunteered because we wanted to do this together with the others [...] And yeah, not many people here in Frankfurt are aware of Korea, even with conglomerates like Samsung and Hyundai, you know, here where I grew up. ('Sunny', student)

I just wanted to do a film festival, it could have been any film festival [...] I can't really explain to you how awesome this has been, it's just so awesome organising a film festival. ('Sarah', student)

³³ My position as the out-going director of studies must be recognised here as a potential influencing factor on the interviews. I knew most of the students who were interviewed, but as I was no longer in the position to award them marks so that there was a sense of trust in being able to speak freely without being worried about saying something that would have biased the marking of their next piece of work. In any case, since the questions related more on the students' perception of Korean culture and their own role as cultural brokers, the likelihood of unnecessarily positive bias vis-à-vis Korean culture is perceived as minimal, but worth acknowledging here nevertheless.

Because, yeah, because I'm in Korean studies and [...] this was a chance to make [the programme] more popular with other students. And for me as well, as a [personal] experience [to put in my CV]. I didn't know what I wanted to do before but now I think I want to work in events management. ('Emmy', student)

Surprisingly, rather than getting involved in order to promote some more or less vaguely defined idea of 'Korea brand' or 'Korean culture' (and many commented that they did not initially have a clear idea what this central organising idea of 'Korean culture' might even be like), it was either their own affiliation with an in-group (as a more or less close-knit group of students with an interest in the same study programme), as well as a desire to organise something that other students could enjoy as well, that turned out to be their primary motivations for involvement. The KGN members, on the other hand, felt strongly that the festival provided an opportunity not only to promote Korean culture to non-Koreans but also function as a location where first and second generation Korean-Germans could also come and enjoy positive aspects of contemporary Korean culture:

For us this is heritage. It should be invested in, it should be kept alive [...] This is also to honour the past, and the sacrifices that our elders made for us. [...] Especially here in Frankfurt, we have a lot of [other] expats, but we [Koreans] are different to them. They have different traditions compared to us. [...] so from my point of view, this is a platform to showcase our culture. ('Make Sense', KGN member)

I feel more Korean the older I get, and when I got this chance to get involved, I did. When the students came up with this idea, I was really just so touched, because I thought that if we could do this together, it would just be such a great experience for everyone. So the main thing is [showing] the movies. The second [motivation] is bringing people together. Our parents came here thirty years ago and now we have this language gap, and a generation gap, and a cultural gap. And now we find that there are a lot of issues and problems between the generations. What I can imagine, and what I hope for this film fest, is that it would be a place where parents

and children can come, and [...] enjoy [time] together, because there are not many things that unite the generations. ('No name chosen', KGN)

The mutual desire for a sense of enjoyment, and particularly one that could be shared between Koreans and Germans visiting the event, was a theme that repeatedly came up in the interviews. This notion of consuming Korean culture for *pleasure* (as opposed to a vague 'nationalistic' reason to promote a version of Korean culture in Germany) was certainly the overriding motivation for most of the students. For the KGN, even where the original reasons for their involvement in the organisation of the event centred very much around a sense of obligation to preserve Korean culture for the future generations of the diaspora, observing the joyous and shared consumption of hybridised K-culture emerged as one of the most positive aspects of the film festival. Interestingly, however, the notion of pleasure was one that appears to come as a surprise to the KGN organisers. Similarly, the consulate staff were surprised with the way in which visitors embraced and exuberantly consumed Korean popular culture during the festival:

I read that Korean music is getting huge in foreign countries but I didn't realise it was so popular. I never thought about doing a K-pop party. And actually, if you go out in Seoul they don't actually play Korean music but Western music, so I was really cynical about whether this music was going to work. Interviewer: But it worked? Yes, the [K-pop] party went on till 5am in the morning. ('S', consulate)

For students, who had no particular emotional or nationalistic attachment to the event (even where some students professed a 'love for all things Korean'), the enjoyment was very much associated with the consumption of Korean popular culture – as well as growing appreciation of traditional culture – for personal fun and entertainment. This corresponds very closely to Rachael Joo's findings on how overseas Koreans in Los Angeles Koreatown who consume Korean popular culture and support Korean sports stars 'articulate a sense of Korean pride that was based on consumer practices and consumer pleasures.'³⁴ Accordingly, and unlike many other festivals

³⁴ Rachael Joo, *Transnational Sport: Gender, Media and Global Korea* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 246.

organised by Korean cultural agencies (even if this was also where the biggest differences of opinion emerged between the three organising groups) the students' wanted to represent Korean culture as they saw it; as a kind of hybrid mixture of things old and new:

We just wanted to include everything Korea has, all the good things Korea has and put it into this festival, but then realised that the budget was not big enough. But realised everything we wanted to project about Korea, all the good things are here. Interviewer: What are those good things about Korea? Like tradition, K-music and K-drama and movies. These are like the secret ingredients that make Korea what it is. ('Yuma', student)

LOCALISED HYBRIDITY OF K-CULTURE AND THE QUESTION OF 'CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY'

The quotation above describes very well the dilemma that the organising team had to deal with in imagining a representation of what Korean culture meant for them. While many students wished to represent 'Korean culture', many had not even been to Korea so that the process of defining what kind of 'authentic' Korean culture was to be represented became an interesting process of cross-cultural negotiation between the students, the KGN, and the Consulate, as well as a team of designers who were brought in at late stages to add a more professional image to the event. This raises fascinating questions about the very notion of 'authenticity' in the context of organising a 'localised' cultural event, particularly where the central organising theme of the event is highly hybridised and based, at least in part, on fantastical projections of K-culture as representative of Korean culture 'proper'.

Given that most of the students had very limited first-hand experience of Korea as a physical location, the students' ideas of what defines Korean culture were informed both by their experiences of Korean people they had met, as well as images and ideas presented in popular culture. However, the *personal encounters* with Korean people emerged as a key source in the students' perceptions of what defines 'Korean culture'. When asked to describe Korean culture in three words, the students produced a list of keywords which included descriptions such as 'noisy', 'joyous', 'chaotic', 'manic', 'cool', 'friendly', 'charming', 'forthcoming', 'strong', 'lovely people' and 'traditional-modern'. These all pointed to an idea of Korea

as a culture that was, first and foremost, perceived as an urban centre of frenetic activity marked by joyous modernity and progress. The KGN members, on the other hand, had much more negative perceptions of Korean culture and used words such as 'melodramatic', 'ignorance', 'flexible only to survive' to describe it. This divergence created some challenges when it came down to defining what kind of K-culture was to be represented through the festival. While the Consulate was initially more inclined toward representing more 'traditional' aspects of Korean culture (as defined by the aforementioned 'Han Style' discourse), they were eventually persuaded by the students' preference for focusing on modern Korea as a way to capture the imagination of local young people. What ensued was a complicated process of negotiation, which resulted in the creation of a metaculture that captured (at least to an extent) the perhaps slightly fantastical image of 'Korea' as seen by the students (or, as one of the KGN interviewers put it: 'our little utopia'), which was broadly agreed upon by the organising committee as a whole, and then conceptually reimagined in the designers' version of ultra-modern Korea, visually represented in futuristic furniture designs, props and LED lights with changing colours. In fact, one of the problems that the organisers recognised with hindsight was that the team had not been able to pin down a clearly defined identity for the event, which meant that the designers had perhaps more say in the final visual identity of the event than the organising team would have liked. Yet this very lack of identity points to a process of negotiation where Project-K becomes a space for creating a 'third culture' rather than an opportunity to promote an imported 'Korea brand'.

In comparison with more traditional forms of Korean cultural events organised overseas that tend to rely on established cultural symbols for identity (the national flag, traditional music, traditional arts and so forth), the hybrid cultural metanarrative that Project K's visual representation gestures toward may appear as inauthentic. Yet the students were almost irreverent in their gleeful obliviousness to notions of 'tradition' ("there is no such thing as a 'unique' culture', as one student asserted), but instead insisted on and prioritised the creation of locally meaningful *interpretations* of Korean culture. In fact, the students – even when gesturing toward ideas of 'traditional' Korean culture – were never too concerned with notions of authenticity. Quite the contrary, positioning the locality of Frankfurt at the heart of the festival took on

an important part in their explanations of what the whole festival was about:

It's about showing both sides of Korea, the traditional and modern culture, but we wanted to focus on the newer culture. And to promote Korean culture here in Frankfurt because we have the largest population of Korean people [in Europe], but no one really knows the culture. Everybody's about Japan and it kinda [sic] sucks that there are all these Korean [things] and no one knows [about Korea]. ('Sarah', student)

We wanted to promote Korean culture. It's a rich culture, calligraphy and tea ceremonies, wearing hanbok and cos [sic] it's a film fest it's all about movies. And we transport that diversity to Frankfurt. ('Anonymous', student)

The KGN members also felt that while the event was an opportunity for the Frankfurt Korean community to meet with each other, it also became a third culture space for non-Korean Frankfurt citizens (who are perhaps already at ease with the multicultural nature of the city and open to new cultural experiences) to meet with Koreans through the medium of consuming Korean culture, music and food. In fact, the students were insistent on giving the event a very local taste to ensure that the event appealed to *local* young people. One such decision was to do with the venue, the rather run-down student union building (AsTA), which the students insisted on specifically because of its low key appearance and perceived approachability. Most of the students complained about the pushiness of the designers in putting forward their vision of Korean modernity symbolised through overly sleek and futuristic designs, which the students felt that was too 'out there' and potentially off-putting for student visitors who were, for the student organisers, at the heart of the project in as much as any agenda to promote 'Korean culture'. In fact, because most of the students were motivated by simple enjoyment for organising an event on which they could stamp their own mark, an overly serious image was seen to hamper the potential for spontaneous enjoyment that their student-centred approach was seen to offer to their peers:

Interviewer: So are you happy with the end result of the project, the way it looks?

Student: Yes and no, because of the designers. They were really pushy.

Interviewer: If you could change this now, what would it look like?

I would make it a bit more student-like [less sleek]. This is a student event. ('Tree', student)

Next year I would like to have more nice movies, and funny movies. You know the kind of movies that people here [in Frankfurt] can connect with. Some of the [serious] movies from Asia are so different that people here have difficulties [understanding] them. ('Bob', student)

Even the Consulate staff, despite strong initial reservations, were also surprised at how successful this hybrid approach was:

Well actually at the beginning we thought we'd do this at a cinema. We only thought about [organising] a film festival, so we thought only [about showing] movies. But students had more ideas, and they said that we could do workshops, sell food, and have parties. So not only movies but we introduced lots of other points about Korean culture too. But at first I was very negative about doing it here [at the student union building], I didn't like this building, it's all old and dark. Interviewer: Why does that matter? I don't know, I've been to Nippon Connection [an annual Japanese film festival organised in Frankfurt], and I didn't really like the student style. But in the end it worked out. ('S', consulate)

When asked what, in the minds of the organisers, set Project K apart from other festivals organised around the world, it was particularly the collaboration between Korean, local Korean-German residents and the students that were identified as the reason why everyone felt a sense of ownership over the final result. Moreover, Project K as a *location* for transcultural communication and mutual appreciation between the various team members also emerged uniformly as the most rewarding aspect of the project to all the interviewees. This was expressed through highlighting a sense of togetherness and of real camaraderie among the organising team:

Working together with Koreans in this way has been great, and getting to know them. The best thing has been to [get to] know all these people. ('Misa', student)

[The best thing about this project is] the interpersonal relationships, the way we communicate, the way we trust each other. It's the people. ('Make Sense', KGN)

I appreciate the people who visited. And I really appreciate the students [...] They don't get paid anything but they work like they were paid a million dollars or something, they work really hard. They are really enthusiastic. That's the best thing [about this project]. ('S', consulate)

While intercultural communication (particularly in terms of hierarchies that inform a lot Korean communication processes that were unfamiliar to many of the students) was not always straightforward, it was also in relation to this feature in particular that the students commented that they had gained competence and confidence. Moreover, while the final product was different to what they had initially imagined, it was recognised as the result of a negotiated process, which involved compromises on all sides. At the same time, the students felt a sense of control and ownership over the process by which the hybrid K-culture was created. This active and participatory aspect in not simply consuming but also in creating and brokering culture suggests that while K-pop and Korean films are both an important part of South Korean cultural exports industry, fans of K-culture are far from passive consumers and instead strive toward creating their own sub-cultures (in ways similar to other established fan cultures).³⁵ Moreover, the conscious choice to allow notions of cultural authenticity to 'slip' in order to translate cultural signs to local audiences, points to an understanding that students recognise themselves as potent distributors and brokers of Korean culture (or perhaps K-culture) among their own peer groups.

CONCLUSIONS

The obvious success of Project K (which attracted over 2,000 visitors over one weekend), may suggest that notions of authenticity should not matter if the aim is, as the organisers asserted, 'to improve cross-cultural communication between the two nations'. In fact, it was the hybrid nature of the event that was perceived to have

made the festival attractive to visitors with little or no prior exposure to Korean culture. Therefore, while representing culture that is not your own may raise questions of inauthenticity, it can also be seen as an effective example of transculturalisation. Within this context, Project K can be seen as a transcultural space, which created its own metanarrative of hybrid K-culture through allowing German university students to (re)define 'authentic' Korean culture through film, workshops and all-night K-pop rave-parties for the consumption of local audiences. While in many ways inauthentic, this nexus between fan-like joyful creation and consumption of K-culture became affective to a level completely different to, for example, a museum visitor engaging with an item of traditional art in a museum that one gazes at from a distance. This is because the process of creation and consumption of K-culture which was evident in Project K insists on active and responsive involvement with the object of consumption on a very personal and inter-subjective level that requires personal engagement with not only objects, but with the people involved as well. What Project K achieved, then, was to create a group of people who were, to quote Mike Featherstone, truly cosmopolitan in that they were "seek[ing] out and adopt[ing] a reflexive, metacultural and aesthetic stance to divergent cultural experiences."³⁶ Within this context, K-culture emerged as not just a hybrid product for consumption but a metacultural space and a 'third culture for transcultural communication' that proved quite transformative for those involved in the organisation of the event.³⁷

In his analysis of the role of hallyu in Japan-Korea relations, Peter Murphy asserts that the "Korean Wave is never going to make a decisive difference in relations between Japan and Korea and [that is] why reliance on soft power in international relations is an illusion."³⁸ Based on the findings of this research project I would, however, argue for a case for soft power through popular culture not as a replacement for 'hard power', but as a form of long-term engagement. Events like Project K, where participants have a degree of control over the final result, can be highly effective in interweaving Korean pop culture within wider globalising processes of multiple cultural flows. The nothing short of joyous and irreverent creation

³⁵ Jonathan Bignell, *An Introduction to Television Studies*, 2nd edition (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 304-305.

³⁶ Mike Featherstone, "Global Culture: An Introduction," in *Global Culture. Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, ed. by Mike Featherstone (London and New Delhi: Sage, 1990), pp. 1-14 (p.9).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Peter Murphy, "The Limits of Soft Power", in *Complicated Currents: Media Flows, Soft Power and East Asia*, ed. by Daniel Black, Stephen Epstein, Tokita Alison (Melbourne: Monash UP, 2010), pp. 15.1-15.14

of a 'third culture space' within which Korean culture was mediated to local consumers as 'K-culture' in ways that did not insist on cultural authenticity certainly evidenced a very localised yet effective form of soft power. As the cultural brokers turn from passive observers to consumers who appropriate (and potentially further broker) cultural products in culturally and socially appropriate ways, they create recognisable (and locally attractive) cultural images for local consumption. Therefore, while it would of course be naïve to suggest that events like Project K can be used to solve thorny national disputes, they can certainly make a difference in the longer term because of their appeal to one demographic that has traditionally been important for cultural (and exchange) diplomacy: the university students.

In his reading of Confucius Institutes and China's soft power efforts in Germany, Falk Hartig argues that it is specifically this 'joint-venture structure' of the institutes, where foreign scholars work within the structure in collaboration with the Chinese government (whilst acting as critical barriers to any overt state propaganda), that can potentially make them successful tools in exercising soft power. He argues that the main reason for this is that the local input and presence of established Western scholars lend significance and legitimacy to the 'cultural message' put forward through the institutes.³⁹ While my intention here is not to compare China's soft power approach to that of South Korea, the collaborative approach aspect of institutes resonates with the approach taken by Project K organisers, which potentially at least allows for a very potent form of cultural diplomacy that will attract larger crowds and recognition of Korean cultural products overseas.

Such recognition, however, comes with strings attached; the creation of this kind of localised appeal requires a rewriting of the nation-branding dogma so that the 'owner' of the brand (the state) may have to relinquish some control over the brand and allow for it to be moulded and localised according to the likes and tastes of the target audience. There is also a need to embrace cultural hybridity without insisting on notions of 'uniqueness' (which is more appropriate in materials aimed at domestic consumption in any case) and perhaps for a creation of a 'third culture space' for the consumption of cultural products. For the purposes of cultural diplomacy

this will, however, present an uneasy dilemma because it risks creation of a localised form of K-culture that may not correspond to the official, state-sponsored definitions of official Korean culture. For the policy makers it may therefore be the choice (or a balancing act) between - at least while Korean culture still remains relatively obscure to most Europeans - focusing on cultural diplomacy through a kind of joyful consumption of K-culture, and on showcasing official state-sponsored forms of Korean Culture that tend to emphasise cultural *difference*. While difference appeals to some (including the author of this article), it can also create distance by its very definition. K-culture, in the meanwhile, offers a potential as a discursive space for negotiating and creating the basis for further cultural affinity, and one that goes beyond K-culture, to flourish.

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³⁹ Falk Hartig, "Confucius Institutes and the Rise of China", *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 17 (2012), 53-76 (p. 70).

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Defining Qualities: The Socio-Political Significance of K-pop Collections



Tower Records in Tokyo's Shibuya district displays what K-pop fandom is all about. (Nov. 2010) (All photos in this article by author).

INTRODUCTION

People have always collected a wide range of things, for reasons both personal and socio-political. The motivation may come from a need to create a sense of order, to efforts to preserve, to the appeal of the chase, to a desire to surround oneself with beauty.¹ The reasons are always compound. To most people, however, the fact that their

collection, whether under their own management and ownership or that of their administration, defines their socio-political position will have particular significance. Since the four main values that can be assigned to objects² – functional, exchange, symbolic and sign – are all determined based on socio-political criteria, physical collections, at least, ultimately serve to define their

1 Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 74–5; Roy Shuker, *Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures: Record Collecting as a Social Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p. 111.
2 Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos Press Ltd., 1981), p. 66.

owner. As Baudrillard succinctly puts it, “it is invariably *oneself* that one collects”.³ Consumers are keenly aware of the significance of their purchases. They will not always actively seek out the most significant purchase they could possibly make, but they generally conform to a pattern of consumption that best reflects their socio-political aspirations, albeit within the limits of their own social class.⁴ To consume and to collect can serve to highlight their good taste, affluence and position on socio-political issues. Record collections stand out among collections of objects, in part because the social perception of music and its performers often change over the years, and in part because technological innovation transforms (but according to audiophiles rarely improves) the playback formats and related experiences.

Indeed, rather than the quality of the sound, it is the playback format that has long determined the experience of music and its socio-political implications. For the first few decades after the rise of gramophone record companies in the 1880s, the quality of the recording was relatively poor and left many sounds inaudible or flat. Since records allowed no more than approximately three-and-a-half minutes of playing time per side they could only be enjoyed actively.⁵ Playing records in the company of others constituted an active performance that highlighted the good taste of the one privileged enough to afford a gramophone player and to know how to operate it. From the mid 1900s, owners could, in theory, wind up the spring of the player and sit down to enjoy a recording while reading the news, but they would still have to jump back up to change the disc every two minutes or so.⁶ In the early years, people often bought music samples from far-away places, to enjoy marvelling at the wonder of the new technology and feel connected to other privileged

people elsewhere.⁷ But from the 1910s onwards, when gramophone technology had become more common and affordable, people began to increasingly buy music to sing along or dance to.

Although prices began to come down considerably in the 1920s, gramophone records were never cheap, and thus rarely bought on impulse. The greater affordability of records simply meant that more people began to collect them for the purpose of ownership: in the United States, at least, during the first two decades of the twentieth century some purists collected records merely to have them in their collection without actually playing them.⁸ But records could do more than assign a degree of sophistication to their owner. Some forms of music represented or expressed strong socio-political views, recordings of which could then transmit the implication of such views to the owner.⁹ In the decades following World War II, a growing number of musicians began to express their views on socio-political issues on recordings. When such musicians reached pop star status, buying one of their records remained a socio-political statement, albeit a conservative, conformist one. People who loved music in spite of the views it conveyed also existed, of course, as well as a minority who simply weren't aware of what it expressed. Subcultures emerged of people who rejected the culture of the hegemony if “obliquely, in style”.¹⁰ They tended to identify themselves through fashion, activities and language, as well as their record collection. The number of records they owned was not important, but having the right records was. The LPs that in the fifties took over from the 10-inch records came with large album jackets that had foldout color images and text. Apart from providing useful data, such as lyrics and dance steps, they provided much support for the mood, sentiment or

3 John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds., *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp. 11-2.

4 Bourdieu notes that consumers who belong to a specific social group will share a set of needs and standards that are best met by way of products and solutions that are specific to them. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 231, 247-50. Bourdieu finds that in their efforts to distinguish themselves through their choice of distinctive goods, the working classes tend to prioritize practical use and cleanliness, while the privileged classes shy away from what the middle classes would consider positively fashionable or original because such values “have long been theirs and go without saying” and have thus become banal (p. 247). Although people of a specific social group may collect items that are not directly specific to them, the importance they attach to that collection will serve to positively distinguish them within their social group. People from another social class may have a similar collection, but the significance they attach to their collection will ultimately differ, because of how their collection will distinguish them within their social group.

5 Timothy Day, *A Century of Recorded Music: Listening to Musical History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 9; Louis Barfe, *Where Have All the Good Times Gone: The Rise and Fall of the Record Industry* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005), p. 32.

6 Timothy Day, *A Century of Recorded Music*, pp. 6-7.

7 See Pekka Gronow, “The Record Industry Comes to the Orient,” *Ethnomusicology* 2 (May 1981), 274. The effect of the connection formed by the new medium could be compared to that of print technology. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), p. 40. Both media allowed ideas to be reproduced easily and circulated widely.

8 Louis Barfe, *Where Have All the Good Times Gone*, p. 66.

9 Not owning specific records could also be a statement. Under Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), for example, some Koreans will have avoided buying Japanese music, or music by Korean artists they felt had moved over to the dark side.

10 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979), p. 17.

imaginary realm that tied the music, the band and its fans together.¹¹

Regardless of whether they belonged to a subculture or not, many people came to own recordings of music that their peers would consider inappropriate for them, often because they were tied to a different class, generation or ideology. Due to the uncomfortable tension that the association of a particular type of music with the parent culture or a subculture – possibly even among the upper classes – can generate,¹² record collections came to represent a serious threat of social embarrassment. In the late 1990s, the UK's Channel 4 broadcast a comedy sketch series, *The Adam and Joe Show*, that used the common experience of discomfort over having one's record collection scrutinized. One recurring skit called "Vinyl Justice" entailed Adam and Joe dressed up as bobbies visiting famous musicians at home. They would sift through their record collection in patronizing breathalyser-test fashion typical of police comedies and if the musician were found to have something as embarrassing as a Hanson, Swing Out Sister or Pinky and Perky's album, the on-the-spot fine would have to be paid by dancing to the main song alongside bobbies Adam and Joe.¹³

In the 1980s and 1990s, several new physical sound storage formats were introduced, but towards the end of the millennium the use of individual digital music files (mostly in MP3 or WMA format) took over. Since music began to be bought and shared online, and reproduced without any loss in quality, this initially led to major losses to the record industry, from which it recovered only in 2013.¹⁴ Record and CD sleeves also disappeared, and with it the recording media's direct impact on the experience of the music they helped advertise, but those images moved online, where they were coupled with music videos. Most people these days own a smartphone that has the capacity to store and play several thousand digital audio tracks and hundreds of videos. Since most music can be downloaded, often free of charge, collections of music rarely require major investment in terms of time or money. Although owning and collecting are separate things, the relative ease with which one can acquire digital entertainment these days somewhat blurs the distinction. The likelihood of the many vast and "invisible"



In 2001 the Korean company Musicpot launched this type of hit-song mixing cassette tape-creating machines, but by 2002 they had largely disappeared again.

digital collections of music, even politically charged ones, serving to distinguish people socio-politically would therefore appear to be small.

And yet, despite the great changes in playback formats, music collections retain their significance as markers of people's socio-political beliefs and position, regardless of whether such collections originate from the same culture as their owner. The socio-political significance of collections is determined less by the culture with which they are associated than by the culture of the collector. In this contribution I explore the significance of collections of K-pop, a genre of music that is created almost entirely by Korean entertainment companies using carefully picked, trained and tailored performers, and is often sold, shared and enjoyed online while involving many special, limited editions of physical playback media and related merchandise. I examine how the many digital collections of

¹¹ See Ian Inglis, "Nothing You Can See That Isn't Shown": The Album Covers of the Beatles", *Popular Music* 20 (2001), 84.

¹² Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 6-7, 11.

¹³ Another act making fun of the importance of record collections is the band Sloppy Seconds, who in 1998 included the song "You got a Great Body, but Your Record Collection Sucks" on their album *More Trouble Than They're Worth*.

¹⁴ International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), "IFPI Digital Music Report 2013", <www.ifpi.org>, p. 6.

K-pop can still serve as markers of people's socio-political beliefs, and I explore the importance of collecting not only between K-pop's domestic and foreign fans but also between them and fans of other forms of mainstream pop music.

THE SLEEVELESS OFFER OF K-POP

In 1999, the South Korean (hereafter: Korean) administration began to endorse the promotion of Korean pop entertainment abroad by way of law amendments, government subsidies and tax incentives.¹⁵ Although Korean dramas, movies and pop acts were already having much success overseas in the years prior, the government support provided a major boost to the industry, which was subsequently able to significantly increase its export of carefully groomed and tailored pop acts. K-pop, as it became referred to, is commonly categorized as musical entertainment, but the particular appeal of the acts lies as much in the group members' looks, styling and visual performance as in their music.¹⁶ There is a lot of similarity between K-pop groups in terms of those aspects.¹⁷ Mixed-sex groups being virtually non-existent, group members are often styled similarly, presumably in order to increase the visual appeal of their dance routines. Overall, the image of K-pop acts is a pretty one: singers dress and pose like models wearing the latest fashion and they are courteous and modest on and off stage. Differences and idiosyncrasies exist, but innovations and transgressions are relatively small and few in number. Like any other business, entertainment companies are under pressure to keep up with the latest developments, but it seems that because its customers comprise mostly teenagers, it takes heed not to push them (or their parents) away.

The range of K-pop includes light pre-teen pop, rock 'n' roll, electro and house. Most music has a strong R&B flavor in terms of its melodic contour and beat, and it often includes short rap sequences. The sequences have little "attitude" and sound rushed, as if the fact that the lines do not suit the beat well is unintentional. Although the hurried performance of those lines is sometimes reminiscent

of an unrehearsed *noraebang* (Korean-style karaoke) rendition, the recital always follows the beat and never disrupts it. Voices are clear and pitch-perfect on recordings while auto-tune, heavy arrangements and sound effects help support a rich "studio-sound" that would be difficult to reproduce live on stage. Many of the songs are dance tracks that include electronic sounds, but at "live" performances even the audible acoustic instruments are rarely shown. In order to preserve their breath for the energetic dance routines, singers often lip-sync at least part of their songs.

Most K-pop acts are characterized by the great synchronicity of their dance routines. The acts are all promoted via elaborately arranged music videos that in the past were included on CDs, sold as special video-CD or DVD sets, or broadcast on dedicated music programs and TV channels. On live stages the complex choreographies are often performed in front of giant video screens that show colorful computer-generated backgrounds and sceneries, and key phrases from the lyrics.¹⁸ Fans sometimes post videos of themselves dancing the exact same routine on YouTube. Perhaps to invite fans to do so, and thus help increase the act's fandom, the agencies behind specific groups share so-called "mirrored dance" videos online. The videos show the stars practicing their routine in training gear without make-up in a small studio in front of a mirror. Although the videos would appear to take away some of the magic of the group, the dance routines shown are always as perfect as in the official music videos. The lack of make-up humanizes the group members and decreases the distance between them and the fans, while also making the dance routines appear deceptively easy.

Sales of digital music have grown considerably since the late 1990s. Since 2008, when Korea became the first country to see sales of digital music media overtake those of physical copies, digital music consumption in Korea has grown steadily, due, in part, to its affordable high-speed mobile communication network.¹⁹ Today, singles, albums and music or concert videos are still sold

¹⁵ Kim Yöngt'ae, "Munhwa sanöp chinhüng kigüm 500-ök chosöng" [Creation of 50 billion fund for the promotion of cultural industries], *Maeil kyöngje* [Economy daily], 12 May 1999, p. 3; Doobo Shim, "The Growth of Korean Cultural Industries and the Korean Wave", in *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*, ed. by Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), p. 28.

¹⁶ A comment thread on reddit.com shows that apart from its upbeat sound and synchronized dance routines, many fans of K-pop appreciate the behavior and look of the idols. <http://www.reddit.com/r/kpop/comments/1a9k06/how_do_you_explain_why_you_love_kpop_to_the/>

¹⁷ Most K-pop stars are not themselves responsible for the creative side of their work, but they perform that which is created by others, including the styling. Due to the significant similarities it would be quite a challenge to recognize the act responsible for a new music video without seeing the faces of its main idol(s).

¹⁸ The author attended a K-pop concert in Sydney on 12 November 2011, and a U-Cube concert on 2 February 2013. On YouTube, many videos of live performances of K-pop can be found that show the elaborate use of screens.

¹⁹ IFPI, "IFPI Digital Music Report 2008" <www.ifpi.org> January 2008, p. 8; Han'guk k'ont'enchi'ü chinhüngwön [Korea Creative Contents Agency, KOCCA], "Music Industry White Paper 2011" (KOCCA, online publication, 2012), p. 71.

on CD, DVD or Blu-Ray, but they are released in small numbers and often sell out.²⁰ Because most audio-visual entertainment is now purchased online, physical record, video and game stores have become a rarity in Korea. The main online digital media stores for K-pop are Bugs!, Soribada and Olleh Music. Some people continue to use P2P software to download music for free, but the government has been successful in curbing the negative effect it can have on the income of artists and copyright holders through copyright law-related measures.²¹ A fast growing number of Koreans are using Social Networking Systems (SNS), such as KakaoStory, Facebook and Cyworld, which allow easy sharing of the many official videos uploaded in various qualities online.²²

Since the late 1990s, when the Korean market for digital music began to thrive, pop music CDs have been packaged as collectables. The boxes began to come in different shapes and sizes often with little toys and other types of memorabilia attached. While the single for Miss A's single "Bad But Good" (AQ/JYP Entertainment, 2010), for example, is triangular-shaped, the first batch of Psy's *Ssai-yuk-kap* (Psy's 6th) – part 1 (YG Entertainment, 2012) came in a cardboard box with a giant see-through eye on top (see figure #1). Merchandise is now an important part of the K-pop industry. Exact sales figures are unavailable, in part because the products – which include t-shirts, posters, toys, photos, customized LED light sticks and jewelry – do not fall into a single category, and in part because many of them are (re)produced without a license. What is more, in Seoul, at least, record stores often give away posters and photos to customers when they purchase a record. Although reliable sales figures of K-pop products by foreign fans are unavailable, it appears that the



The CD boxes of most major K-pop acts are packaged as collector's items.

location of foreign fans determines the degree to which they shop online and with which companies, and that the online outlets for K-pop products popular with foreign fans include eBay, Gmarket, Rakuten, Yesasia, Kpoptown, Kpopheaven, Amazon and Kpopmart.²³

Many foreign fans hope to visit Korea in order to immerse themselves in the culture of their favorite idols, but due to their young age they are rarely able to afford the cost. Whereas many fans share experiences of a trip to Korea online, others share images of their K-pop concert experience or product purchases made elsewhere. One Canadian fan using the name Geena shared pictures of her collection on Gurupop, a community site dedicated to K-pop fans in particular, saying, "So between the time of July 8th to August 5th [2013], my entire family took a trip to Hong Kong to visit family and all that. My main(-ish) goal was to get KPOP merchandise because it's cheaper than Canada and because they had a huge variety of it ^^." ²⁴ Discussions over merchandise often revolve around cost and availability, and fans often reveal their inability to purchase particular items independently from their parents.²⁵

²⁰ Sales of digital copies still showed an overall growth of almost 9% between 2008 and 2010, but they have since also been in decline. Han'guk k'ont'en'ch'ü chinhüngwön, "Music Industry White Paper 2011", p. 142.

²¹ Han'guk k'ont'en'ch'ü chinhüngwön, "Music Industry White Paper 2011", pp. 94-7.

²² Kim Ch'anggwön, "Mobail int'önet t'üraep'ik" [Mobile internet traffic]. (Seoul: KDB Daewoo Securities, 2012), pp. 3, 5.

²³ Chisang Hong et al., "Hallyurül almyön such'uri poinda: hallyurül hwalyonghan such'ul sangp'um mak'eb'ing, 4P-chölllyagül chungshimüro" [Hallyu as a condition for export: Focusing on the 4Ps of marketing hallyu-based export products], *Trade Focus* 10:52 (2011), 14, 17. Gmarket, Kpoptown and Kpopmart are Korea-based online market stores. A spokesperson for Kpopmart told me that it served customers in over sixty countries worldwide, and that for K-pop fans it was not just about the music but about the culture: "customers ask us not only about the products, but about Korean trends, sometimes even fashion trends." Email correspondence with Kpopmart's customer service department, 3/12/2013. Comment was anonymous and edited for readability.

²⁴ <<http://www.gurupop.com/post/221976-All-The-KPOP-Merchandise-I-Bought-Albums-PART-1>>

²⁵ <<http://www.gurupop.com/post/5831>>; <<http://www.gurupop.com/post/5108>>; <<http://www.gurupop.com/fanclubs/runningman/41585>>

WHAT ATTRACTS NON-KOREANS TO COLLECTING K-POP?

An obvious incentive for fans to purchase official, physical copies of K-pop products is to support their idols. Fiske writes: "Collecting ... tends to be inclusive rather than exclusive: the emphasis is not so much upon acquiring a few good (and thus expensive) objects as upon accumulating as many as possible. The individual objects are therefore often cheap, devalued by the official culture, and mass-produced. The distinctiveness lies in the extent of the collection rather than in their uniqueness or authenticity as cultural objects."²⁶ Whereas Fiske's words apply across many aspects of popular culture, they do not take into account the advent of gramophone records, which saw the exclusive collection of unique sounds representing cultural, economic, and arguably social capital, and they predate the digital media age in which physical copies are once again sold as collectibles as a result of the widespread sharing and downloading of digital media. K-pop records are widely available in physical form, but at dedicated record stores so-called limited and special collector's editions appear to outnumber regular ones. Activities related to associated merchandise, on the other hand, continue to closely mirror Fiske's portrayal. In a column on the Korean pop fansite Seoulbeats, Subi writes,

*There is a sense of legitimacy gained from purchasing a physical piece of merchandise. After all, you're supporting the artist. As someone who owns quite a bit of merchandise myself, I get it. [...] Companies know that there are fans that will do anything to support their artists. ... And so they churn out the most ridiculous of things. Just wait: before you know it, you will be able to purchase a **2NE1** toilet plunger, **BEAST** underwear, and if the companies feel extra generous, a lock of **DBSK's** hair.²⁷*

Subi's comments invoked many responses from fans who either agreed with the criticism or felt that it was up to the fans to decide what they spent their money on. Despite Subi's critique, the use of idols to induce sales of products otherwise unassociated with music is common

practice in Korea. A study of commercials appearing on Korean and US television between 29 July and 2 August 2002 showed that already at the time fifty-seven percent of Korean commercials featured a celebrity compared to a little over nine percent of US ones.²⁸ The increase in the use of celebrities has not abated. In 2012 the Seoul government urged advertisers to "exercise restraint" when a study found that idols were used in seventy-two percent of ads for alcoholic drinks.²⁹

Products not only support the idols, but also the fans' self-image. When the Korean government began to endorse the cultural industries behind the Wave, Korean policymakers explained the success of Korean products overseas by pointing out their special qualities and suggesting that other cultures simply had little that compared.³⁰ Yet despite the increasing success of Korean popular entertainment abroad, it would be wrong to dismiss the importance of local, overseas conditions to the Wave. In Australia, for example, which is commonly viewed as belonging to the West, the vast majority of fans has an Asian background, including first and second generation migrants. Some of them find particular comfort in entertainment that they can more easily relate to and serves to positively distinguish them within their communities. There is nevertheless a growing body of K-pop fans that have no Asian background. The fact that in official discourse Australia considers itself part of Asia certainly supports the exploration of those things Asian that have a significant "cool" factor and are not only worth looking into but also being associated with.³¹ While in Europe and some part of South America, K-pop has a fast growing fan base too, fans in Australia will be less isolated in their activities, both in practical terms, due to the presence of K-pop in the mainstream media, and in terms of there being much openness amongst Australians towards Asian culture. It remains odd, in some way, because the Australian news media continue to largely ignore South Korea. The media show no fundamental interest in contemporary Korean culture, and discourse on South Korea is often limited to its strategic importance in dealings with North Korea.

²⁶ John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom", in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. by Lisa A. Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 44

²⁷ Subi, "K-Pop Merchandising: Exploiting The Consumer", Seoulbeats.com, 1/1/2012. <http://seoulbeats.com/2012/01/k-pop-merchandising-exploiting-the-consumer/>

²⁸ Sejung Marina Choi, Wei-Na Lee and Hee-Jung Kim, "Lessons from the Rich and Famous: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Celebrity Endorsement in Advertising," *Journal of Advertising* 34:2 (2005), 89-91.

²⁹ Kim Taesōng, "Seoul-shi 'sul kwangoe aidori 72%... chajehara" [Seoul city, "exercise restraint... use of idols in 72% of alcohol ads"], *Han'guk ilbo* [Korea daily], 12 Dec. 2012, p. 11. See also Roald Maliangkay, "Catering to the Female Gaze: The Semiotics of Male Models in Korean Advertising", *Situations: Cultural Studies in the Asian Context* 7 (2013), 43-61.

³⁰ See Cho Hae-Joang, "Reading the 'Korean Wave' as a Sign of Global Shift", *Korea Journal* 45:4 (2005), 160.

³¹ The term "cool" here is not intended to refer to the national branding of "Cool Japan".

Most of the aspects of K-pop that appeal to Koreans will also appeal to non-Koreans, such as the beauty of the idols, the fashion, the dance routines, and the music, but there are aspects that non-Koreans fans may appreciate more by comparison. Sun Jung writes that among the key attractions of K-pop to many Indonesians were its blend of “modern, cool attributes, in large part originating from Western popular culture forms such as American hip-hop and R&B, European electronic music, and pop and visual elements from J-pop”.³² In the case of her informants too, the attraction will have lain in a combination of qualities, including the general impression they had of the country of origin. When people become infatuated with a foreign product, the association of that product with their image of the country of origin is crucial. That image is rarely a well-informed one, and the degree to which it is positive will depend on the observer’s home country, cultural background, social class and generation. To fans, it will also depend on the special features of a product’s country of origin that they identify with or appreciate. Whereas some will find South Korea’s status as a high-tech industry-led and economically vibrant democratic middle-power important, to others the fact that the nation was also the victim of Japanese aggression may be crucial, or that its people are generally portrayed as attaching great importance to family values. K-pop does not express or symbolize any support for specific socio-political views or religions, but the many miniskirts and hot pants could be seen as championing Western notions of individual freedom. And many values that K-pop may be associated with, such as capitalism, beauty and filial piety, are embedded in the TV dramas that are popular with many K-pop fans and their parents. Through TV dramas, on the one hand, and the behavior of idols, on the other, K-pop has become widely regarded as a preferable alternative to Western acts.

While the use of Korean will be putting off many non-Korean speakers, to K-pop fans they constitute a positive feature. The language poses a challenge that many foreign fans embrace in order to gain a better understanding of the meaning of the songs and music videos. They can use the special knowledge to climb up the hierarchy of their

fan community, and earn a degree of recognition outside of it. Even so, in order to nurture fandom, a number of the acts that are particularly popular among Chinese and Japanese fans have recorded songs in the language of their fans. Presumably because Chinese is harder to learn for Koreans than Japanese, a growing number of groups, such as f(x) and Miss A have one or more Chinese members. In 2012, SM Entertainment launched a Korean and a Chinese boy band, named Exo-K and Exo-M respectively. Although the groups perform the same material, the first one performs in Korean and the latter in Chinese. The Korean language nevertheless continues to intrigue a considerable number of fans, including Chinese and Japanese ones. From the mid 2000s, when K-pop began to take over from movies and dramas as the most visible form of Korean popular entertainment, the number of Korean language learners have shown an explosive growth: at secondary and tertiary institutes in Australia, at least, numbers have grown by more than 300% since 2006. The majority of students in *ab-initio* courses say that they take up studying Korean because they like Korean popular culture, and K-pop in particular.³³

Chinese and Japanese songs are performed as fluently as possible, but many songs include randomly composed, nonsensical English phrases that rarely make sense on their own. They often comprise or form part of the songs’ chorus or bridge. Consider, for example, the opening phrases of Exo-K and -M’s 2012 hit *Mama*:

*Careless, careless. Shoot anonymous, anonymous.
Heartless, mindless. No one who care about me?*

Although these lyrics may indeed seem careless and mindless, they are not meaningless and must be considered part of an act that interjects phrases for their sound and symbolic rather than literal meaning, while perhaps also connoting an understanding of Western culture for an audience with a limited knowledge of English. While the grammar may be wrong, and may be easily recognized by the audience as wrong, the use of the words implies that the performers, some of whom are, crucially, native English speakers, are under no pressure to verify their

³² Sun Jung, “K-pop, Indonesian Fandom, and Social Media”, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 8 (2011) [Race and Ethnicity in Fandom] special issue ed. by Robin Anne Reid and Sarah Gatson.

³³ A survey conducted by Dr Shin Gi-Hyun of the University of New South Wales in Sydney among his students (which number a few hundred) in August 2011 revealed that *ab-initio* Korean language students continued into the second semester mostly because they liked to learn a new language. The second and third reasons given most were K-pop, and Korean dramas and movies respectively (Shin, pers. comm., 14 Jan. 2012). Shin’s findings correspond with the author’s own experience teaching first-year Korean at the Australian National University since 2006. It also mirrors the experiences of many other teachers the author has spoken since then, at both secondary and tertiary institutions across Australia.

facts. Rather, the use of random English phrases in an opening sequence or chorus is intentional. It breaks with the rules of traditional English grammar and empowers the performers, who are regarded as having the final say on the words' new, symbolic meaning.³⁴

To add a foreign flavor to one's collection or to devote oneself entirely to music from a different culture can have a positive effect on people's personal image. It can suggest that they are knowledgeable about music in general and critical of the music that is predominantly played by the mainstream media. It also allows them insight into a realm that is unknown to the majority of the people around them. To be involved in an activity that enables people to connect to others from different cultures can be attractive, especially when there is a challenge involved. The empowerment that comes from having the knowledge required to engage with other fans of a particular form of culture and the inherent denial of the value of the dominant culture that the hegemony supports, can create a community, a subculture, that at least on the superficial level of performance defies the rules of the dominant ideology. The fact that the fans may have very different backgrounds representing vastly different social classes does not, therefore, constitute a contradiction to the phenomenon since the opposition is not a direct, but a symbolic one.³⁵ K-pop can support a subculture too, even though it is very much part of the dominant culture in its country of origin, where it is endorsed by the government. As long as the various aspects of K-pop can be used to support a new cultural identity that manifests itself within a subculture, it does not pose a contradiction. Even in Korea, a subculture could use elements of K-pop,



Two Australian fans at a K-pop concert in Sydney on 12 Nov. 2011

but unlike foreign K-pop fan subcultures, it would have to give particular elements new symbolic meaning.³⁶

One rather unique aspect of K-pop both in Korea and abroad is the vast majority of female fans. Although the realm of collecting is usually one dominated by men, K-pop appears to give rise to many exclusively female realms of activity. While collections of K-pop may fall into the category of artistic objects Belk has found are typically collected more by women than by men, the large number of special and limited editions also assigns functional and exchange value to the collections, aspects which have long been valued more by male collectors in the West.³⁷ Recognizing a collection's exchange value may appear inconsistent with the notion of a subculture, which commonly rejects some of the ideological paradigms on which the dominant consumer economy is founded, but that value will always be less than its symbolic value within the subculture.

The notion of subculture suggests a degree of owner-

³⁴ At the same time, it is these meaningless English phrases and the emphasis on the performance as opposed to the music that puts off many others. In the West, a degree of orientalism remains noticeable in how Asian cultures are perceived. The success of Psy's video *Gangnam Style* lies partly in the fact that it somehow addresses the prejudice that is commonly held in the West and regards Asian men as introvert and incapable of self-ridicule. The video's first sequences are humorous, fast, colourful and unusual, and they offer great diversity in terms of settings and characters. When people check videos through SNS the first 30 seconds are crucial. In those seconds, the video shows a fat man sweating it out in a beach chair while a very young B-boy next to him grooves to the beat. In the 10th second, the man suddenly shouts "oppa kangnam style" into the lens of the camera and is an instant later shown walking into a stall performing a horse-riding dance surrounded by real horses. Although the strong electronic groove and fast and colourful sequence of events have certainly led to a greater number of people watching and sharing the video, many people will have liked it because Psy was able to mock the persistent image of Asian pop and Asian men as introvert and self-conscious.

³⁵ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 17.

³⁶ John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, "Subcultures, Cultures and Class," in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 42.

³⁷ Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, pp. 97-99.

ship of the act, but whereas a degree of purism can easily be found among subcultures,³⁸ scholars do not consider ownership of (part of) the act or its music a prerequisite for the music of a subculture. It is nevertheless presumed that in most cases, popular music broadcast on the main, public channels will represent the interests of the hegemony's superstructure. Subcultures may resist some or all forms of music that allow the ideologies of the dominant culture to apply, but despite their resistance, they will to some degree respond to the role they are assigned by the superstructure's mass media, which serve to frame the various social group(s) that constitute both the subculture's object and subject.³⁹ Even those subcultures that revolve around major industry-based music, such as K-pop, along with its standardized structures, formats and symbolism, may wish to take ownership of or reify at least some of its aspects, by changing some of the formats or choosing, for example, unusual venues for performance.⁴⁰ Since the element of creativity is believed to be primary to most popular music in the West, K-pop can, in theory, be used to express resistance to this. John Seabrook appears to share a rather idealistic view of America's pop music when he comments on a performance of one K-pop's main acts, Girls' Generation,

*But after the Girls left the stage the concert flagged a bit, and I found myself wondering why overproduced, derivative pop music, performed by second-tier singers, would appeal to a mass American audience, who can hear better performers doing more original material right here at home? The Girls strenuous effort notwithstanding, the mythical melange of East and West remained elusive.*⁴¹

K-pop fans have expressed frustration over Seabrook's description of K-pop as being overproduced and derivative, and performed by second-tier singers,⁴² but their responses to music videos posted online so often mention the looks, dancing and styling of the idols, as opposed to their music, that some of them may well entertain the

somewhat subversive and forgiving notion that the over-producing is in this case done by Koreans, as opposed to Western music moguls, and that the production value, on the one hand, and the famously tough selection and training procedures, on the other, make the acts far superior to Western ones in those aspects to which K-pop fans have come to attach greater importance.

K-pop fans are spread across the globe, including the West, where a degree of orientalism has fueled many people's interest in Asian cultures. It is likely that with K-pop, too, a degree of orientalism lies at the core of its fans' passion. Although the way in which K-pop idols are represented does not posit them as particularly spiritual and mysterious vis-à-vis a more rational, scientific West, the upbeat videos are nearly always set in brightly-colored studios and they often portray women as either naïve or devious and sexually adept, and their male counterparts as hyper-feminized.⁴³ A degree of othering is therefore likely to be taking place, although this is fairly natural and certainly deserves more careful scrutiny. The orientalisation of Korean culture by K-pop fans is complex and extends far beyond representations of gender. Among other things, one ought to examine the ways in which fans appropriate new positive uses and meanings for signs and symbols they cannot read nor interpret within the full context of Korean culture. Because the latter remains largely unfamiliar to foreigners, especially Westerners, they are unable to interpret the various signs and symbols embedded in K-pop, though that does not imply they cannot use their fandom in their own environment to their advantage.

COLLECTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Explaining fan culture is difficult, even when focusing on specific cultures, or subcultures. How can one explain, for example, why a fan gets death threats – rather than a medal – for ripping up a Justin Bieber poster on YouTube? Fandom and collecting are personal, emotional and socio-political affairs. Some common factors that have nurtured the pursuit of K-pop products can nevertheless be iso-

38 Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 42-3.

39 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture*, pp. 85-6.

40 Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures*, p. 39.

41 John Seabrook, "Factory Girls," *New Yorker*, 8 October 2012, p. 96

42 See "Cultural Technology and the Making of K-Pop: The New Yorker," <<http://240films.com/2012/11/24/cultural-technology-and-the-making-of-k-pop-the-new-yorker/>> (posted by Jen on 24 November 2012), accessed on 25 May 2013; "What Happens When America's Cultural Arbiters Try to Tackle K-pop (Subscription)," <<http://hanguknamja.tumblr.com/post/32720847241/what-happens-when-americas-cultural-arbiters-tries-to>> [accessed 25 May 2013].

43 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 40, 324-5; Minjeong Kim and Angie Y. Chung, "Consuming Orientalism: Images of Asian/American Women in Multicultural Advertising," *Qualitative Sociology* 28:1 (2005), p. 74.

lated. Apart from the beauty of the idols, the fashion, the sharp dance routines, and the music, K-pop constitutes a unique and competitive alternative to Western pop music, with which it nevertheless shares many musical elements. It is still new and fairly unknown to the majority of major markets outside of Korea, and that allows fans to use it to their advantage. Few aspects of K-pop pose a true challenge to foreign fans, apart from the language. The presentation may sometimes be quite erotic, but K-pop features no nipples or cleavage, no aggression, and virtually no religious symbolism. Another important factor in the success of K-pop overseas is the availability of high-quality music videos on YouTube, which fans can share via SNS and save on their desktop or personal media player. The image of South Korea as a technologically powerful, democratic middle power is another factor that may appeal to foreign fans in particular. Although many have no interest in Korean culture beyond Korean entertainment, there seems to be little about South Korea that puts them off.

Popular culture continues to be driven by people's association with unique people or feats, or the ownership of uniqueness in more material form. People need a sense of security, which they pursue through forms of soft and hard power by way of association and ownership. Whereas symbols of social empowerment and hierarchy are infinitely complex elements of people's daily lives, both in the corporate and private realm, people constantly stay informed on what allows them to secure and raise their social status. Popular culture constitutes a realm of activity where success at achieving important feats can be instant and obvious. SNS offer the possibility to instantly highlight one's achievements and acquisitions, and one's dissenting views. K-pop can represent a subculture, and a rejection of the norms of the parent culture. In the case of K-pop, however, the idols are such advocates of proper manners and conformism that even the fans who invest some time and effort into emulating their style would not immediately stand out in public. To most people, they would probably just look fashionable. Their desire to more effectively distinguish themselves and show their special knowledge of things foreign could explain the public flashmobs and many thousands of K-pop group lookalike videos on YouTube. The unique understanding that their involvement in K-pop implies

serves to positively distinguish foreign fans from the mainstream, regardless of whether their music is in physical or digital form. While some fans will live in countries that lack a sizeable Korean community (or one among which Korean entertainment is unpopular), where they may struggle with a deep-rooted orientalism or an unbalanced representation of Korea in the media, such conditions may also serve to strengthen ties among them.

Collections of music can carry considerable symbolic meaning to the proponents of specific communities. They will represent a combination of meanings and values, and may highlight very different aspects of the experience of music within a parent or subculture. Because they represent cultural, economic, and arguably social capital, fans can dedicate themselves to various aspects of K-pop in order to positively distinguish themselves within their peer group. Sarah Thornton coins the term "subcultural capital" which in comparison to cultural capital is less tied to class and more connected to the media. These aspects certainly apply to K-pop fandom as well. The language used in K-pop – both the music, the videos and the physical packaging – is an important factor. Not only does it pose a positive challenge to foreign fans, but because it is a current and major foreign language it allows them to distinguish themselves both within their subculture and outside of it. What is more, because it is foreign to them, the Korean language does not connote any social class per se. The reinterpretation of K-pop by overseas subcultures is likely to reflect on and respond to the mainstream cultures of the fans' various locations first and foremost. Hebdige points out with regard to the punk movement in the UK that even its protagonists' most oddly constructed stylistic ensembles "were cast in a language which was generally available – a language which was current".⁴⁴ Although among foreign fans the language of discourse will therefore be their own, local one, it may occasionally adopt terms considered key in the realm of K-pop fandom.⁴⁵

It would seem that the importance of a record collection within a culture or subculture has not changed, despite the changing formats and range of materials it may comprise. While special limited editions may be the rule rather than the exception these days, K-pop aficionados, especially those overseas who have limited access to Korean products, will regard collections as important

⁴⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 87; John Clarke et al., "Subcultures, Cultures and Class", p. 5.

⁴⁵ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures*, pp. 11-2; John Clarke et al., "Subcultures, Cultures and Class", p. xx.

symbols of cultural, economic, and possibly social capital. Among some subcultures the significance of a collection will lie more in the quality of the recording or the uniqueness of the various records, while among others the emphasis may lie on the key members of a performing group, the language used, or a band's fashion. Even when the differences between cultures and economies are taken into account, the local fan base will determine the quality of a collection, and with it the degree of empowerment that its ownership generates. The format of the recordings will continue to change, but that will not change their significance as physical evidence of someone's dedication and special knowledge. That the Korean government is indirectly involved in the production of the music will mean little to foreign fans, who may merely share some concern that the growing popularity of K-pop is taking away some of its exclusivity. Since they are in a better position to follow their idols and emulate their styles, Koreans may be in a better position to acquire a unique K-pop collection than foreign fans, but it is unlikely to positively distinguish them. Meanwhile, because K-pop products increasingly use English, this allows even "hangers-on" to take up the cause of the true fans and deflate the value of the knowledge capital.⁴⁶ When, as is common, the subculture is then incorporated into the mainstream, foreign fans may lose their interest and seek out new markers of distinction.

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