



## Korean Culture Power, Part II

BY MARK RUSSELL

"We never could have gotten Liam Neeson 10 years ago," exalted John H. Lee, director of *Operation Chromite*, this summer's 55-billion-won (approximately \$48 million) hit about the lead-up to the daring landing at Incheon that prevented North Korea from swallowing the peninsula in the first months of the Korean War. In it, Neeson plays Douglas MacArthur, the legendary American general whose reputation as a strategist was cemented that fateful day. (It would later be blackened when MacArthur foolishly dared China to enter the conflict. But that's another story entirely.)

Lee is a symbol for how international Korean pop culture has become. A U.S. citizen, Lee made his first film in the United States, and has made movies in Japanese and Chinese, as well as three in Korean. His American agent at CAA in Los Angeles works just down the hall from Neeson's agent, which proved a big help in signing the big-name actor, Lee says. (The quality of the script surely had something to do with it, of course.)

Hard to believe, but it's been four summers since "*Gangnam Style*" by the singer Psy (Park Jae-sang) exploded across the Internet, colonizing the brains of almost everybody under 30. At 2.6 billion YouTube views, it remains the most-watched video on the premier video portal, even if there is a lot more competition now. (Wiz Khalifa's 2015 song "See You Again" is at 2.1 billion views, and Mark Ronson's 2014 hit "Uptown Funk" has 1.9 billion.)

Actually, if you go down the list of YouTube hits, you'll have to look way, way down to find another Korean contender. Another Psy song, "Gentleman" is edging up on 1 billion views, and a second version of "Gangnam Style" is at 656 million. Big Bang's "Fantastic Baby" has 252 million, and Girls Generation's "I Got a Boy" has 173 million.

So, does that mean Korean pop culture was a one-off flash in the pan? Hardly. While K-pop may not be setting YouTube records or landing on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine these days, in cinema, TV, music and assorted other popular arts, Korea has become even more of a leader, shaping how the world sees this small, northeast Asian nation and giving the rest of Korean economy a hearty (if hard to quantify) boost in export markets.

At a basic accounting level, the money is better than ever. In 2015, according to the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), Korea raked in \$3.2 billion in gaming exports, \$550 million in character licensing, \$370 million in TV exports, \$360 million in music exports, \$250 million for publishing, \$120 million in animation, \$30 million for movies and \$30 million in comics.

KOCCA also tries to put a value on consumer goods exports that are tied to the Korean Wave, estimating it at some \$800 million for food and beverages, \$560 million for cosmetics, \$290 million for apparel, \$430 million for home electronics, \$300 million for mobile phones, \$780 million in automobiles and \$990 million for tourism.

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No one in China was confirming cause and effect. Indeed, the assumed linkage was dismissed as paranoia in some quarters. "I believe very strongly that at the end of the day, political or economic decisions are largely based on interests and preferences. Hard power weighs more," argues James Kim, senior analyst at the Asan Institute. But it certainly spooked K-pop industries, which salivate over China as the home of half of East Asia's consumers, and share prices have suffered accordingly.

K-pop's success at home has also revealed some misgivings. Korea (like most affluent countries), it should be noted, has experienced a sharp increase in income inequality in the past few decades. And the growing insecurity of the middle class has been conflated in the minds of many Koreans with the "winner-take-all" phenomenon prevalent in the entertainment industry. The media are full of complaints that Korea has become just too cutthroat and expensive for the average Park or Lee to get ahead.

Of course, a lot of Korea's problems are the kinds that other affluent countries would love to have — low unemployment, low government debt and healthy (3 percent) growth. "To an extent, that is what democracy is about, the ability to debate these problems in the open," says Kim. "I think Korea's chances look good right now compared to other countries that are struggling with similar problems."

In any event, love it or hate it, the influence of Korean popular culture continues to grow and K-pop themes keep resonating with new audiences. A Korean travel reality show, *Grandpas Over Flowers*, about four older men traveling the world and getting into trouble, was recently reborn as *Better Late Than Never* on NBC, featuring William Shatner and other celebrities. And one of Netflix's largest single investments has been in the latest sci-fi movie, *Okja*, by Bong Joon-ho (of *Snowpiercer* renown). The \$60 million film is due next year.

Korea, it seems, has made creativity part of its national brand — literally. In July, it launched a new national brand identity campaign, "Creative Korea," which is the successor to "Dynamic" (circa 2002) and "Sparkling" (2007). Never mind that "Creative Korea" isn't, well, all that creative a brand designation: **France already tried it earlier this year**. But putting the label front and center suggests how seriously the northeast Asian nation is relying on its culture these days to define its place in the world. And for good reason: the big bucks (won?) may still lie in cars, ships and electronics, but the impact of Korean pop culture on the hearts and minds of global villagers may prove more enduring.

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