Korean American Youth and Transnational Flows of Popular Culture across the Pacific

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Rapid globalization has profoundly transformed our lives. Extensive and intensive flows of people, material resources and information across borders have intertwined the global and the local more closely than before.1 Such crossing of diverse cultures, peoples and information has weakened the rigidity and significance of existing borders, leading to the growing presence of “border zones,” where multiple cultures or political systems come face-to-face.2

While encounters with “border zones” and experiences of “border-crossing” have become integral, some people experience them more frequently than others.3 For transnational (im)migrants,4 border-crossing constitutes the core of their life experiences.5 Located “in-between,” they are “fully encapsulated neither in the host society nor in their native land” but “nonetheless remain active participants in the social settings of both locations.”6 Thus, they often build their niches in the interstices among various social, cultural and political communities.

Despite scholarly attention to the growing prevalence of transnational (im)migrants, at least in North America, there has been a relative lack of accounts on a segment of the transnational population: the (im)migrant youth. Discussions about Asian American youths have largely been limited to select topics such as academic performance, problems related to adaptation processes, generational gap and gang violence.7 Yet the lives of Asian American youths are imbued with as many complexities as

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those of adults. Their experiences can shed light on many critical aspects of global transformation as they are one of the major consumer groups of various popular cultures, one of the most active voices in cyberspace, and one of the most mobile groups that frequently cross real and virtual borders.

Popular culture is an area in which Asian American youths’ role in the transnational circulation of products, information and people is critical. Their interest in and easy access to diverse popular cultures, especially U.S. and Asian pop cultures, enable them to become core consumers of multiple national, regional, and global pop cultures. Through their frequent trans-Pacific contacts, they disseminate and mediate cultural information across borders, sometimes far more effectively than the media. They also participate in the construction of popular culture through their work in the media or entertainment industries on both sides of the Pacific.

The multiple roles of Asian American youths in trans-Pacific flows of popular culture indicate changes in the global cultural landscape. The boundary-collapsing power of globalization has subverted our long-held notion of culture, which is generally understood as shared meanings, values, and customs of a group of people who live within bounded territories, and “hybridization” and “creolization” have become typical characteristics of contemporary culture. Moreover, advancements in technology, which have widened the scope and accelerated the speed of the circulation of information and products to an unprecedented degree, have induced contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, they strengthen the West’s, especially Hollywood’s, cultural hegemony as the global media industries are mostly controlled and owned by Western capital and as the content of popular culture is still largely of Western origin. On the other hand, they have expedited the regionalization of cultural flows, such as intra-Asian cultural circulation, which challenges the unidirectional cultural flows from the West to the rest, partly because global media industries divide the world into regional markets and tend to regionally distribute programs, many of which are produced locally. In addition, some Asian countries, with the development of their economy and media industries, have produced marketable popular cultural products such as film, music and animation, which first circulated at the local and regional levels and then gradually expanded to the global market. Hong Kong films and Japanese animation exemplify this. Cultural influences from the “periphery” to the “center” are not uncommon nowadays, as illustrated by the notice-
able African, Latin or Asian influences on contemporary U.S. pop culture. Asian American youths’ multiple roles signify their critical involvement in this trans-Pacific “cross-fertilization of culture.” In addition, the consumption of “homeland” popular culture reconnects them to their “homelands” through images mediated by “electronic capitalism” such as television and cinema, which potentially provide a ground on which to construct a new kind of transnational community based on shared imagination and consumption.

Drawing on ethnographic accounts of Korean American youths’ consumption of popular culture, especially their consumption of South Korean popular culture, in Los Angeles and Chicago, this paper explores the role of (im)migrant youths in the transnational flows of popular culture and its ramifications. I discuss the following: 1) how young Korean Americans consume, disseminate and construct popular culture across the Pacific; 2) how Korean American youths’ consumption of South Korean culture is interrelated with their search for identity and community; 3) how the trans-Pacific cultural flows are affected by the interplay of various structural forces including the market and the state and how they signify the changing global cultural landscape and power relationships.

**Globalization and the Growing Presence of South Korean Popular Culture in Metropolitan U.S. Cities**

Contemporary discussions of globalization often equate the process with Americanization, as the United States has exerted its power on others’ political, economic and sociocultural lives in most parts of the world. In the popular cultural realm America’s hegemony has long been undisputed as symbolized by the dominant power of McDonald’s, Coca Cola and Hollywood overseas. Interestingly, in contrast to the plethora of literature on the (mostly negative) impact of Americanization on other local cultures, scholars have largely ignored the influence of foreign popular cultures on the U.S., implicitly leaving the impression that the U.S., as the center of cultural hegemony, is almost immune to the overwhelming power of cultural globalization. However, the U.S. is not free from foreign cultural influences, although they may not be as strong and visible as American culture represented by Hollywood elsewhere. Indeed, from the incipient stage of its foundation, this “country of immigrants” has always been subject to foreign cultural influence even though the influence from the north-
ern and western European countries has remained mostly dominant. Yet, since the late twentieth century, the acceptance and visibility of non-European cultural influence in U.S. society have become more apparent as the number and politicoeconomic power of non-European American populations have increased. Nowadays, it is not unusual to see, for instance, Asian, African or Latin cultural influences on American popular culture such as in fashion, food, films, music, and art.

The prevalence of foreign cultural influence is more strongly felt in ethnic spaces and among transnational (im)migrants in metropolitan cities. Historically, (im)migrants’ consumption and retention of their heritage culture are nothing new. But contemporary media capitalism, combined with technological development and individuals’ movements across borders, has enabled extensive and speedy exchanges of cultural information between the countries of origin and transnational (im)migrants. The speed and volume of these exchanges enable simultaneous and almost unlimited cultural consumption, which connects the countries of origin and (im)migrants more immediately. Moreover, since ethnic spaces in the U.S. are no longer enclosed and isolated islands from the larger society as they once were, cultural practices and information available in ethnic spaces are easily transmittable to the larger society. In this sense, urban ethnic spaces and transnational (im)migrant populations are significant nodal points of the circulation of foreign cultures in the U.S. and important sites for examining cultural globalization of the U.S.\textsuperscript{18}

In major U.S. cities such as Los Angeles, New York and Chicago, ethnic Korean TV channels are established, and depending on the region and the size of the ethnic media market, they air ethnic programs, most of which are imported from South Korea, for hours every day.\textsuperscript{19} In addition to the regular TV channels, cable TV and radio stations are also available. Ethnic newspapers, whose news is transmitted from Korea through satellite, are either mailed or delivered to subscribers’ doorsteps every day, and the proliferation of ethnic video rental shops, bookstores, and various types of ethnic cultural spaces (including cafés, clubs, clothing stores, hair salons, etc.) also contribute to Korean Americans’ easy and extended access to “homeland” popular culture.\textsuperscript{20}

Time lag in the transmission of information between South Korea and Korean American communities in metropolitan cities is minimal. For example, through the Internet, news can be shared concomitantly on both sides of the Pacific. The Internet also pro-
vides the fastest way to watch the latest episodes of Korean TV dramas and show programs aired in South Korea (within twenty-four hours). Within a week the same programs are available at Korean video rental stores in metropolitan cities. Spatiality as well as temporality are compressed, bringing the “homeland” and Korean Americans tightly together. As print capitalism facilitated the formation of nationalism by connecting people through imagination, this type of simultaneous sharing of information through the media seems to pave the way for a new kind of imagined transnational community.

The growing availability of cultural information from Korea has increased young Korean Americans’ exposure to and consumption of Korean popular culture over the years. Yet there are some variations in terms of genre, intensity and frequency of their consumption depending on factors such as generation, living arrangement, self-identity, sociocultural grouping and Korean proficiency. For example, consumption of certain types of South Korean popular culture requires a degree of Korean proficiency (such as Korean TV dramas without subtitles), which limits the participation of non-Korean-speaking people. Also, if one lives with a family, there is a better chance of being familiarized with Korean popular culture because watching Korean videos is one of the most popular pastimes among first-generation Korean Americans.

The Korean American youths I discuss largely consist of three groups: the U.S.-born generation, the 1.5 generation, and yuhaksaeng (students who study abroad). The yuhaksaeng group in particular is a key player in the consumption, dissemination, and to some extent, creation of trans-Pacific popular culture because of their multi-site living arrangements and frequent travel. In fact, through the trans-Pacific traveling of the yuhaksaengs and their family members (generally mothers), the latest trends on both sides of the Pacific are smoothly transmitted to the other side. For example, when I taught at a predominantly white, small liberal arts college in the Midwest in the late 1990s, one of my European American students surprised me by saying that he was familiar with the music of H.O.T., the hottest teen idol group in South Korea at that time. It turned out that the student, who was from Philadelphia, went to a boarding school where he befriended Korean yuhaksaengs. They listened to H.O.T. and other Korean singers all the time, so other students in the school also naturally became acquainted with their songs. The Korean yuhaksaeng group even performed H.O.T.’s music (along with dancing) during the school’s
talent show. It must have been a unique experience for the audience as H.O.T.’s style is basically hip hop dance music with a hint of Japanese visual rock (the latter influence is limited to make-up and dress style, not music style), an interesting amalgamation of American and Japanese popular music genres. On the other hand, yuhaksaengs also introduce the latest cultural information from America to South Korea (from body language to drugs), which quickly spread throughout the media and youth “club culture.”

The increasing visibility of South Korean popular culture in the U.S. is also partially interrelated with market and state forces. In the early 1990s, the South Korean government created an ideology/policy called segyewha (globalization). It is largely a new nation-building ideology proposed by the Kim Young Sam government, but it soon exerted tremendous influence on every aspect of South Korean life. In the beginning, which was the time of South Korea’s economic prosperity, it had a nationalistic undertone with the implication that Korea will expand its cultural and economic influence overseas through globalization. Before the ambitious plans materialized, however, an economic crisis hit South Korea in 1997, bringing the global to the local the hard way as South Korea had to accept IMF (International Monetary Fund)-led imposed “economic restructuring,” which included large-scale M&As, merciless layoffs and the adoption of “transparent and rational Western business style,” in order to “globalize” the South Korean economy as a way to save it from the economic crisis. Although the directions and realities of globalization had drastically changed, globalization remained a key discourse in the society. Then, four years later, in 2001, Korea officially declared its “graduation from IMF,” celebrating economic recovery. Even during the post-IMF era, globalization still proved to be a strong discourse—this time, it was often linked with a growing South Korean cultural influence in East/Southeast Asia called hanryu (“Korean waves”—this term refers to the Chinese way of describing the popularity of Korean popular culture), which began in the late 1990s. Korean TV dramas, songs and movies have become great hits in countries such as China, Taiwan and Vietnam, competing against the dominant American and Japanese popular cultural influences in the area. Encouraged by this success, the Korean media industry has actively sought to explore overseas markets through energetic export of Korean popular culture and systematic cooperation with other Asian media industries. The Asian market is the main tar-
get at this point, but the Korean media industry has also made an effort to penetrate the U.S. market, as exemplified by the opening of South Korean films at regular movie theaters in major U.S. cities in recent years (for example, the showing of *Shiri* and *Chunhyang*). At the same time South Korean TV dramas and movies also made their way into the homes of some Asian Americans (mostly those whose countries of origin have experienced hanryu) as the popularity of Korean popular culture in those people’s countries of origin has generated a demand for Korean popular culture in the U.S. as well.

Korean American youths’ consumption of South Korean popular culture is interrelated with the growing availability and improved quality of South Korean cultural products supported by the state ideology, market interest and globalization of the media. But there is another critical factor that has facilitated Korean American youths’ patronage of Korean popular culture: their sociocultural position in the U.S. and their need for a niche and a sense of belonging.

**Some Untold Stories, Limited Cultural Citizenship, and the Search for Space and Identity**

Molded in the “model minority” stereotype, younger generation Asian Americans are generally viewed as a “problem-free” and “smart” group of people who are valedictorians and computer whiz kids. By virtue of their membership in this over-generalized and imposed category called “Asian American,” Korean American youth are also considered “model” students who excel in school and have a rosy prospect for future jobs. Although some live up to these celebrated images of success, a closer look at Korean American youth reveals that, contrary to the public images, many young Korean Americans struggle with social, economic, psychological and academic issues. For example, behind the much-hailed success stories of valedictorians and Ivy League school graduates, there is a considerable number of high school and college drop-outs and college graduates who constantly shift from one temporary job to another or who simply do not work at all. It is not unusual to encounter a recognizable number of paiksu (the unemployed) who “kill time” at Korean cafés, billiard halls, PC bangs (Korean-style Internet cafés) and comic book stores in the Los Angeles and Chicago “Koreatown” areas at any given time. They hang out at those ethnic public spaces either with friends or by themselves, looking for something to do or a place to belong.
to. Some do that as a temporary pastime during a transitional period between job changes or post-graduation, whereas others do it regularly, full-time.\textsuperscript{29}

Kihun is a twenty-five-year-old 1.5-generation paiksù whom I met in Chicago.\textsuperscript{30} He came to the U.S. in his mid-teens and went to a small private liberal arts college in the Midwest. After graduating from college, he came back to Chicago and has lived with his parents since then. He has been home for more than a year, has worked at odd jobs on and off, but for the most part, he has been a paiksù. Life as a paiksù was not idle, however. According to Kihun, staying at home and listening to others’ (mostly parents’) comments about his unemployment or advice on how to find a job is one of the hardest things for a paiksù to bear. So he makes himself busy, staying outside of home as much as possible. Relying on the generosity and resources of others including friends and sonbae (senior alumni), he hung out at ethnic public spaces all the time, except for occasional stints at part-time jobs, especially at his sonbaes’ stores in poor urban neighborhoods. He aspires to have a white-collar job someday, but the prospect of realizing that wish seems remote.

I met Chansik, a 1.5-generation part-time college student in his early twenties, at a comic book rental store in Chicago. He was one of the “regulars” at the store, who hung out there during their free time and/or after work. Many of the regulars make themselves “at home” at the store, even eating meals ordered from nearby restaurants.\textsuperscript{31} According to Chansik, he hung out at ethnic public spaces such as the comic book store because he did not know what to do with his life and future. He said:

We (1.5 generation) don’t have dreams. That is the sorrow and limit of the 1.5 generation. Although you try, things do not work out as you intended. Also, I don’t know where to start. I am afraid. . . . I don’t know what to do. Most of all, I don’t have any experience. . . . Because we live with other ethnic groups, there is no room or flexibility like in Korea. You cannot fit in. Things are cut out, disconnected.

Chansik described himself as an “ordinary” person, who, unlike those “who are goal-oriented and have ability to overcome obstacles,” cannot accomplish what is expected of him, such as socioeconomic success, even if he tries. Besides his ordinariness, he was a minority. He was indeed very conscious of his “life as a minority.” He pointed out that Asian Americans can reach only a certain level in institutions, such as supervisor, but they never become
higher-level decision makers. Chansik has witnessed so many cases like that that he has become discouraged and disillusioned. Indeed, based on their personal experiences, both Chansik and Kihun are intimidated and frustrated by the gulf between the ideal and reality, and the larger society and the ethnic community. Without many alternatives, they float like ghosts in the ethnic public spaces as temporary or full-time *paiksu*.

The sense of alienation is not, however, felt by those less successful or jobless young Korean Americans alone. Many academically successful and socioeconomically competent younger generation Korean Americans also feel that way. For instance, a 1.5-generation professional, Cathy, who is a graduate of one of the country’s most prestigious universities, told me about her experiences during her high school and college days:

I even was on the pom-pom squad, you know, that type of thing. But I don’t think you really felt that you were a part of that school. You always felt that you are running around the periphery. And in college...you go to a good school, but there is a difference. I think a lot of difference in terms of the roots. For example, my roommate, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, her father went to the school and her father was a contributor and her uncle went to the school. And there is history and heritage, whereas for us there was none. So we really didn’t feel a part of belonging to the institution or to the place as a social being.

This painful recollection of a bright, ambitious and outgoing 1.5-generation woman illustrates the lack of social space, sense of belonging and socially equal heritage for them in the larger U.S. society. This sense of alienation is also found among the U.S.-born generation. A second-generation artist in his mid-twenties, Brian, expressed his sense of marginality:

Oh, I consider myself an American conditionally, kind of. . . . Not fully American. I don’t feel fully American. . . . I don’t feel fully assimilated into American life and culture. I think I did before; when I was younger, I really felt like I’m just like anybody else, but as I get older, I’ve started to realized that there’s no way that anybody who is a different race really is going to fully assimilate themselves into American culture, society, just because it is so...everything is so white-dominated and everything from whatever the ideal is, like sexual ideal or even like intellectually, I think the stuff we talked about earlier. So yeah, I consider myself a conditional American. . .Like a visitor, a visitor.
Ethnic public spaces are frequented by a complex mix of groups including the above-mentioned sub-groups of youth. Despite differences in generation, academic and social success, and gender and class background, many young Korean Americans feel that they have been marginalized; their identity has been simultaneously denied and imposed, and their heritage has not weighed equally. They may be legal citizens of the U.S., but their cultural citizenship was not fully granted as their sociocultural entitlement and membership are, more often than not, overlooked and negated. According to Rosaldo and Flores, cultural citizenship is “the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one’s right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state’s democratic processes.” In other words, “different but equal” is what cultural citizenship advocates. It also emphasizes the importance of having a space where people of different heritages can feel safe and comfortable. Korean ethnic spaces, in this sense, are sites where Korean American youths can feel comfortable, secure and entitled. Thus, backed up by the emotional comfort, Korean American youths often find a sense of belonging and assurance of their identity in such spaces.

Identity is a complex and elusive yet critical boundary marker that defines us and differentiates us from others. For transnational (im)migrant youths, identity is an even more contested issue because they tend to juggle with “multiplicity of subject positions” as they are located between nation-states, races, generations and classes across borders. Moreover, as Morley and Robins argue, “identity is a question of memory, and memories of ‘home’ in particular. Film and television play a powerful role in the construction of collective memories and identities.” In this light, Korean American youths’ consumption of South Korean popular culture can be construed as a pursuit of collective memories and, most of all, home. But in contemporary globalized society, home is not necessarily grounded in a territory. Instead, it may be a search for a sense of home where individuals can “feel at home” with the emotional comfort and safety usually associated with the notion of home. By consuming popular culture from the “homeland” at an ethnic space where one feels secure and entitled, transnational youths can experience, albeit temporarily, a sense of belonging to an imagined community and a home where memories are shared and constructed through the mediation of the media and consumer goods.
Crossing Boundaries and Building Bridges: Emergence of New Relations and the Complexity of Power Relations in Transnational Cultural Flows

According to Crang and Jackson, consumption tightly connects the local and the global through the globalized production and circulation of commodities and information. It also constructs individual and collective identities based on “socially differentiated (racialized, classed, and gendered) senses of separation.” In other words, identities manifested and mediated by consumption patterns and preferences are indicative of the differentiated social relations and positions in which individuals are situated. Young Korean Americans’ consumption of Korean popular culture reveals their “socially differentiated senses of separation” rooted in their transnational position and ethnic/racial minority status; thus, the dynamics of their social relations in which the local, national and global forces intersect are reflected on and generated by it.

While Korean American youths’ consumption of South Korean popular culture indicates their “socially differentiated senses of separation,” it also builds bridges between groups, generating new senses of connection. For example, it brings South Korea and its culture closer to the (im)migrant youths, laying the foundation for a sense of community. Watching Korean TV dramas helps the (im)migrant youths keep up with the latest sociocultural trends and issues in South Korea. Some (especially, yuhaksaengs) even consult with their friends and relatives in Korea regarding which dramas to watch; thus, tastes, references and knowledge are almost simultaneously shared through common consumption of cultural products across borders, which, in turn, reinforces a sense of connectedness.

Consumption of South Korean popular culture also mediates generational relationships. Watching Korean TV dramas is a typical pastime for first-generation Korean Americans. By joining their parents or grandparents in this family pastime, some Korean American youths ended up developing better intergenerational understanding and relations. Sandy, a second-generation college student whose family lives in Los Angeles, told me that her relations with her mother grew closer as they watched Korean dramas together. She said that she had realized that there were things in Korean that she could not understand or translate into English, such as the concept of han (a complex concept that combines compressed sorrow, accumulated anger, and potentially, their transcendence). Discussions of such a concept
with her mother and viewing TV dramas together with her (and occasionally crying together over a sad story) connected Sandy and her mother strongly since not only did they share time and emotion but also Sandy developed a better understanding of her mother’s way of thinking based on her Korean upbringing.

South Korean popular culture connects Korean American youths of different backgrounds (including generation) and elicits a sense of camaraderie among them. As I pointed out earlier, they have a growing chance of intermingling with one another through ethnic public spaces and of sharing cultural references. Some even think that there is a unique “sense of fun” that only Korean American youths, as co-ethnics, can understand and share by hanging out at ethnic public spaces and consuming ethnic popular culture. Through these ethnically specific activities, spaces and references, Korean American youths encounter more chances to socialize with and feel closer to one another, crossing whatever sub-group boundaries they may have.

Friendship-building through the consumption of ethnic popular cultures moves beyond the boundary of the Korean American group, and Korean American youths are often connected to other Asian American youths through shared consumption of Korean as well as Asian popular cultures. In recent years Korean popular culture has become a source of shared reference and connection among some East/Southeast Asian American youths due to hanryu. Also, it is not uncommon for the urban Asian American youths to be familiar with various popular cultural trends in different parts of Asia. These Asian popular cultures, most prevalently circulated in their respective (im)migrant communities, often spread to other Asian American communities as the youths frequently exchange information and are curious about something new and different. Oftentimes, better mutual understanding and social relationships are inculcated by such cultural sharing.

The increasing popularity and presence of Asian popular culture among Asian American youths are occasionally expanded to the larger society. As illustrated in the episode about a European American college student’s familiarity with a Korean idol dance group’s (H.O.T.) music during his high school days, there are numerous examples of cross-cultural consumption of popular culture, especially at the individual level. Yet some cultural influences from Asia have become more visibly felt and widely practiced in the larger society at the collective level. From the recurring appropriation of Chinese and Japanese styles and motifs in the
fashion industry and the long-lasting popularity of Hong Kong martial arts and action films to the more recent success of Japanese animation and yoga boom, Asian popular cultural influence on American popular culture has continued.\(^4\) Compared to before, recent Asian popular cultural influence has been more commercialized and readily accepted, perhaps echoing the involvement of global capital in the transnational flows of Asian popular culture, the changes in U.S. domestic sociocultural situations, and the penetration of cultural globalization into the U.S.\(^\text{42}\)

There are complicated power relations embedded in transnational flows of Korean and Asian popular cultures in the U.S.\(^\text{43}\) The Korean comic book rental store is one such example of how these power relations operate. Unlike American comic book stores, which are geared toward the selling of comic books, Korean comic book stores focus on renting. Thus, they are equipped with thousands of books rented for either home or in-store viewing.\(^\text{44}\) Clients in comic book stores are mainly in their teens up to their thirties (female clients tend to be in their teens and twenties), but younger or older clients are occasionally present (especially men in their forties and fifties). All of the comic books available in rental stores are written in Korean, and the majority of them have Korean titles and Korean author names. For this reason, some parents even rent comic books for their children in order to help them learn Korean in an easy and more entertaining manner. However, until recently, the Korean titles and authors' names could be deceptive in many cases because the content of the comic books are actually of Japanese origin (in other words, pirate copies), and due to hasty, rough translation, even certain expressions and grammar follow the Japanese way instead of Korean.\(^\text{45}\) South Korea’s ban on Japanese popular culture, due to the historical legacy of Japanese colonization of Korea, prohibited the legal publication of Japanese comics, which are frequently described as violent and obscene, until a few years ago. However, despite the legal sanction, pirate copies of translated Japanese comics with fictitious and real Korean authors’ names had flourished in Korea for decades. Drawing styles, story development and even wording of many Korean comic artists have been influenced by Japanese styles as some learned how to draw comics by reading and imitating Japanese comic books (because of the lack of formal educational channels in Korea until recently) or as some used to work as contract workers for Japanese comic artists/animators.\(^\text{46}\) The illegal circulation of pirate copies under the false façade of Korean titles and author
names, as well as the long working relationships between Korean and Japanese comic artists/animators, have intensified the “natural” penetration of Japanese styles into Korean comics. Thus, by consuming “Korean” comics, Korean Americans are exposed to the chance of becoming familiarized with the Japanese way of thinking and aesthetics embedded in the disguised form of Korean comics in Korean comic book stores.

There is another layer of cultural influence here. A large proportion of the stories and backgrounds of Japanese comics are either European or American, indicating Japan’s long-held fascination with the West. Character names and features are those of “Westerners,” and sometimes stories are borrowed from Western classics or historical facts (such as European fairy tales and the Russian revolution). Korean American readers, therefore, learn about the West through the Japanese lens while they also learn about Japan through the Korean lens (in the form of Korean-language comics). In addition, translated Chinese martial arts novels and comics as well as translated Western novels are usually carried by comic book stores, adding more layers to the transnational cultural encounters. In other words, juxtaposition and hybridization of cultures are clearly manifest in the texts that Korean comic bookstores carry. Whether these are considered to be examples of cultural hegemony (of the West and Japan) or (Korea’s) “domestication” of foreign cultural products is open to debate. In either case, it is clear that there are ironic complexities embedded in cultural products and information in a globalized era in which culture has been hybridized, localized and appropriated through continuous encounters and flows in the midst of lingering cultural hegemony.

Since the directions of cultural flows are multifaceted and the interplay between hegemonic cultural influence and local response constantly “hybridize” given cultural information and products, traditional cultural “centers” and “peripheries” are situated in a different way than before. Indeed, what intrigued me in my observation of recent trans-Pacific flows of popular culture between the U.S. and South Korea is the transformation, albeit temporary, of center/periphery relations. To illustrate, cultural information and trends that originated in traditional cultural “centers” such as America become reformulated and redefined in cultural “peripheries” such as Korea, as they get sifted through local cultural codes, lenses, and practices. These Koreanized (localized) cultural trends and information are then imported back to the “center” again and consumed and disseminated not only in ethnic spaces but also in
the larger society, becoming part of the “center,” which then will be exported to the “periphery” again. The recent sales of the copyright of a few successful Korean film scenarios—including yŏp-gijŏkin keunyŏ (My Sassy Girlfriend) and Jopokmanura (My Wife is a Gangster)—to Hollywood studios are indicative of this tendency because once Hollywood makes films based on these Korean scenarios with a touch of the “Hollywood style,” they will be exported to Korea as Hollywood films.

Can Korean American youths be creators of transnational popular culture? In the music genre Korean Americans and yuhak-saengs left their footprints in Korean popular music in the 1990s. Hip hop and rap were introduced to South Korea by Korean American musicians in the mid-1990s, and a series of Korean American and yuhak-saengs have been the leading voices in that genre ever since. The success of Korean American youths in the Korean music industry began with the successful debut of Solid, whose members are from Los Angeles. After they popularized the R&B-style music with an accent of rap and acquired wealth and fame, many aspiring Korean American musicians, who were frustrated with their lack of opportunity in the American music industry, packed up and headed for Korea. This coincided with the South Korean music industry’s interest in Korean American musicians as the success and newly found marketability of rap propelled them to seek the next big star among Korean Americans, who are supposedly more familiar with the genre of rap. Also, this went hand in hand with the “star system” methods of discovering and making a star, which was about to be more systematized in South Korea. The result was that since the late 1990s, almost all of the top idol groups in South Korea have had at least one Korean American member (for example, groups such as H.O.T., G.O.D., Drunken Tiger, Shinwha, and S.E.S. have Korean American members, who usually take on the rap part). Soloists such as J, Lee Hyun-Woo, and Yu Seung-Joon are also from the U.S. Moreover, transnational Koreans educated in American institutions or strongly influenced by the American music style have played a crucial role in the construction of South Korean music trends. Seo Tae Ji and Boys, Cho P.D. and Ssai belong to this category.

The star- and trend-making power of the media industry aside, the changes in South Korean state policy have enabled Korean American youths’ active involvement in the Korean entertainment industry. The segyewha (globalization) discourse had fundamentally transformed South Korea’s worldview and reality. It opened
new doors for overseas Koreans as it regarded them as forerunners and assets of South Korea’s expanding politicoeconomic and cultural spaces, epitomized by the intended construction of a “de-territorialized” global Korean community. In conjunction, a new law regarding the status of overseas Koreans (haeoidongpööi böpmyuljöök chiwiegwanhan teukbyölböp) was passed in 1999, granting a select group of overseas Koreans quasi-dual citizenship. The law was created to accommodate the needs and demands of overseas Koreans (mostly Korean Americans and pro-South Korea Korean residents in Japan) and to facilitate their social and economic participation in South Korea. Unwittingly, it benefited Korean American entertainers, allowing them to become engaged in commercial activities with few restrictions.

While the Korean state and market provided an incentive for Korean American youths to go to Korea, their limited sociocultural membership in the U.S. propelled such a decision. In the entertainment business aspiring Asian American actors and musicians face serious obstacles as there have not been enough space, markets and role models for them yet. Asian Americans are still largely deemed unmarketable (unless they are martial artists) and more often than not are directed to typeset roles. The situation seems to have improved slightly in recent years, with a little more visibility of Asian/Asian American actors/actresses as lead characters in major films. Yet, Asian American actors are still generally used as token and stereotypical characters, and in the music business they are almost nonexistent. In this situation aspiring artists head for South Korea. Some of them expressed their wish in public, remarking that they hoped to come back to the U.S. after becoming successful in Korea and then Asia. Given the changing global popular cultural landscape, Hollywood’s growing interest in the Asian market, and increasing transnational collaboration in the production of popular culture, their aspiration and hope may actually come true in the near future. Then, it will be another indication of the transforming directions of cultural influence, a reverse move from the “periphery” to the “center.”

Although the contribution of Korean American entertainers, particularly musicians, to Korean popular culture could be acknowledged, it is questionable whether they are creative agents of transnational popular culture because, so far, what they have done is not far from disseminating information (for example, hip hop and rap) from the traditional “center” to the “periphery.” They still largely remain studious students or imitators of West-
ern artists in the same genre instead of independent artists with their own voices and colors that are grounded in the locality and individuality. This maturation will take time, but it is undeniable that the role of Korean American youths in the flows of transnational culture on both sides of the Pacific has become significant.

**Conclusion**

Korean American youths’ consumption of South Korean and other Asian popular cultures is intertwined with the general trend of cultural globalization, which has been facilitated by the interplay among global media, the market, the state and technology. At the same time Korean American youths’ marginalized status in the U.S. and their quest for community and identity have intensified their consumption of the now more readily available “homeland’s” popular culture. As Gupta and Ferguson argue, in contemporary society, individuals, particularly displaced people, try to “construct imaginatively their new world.” In this context their “homeland” is often remembered and re-imagined and becomes a “symbolic anchor of community” through the remembrance. The media mediates such remembering in a critical way, connecting the “homeland” and the (im)migrants through the compressed time and spatiality. But since the media is full of hybridized and creolized information and perspectives, which change constantly, its mediation between the transnational (im)migrants and their “homelands” adds more complexity and contradiction rather than provides a simple foundation for a coherent imagined community.

As a core consumer group of global popular culture, transnational (im)migrant youth are key players in the transnational cultural flows, as exemplified by Korean American youths’ roles as consumers, disseminators and potential creators of popular culture across the Pacific. The extensive popular cultural flows indicate a condensed and rapid transformation of the trans-Pacific cultural landscape between Asia and North America. Soon the magnitude of the trans-Pacific cultural trafficking may become similar to that of the black Atlantic cultural sphere that Paul Gilroy describes (especially, in terms of Asian culture’s influence on the U.S.). In this case Korean American youths’ roles as cultural mediators and creators will become more salient and significant. How they position themselves and participate in the construction of an imagined trans-Pacific cultural community thus will become an important part of their identity politics and search for space and community.
Notes


3. Gordon Mathews argues that people residing in economically advanced societies, especially the elite and educated people, are most strongly affected by globalization. His point on the class dimension of globalization is valid. See Gordon Mathews, Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket (London: Routledge, 2000). But I think that poor and uneducated people are as strongly affected by globalization, especially if they are transnational (im)migrants. For example, as Saskia Sassen points out, those people working in the service sectors of highly globalized metropolises in industrialized societies are often poor (im)migrants from less developed countries. They may not benefit from globalization, but they are surely immediate subjects of globalization. See Saskia Sassen, Globalization and Its Discontents:

4. I borrowed this expression, “(im)migration,” from Rouse.

5. Basch et al.

6. Nina Glick-Schiller and George Fouron, “‘Everywhere We Go We are in Danger’: Ti Manno and the Emergence of a Haitian Transnational Identity,” American Ethnologist 17:2 (1990), 330. Nowadays, the lives of a growing number of transnational (im)migrants span more than two countries (host and native lands) as their continuous movement across borders includes more than one host society. In other words, the traditional notion of immigrants who move from one country to another where they settle for good no longer holds true. Thus, contemporary transnational (im)migrants’ involvement with the multiple host and native societies is much more complex than before.

7. In most discussions, particularly in media coverage, gang violence is usually associated with certain groups of Asian American youths—a discussion which constructs stereotypes.

8. Anthropologists used to describe this notion of culture as “the way of life.”


12. Iwabuchi.


15. James Watson, ed., Golden Arches East: McDonald’s in East Asia (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Gina Marchetti, “Buying American, Consuming Hong Kong: Cultural Commerce, Fanta-


18. Jung-Sun Park, “Korean American Youths’ Consumption.”

19. Those three cities and the surrounding areas have the highest concentration of Korean American populations.

20. Until the mid-1990s, sample copies of newspapers were directly shipped from Korea by air every day and then reprinted locally, causing considerable time lag in the dissemination of news. The satellite transmission of information, however, reduced the time lag to a minimum.

21. Harvey.

22. Anderson.

23. Due to the dominance of post-1965 immigration among Korean Americans, most U.S.-born Korean American youths are second-generation, although third- and even fourth-generation Korean American youths are found among the descendents of the early 20th-century Korean immigrants. The 1.5 generation usually refers to those who immigrated to the U.S. in their pre-teens or early teens with their parents. The yuhaksaeng category ranges from early (or pre-) teens (chogiyuhaksaeng—young students who study abroad: they are often called the “parachute kids”) to post-graduate students, but I focus on those in their teens and early twenties in this paper. In a strictly legal sense, most yuhaksaengs are Korean because they are not immigrants. Sooner or later, many of them tend to acquire U.S. permanent residency or citizenship. So they are potential Korean Americans at least, and in actuality, they (especially the chogiyuhaksaengs) share many similarities with the 1.5 generation.


27. Blockbuster stores carry the videotapes of Shiri, Chunhyang and some other Korean films. Before those films, Korean movies had not been available at major video rental stores in the U.S.
29. This does not necessarily mean that most young Korean Americans who hang out at ethnic spaces at odd hours are unemployed. Young professionals, students, and even travelers frequent those spaces as well.
30. All names are pseudonyms.
31. The catchphrase of the comic book store printed in its advertisement reads: “Let’s blow off the stress of immigrant life!”
35. Morley and Robins, 91.
37. Morley and Robins, 87.
38. Philip Crang and Peter Jackson, “Geographies of Consumption,”

39. Park, “Korean American Youths’ Consumption.” For some Korean American youths, consumption of Korean popular culture is also a way to polish their Korean language skills and learn about the history and contemporary realities of Korea, all of which are broadly related to the construction of identities based on heritage.

40. In particular, extensive exchanges of cultural information are easily observable at places such as college dormitories where students from all over the world live side by side.


42. The ironic fact that the Disney studio became a U.S. distributor for its long-time biggest rival, Miyazaki Hayao’s animations, illustrates a logic of borderless, profit-oriented global capitalism. It is also indicative of Western capital’s involvement in the transnational flows of Asian pop culture.

43. Although transnational cultural flows have become much more diverse and multidirectional than before, there still is an interconnection between cultural influence and political and economic power. For example, the popularity and wide consumption of Japanese popular culture, including animations, TV dramas, and music, among Asian American (particularly East/Southeast Asian) youths is related to Japan’s strong economic and cultural influence in the “homelands” of those Asian American youths. By the same token, the emergent popularity of South Korean films and TV dramas among some East/Southeast Asian American communities also reflects the growing presence and influence of South Korean popular culture in the areas in recent years (as epitomized by hanryu).

44. Some read the rented comic books at home, while some prefer to read them at the store. Thus, comic book stores are equipped with comfortable sofas and reading spaces to accommodate their clients.


46. Korean society’s interest in and respect for comics and animation as creative and lucrative genres did not occur until the late 1990s. Before then, except for very few successful ones, comic artists had long been looked down upon and suffered from lack of sufficient income. So some individuals took sub-contract jobs from Japanese comic artists, which, in turn, affected their own styles. Since be-
coming comic artists is mostly through apprenticeship, “masters’” (established comic artists) styles tend to be copied by “apprentices” (new comic artists). Thus, once a style is fixed, it is difficult to diverge from it.


49. Basch et al.

50. Park, “Change.” The original version of the special laws proved to be unconstitutional because it breached the universality principle of a law. An amendment to the laws was made at the end of 2003, although it still is controversial.


52. It is reported that a Korean American actress named Yoon Jin Kim, who gained fame through her role in a successful Korean movie, *Shiri*, which opened in the U.S. and whose videotapes are available at Blockbuster stores, recently signed a contract with a U.S. management company. She is expected to appear in a regular program on a major U.S. network TV in 2004.

53. Asia is the hottest market for global media industries nowadays because of its size and economic potential. See Iwabuchi.
