

**Korea as the wave of a future:
The emerging Dream Society of icons and aesthetic experience**

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Abstract:

A familiar perspective on social change suggests that over the past several thousand years, human settlements have changed in size and complexity from hunting and gathering, to agricultural, to industrial, and most recently to information societies. Some theorists have recently suggested that the world may be moving into dream societies of icons and aesthetic experience. Evidence is presented here that indicates that South Korea may be leading the transition as it implements policies to base their economy on popular culture, perhaps eventually replacing "Gross National Product" as a measure of socioeconomic success with "Gross National Cool".

Asians are Surfing Hanryu

Asia is awash in a wave of popular culture products gushing out of South Korea. Youth in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Japan, as well as Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, are agog at the sights and sounds of H.O.T., S.E.S., Shinhwa, god, and J.T.L. "K-pop has broken across borders: teenagers from Tokyo to Taipei swoon over performers such as singer Park Ji Yoon and boy band Shinhwa, buying their CDs and posters and even learning Korean so they can sing along at karaoke. BoA this year become the first solo artist in more than two decades to have a debut single and a debut album reach No. 1 in Japan... 'Korea is like the next epicenter of pop culture in Asia,' says Jessica Kam, vice president for MTV Networks Asia".¹

Before the pop stars, Korean movies led the overseas export of Korean popular culture. *Swiri*, the first Korean-made blockbuster movie, earned millions of dollars in Japan and elsewhere. The sound track from the movie was "snapped up as soon as it hit the shelves" in Japan.² Certain South Korean television dramas have also become so popular that organized tours bring Japanese to their filming locations in Korea.³ In China and Taiwan as well, Korean dramas are among the most favorite TV programs. "Stars of such dramas

¹ *Time Asia*, July 29, 2002.

² *Trends in Japan*, May 19, 2000.

³ "Long Indifferent," *Trends in Japan*, February 22, 2004.

have become shining idols in those nations and fans there emulate the fashion, hairstyle or makeup of Korean stars.”⁴

And as for pop groups, "Korea's platinum dance group H.O.T has emerged as national idols of teenagers in China, as indicated by the hundreds of thousands of young fans who stormed the group's concerts in China. Korea's 'techno princess' Lee Jung-hyu has become a nationwide sensation in China and Hong Kong, with her Mandarin versions of her hits heard on every street corner and her powerful choreography shocking local music fans".⁵ It is reported that “Chinese girls wear character badges featuring their Korean idols, decorate the dormitory walls with their photos and...study the Korean language in order to better understand the meaning of the songs and to enable them to say hello to their stars in Korean.”⁶

Even more dramatically, some Chinese women "reportedly ask plastic surgeons to change their faces to look like the Korean stars." Even "eating Korean food, so often featured in Korean TV dramas, has become a new fad among youngsters in many Asian nations. Some even thought kimchi was a cure for SARS and traditional Korean barbecue restaurants are mushrooming around Asia.”⁷ A report in the *International Herald Tribune* noted that "South Koreans are only just starting to realize that food can be just as profitable an export as semiconductors.”⁸

The Korean Wave has also swept across much of Southeast Asia.

“In Thailand, the Korean wave is evident on both the small and big screens. Korean dramas are now programmed regularly on TV and enjoy high ratings.⁹ “In Vietnam, Korean heartthrob actor Chang Dong-gun and actress Kim Nam-ju have been adored as national celebrities--to the degree that the Korean government invited them to an official dinner on August 23 [2001] for Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong during his state visit to Korea”.¹⁰ "In the streets of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, fashion-conscious young Vietnamese have adopted the darker makeup colors, thinly shaved eyebrows, body-hugging clothes, and square-toed shoes of Seoul fashion.”¹¹

⁴ Hyundai heavy industries report on pop culture, January-February 2004.

⁵ *Korea Herald*, September 11, 2001.

⁶ *Trend in Japan*, February 11, 2001.

⁷ *Hyundai heavy industries report on pop culture*, January-February 2004.

⁸ *International Herald Tribune*, May 31, 2002.

⁹ *Arirang TV*, February 2, 2004.

¹⁰ *Korea Herald*, September 11, 2001.

¹¹ *AP Breaking News*, February 3, 2002.

In Singapore, “K-drama is even hotter than Japanese drama, with Channel U's "Winter Sonata" - a South Korean production - scoring high in the ratings war here. South Korea is now one of the hottest destinations for Singaporeans.¹² The Korean Wave has even washed over Myanmar. Aung So, a staff member at Myanmar Broadcasting, said, "Korean TV dramas are extremely popular in Myanmar. Wherever people gather--at cafes, at the market, and at schools--people discuss the storyline of the Korean dramas or the actors and actresses that were seen the night before." He went on to say that “most of the calls to the broadcasting station are inquires about Korean dramas”.¹³

More recently, online games exported from South Korea are "enjoying sensational popularity" in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam.¹⁴ In fact, Korean online gaming is overwhelming the other aspects of the “Korean Wave” in terms of export amounts. The Korean firm, NC Soft, said to be the biggest online gaming company in the world, earned royalty income of \$25 million from foreign countries in the year 2003, and the company is forecasting \$40 million of overseas sales (mostly from Asia) in 2004.¹⁵

Indeed, the overall rise of pop culture in Korea is so dramatic that one culture critic complained that “all the best young people have moved into movies, leaving the literature circles barren. The era of letters has ended, and has been replaced by the era of images,”¹⁶ about which more will be said later.

Why is there a Korean Wave?

Until recently, the United States and Japan have dominated the Asian pop culture scene. So why is this Hanryu sweeping across Asia?

Some say that "Korea's dynamic young generation is the engine behind the success story. Their creativity and imagination is blossoming as a result of the country's newfound economic prosperity and political democracy. As Korea's living standards improve, people look for ways to enrich their lives culturally and spiritually. Particularly younger

¹² *The New Paper in Singapore*, “Rising Interest in Korea” December 22, 2002, online edition, <http://newpaper.asia1.com.sg/printfriendly/0%2C4139%2C11071-1040572740%2C00.html>

¹³ *Weekly Chosun*, “New Hanryu 2004,” in Cover Story, March 10, 2004, <http://weekly.chosun.com/wdata/html/news/200403/20040310000009.html>.

¹⁴ *KOCCA News*, September 3, 2003.

¹⁵ *Weekly Chosun*, “New Hanryu 2004,” in Cover Story, March 10, 2004, <http://weekly.chosun.com/wdata/html/news/200403/20040310000011.html>.

¹⁶ *Joong-Ang Ilbo*, February 25, 2004.

Koreans, with no memory of poverty or hunger, are exploring the new world of pop culture, taking full advantage of their wealth.”¹⁷

Others say that the increased "democratization" in Korea "has also played a role. In movies and music, full-fledged freedom of expression is guaranteed. Previously taboo subjects such as ideological struggles have been allowed, and a full degree of freedom is granted in depicting such subjects. In pop culture, old authoritarian rules and traditional values can be ridiculed without fear of censorship.”¹⁸

Other "experts attribute the phenomenal success and advance of Korea's mass culture in Asia to a set of its unique qualities--its characteristic dynamism (as displayed in Korean dance music), highly entertaining nature, admirable production quality, and niche market position”.¹⁹

While there is no doubt these factors are contributing to the phenomenon, they don't seem to be the main reason. There must be more to it than this.

A passing fad?

Of course, fascination with Korea could be nothing more than a passing fad that has no special meaning at all. Pop culture promoters and venders are constantly in search of new material. For the moment, that new material might be coming from Korea. It may be popular only because it is new--and very well produced. But how much "kim chic" can one endure before it becomes old hat indeed? There are already signs that the trend may be coming to an end as culture vultures look for something even newer and hotter.

Moreover, it is important to realize that the Hanryu did not just spontaneously emerge. Grungy Korean teenagers, screeching and moaning away in their parent's garage, didn't just happen to be "discovered" by a passing pop culture promoter. To the contrary, all of the major Korean pop groups were carefully imagined, funded, instructed, created, and promoted by culture entrepreneurs.²⁰ And they were promoted by the Korean government at precisely when the Korean market was being opened to Japanese pop culture, legally for the very first time.²¹

Indeed, perhaps the entire phenomenon is nothing more than an attempt by Korea to protect its culture from further contamination by American, other Western, and especially Japanese cultural imports. There is some evidence for that, but we do not think that is the main story either.

¹⁷ *Hyundai heavy industries report on pop culture*, January-February 2004.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Korea Herald*, September 11, 2001 *Korea Herald*, September 11, 2001.

²⁰ *Time Asia*, July 29, 2002.

²¹ "Long indifferent," *Trends in Japan*, May 19, 2000.

A flowering of a Pan-Asian culture?

Perhaps the Korean Wave is the long-awaited flowering of post-colonial Asian artistic expression--the creation of a regional "Asian" cultural manifestation against the erstwhile domination of America/Western culture. There is considerable support for this position as well. "Zhang Jianhua, 24, owner of a Beijing video and music shop that stocks Korean products" notes that "Korean pop culture is seen as fresh and edgy, but non-threatening because 'they're Asian and look like us. So it's easy to identify with them.' Sociologist Habib Khondker agrees. The Korean fad is part of a region-wide 'reassertion of Asian identity,' he said. "It's kind of a pan-Asianism. You can look for alternative cultures, not necessarily European or American."²²

In this case, "what makes Korean mass culture attractive is its merit of faithfully dramatizing Asian sensibilities, including family values, and traditional emotive delicacies that are warmly embraced by local fans in some Asian countries where full-fledged industrialization has yet to arrive. Korean industry veterans argue that, even though these countries are ready to accept Western values, the people may still find Japanese and American mass culture irrelevant to their reality and are uncomfortable with the foreign cultures' emphasis on violence and sex. 'Korean pop culture skillfully blends Western and Asian values to create its own, and the country itself is viewed as a prominent model to follow or catch up to, both culturally and economically,' said Lui Mei, a Chinese resident in Seoul of three years."²³

In addition, the emergence of an affluent middle class in Asia has provided a clientele for Korean pop culture. Iwabuchi Koichi's analysis of Japanese pop culture in East Asia applies equally well to the Korean Wave. According to Iwabuchi, "under the globalizing forces, cultural similarities and resonances in the region are newly articulated. It is also an emerging sense of coevalness based upon the narrowing economic gap, simultaneous circulation of information, the abundance of global commodities, and the common experience of urbanization that has sustained a Japanese cultural presence in East Asia..... For audiences in East Asia, Japanese popular culture represents cultural similarities and a common experience of modernity in the region that is based on an ongoing negotiation between the West and the non-West experiences that American culture cannot represent."²⁴

An article from *China Daily* also support Iwabuchi's argument: "The changes in media culture, especially in TV culture since the late 1990s, have resulted in a new aesthetic in

²² Dean Visser, "Korea fever' is sweeping the pop culture scene in Asia," *AP Breaking News*, February 3, 2002.

²³ *Korea Herald*, September 11, 2001.

²⁴ Koichi Iwabuchi, "From Western Gaze to Global Gaze," in *Global Culture*, Diana Crane eds., New York, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 270.

Chinese popular culture. One feature of this new aesthetic is that cities have replaced the countryside as centres of cultural imagination... The lives of middle income city-dwellers today have nothing in common with those of rural Chinese. They are born into the web-like societies of bustling metropolises that are part of the globalization process. Examples of this trend are the overwhelmingly popular pop idol soap operas and Japanese cartoon series, as well as TV game shows, clothes and hairstyles "imported" from countries and regions such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. In Japanese, Korean and Chinese pop idol soap operas, viewers find similar love stories, similar depictions of luxurious lifestyles, pretty faces, chic clothes, big houses and flashy sedans, all elements of the city life Asian youth dream of today".²⁵

We are certain that these factors are important in explaining the acceptance of Korean pop culture in Asia. But they are not enough. We need to understand why pop culture itself has so recently begun to flourish. And for this we need to turn to a recently-articulated perspective on social change and the futures.

A Dream Society of Icons and Aesthetic Experience?

One of the most persistent theories favored by futurists describes the recurrent transformation of societies as new technologies make new behaviors, values, and lifestyles possible while rendering previous behaviors, values and lifestyles, based on earlier technologies, no longer necessary or desirable.²⁶

At the most aggregate level, these theories have been used to describe and explain the transformation from small, nomadic, hunting and gathering societies, to larger, sedentary agricultural societies, to even larger and more dynamic industrial societies, and most recently (from the mid 20th Century), to superfluid information societies. Each society is "labeled" by the dominant economic system of the time--dominant in terms of the percentage of the population engaged in the economic sector, and "dominant" in terms of wealth and/or power accruing to people in those sectors, compared to other sectors. Each transformation marginalizes, but does not eliminate, the previously dominant sectors. Thus, hunting and gathering still happens (but generally as a "sport" or "pastime" and not for subsistence) in an agricultural society (and on to the present) while people still eat, and many eat very well, in an information society though few till the soil or tend farm animals.

Most discussion at present tends to focus on continuing efforts to transform societies from agricultural to industrial economies, or on how industrial societies are becoming post-industrial information societies. But we side with those few futurists who believe

²⁵ *China Daily*, June 10, 2003, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-06/10/content_168477.htm

²⁶ One of the best application of those theories is Alvin Toffler, *The third wave*. New York: Random House, 1980.

they have discovered the seeds and early sprouts of the future political economy. Ernest Sternberg calls it "The Economy of Icons" while Rolf Jensen designates it "The Dream Society." Joseph Pine and James Gilmore refer to it as "The Experience Economy" and Virginia Postel writes of "the substance of style" and discusses the rise of aesthetic value in economic life. All four are describing roughly the same phenomenon.

Sternberg puts it this way:

"It is still widely believed that we live in an information society in which the most valued raw material is data, production consists of its processing into information, efficiency depends on computing and scientific reasoning, knowledge and rational calculation underlie wealth, and society is dominated by an educated elite. These were revealing ideas when they were proposed almost thirty years ago, but as we begin the twenty-first century, the concept of the information economy has become a kind of collective wisdom, obscuring another economic transformation that has already overtaken us. The driving force in this newer economy is not information but image. Now the decisive material is meaning, production occurs through the insertion of commodities into stories and events, efficiency consists in the timely conveyance of meaning, celebrity underlies wealth, and economic influence emanates from the controllers of content."²⁷

Rolf Jensen says,

"The sun is setting on the Information Society--even before we have fully adjusted to its demands as individuals and as companies. We have lived as hunters and as farmers, we have worked in factories, and now we live in an information-based society whose icon is the computer: We stand facing the fifth type of society: the Dream Society".²⁸ "The Information Society will render itself obsolete through automation, abolishing the very same jobs it created. The inherent logic of the Information Society remains unchanged: replacing humans with machines, letting the machines do the work. This is reflected in the three waves of the electronics industry. The first wave was hardware. The second wave was software (where we are now). The third wave will be content; that is, profit will be generated by the product itself, not by the instrument conveying it to the consumer."²⁹

Very importantly, Jensen sees society finally moving from a dependence on writing to the dominance of audiovisual images: "Today, knowledge is stored as letters; we learn through the alphabet--this is the medium of the Information Society. Most likely, the

²⁷ Ernest Sternberg, *The Economy of Icons: How business manufactures meaning*. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1999, p. 5.

²⁸ Rolf Jensen, *The dream society: How the coming shift from information to imagination will transform your business*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999, p. vii

²⁹ Ibid, p. 2f.

medium of the Dream Society will be the picture"³⁰ Jensen concludes that Henry Ford was the icon of the Industrial Age while Bill Gates is the icon of the Information Age. "The icon of the Dream Society has probably been born, but she or he is most likely still at school and is probably not the best pupil in the class. Today, the best pupil is the one who makes a first-rate symbolic analyst. In the future, it may be the student who gives the teacher a hard time--an imaginative pupil who is always staging new games that put things into new perspectives." "He or she will be the great storyteller of the twenty-first century." "...Steven Spielberg [is] the closest we now have to a Dream Society icon."³¹

Similarly, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore assert that "Experiences represent an existing but previously unarticulated genre of economic output. Decoupling experiences from services in accounting for what businesses create opens up possibilities for extraordinary economic expansion--just as recognizing services as a distinct and legitimate offering led to a vibrant economic foundation in the face of a declining industrial base. And a new base is emerging. Ignore the familiar hype: Information is not the founding of the 'New Economy'...." "Recognizing experiences as a distinct economic offering provides the key to future economic growth...."³²

More recently, Virginia Postel has commented on the transformation: "We are now at a tipping point. Small economic advances that have built bit by bit for more than a century are reaching critical mass..... At the same time, recent cultural, business, and technological changes are reinforcing the prominence of aesthetics and the value of personal expression. Each new development feeds others. The result feels less like the culmination of a historical trend than the beginning of a new economic and cultural moment, in which look and feel matter more than ever."³³

Finally, even such a mainstream journal as the *Harvard Business Review* recently included a small item about the urgent importance of aesthetics and creativity rather than quantification and control in the future world economy:

"An arts degree is now perhaps the hottest credential in the world of business. Corporate recruiters have begun visiting the top arts grad schools in search of talent." "[M]ore arts grads [are] occupying key corporate positions, the master of fine arts is becoming the new business degree." "In many ways, MBA graduates are becoming this century's blue-collar workers: people who entered a workforce only to see their jobs move overseas."

³⁰ Ibid, p. 40.

³¹ Ibid, p. 121.

³² B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The experience economy: Work is theatre and every business a stage*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999, p. ix.

³³ Virginia Postel, *The substance of style: How the rise of aesthetic value is remaking commerce, culture and consciousness*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003, p. 39.

"At the same time, businesses are realizing that the only way to differentiate their goods and services in today's over-stocked, materially abundant marketplace is to make their offerings transcendent--physically beautiful and emotionally compelling." "[L]isten to auto industry legend Robert Lutz. When Lutz took over as chairman of General Motors North America, a journalist asked him how his approach would differ from his predecessor's. Here's what he said: 'It's more right brain. I see us as being in the art business. Art, entertainment, and mobile sculpture, which, coincidentally, also happens to provide transportation.' General Motors--General Motors!--is in the art business. So, now, are we all."³⁴

Nothing new?

As the quotation from Postel makes clear, we are not arguing that the dream society of icons and aesthetic experience is emerging from nowhere, or is completely dominant now. To the contrary humans have been image-makers from their earliest origins, while modern advertising from the early 20th Century onward has relied more and more on image projection and less and less on providing useful and accurate information about the product being advertised.

Similarly, Hollywood has been big business since before the Second World War (with Bollywood and more recently Hong Kong kung fu films thereafter) while the development and diffusion of television, videos, and electronic games has inundated everyone with powerful and attractive images. It goes without saying that the United States has been the major producer of most images of the good life and the future for the past seventy-five years, and that it clearly colonizes all minds it touches everywhere today.

Mickey Mouse was one of the first (but not the first) "character product," while DisneyWorlds and DisneyLands are everywhere. "Hello Kitty" simply carried the concept to new heights. Now Aibo and Asimo suggest that a new era of warm, caring, adoring "evocative machines" (in the words of MIT theorist Sheryl Terkle) are going beyond mere artificial intelligence towards simulated but satisfying personal companions, caregivers, and lovers.

Also, from a theoretical perspective, this development has not gone unanticipated. As long ago as the first third of the 20th Century, Johan Huizinga was suggesting that "man" was evolving from *Homo Sapiens*, to *Homo Faber*, and finally to *Homo Ludens*--"Man the player."³⁵ Somewhat later, two of the major futurists/philosophers of our time,

³⁴ Daniel H. Pink, "The MFA is the new MBA," *Harvard Business Review*, February 2004, p 21f.

³⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play-element in culture*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1950. First published in German in 1944.

Marshall McLuhan³⁶ and John McHale³⁷ anticipated the growing prominence and dominance of image and play in society. And of course postmodern critical theorists and the emergence of "cultural studies" is similarly focused.³⁸

Korea as a dream society of icons?

What we do want to suggest, however, is that Korea may be the first nation *consciously* to recognize, and, more importantly, then to form official policy and take action towards, becoming a dream society of icons and aesthetic experience. The global dominance of Hollywood and Disney are not the consequence of American national policy. To the contrary, "serious" people in the United States still view pop culture with disdain--no matter how much they may pay to consume it themselves.

Similarly, while Japanese pop artists and technicians (especially game producers) have been enormously successful as exporters of pop culture, this has not been the consequence of Japanese national economic policy, but of the exceptional entrepreneurial and creative spirit of a few Japanese, aided by progressively cheaper and more powerful digital production technologies.

Ichiya Nakamura a researcher on Japanese pop culture at the Stanford Japan Center, recently stated that "the market value of media contents in Japan was worth approximately 13 trillion yen in 2001."³⁹ However, in Japan, "The venture aspect is one of the features of the pop culture industry. For both the game and animation industries, their software markets were mainly pioneered by newly-risen small companies." "The game industry currently contains 146 companies and 46% of these companies have less

³⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *The mechanical bride: Folklore of industrial man*. Boston: Beacon Press 1951; *The Gutenberg galaxy: The making of typographic man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962; *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964; *The medium is the message*. New York: Bantam Books, 1967; and *Culture is our business*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970.

³⁷ John McHale, "The expendable ikon," *Architectural Design* (London), Vol. XXIX, February 1959; "The plastic Parthenon" *Dot Zero Magazine* (New York), No. 3, Spring 1967, reprinted in John Russell and Suzi Gablik, ed., *Pop Art Redefined*, New York: Praeger, 1969; "2000+" *Architectural Design* (London), Vol. XXXVII, February 1967; *The future of the future*. New York: G. Braziller, 1969.

³⁸ For example: Michael Peters, Mark Olssen, and Colin Lankshear, eds., *Futures of critical theory: Dreams of difference*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003; Judith Stamps, *Unthinking modernity: Innis, McLuhan, and the Frankfurt School*. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995; Michael J. Shapiro, *Cinematic political thought: Narrating race, nation, and gender*. New York: New York University Press, 1999; Michael J. Shapiro, *The politics of representation: Writing practices in biography, photography, and policy analysis*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988. Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U Press, 1986; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis, Minn. : University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

³⁹ Ichiya Nakamura, "Japanese pop industry," Stanford Japan Center, November 22, 2003, DP 2003-002-E, p. 5.

than 1 million yen in capital. The population of the industry is said to be about 18,500, which means the average number of employers per company is approximately 100 people.”⁴⁰

Douglas McGray observed that in spite of foreigners' obsessive belief that Japan is in a deep recession, and should follow various neoliberal reforms to get out of it, "Japan is reinventing superpower again. Instead of collapsing beneath its political and economic misfortunes, Japan's global cultural influence has only grown. In fact, from pop music to consumer electronics, architecture to fashion, and food to art, Japan has far greater cultural influence now than it did in the 1980s when it was an economic superpower.”⁴¹ "Gradually, over the course of an otherwise dismal decade, Japan has been perfecting the art of transmitting certain kinds of mass culture....".⁴²

"Japan...has succeeded not only in balancing a flexible, absorptive, crowd-pleasing, shared culture with a more private, domestic one but also in taking advantage of that balance to build an increasingly powerful global commercial force. In other words, Japan's growing cultural presence has created a mighty engine of national cool.”⁴³

On the other hand, Nakamura says that "the Japanese entertainment industry has been shrinking over the last few years. Hollywood's full scale efforts towards the content business and the speed of growth of Korea's game and animation industries, back up by government policy, are also threatening Japan.”⁴⁴

So, might Korea be in the process of becoming the world's coolest nation as a result of Korea's leaders recognizing that the dream economy of icons and aesthetic experience is the wave of a future? There is some evidence to suggest that leaders understand this to some extent, but perhaps not to the full extent they might.

Korean President Roh recently said, “The 21st Century is the age of knowledge and the creative mind. A powerful cultural nation will become an economically strong nation. In particular, the game industry is a high value added cultural industry that has enormous future potential.”⁴⁵ KOSDAQ securities market president Ho-joo Shin recently stated, “I think the culture industry can be a breakthrough for a revitalization of the South Korean economy. It is often said that the 21st Century is the age of culture. There is a debate

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴¹ McGray, *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2003, p. 47.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁴ Ichiya Nakamura, "Pop culture and digital policy" p. 1.

⁴⁵ *Digital Times*, February 25, 2004.

regarding the IT industry as to whether it is already at a mature stage or whether it is still in its infancy. The important point is that we should create new sources of supply, such as the cultural industry, with an economy based on the IT industry as its cornerstone.”⁴⁶

According to the “Cultural Industry White Paper 2003,” published by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the size of the Korean cultural industry market is estimated to be about \$350 billion, which is 6.6% of Korean GDP. The number of people expected to become involved in the cultural industry in Korea is growing rapidly and is expected to reach 200,000 people by 2008, when it is hoped the value of exported cultural goods will reach one billion US dollars.⁴⁷

Minister of Culture and Tourism, Lee Chang-dong, stated, “Korea must first build a stronger cultural infrastructure in order to gain a larger piece of the \$1.4 trillion global cultural industry.” The Federation of Korean Industries also emphasized the need for entrepreneurs to engage in more culture-related businesses.⁴⁸ Experts and government officials agreed to cooperate in fostering the nation's gaming industry so that it can be ranked among the world's top three by 2007. The government seems set to earmark 150 million won for that purpose.⁴⁹

Contributing Factors

1. The Internet.

Several other factors need to be mentioned as factors that have enabled Korea to move quickly towards becoming a dream society of icons and aesthetic experience. The *Guardian* quoted a western diplomat in Seoul as saying, "The Internet is so important here. This is the most online country in the world. The younger generation gets all their information from the web. Some don't even bother with TVs." "Almost 70% of homes [in Korea] have a broad band connection compared with about 5% in Britain". "Koreans are said to spend 1,340 minutes online per month. And 10% of economic activity is related to IT--one of the highest levels in the world.”⁵⁰

One of the consequences of this has been widely heralded and discussed--skillful Internet use is said to have enabled Roh, Moo-hyun to beat the odds and all newspapers'

⁴⁶ Ho-joo Shin, “Interview with KOSDAQ securities market president,” *Segye Ilbo*, October 14, 2003.

⁴⁷ *Seoul Shinmun*, February 25, 2004.

⁴⁸ *KOCCA News*, December 18, 2003.

⁴⁹ *Arirang TV*, November 13, 2003.

⁵⁰ *Guardian Newspapers*, February 23, 2003.

predictions (and desires) and be elected President of South Korea in 2002.⁵¹ However, whether that was a fluke or an example of a new force in democratic politics remains to be seen. Still the point to be emphasized concerning Korea is that significant numbers of Koreans have had access to pop culture via the Web for some time, and pride themselves on being early and among the world's most prolific users of the most advanced digital technologies.

2. Age-cohort shifts.

2. Age-cohort shifts.

One of major theories/methods that many futurists use is age-cohort analysis--the fact that people born during a certain time interval tend to have certain common experiences that mark them from people older or than younger than they--experiences that they carry with them as strong influences on their beliefs and behavior throughout their entire lives. Age-cohort analysis has recently been applied in Korea to identify and explain significant differences of attitudes about the future of Korea.⁵²

While the popular press uses the terms "386 generation", "New generation", "April 19th generation", "R generation", "Generation 2030", and the like, we believe it is more helpful to distinguish the various relevant age-cohorts in Korea according to the following six groups: Colonial, Veteran, Democracy, Baby Boomer, Silent, and Network.

The members of the Colonial Cohort were born and grew up in the early Japanese colonial period (Born between 1900 and 1920). While few of this cohort is still alive, they and their efforts are still revered since they envisioned and rebuilt an independent Korea after the Japanese defeat in the Second World War--only to see the country tragically divided as a consequence of the Korean War. The Veteran Cohort (1921-1933) were born and educated in the Japanese language during the Japanese colonial period. They fought during the Korean War and thus hold very strong anti-communist feelings. Their lives have been characterized by intense suffering, struggle, and eventual victory. However, neither of these two cohorts have much interest in, nor impact on, current Korean pop culture.

The cohorts that are significant can be divided into four distinct groups: Democracy (Born between 1934 and 1953), Baby Boomer (1954-1971), Silent (1971-1981), and Network (1982~).

⁵¹ Young Min Yun, "Analysis of Cyber-Electioneering: Focusing on the 2002 Presidential Election in Korea", *Korea Journal*, Autumn 2003, 141-163; presidential election during 2000-2002; Jongwoo Han, "Internet, social capital, and democracy in the Information Age: the Red Devils, candle light anti-US demonstration, and presidential Election during 2000-2002," unpublished manuscript, September 2000; In-Yong Rhee "the Korean election shows a shift in media power," *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2003.

⁵² See Yongseok Seo, "From the 38th Parallel to a Border: Exploring Alternative Futures of Korea," *Journal of Futures Studies*, May 2002, 6/4, pp. 1-16.

The older members of the Democracy Cohort (1934 - 1953) experienced Japanese colonial rule while the younger members spent most of their lives under American cultural imperialism. This is the cohort that was educated via the Japanese language, and then was crazy for Elvis Presley's rock 'n' roll music and Hollywood movies while yearning for the wealth and power of America. Accordingly, both the older and younger members of this cohort are swayed by feelings of psychological inferiority of Korea as a cultural periphery. At the same time, this cohort played a leading role in Korea's "economic miracle" and has a strong "can do" spirit with a burning desire to leave the periphery and enter the center. They understand that the Korean Wave is to some extent the consequence of their "can do" effort, and interpret it as a source of national pride and superiority. They even believe that it is the realization of their long desire for Korea to be prominent on the world stage.⁵³

The Baby Boomers (1954-1971) are the cohort on the boundary, sharing attitudes towards pop culture with both the Democracy cohort and [the Silent and Network cohorts]. Most Koreans are Boomers and thus dominate Korean economics and politics. They witnessed firsthand the democratization of Korea, and played a major role in the information technology revolution.⁵⁴ However, the perspective of this cohort regarding the Korean Wave is not much different from the Democracy cohort. They also view *Hanryu* with a sense of pride that Korea is finally entering into the cultural center. This is also the cohort that spent their teenage years enjoying American pop music and Japanese pop culture even though the latter was prohibited in Korea at the time. Although they have a complex against the cultural center, this group consists of the film directors, music developers and producers, and TV drama directors who now lead the Korean Wave.

The Silent Cohort (1972-1981) and the Network Cohort (1982-) share many similarities in terms of cultural perspectives and attitudes toward the Korean Wave. The Silent cohort is probably the first "otaku" generation in Korea.⁵⁵ The members of the Silent cohort grew up in a relatively abundant material environment, and have no interest in politics. They would rather indulge themselves in computer games and animation. They are more accustomed to using computers and the Internet than are the Baby Boomers, and are always searching for their own character and uniqueness.

⁵³ Haejoang Cho, "Modernity, Popular Culture and East-West Identity Formation: A Discourse Analysis of 'Korean Wave' in Asia," November 12, 2002, <http://www.haja.net/users/cho/db4/vi.asp?idx=36>.

⁵⁴ Gun Ko, a professor of Computer Science at Seoul National University, argues that the rapid diffusion of the Internet and the mobile telephone in Korea is largely due to the Baby Boom generation. According to Ko, they entered their 20s and 30s during the early and mid 1990s when the Internet and mobile technology was sweeping the world. Their young, technology-oriented minds easily absorbed the new technology, *Weekly Chosun*, October 23, 2003, <http://weekly.chosun.com/wdata/html/news/200310/20031021000030.html>.

⁵⁵ "Otaku" is a Japanese word literally meaning "(your) home." It is used to designate the growing number of people, mainly young men, who spend all their time at home playing electronic games, often becoming more involved with the characters and situations of the games than with "real life." The same word is used in Korea to describe similar people there.

Most importantly, they are cynical about nationalistic perspectives of the older cohorts regarding pop culture and Hanryu. Unlike the older cohorts who spent their teenage years singing American popular songs, the Network cohort enjoys music that was made in their own country and in their own language. They are the main consumers of pop culture, and their peers make up the majority of the performers. Many current Korean Wave stars (including BoA) belong to this age-cohort. For them, nationality and the origin of a cultural product are not important as long as they are satisfied with the sensitivities and emotions, and there is no such thing as a cultural periphery inferiority complex, nor is there a strong desire to enter into the cultural center.

At the same time, the success and brashness of the Network cohort offends many of the older cohorts. One said, "I feel as though I have been driven out of my own old house.' Some of them are bitter about the sudden power shift between generations. A businessman in his fifties said," "My generation has been working hard and waiting patiently for our turn to take charge. But there was no such thing as our turn. Suddenly, the younger ones are in charge."⁵⁶

Moreover, according to one report, "access to information technology varies widely among different age groups. According to a recent survey, 58 percent of South Koreans use the Internet. Among these, more than 90% of the 20-year-olds use the Internet while only about 30 percent of the 45-year-old South Koreans use it, and for those who are over 65, less than 5 percent use it. The generational gap in Internet use is much more pronounced in South Korea than in other similarly advanced societies such as the United States where there is virtually no difference in Internet use between 20-year-olds and 45-year-olds." "Cyberspace liberates young Koreans from old hierarchies. To the dismay of many older (and some not-so-old) South Koreans, the honorifics system of Korean language is often ignored on the Web, and this allows communication between generations on a more equal basis. This has translated into greater political activism among the youth tuned into the Internet."⁵⁷

3. Consumer Debt.

Unlike Japanese and almost more than many Americans, Koreans seem to have embraced credit cards with great enthusiasm, and have run up debts of truly impressive magnitudes. "According to the Korea Federation of Banks (KFB), the number of credit defaulters became a record high of 3.8 million at the end of 2003." "In other words, one of every five Korean adults faced bankruptcy due mainly to overdue credit card debts and it is likely to continue to surge." "According to the Boston Consulting Group, 40 percent of Korean households are incapable of paying their debts as they surpass their assets and

⁵⁶ Sangmee Bak, "Ties vs. Allies: Suddenly, Three's a Crowd in South Korea," *Washington Post*, January 26, 2003, p. B01, online edition
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A41403-2003Jan25.html>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

disposable income”.⁵⁸ “South Korea's ratio of household debt, including overdue credit cards bills, to gross domestic product is forecast to reach 80 percent this year, up more than 50 percent since 1999, a Seoul analyst said. He said the figure is already greater than Japan's 70 percent and similar to the 81 percent in the United States.”⁵⁹

This seems to us clear evidence that many Koreans are already quite eager to live in a Dream Society of Icons and Aesthetic Experience where all of the economic and moral principles of capitalism, based on the "Puritan Ethic" and hard work of industrialism, no longer apply. While this huge level of debt may indeed come back to haunt Korea, it need not, since even so respectable an American fiscal giant as Alan Greenspan recently urged American consumers to keep consuming--that is to say, to continue going into debt to consume--or else the great engine driving the global economy will come to a halt. Under the headline, "Greenspan calm on consumer debt", *BBC News* for February 23, 2004 stated "The huge debt run up by US consumers in recent years is not a threat as long as interest rates stay low, Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan says" in a report to the US Congress.⁶⁰

And Americans are following his advice: "Despite the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and two subsequent wars, despite a recession in 2001 and the resulting loss of 716,000 jobs, US consumers haven't stopped spending and piling on debt. In fact, consumers have increased spending for 48 quarters straight, an incredible streak. That long run has been fueled, in part, with \$2 trillion in credit-card, auto, and consumer debt and with another \$7 trillion in home mortgages.”⁶¹

Thus the only thing Korean credit card distributors need to do when people exceed their credit limit is to raise the credit limit endlessly, or, if consumers do enter into bankruptcy, to allow them easily to go into debt again--and again and again. It can all be done in the name of transforming the nation into the Dream Economy of Icons and Aesthetic Experience. To do otherwise--to pretend the debts are real and to call them in--will bring the current global economic house of cards crashing down. Far better to keep the Dream alive!

But how realistic is any of this?

Perhaps the Korean Wave is just a passing fad and not the wave of a future after all. Is it reasonable to expect that Koreans can continue to be the creative risk-takers they are now? Perhaps their present success is just because of the novelty of it all plus a whole lot

⁵⁸ *Hankook Ilbo, Chosun Ilbo, Donga-Ilbo*, November 7, 2003.

⁵⁹ *Korean Times*, December 26, 2003.

⁶⁰ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3514817.stm>.

⁶¹ *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, March 6, 2004, p. C2.

of luck. Certainly one can expect Disney, or MGM, or Sony, or Murdoch to gobble up the producers and products of the Korean Wave if they do continue to be successful. Or perhaps the world's next media giant will emerge from within the ranks of Korea's current culture entrepreneurs.

Time will tell. For now, we remain optimistic that the willingness (can we say it is their "national character"?) of many Koreans compared to Japanese and Chinese, to be "out there", with their emotions barely concealed behind a façade of rationality, will enable Korea to succeed while others might fail. An economy of "aesthetic experience" seems just right for Koreans who seem to love to treat politics, strikes, demonstrations, ritual suicides, and many other aspects of public life as though they were high drama--if not high camp. The Dream Society seems a dream come true for many Koreans.

But how in the world can one speak responsibly of a "dream economy" when a billion people go to bed hungry each night and half the world's six billion people are malnourished and in poverty?

And what about global warming, sea level rise, and the abrupt halt of the deep ocean thermohaline current? Isn't humanity more likely to spend its time coping with the long-ignored consequences of global climate change instead of being lost in dreams via online games?

And terrorists! Where are they in the economy of icons? Indeed, since many of the terrorists are apparently driven by fundamentalist phobias--phobias that many Korean as well as American Christians share--how can one presume that pop culture has any future at all in a world whipped into submission by Mel Gibson's bloody scourges, and shrouded in bourkas by Osama bin Laden?

And what about the growing threat of war, including war between North and South Korea? Indeed, where is North Korea in all of this anyway?

It seems that many elite youth in North Korea are eager consumers of South Korean pop culture. "South Korean hit TV soap operas, such as 'All In,' 'Autumn Rhapsody,' 'Winter Sonata,' and 'King Taejo,' are popular among young North Koreans. The soundtracks of the dramas, such as 'Like the First Day,' from 'All In,' are also popular in the North. The spread and popularity of South Korean culture is limited to Pyongyang, Sinuiju, and Cheongjin, areas that are relatively open to outside contact, Chinese sources familiar with North Korea said. South Korean dramas wind up in the three cities about three to six months after being broadcast here." "The eagerness for South Korean culture is also spreading to the market where South Korean products are becoming more popular than relatively cheap Chinese products. The conception that South Korean clothes are best, and that South Korean electronics are as good as Japanese electronics, is spreading to North Korea's upper class."⁶²

⁶² Chol-hwan Kang, "'Korean Wave' Washes into Pyongyang," *Chosun Ilbo*, November 30, 2003.

Perhaps young North Koreans are, or could become, talented producers of pop culture too. Indeed, here may lie a way to break the deadlock between North and South Korea. It is already very well known that Kim Jong Il is a great movie buff and an accomplished producer. We propose that North and South Korea join in becoming the Dream Republic of Korea: the first nation consciously to abandon measuring its wealth by its Gross National Product, instead measuring it by that true indicator of a dream society of icons and aesthetic experience, its Gross National Cool.

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