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Cultural Proximity and Distance: The Reception of Korean Films in China Through the Lens of *My Sassy Girl*

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Introduction

This article explores the reception of Korean romantic comedy, *My Sassy Girl*, among Chinese youth. Through the lens of this popular movie, the authors attempt to explain the complexity of the popularity of Korean films and other cultural products in China in recent years. By analyzing the outcome of online questionnaires and depth interviews regarding the reception of *My Sassy Girl*, the authors argue that although the strong presence of Korean films in China is contributed by the significant growth of the film industry in South Korea since the 1990s, the current conditions of China society and its movie market, and the cultural proximity the Chinese youth as movies viewers perceived among these two nations in comparison with Western media products, especially Hollywood movies, facilitates Korean films' popularity at the personal level. The authors also argue that the artistic representation and the themes the Chinese youth found in Korean films are apparently what are missing in Chinese films and their daily reality, which function as a comfortable distance for them to desire.

Background

My Sassy Girl and Beyond — The Arrival of *Hanliu*

Popular culture in China has been taking on a different look during different periods of time after the Cultural Revolution and the initiation of Open-Market policy in the late 1970s. In the 1980s, Hong Kong martial arts film and gangster TV drama, and Taiwanese romantic TV dramas were very popular. A few Japanese TV dramas, such as *Ashin* (Oshing in Japan and Korea) in the early 1980s, also had an imprint on the memory of millions of Chinese TV viewers. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a Japanese romantic TV drama, *Tokyo Love Story*, was a smash hit.

Since the late 1990s, Korean TV dramas and films are introduced into the China market and ended the absence of Korean mass culture. The importation of Korean media products into China came after Korea and China established a diplomatic relationship in 1992. In 1997, Chinese Central Television (CCTV) for the first time broadcast a Korean TV drama, *What Is Love?* It has impressed many Chinese audiences from their 20s to 50s. Soon after that, Korean films

and TV dramas started landing on China one after another, becoming a strong competitor for films from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan as well as domestically produced films, even though the first two of which share the same language as Mainland China. Korean films arrived in China in conjunction with TV dramas, pop music, fashion and cartoons. The wide spread of Korean popular culture in China is termed as "Hanchao" or "Hanliu", which literally means "the tide of Korea" or the "Korean trend." It became the most frequently appeared term in Chinese media and entertainment industry at the turn of the century (Yao, 2002).

Released in 2001, the romantic comedy *My Sassy Girl* was the most popular Korean movie in East Asia and Southeast Asia at that time. Based on the Internet novel of the same title, *My Sassy Girl* tells the love story of a college student, Kyun-woo, and an extremely beautiful and innocent looking but temperamental girl. After Kyun-woo meets the girl on the subway when she was very drunk, a series of stories happened between them. Although he suffers physically and mentally from the girl, he believes that under her apparently temperamental behavior is a kind heart with sorrow.

The attendance of *My Sassy Girl* in Seoul was 1,761,100 and its box office number ranked second in Korea in 2001 (KOFIC, 2001:228). In Hong Kong, it was at the top of the box office for two weeks, while normally Hong Kong and Hollywood films dominate the local market (Walsh, 2004). In China, although the box office number is not as stunning as in Hong Kong, the actual viewing rate is high among the urban youth; lots of the young Chinese watched it through DVD, VCD at home or in the dormitory. By the success of this film, Jeon Ji-Hyun, the heroine of this film became a pan-Asian star. Later Dream Works bought the right of the remake (*Cine21*, May 13, 2002; Kaufman, 2002) and Gurinder Chadha, who directed *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and *Bride and Prejudice* (2005), will be the director (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0404254/>). After this film, several other nostalgic and sentimental romantic films were made and released, such as *Lover's Concerto* (2002), *The Classic* (2003), and *A Moment to Remember* (2004).

Compared with the earlier popularity of cultural products from other foreign countries and regions in the 1980s and early 1990s, the magnitude of the Korean counterpart has gone far beyond the influence of the former. Korean dramas and films become the daily gossip of the Chinese youth; photos and biographies of Korean movie and film stars appear frequently on the popular Chinese websites; DVDs of Korean dramas and films are available everywhere from big cities to small towns, and easily to be downloaded from personal homepages. There are also different online forums where Korean movie fans share their experiences, such as www.hanliu.org.

Social Change and the Chinese Movie Market

"Hanliu" took place after the Korean film industry revived in the middle 1990s (Shim, 2002), and at the same time, China has stepped on a new stage in its economic reformation. The greatly improved Korean films and the relatively stagnant Chinese film industry provided the space for Korean films to fill in, especially youth films. To a great extent, the Chinese film industry has long been directly influenced by film policy. Not until 1993 did the idea that the movie is a commodity and film is an industry come out in the field of film research and production. Only after China joined the WTO, the Chinese government started to encourage local produced films that will be box office successes. Propaganda films have always been strongly supported by the government, now termed as "main melody," "new mainstream" films. (Rao, 2005) They promote grand themes such as loyalty to the nation and party, self-sacrifice and discipline, working as an agent to keep the socialist values and national solidity; besides the mainstream cinema, movies produced by the "sixth generation" directors are hardly successful in box office because most of them focus on the theme of their narrow alternative lives. They care much more about how a film expresses their own feelings and ideas than whether the film will be successful on the market. The stagnancy of the Chinese movie market is also reflected by the total production. From 2003 to 2004, only more than 100 Chinese domestic films were released in theatres among more than 320 films produced during that time (Rao, 2005). Among the small numbers of movies reflecting the lives of ordinary people and youth, the films of high production quality are even fewer.

In the process of transition from planned economy to market economy, the Chinese, especially Chinese youth, tend to have more diversified values than before, thus are eager to consume a larger variety of cultural products. Being tired of the didactic Chinese films with serious themes and disappointed by the low quality of Chinese romance films, Korean films, especially romance films, naturally have advantages to catch the attention of the Chinese youth.

International Media Flows and Cultural Proximity

Most literatures dealing with the transnational flow and circulation of cultural products criticize the dominance of American culture in developing countries under the thesis of cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1991; Mattelart, 2000). The main argument of this thesis is that as the Western cultural hegemony is imposed on the non-Western world, the indigenous cultural traditions and belief systems are destroyed. Others use dependency theory to explain the culture power of industrialized countries. In the world of center-periphery divide, the Third World countries as periphery depend on the former for various natural resources.

Going beyond the cultural imperialism thesis and center-periphery model of cultural dependency, Sinclair *et al* introduce the notion of “geolinguistic region” (p.8) to explain the new patterns of international television flows. In each geolinguistic region, there are one or two centers of audiovisual production. Hesmondhalgh (2002) defines geolinguistic regions as groups of countries with “common culture, linguistic and historical connections” (p. 178). Potential regions include Latin America with Brazil and Mexico as the centers, the Chinese speaking countries with Taiwan and Hong Kong as the centers, and Indians in Asia and Africa with India as the center (Sinclair *et al*, 1996).

Similar but different from the concept of geolinguistic region, is the notion of geo-cultural region. In a geo-cultural region, countries share similar cultures rather than the same language. In *Recentering Globalization*, Iwabuchi (2002) argues that Japan had been playing an important role in the intra-Asia cultural flows under the general force of globalization. In the 1990s, Japanese idol drama, animation, and fashion were endorsed by youth in many East Asian and Southeast Asian countries and regions, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and, to a lesser extent, China. He also resorts to cultural proximity to explain the reception of these Japanese cultural products. “It explains the audience preference for products from countries with which their consumers allegedly share cultural ties.” (Iwabuchi, 2002, p.30). Similarly, Straubhaar notes that audiences actively choose to watch regional or national television programs rather than international ones, “based on a search for cultural relevance or proximity” (Straubhaar, 1991, p.39).

When examining the flow of cultural products and cultural proximity, most authors focus on the flow of television programs. Following the same fashion, the flow and viewing choice of films may share the same properties as television programs to a great extent. While the mass flow of Hollywood movies into developing countries is still prevailing, one cannot fail to recognize that besides the US, many non-Western countries and regions have significant films industries, such as India, Japan, and Hong Kong. India films play an important role in South Asia and among Hindi speaking populations and Indian descendents in Africa. Hong Kong films have been popular among the Chinese speaking population in Greater China. Based on these facts, the popularity of Korean films is not surprising; Korea can be seen as a newly emerged center in a geo-cultural region composed by China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South East Asia, and South Korea itself.

As has been mentioned earlier, Korean movies have filled in the lack of romantic comedy as a genre and taken the advantage of the relatively immature film market in China. However, the themes and quality of Korean films cannot completely explain their popularity. Different genres of Hollywood movies have had a long existence in China; romantic films with good quality are not

scarce. Although China imports only 20 foreign movies total each year, all kinds of Hollywood movies and movies from other parts of the world are available in video stores due to piracy. This article investigates how the role of cultural proximity plays in the coexistence of both Korean movies and movies from the West.

Methodology

To examine the reception of Korean film, the researchers sent questionnaires and interviewed some audience online. They outweigh quantitative research methods in getting to the subtlety of audiences’ perception. As Ang² (1996) points out, “Ethnographically oriented research is considered the most suitable to unravel the minutiae of difference and variation as they manifest themselves in concrete, everyday instances of media consumption.” (p.251)

The subjects of this research are all Chinese youth in their 20s to 40s, including Chinese in China and Chinese who came to the U.S. no more than three years ago. They include university students who study chemistry, accounting, and economics and a communications university teacher, media professionals, and white-collar workers.

The study includes ten interviews and ten questionnaires. In-depth interviews were conducted either face to face or via telephone, while the questionnaires were delivered to the Chinese youth through emails. The subjects are recruited through the snowball sampling method, which means they are all the authors’ acquaintances and friends’ friends.

At the early stage of the study, we tried to recruit a balanced number of female and male respondents. However, the Chinese youth who favor Korean movies and other Korean cultural products are predominately female. Most of the male Chinese youth we interviewed do not watch other Korean movies except *My Sassy Girl*, nor do they claim that they are interested in Korean films as a whole. In contrast, female audiences tend to be much more enthusiastic and informative. As a result, most of the interviews and questionnaires are from female viewers. In the early stage, interviews were conducted in English if interviewees could speak English but later, in Chinese if interviewees could not. The online questionnaire is in the appendix after the conclusion.

Results

Movie Watching as Fun

The respondents all watched *My Sassy Girl* two or three years ago, when the impact of “Hanliu” began in China. Some of them watched it more than once. Most of them recall that *My Sassy Girl* was the first Korean movie they

watched, and triggered their search for more Korean cultural products, although some already heard or watched Korean TV dramas such as *What Is Love?* (1992) and *See and See Again* (1996) through China Central Television Station (CCTV). One respondent in his late 20s said, "Before I watched *My Sassy Girl*, I actually knew nothing about Korea, except some electronics such as Samsung." Another respondent observed that although she watched *Model* (1997), a Korean TV drama, Korean films and TV dramas were not impressive until she watched *My Sassy Girl*. "*My Sassy Girl* is so refreshing and after that, I just want to watch more Korean movies."

My Sassy Girl surprised the young Chinese movie viewers in various ways. Until they watched it, the young Chinese viewers thought of South Korea as a very traditional and conservative country, if they had thought about it, which has a lot of customs and rules that restrict social behaviors of people, especially the young and the female. In this slapstick romantic comedy film, the girl, whose name is not revealed, dares to ill-treat her boy friend in public, and the boy accepts whatever the girl brings to him. The funny plots and the storytelling are also very fresh to them, as one female respondent said, "I have never seen a romantic love story as funny as this. The plots are well-crafted." The role of the female character in this movie breaks the stereotype in Japanese idol dramas, in which a girl friend is typically acquiescent and graceful. In sharp contrast, the nameless girl is temperamental and sassy.

Glorification and Romanticism

Besides the humor, the respondents were impressed by the glorification and romanticism represented in *My Sassy Girl*, which they also found in most Korean films or dramas they watched. Glorification is defined here as the emphasis on the visual beauty. In the film, the tempo is too slow when beautiful sceneries are emphasized. For the respondents, the great cinematography, the background music, and the physical beauty of the actors and actresses contribute to the success of *My Sassy Girl*, and emphasize the romanticism. Most respondents perceived that the romance in *My Sassy Girl* is "uncontaminated" and "idealistic." Although they know it is hard to find this kind of love in real life, they appreciate its way of storytelling and do not criticize its unrealistic nature. For the respondents, the purpose of watching a movie is to be entertained rather than to evaluate how realistic it is. Comparing *My Sassy Girl* with American movies, they thought the former emphasizes the delicacy of the storytelling, which can be comprehended easily by Chinese, while the stories of Hollywood movies evolve at a fast space and succeed in special effects. "I like Hollywood movies because of its visual impact." This comment represents the view of many respondents.

The Ideal of Love: The Predestined Affinity and the Persistence of Love

Compared with some Hollywood romance movies, some respondents said that *My Sassy Girl* was more appealing to them because the idea of love in this film is closer to their belief. They found that *My Sassy Girl* showed "the predestined affinity" and "the persistence of love" while the Hollywood blockbuster movies always embed love stories in a grand historical background, centralizing heroes not heroines; some other romantic comedies, such as *American Pie*, as one of the female respondents commented, seem to "too liberal in sex but nothing serious in the pursuit of love."

When we asked how they conceive the values presented in *My Sassy Girl*, some of the respondents said they have never thought about it, while others mentioned "predestined affinity" and "persistent of love." In *My Sassy Girl*, the boy, Kyun-woo, was supposed to meet a girl by family arrangement at the beginning of the movie. However, Kyun-woo did not go to his aunt's home to meet the girl as his mother told him to, but accidentally met the girl when she was heavily drunk on the subway. After a series of accidents, they came to like each other. After several years of loss of contact, Kyun-woo and the girl meet again by accident. For most people, the final reunification of Kyun-woo and the girl is not likely to happen in real life. Therefore, some respondents see this as an implication of predestined affinity.

In explaining "persistence of love", one respondent said,

In *My Sassy Girl*, the girl did not choose to be together with Kyun-woo till the end of the movie because she could not forget her ex-boyfriend, who died in an accident, before she met Kyun-woo. Kyun-woo did not give her up, but waited for her for several years. This echoes the belief that one should be persistent in true love, which can endure time and space.

The respondents easily find these values pertaining to love in other Korean movies, such as *The Classic* (2003, translated in Chinese as *If Love Has God's Will*), *Windstruck* (2004), and *Love's Concerto* (2002). When comparing young people in China with those of Korea youth and Western countries, another respondent in her mid-20s remarked, "Koreans are similar to the Chinese in terms of love...." "They are both conservative unlike young people in Western countries. They care about passion more than responsibility."

Korean Fashion and Campus Life

More than half the respondents, especially female viewers, said that they like the fashion of the Koreans in the movie. This also applies to other Korean movies. One respondent said, "The dressing of the actresses and actors are fashionable, old or young. Even if the movie tells a story that happened several decades ago, what people dress is still pleasing to the eyes in the movies." A lot of Korean actresses have become idols for young female viewers. Some of them even watch movies by a particular actress who has

similar stature as they do. For example, one respondent in her early 20s said, "I like watching Song Hea-Kyo's films and TV dramas because I am a little bit fat just as she is. I think I can borrow some ideas of how to dress from her."

In *My Sassy Girl*, there are several scenes on the campus where Kyun-woo studies. The Korean campus life is attractive to some of the respondents as well. On the one hand, the campus has a lot of rules and disciplines as Chinese campuses, such as showing respect to professors and being on time in class. However, Korean college life in *My Sassy Girl* is much more fun than Chinese college life. "We spend most of our time on studying in university, while Korean students play a lot. Besides this, Korean students wear more modern and youthful clothes than Chinese." The respondents viewed the campus life in *My Sassy Girl* as desirable, is a stage for the youth to have fun and show their youthful natures, while on a typical Chinese campus, students have a heavy load of course work.

Family Values and Responsibility

When asked the values they think *My Sassy Girl* and other Korean movies represent, some of the respondents mentioned family values and responsibilities besides the predestined affinity and the persistence of love. When Kyun-woo and the girl met for the first time, she called Kyun-woo "darling" by mistake before passing out due to intoxication. Her mistake made other passengers think Kyun-woo was her boyfriend, which forced Kyun-woo to take care of her and he carried her away.

One respondent, who has been in the US for one year, said, "In *My Sassy Girl* and other Korean movies, parents and the old always have the authority, even though they are sometimes challenged. When Kyun-woo came back home after he stayed out overnight in a hotel, his mother beat him with a besom. I think this is common in a lot of Asian countries. But I cannot imagine it in the US. It would be a kind of family abuse, if taken seriously."

Historical Proximity

Some respondents were likely to talk about Korean films other than *My Sassy Girl*. When they saw Korean films as a whole, two respondents found some similarity in the history between China and Korea represented in Korean movies.

I can always compare Korea with China when I watch movies and TV dramas in terms of history. In Korean movies that treat the story in ancient dynasties, I find that the costumes, the bureaucracy and customs are very similar to those of ancient China. Even in their writing, they use a lot of Chinese characters. Until I watch *Chihwaseon (Painted Fire)*, I knew that Korean painting was influenced by Chinese painting so much. In Korean movies about the stories in the 1960s or 1970s, I see a much less developed Korea. China had similar situation at that time. In *The President's Barber* (2004), there is even kind of leftist (oppressive) trend

in politics in South Korea, which I have never thought of before. I thought that it was only the case of China before the 1980s.

Similarly, another respondent said that when she saw *My Sassy Girl*, she was surprised that Korean culture is so close to Chinese culture. She recalled one scene when the girl imagines that she turns to be a warrior in ancient times in her novel. "The acting and settings are so much like a Chinese martial arts movie, but the costume is Korean style, though close to the costume of ancient China."

The Korean Language and Sense of Modernity

Some respondents pointed out that they preferred to watch Korean films that are not dubbed because it makes the movies more authentic. When a movie is dubbed into Chinese, it loses some attraction. Most of them perceived Korea as more modern than China, especially from the fashion and background settings shown in the movies. One respondent in her late 20s said, "Koreans are very fashionable.... Most Chinese films that reflect the lives of young people are unpleasant to look at because the actors and actresses look so native, and their clothing, their hairstyles and behaviors are not trendy but outmoded. There is no beautification in the movies. They cannot get out of the context of China." Another respondent commented that one of the reasons she does not watch Chinese idol movies is that the Chinese actors and actresses always act characters much younger than their actual ages.

In the 1990s, Taiwanese romantic dramas were very popular in China, but now Korean dramas and films replaced them. In answering how they perceived the difference between Taiwanese dramas and Korean films, some respondents remarked that the most Taiwanese romantic dramas tell stories that happened in old days (before the 1980s or in ancient times) and are too long (too many episodes). Besides, they are too far away from their daily lives. *F4*, a recent Taiwanese romantic TV drama, was a hit, but some respondents thought the tempo is still too slow and somehow imitating Korean dramas. One respondent said, "The female character in *My Sassy Girl* is bolder than Chinese girls in many ways besides not being kind or gentle. Other Korean films also show a lot of distinctive females. They are more modern. They have a lot of new ideas." Another respondent said, "I feel so happy when I saw that the girl beat Kyun-woo. Girls should have more power like her. I wish I had this kind of boyfriend to abuse. It's fun". In a word, they thought that while Taiwanese and Korean romantic films or TV dramas share something in common with Mainland Chinese culture, Korean ones outwit Taiwanese ones in terms of their more modern features of fashion and tempo.

Conclusion

Since the research question is why the Korean romantic comedy *My Sassy Girl* and other Korean films are popular in China in recent years, the respondents were Chinese who claimed to be interested in Korean films and enjoyed watching *My Sassy Girl*. Therefore, the responses received were mostly positive comments. However, negative observations of *My Sassy Girl* and other Korean films did exist. For example, some respondents mentioned that the acting of some Korean actors and actresses are exaggerated; so to enjoy Korean films does not mean to embrace them without any criticism.

Cultural proximity, as perceived by the respondents, has added a lot of charm to Korean films in their Chinese reception, whether consciously or unconsciously identified. This has helped the Chinese respondents in this study to comprehend *My Sassy Girl* and other Korean films. Most of them mentioned that the Korean culture represented in *My Sassy Girl* is similar to that of China in various ways. In terms of the belief in love, both Korean and Chinese accept the idea of predestined affinity, the fate to bring people together, which takes its root from Chinese Buddhism and has been shared by Chinese people ever since ancient time. The respondents also noticed that Korean films and TV drama are strongly family oriented or emphasize family values, which is consistent with the dominant values in China. This is a common feature across Asian countries where collectivism is valued over individualism. In terms of the mode of storytelling, Korean films normally proceed at a relatively slow pace, highlighting the delicacy and details, leaving a large space for audience to reflect, which can be hardly seen in Hollywood movies. The reason why Chinese youth appreciate the former can be explained by the fact that Chinese and Korean societies are high context culture societies, where what is said and what is not said are both important.

Korean fashion is apparently a big selling point of Korean films in China, especially for female viewers. Besides watching the movies, most of the female respondents actively observed what kind of clothes the actors and actresses wear, how they combine different colors together, their hairstyles, and so on. In contrast, female respondents did not refer to any American movie for their clothing or make-up. This is not surprising because Chinese and Koreans are racially similar. Regarding fashion, what applies to Koreans can also apply to Chinese; it is irrelevant to borrow fashion style from people who have different facial structure, skin, and hair color.

The respondents also perceived the similar customs between these two countries. Although scholars have different views in terms of to what extent China has influenced Korea, it is relatively obvious that Korea borrowed from China at least in the style of painting, calligraphy, and language, which is also reflected in some Korean contemporary films.

Besides similarity, the respondents also appreciated unfamiliar, eye-catching elements in the movies that the respondents did not find in the

Chinese films and dramas. The fashion is definitely more up to date, at least compared with what the Chinese youth wear in Chinese movies. The high production quality of Korean films is perceived that Korea is a more modern society. Furthermore, the different settings and sceneries, and speaking another language all function as something desirable but with a distance from the respondents' real life.

Although both cultural similarity and cultural distance facilitate the popularity of Korean films and other cultural products in China, other conditional factors are important. They include the stagnancy of the Chinese movie market, the lack of local romance films, the increasing need of the urban youth for diversified media products, and the development of Korean film industry. It cannot be concluded that Korean films are more popular in China than Hollywood and Hong Kong movies, although "Hanliu" is by now a distinguishing phenomenon in the current China mediascape. In fact, responses from the respondents indicate that they watch movies for different reasons and different purposes: Hollywood movies for special effects, Hong Kong movies for martial arts, and Korean movies for romance.

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Online Questionnaire for *My Sassy Girl*

1. Did you see other Korean films before you saw *My Sassy Girl*?
2. Before you saw *My Sassy Girl*, how much did you know about Korea and Korean culture? You may write about your experience of Korean popular culture before you saw *My Sassy Girl*.
3. Did you already enjoy any other country's films, such as Hollywood films or Hong Kong films?
4. Over what period did you see *My Sassy Girl*?
5. Did you see it with friends or alone?
6. How did you hear about *My Sassy Girl*? (From friends, commercials, DVD stores...)
7. What did you enjoy most in *My Sassy Girl*?
8. What else do you like in Korean movies? (cinematography, sound, music, acting, storyline...)
9. Did your understanding of Korea and Koreans change after you saw *My Sassy Girl*?
10. Did you enjoy watching Korean dramas after you saw *My Sassy Girl*?
11. Did you enjoy listening to Korean pop after you saw *My Sassy Girl*?
12. Did you enjoy playing Korean online games after you saw *My Sassy Girl*?
13. What do you think is the closest feature of *My Sassy Girl* to Chinese film and culture?
14. What do you think is the most different aspect of *My Sassy Girl* from Chinese film and culture?

15. Do you find there to be any unique Korean features in comparison to Chinese film, TV drama, Hollywood films or other European or Asian films?
 16. How, from your perspective, can we explain the widespread of *My Sassy Girl* and other Korean cultural products?
 17. What values does *My Sassy Girl* present to you personally?
 18. You can add anything else that you want to say about Korean cinema if you think that there is something missing in these questions.
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