Mythologized Glocalization of Popular Culture: a Postcolonial Perspective

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This netnographic research reveals that the glocalization process of popular culture (Korean) cannot be reduced to a uni-discursive thesis that immortalizes the themes of cultural imperialism. Globalization of popular culture necessitates hybridity that uses the same traditional ingredients but transforms into a new taste based on a new cultural recipe.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, Korean popular culture (KPC hereafter) has increasingly gained enormous recognition in East and Southeast Asian countries, and the popularity currently extends to the Middle East, former Soviet Union countries in Central Asia, and even European countries. Previously dominated by American and Japanese popular cultures, Asian popular culture is currently transforming itself into a “neo-cultural imperialism” mode.

Popular culture has been one of the topics in consumer culture theory for its function as a transmitter of marketplace ideologies (Belk and Pollay 1985; Hirschman 1988, 1990), an indispensable element of local identity construction (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006), and a portrayal of hegemonic brand culture (Thompson and Arsel 2004). However, it is rarely studied in its entirety, as a symbolic and ideological product that one cannot simply reject, and its globalization process has been understudied.

In recognition of popular culture’s theoretical significance as a key driver of current consumer culture in Asia, this study will delve into two main research questions: 1) What are the cultural connotations of KPC, as opposed to American or Japanese popular culture, for Asian consumers with respect to their identity, lifestyle, and ideology? In other words, why do Asian consumers superannuate the almost “orthodox” representation of today’s culture (American pop culture) and choose to fetishize a new ideology? 2) How is the globalization process of KPC discernible from that of hitherto predominant popular cultures?

One particular characteristic of cultural pluralism in popular culture is that it necessitates multi-directional, rather than top-down, or unidirectional movement of cultural elements among several cultures (Appadurai 1990). As a result, cultural hybridization is intensified by the perpetual tension between acceptance and resistance, as well as amid the “triumphantly universal and resiliently particular” (Appadurai 1990, p. 308). That is, the hybridized cultural products undergo a serious, long-term ideological process, which might be seen as a series of fads and trends (Figure 1). KPC’s globalization is in accordance with Lévi-Strauss’s (1963) understanding of the mythological structure of paradoxical resolution of binary oppositions.

Postassimilationist discourse contests the idea that the acculturation process is linear, easily traceable, and mostly characterizable (Askegaard et al., 2005; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994). KPC’s cultural outlook resonates with postassimilationists’ standpoint as it facilitates heterogeneous, nondeterministic, and liberatory cultural enterprise among consumers of the new acculturation agent (Iwabuchi 2001; Ryoo 2005). The unique patterns and characteristics of KPC engender third space as the term BhaBha (1994) used to describe the challenge of explicating a new phenomenon in which alternatives or an indigenous mixture of discourses epitomize and texturize the hybridity.

A netnographic study combined with critical discourse analysis is conducted due to the unique discursive and reflexive ground of KPC that absorbs counteracting perspectives and manifests in harmony with the particular cultural landscape. One of the most popular Korean TV dramas, Dae Jang Geum (DJG), is chosen in the context of Hong Kong. Newspaper articles (417) were collected from Hong Kong and Mainland China between 2004 and 2005. From the articles, three characteristics of each report were identified: exeptional style, main theme, and sociocultural influence. Concurrently, textual data from six websites based in Hong Kong, including fan forums, discussion boards, and the main actress’ fan-site, were collected from the same period of time. This attempt is to trace the relationship between discursive movements observed in newspapers and the grassroots practices.

The glocalization of KPC in Hong Kong underwent a cyclical formation process, in which the discursive drives of newspaper articles triggered tensions and development of particular social discourses. The first discursive phase detailed a taste-based class discourse among Hong Kong audiences, consistent with the main theme of the drama that depicts some elements of social stratification. In the second discursive stage (late 2004), changes in the newspaper discourses activated public sensibility of ethnic identity as a crucial discursive aspect of glocalization. In the following period (early 2005), a more pertinent discourse to postassimilationists’ critique was galvanized. As fans of DJG started to fantasize about the characters and the story line on the websites due to the drama’s novelty and cultural kinship, discussions of its positive and negative implications also took place. The last phase (late 2005) of the glocalization process of KPC in Hong Kong can be portrayed as a reflexive and yet transient ideology (zeitgeist). KPC was normalized and instilled in everyday life of Hong Kong consumers because the newspapers began featuring interviews of the celebrities about their personal lives and heralded normal activities (e.g., cooking, shopping, and night life in Korea) practiced in Korea, as though the culture needed not be kept exotic any longer and became a part of daily life in Hong Kong. In each phase, observed tensions among consumers were resolved as the newspaper discourses redirected the public attention to a new discourse. However, concurrently, critical voices about class, ethnicity, and cosmopolitanism existed amid the discursive movements. The cultural pendulum of rejection and acceptance of the foreign popular culture is omnipresent and self-perpetuating, but not as the momentum of glocalization. Rather, the driving force of glocalization is the continuing dynamics between the institutional reality-engineering practices on newspapers and grassroots responses to the new socio-politico-cultural episodes.

Glocalization process of popular culture cannot be reduced to a “uni-discursive” thesis that immortalizes the themes of cultural imperialism. Future research opportunities include juxtaposition of the ascent movement of KPC with the “demise of the imperial,” witnessed in Asia. It is uncertain whether the cultural plurality that has been inculcated means coexistence of new ideologies with the dogmatic, or overthrow of Hollywood and MTV. The reaction from the losing party is of special interest because it may attempt to turn the temporarily calmed popular cultural outbreak upside down. Globalization of popular culture necessitates hybridity that uses the same traditional ingredients but transforms into a new taste based on a new cultural recipe. The paradoxical nature of KPC appears to be the same as the self-perpetuating theme of globalization, but the very paradox is what makes it “popular.”

REFERENCES


