CONNECTING EAST ASIANS IN EUROPE: THE POWER OF KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies popular culture in the daily lives of East Asians living in Vienna. It shows that these immigrants maintain connections with their homelands in part by consuming Korean pop culture, which they consider to be generally Asian and therefore useful in articulating a transnational East Asian identity. Many hesitate to admit that Korean pop culture plays an important role in their identity formation, but because of it they have found new common interests. Those who had previously confirmed their existence only through the West are finding new opportunities to construct an alternate consciousness by sharing popular culture, largely because it breeds a creative form of hybridisation, which works toward sustaining local identities in global contexts. How audiences identify with what they see and hear is important in their derivation of pleasure from media consumption.

Key words: popular culture, transnationalism, migration, East Asian identity, Korean wave, transnational community

1 INTRODUCTION

Factors such as the high speed of the Internet, multiple cable channels and media globalisation have led to the possibility of dynamic cultural exchanges within East Asia. Recent discussion of East Asian media is centred on the idea of ‘East Asian popular culture’ in the global scene, and the cultural imperialism of the West is no longer a topic of concern (Chua 2006). Consuming East Asian popular culture has gradually become part of the daily routine in contemporary East Asian society, and this transnational consumption is not only connecting East

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Asians more closely together, but also creating a special kind of transnational consumer group among East Asian emigrants. If earlier studies of immigrants focused on assimilation into the receiving culture or analysed how immigrants struggle to remain in contact with the home culture, the new trend focuses on how immigrants develop their dual or even multiple identities in the transnational community. Because of globalisation, terms such as multiple identities, transnational community, and multilayered citizenship have come to the fore. Unlike previous immigrants, today’s migrants orient their lives towards two or more societies and develop transnational communities and consciousnesses (Castles 2002: 1146). They tend to focus on the new, receiving culture while remaining part of their community in the country of origin (Madsen and Van Naerssen 2003: 68). For these migrants as transnational members of society, the consumption of popular culture plays an integral role in community-building and identity-construction.

Popular culture plays a weighty role in the daily lives of East Asians, possibly more so than in other regions, such as Europe as a whole (as suggested by Katzenstein 2005: 88). Television dramas can be a topic of daily conversation, and pop stars can act as cultural ambassadors of the nation. Consequently, to gain more cultural power in the region, each nation is trying to contribute to the East Asian pop cultural flow and to attract more regional fans. With the Internet and cable channels well developed, the role that popular culture is playing as a soft power of the nation is immense. According to Vicky Cheng, a section chief at the international affairs division of the Tourism Bureau in the Ministry of Transportation and Communications of the Republic of China (Taiwan), where she was interviewed:

Unlike Asians, Europeans or Americans are not interested in Asian pop stars or pop culture in general. Therefore, we use different strategy when targeting global travellers. But for Asian travellers, I think using celebrity to create an image they like to promote is the best way to promote Taiwan (interview with author, 25 March 2011).

As evidenced by my earlier works and interviews, I emphasise the important role of popular culture in East Asian nations and argue that popular culture is a key to understanding how East Asians are articulating their identity in the 21st century.