

MANWHA, MANGA AND CULTURAL IDENTITY COMICS READERS AND NATIONALISM IN KOREA

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1) Anxiety of Comics Readers: Response to *Ken-kanryu*

For people with a professional interest in manga, works such as *Ken-kanryu* and those drawn by Yoshinori Kobayashi are getting more people's attention. The Japanese word "Ken-kanryu" can be defined in two ways: one refers to a dislike of Hallyu (the boom of Korean pop culture), and the other refers to an aversive social movement toward Korea.

Ken-kanryu depicts characters who belong to a university history club called "Far-east Asia Investigation" whose activities are defying, refuting or debating an anti-Japanese club called "Asian History Study Group," as well as debating friends of Korean residents in Japan, with a purpose of crushing their "victimized historical point of view." This comic was published in September 2005, and *Ken-kanryu 2* was published in February 2006. As of this April, a total of 650,000 copies were sold.

In Korea, numerous news sources immediately announced that *Ken-kanryu* had become popular in Japan. Some bloggers even introduced it on their websites by translating parts of *Ken-kanryu*. *Ken-kanryu* offered Koreans the chance to debate the problem of Japanese understanding of history, but it possessed no blatant attacks against Japan.

A "comics and animation fan" wrote on an Internet message board: "In Korea, as long as we have interest in Japan, we will be criticized." This fan claimed that the various media discussions over *Ken-kanryu* threatened his/her own identity, whose affinity towards pop culture included Japanese products.

In Korean popular culture, affection for a certain series of works sometimes unavoidably clashes with nationalistic feelings and cultural identity. For Korean comics readers like the one above, it is complicated to admit to being a general Japanese comics fan rather than a critic of the ideology found in *Ken-kanryu* and a supporter of national pride.

In this paper, I would like to focus on the anxiety that is shared by comics fans. Through this, Korean comics culture should be regarded keeping in mind the influential backdrop of acceptance of Japanese pop culture. The purpose of this paper is also to consider historical perspectives that are being created in comics culture. My goal is not to investigate text-based expressions in order to understand historical perspectives. This paper rather focuses on the dynamics around comics—

reading, discourse, and behaviors derived from comics—and historical perspectives that are actually created in practical ways.

2) History of Anxiety – Korean Nationalism and Acceptance of Japanese Culture

What causes comics readers to feel insecurity about their identities connected with their affection of comics? To begin with, in Korean society, acceptance of Japanese popular culture is deeply implicated with nationalism. Let us examine the basic factors of this insecurity.

Many Japanese researchers of Korea indicate that the exclusion policy against Japan in Korea after the end of colonial rule played an important role in building up the nation's nationalism and cultural identity. This social policy was reinforced after independence, and Korean culture has a custom of sketching its likeness as a reflection of Japanese culture. However, there is an aspect of Korean culture, including popular culture, that has been created/imagined as a pure, non-Japanese culture.

In Korea, the use of Japanese language in public was forbidden and Japanese popular culture such as movies, music and television programs also were prohibited from being imported. This was the exclusion policy, and it was upheld even after bilateral rapprochement in 1965, until the phase in of Japanese popular culture in 1998.

However, the forbidden Japanese popular culture always infiltrated Korea as underground culture. For instance, in the case of comics, many works drawn by Japanese manga artists were copied by Korean artists, and after national censorship, those comics were published as Korean manhwa. In fact, much Korean popular culture has been blended with Japanese culture in some way constituting a hybrid culture.

There is a contradiction between Korean nationalism based on anti-Japanese cultural identity and this hybrid popular culture. Moreover, in Korea, since popular culture is regarded as “lower,” its acceptance is shameful in terms of nationalism and education.

However, around 1990, people labeled this culture “Korean.” In 1987 the Democratization Declaration was issued, and since then society has changed a lot with the subsequent Seoul Olympics and the deregulation of overseas traveling. As more people and information flowed freely, unprecedented numbers of recognizably Japanese products or cultural items started to circulate in the society. The hybrid popular culture became the Korean popular culture by contrasting with Japanese products and culture available in the market. Academics and the mass media disapproved of the consumers of Japanese culture saying that they were accelerating Japanese cultural imperialism. The more they consumed Japanese products, the more criticism mounted.

It is natural that this influenced comics. In the 1990s, a mass of translated versions of Japanese manga entered circulation. Before long publishers started to take copyrights of Japanese manga, and Japanese manga artists' names were printed on covers. This is the first appearance of Japanese manga in the Korean comics field previously inhabited solely by manhwa. As works of manga sold

well, people who did not even read comics started to notice them. Gradually, condemnation of reading Japanese manga accumulated. In the newspapers, there were articles reporting the Japanese manga invasion, expressing concern that children who read Japanese manga might be harmed by it. Certain Civic organizations like the YWCA carried out campaigns to denounce comics in order to protect children. In the process, manwha could not appeal to people's pure blood characteristics or "Koreaness," and the assessments of manwha were downgraded to the point of disparagement, like those of manga.

In Korean society, comics readers have been regarded as "children." Criticism of comics has worked well for uplifting nationalism, especially because Japanese manga fans were regarded as childish and vulgar. In other words, even though it does not necessarily mean that comics readers were always "children," they were forced to be silent because they were reading something "sleazy." In the present situation, the comics fan's ambiguous anxiety about identity has something to do with elements considered Japanese within Korean nationalism and popular culture.

On the other hand, some say that this dualism of both accepting and rejecting Japanese culture is disappearing rapidly among younger generations. Since 1998, Japanese popular culture has been being phased in. Japanese movies and television are openly watched, and Japanese music CDs are readily available. The expanded distribution of Japanese products is no more a target of criticism. In Korea, the appraisal of popular culture has shifted from judging it as "vulgar" to a cultural industry that affects the nation's future. This about-face is significant. Popular culture is spotlighted as a driving force behind Hallyu (the boom of Korean pop culture). Popular culture is now officially given a chance to be a part of Korean culture.

Japanese Studies researchers in Korea suggest these perceptual changes among the young generation are based on social change. They say that the young generation has no hesitation to consume Japanese popular culture and has started to distinguish between consumption and recognition of history. Then, researchers appreciate young people's capacity for enjoying popular culture the way it is (Park 2002, *Japanese popular culture & Korea- Japan*, Sangensya. Jang 2005, *Between ideology and post-ideology*, in *Trans pop-culture and imagined asia*, mekon etc.). Nevertheless, I found it difficult to agree with their opinions. In the following, I would like to examine the emergence of popular culture in Korea and the causes of people's discomfort with it, even after the deregulation of Japanese culture; these reflect the troubles of embracing nationalism and of accepting Japanese popular culture.

3) Eruption of Anxiety – "Children who are Crazy with Japan"

A message got afloat on the Internet in August 2005. It said that a national program on KBS was broadcasting "Children who are Crazy with Japan" on August 15th as a part of special TV programs commemorating the 60th anniversary of independence from Japan, at Gwangbokjeol. The message called for avoiding cosplay (such as wearing Japanese-style kimono) at the comic art exhibition (this type of exhibition is colloquially known as "comic world" or "comiket") scheduled for August 13th to 15th. Cosplay means identifying comics or animation characters by imitating

their appearances. In the case of imitating Japanese manga characters, wearing Kimono or swords is involved.

Later, this message turned out to be a false rumor, but this incident highlighted the latent anxiety shared by comics readers. Let us consider the whereabouts of their anxiety, referring to their comments written on the KBS message board.

The first response linked with this rumor bears the date of August 5th 2005. Before the posting, the same topic was already discussed in another Internet community, named Café. Café is an Internet circle on Korea's large portal sites such as Daum or Naver. On the KBS message board, there were 24 postings (perhaps containing some by the same person) by August 18th in addition to 54 recommendations. Each posting had more than 100 visitors, and the largest was more than 400.

Through posting, they tried to strip off two labels. One label is the notion that comics fans (or people who enjoy cosplay of comics characters) are equivalent to the consumers of Japanese culture. Another is the stereotyping of comics fans as children. This was the way comics readers were viewed in the realm of comics critique discourses. By obtaining a means of expressing themselves on the Internet, comics readers started to resist those who try to define them with keywords such as "Japan" and "children."

Let us analyze the fact that the story about the TV program was a mere rumor. Even though no one asked them, comics readers felt they need to explain that they had no special fascination with Japan. They had the Japanese shadow hanging over their heads. Contrary to what researchers point out, there is no indication that comics fans feel no hesitation to consume Japanese cultural items. If anything, it could be said that those researchers' remarks made comics readers confront Japan. They are subjectified themselves as the ones who cannot enjoy popular culture the way it is, in the realm of social discourses.

Then, in order to shake off the connection with Japan, the subjectified comics readers searched for their Korean cultural identity in popular culture. On the message board, they strongly insisted that they were Koreans. They also confirmed that "it is wrong to wear Japanese traditional costumes at Gwangbokjeol," and they showed off their nationalism by reporting, "there were a lot of people who carried the flag of Korea" or "there are some who were doing Han-bok (Korean traditional clothes) cosplay." They did not place comics culture as part of the counterculture but wanted to be recognized by the mainstream by sharing nationalism with it.

However, the nationalism they showed was peculiar to them. They did not use the traditional definition of Korea, which involves comparison with, or denial of, Japan in accordance with the nationalism until recently endorsed by Korean society. They rather emphasized their being Koreans by using traditional Korean images such as the flag or Han-bok. In other words, they concocted something Korean-like by blending traditional culture with popular culture. Besides, as nationals who love those qualities, they tried to identify themselves as Koreans. This is a self-sufficient nationalism in popular culture.

Yet, is it not appropriate to say that Korean popular culture is the hybrid one in the first place? Is it not inconsistent that they try to find Korean identity in Korean popular culture while they insist that Japanese popular culture has nothing to do with Japaneseness? They deny the nationality

found in popular culture in which nationality is obscure, but at the same time they need it. Do they not notice this paradox? It seems that this ambiguity of cultural identity in popular culture is the birthplace of their anxiety.

4) “Safe” Popular Culture—Commercialization of Korean History

In what country is popular culture made? This is a question for both comics readers and producers (including artists, publishers, and manwha-supporting government officials) in the Korean comics culture industry. What is the difference between manga and manwha? What is the authentic Koreaness? Producers have no choice but to follow a Korean model in the process of joining the international market while being supported by the government, which says they should foster the comics industry as a national one. Presently, they cannot define what Koreaness is. Instead, they are trying to craft Koreaness strategically.

In August 2005, there was another animation/comics-related event held along with the comic art exhibition. This was SICAF (Seoul International Cartoon & Animation Festival). Different from the comic art exhibition (or comiket) organized by amateur fans, the SICAF has the quality of an industry exposition. Creators of the comics culture industry took advantage of the 60th anniversary of liberation. They believed that the history of liberation could become the best Korean merchandising ingredient. Comics readers could enjoy Korean-like popular culture within a subculture, which, the mainstream hoped, did not run afoul of nationalism.

SICAF set up the main theme zone, which provided “a chance to see Korean history in a new light by examining the role of cartoons and animation in modern Korean history in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the nation’s liberation from the Japanese colonial rule” (SICAF 2005, August 9th Seoul International Cartoon & Animation Festival, p 30-31). A remarkable exhibition was one entitled “Independence Heroes in Cartoons.” Students from a comic art university department created images of independence heroes such as Yoon Bong-Gil, Yoo Gwan-Soon, Kim Gu and An Jung-geu.

They are familiar to Koreans in various stories or school textbooks. Each is said to have played an important role in the independence movement. After the March 1st movement in 1919, Kim Gu went to China and took part in establishing the provisional government of the Republic of Korea. He went back to Korea in 1945 but could not take office. He was assassinated in 1949. Yoon Boun-Gil engaged in an anti-Japanese movement under Kim Ku and set off an explosion at the Hongkew Park in Shanghai in 1932. He was arrested, imprisoned and executed. An Jung-geu is said to have been tortured to death in prison after being accused of leading the March 1st movement in 1919.

Responding to this exhibition, bloggers posted messages such as “An Jung-geu, cool” or “Kim Gu looks like a bad guy.” A man at the exhibition actually said things like, “What if we create an animation of combat formations with this?” Aside from the glorious historic achievements those real heroes made, the people attending the exhibition enjoyed those fictional creations. From this, it

is safe to assume that independence heroes from Korean history could become a feature of a harmless subculture, which never evokes the unwanted spirit of Japanese influence and provokes nationalism for both comics readers and creators.

Certainly history manhwa had existed previously; therefore, it can be pointed out that comics readers could have obtained a less controversial subculture if they wanted. Nonetheless, there is a dissimilarity between the “Independence Hero in Cartoons” and history manhwa.

Heroes displayed at the exhibition were not always accompanied with autobiographical comics, but sometimes some parts of manga scenes, which clarified each hero’s achievement, were introduced. For example, Yoo Gwan-Soon blows enemies away with blasts of air, shouting “Hurray, Korea!” Yet, this scene is just a denouement. This means that the heroes displayed there are open to a different type of interpretation, and this is signified as “Kyara.” In many history comics, personages are described as “characters,” while those independence heroes were depicted as “Kyara.” This difference is significant. Even the works that are obviously uncontroversial are marked by hybridism from popular culture. In fact, these heroes were consumed the same way Japanese manga is consumed.

According to Go Ito, who is a Japanese comics researcher, there are two levels of interpreting personages in comics. One is “Kyara.” It simply means a drawing of a human body with lines. The other is “Character.” It includes a representation of a personified body in the context of a story. Manga succeeded in reifying modern subjective “Character” and in depicting stories equivalent to modern literature or movies. On the other hand, the level of “Kyara,” which shatters rather than depicts reality, had been submerged in manga telling modern stories. Ito’s discussion tries to find a clue to figure out the current Japanese manga situation by focusing on the level of Kyara. “Kyara” is formed under the condition where multiple illustrations are acknowledged as the same personage. Once “Kyara” is formed, it possesses the capability of detaching from text. Using this point of view, he argues the emergence of “Kyara” appeared as secondary products in “Dojinshi” (materials made by artists or writers who prefer to publish on their own) and in the media mix scene since 1980 in Japan. He also discusses the emergence of the sentiment called “Moe,” in which fans take pleasure in the process of creating “Kyara” itself instead of enjoying “Character” in the story.

Heroes displayed at SICAF were secondary products based on real people. This means that for the university students, heroes are understood as “Kyara” and produced as “Kyara.” Since “Kyara” has the capability of detaching from text, those heroes can be seen not only in the history of the Korean peninsula but also in the stories of combat formations. It could be extended to wherever they might be, even the future or another planet.

With manhwa creators, comics readers sought popular culture that embodied Korea and finally discovered historical heroes in “Kyara.” Those heroes can satisfy comics readers’ cultural identity because they are part of Korean manhwa. Also, due to being “Kyara,” they can satisfy comics readers’ feelings which are rooted in hybrid comics culture originating in Japan.

Consequently, however, do not comics fans’ feeling of history have no choice but to change? In order to become “Kyara,” historical heroes stop being “Characters.” Does that not mean that they

abandon their bodies and spirits embedded in the historical context? The hero became a factor that signifies Korea not only in history but also in different cultural scenes. In short, the hero became a pop star.

5) Conclusion

Up to this point I have presented an overview of Korean comics culture referring to the anxiety shared by comics readers. This anxiety is ascribed to the cultural and nationalistic ambiguities that comics culture embraces. Comics readers sought Korean identity in order to reject the stereotypes placed on them such as “acceptant of Japanese culture” or “children,” and they tried to overcome this anxiety. Comics producers also sought Koreaness and their efforts were seen at the SICAF. These include absorbing history into popular culture and producing Korean-like popular culture. However, this undertaking contains undertones that invoke a pop feeling of history, because it is based on a particular feeling nurtured in comics culture.

We should not jump to the conclusion that this pop feeling of history distorts the recognition of history. We are not supposed to bring in a dichotomous analysis of history: authentic versus fabricated. In addition, people’s sincere attitudes toward pop-history in popular culture should not be taken lightly.

Nowadays, history does not mean a mere history found in experienced stories. It is becoming history capable of being reproduced in the media culture. Yet, the texts in media are not always influencing people. Rather, the media itself, and the feeling of history produced in popular culture, including discourses around the media, must be a crucial element. People seem to construe every text in line with this sensation. The future direction of this study will be examining how this pop feeling of history functions in relation to others.