Japanese Middle-aged Women and the Hanryu Phenomenon

by

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Abstract

This article evaluates the Korean cultural boom in Japan, particularly the popularity of Korean soap operas, which has initiated a cultural flow between the two countries. This phenomenon is unique in two respects. First, owing to the post-colonial relationship between Korea and Japan, the interplay between the two had been limited and their relationship was rather complex and sensitive. In terms of cultural exchange, Japanese people have never previously indicated a strong interest in Asian popular culture even though Hong Kong movie and pop stars had gained some popularity in Japan during the 1990s. Instead, Japanese have been interested in western popular culture, predominantly that of the US, including Hollywood movies, American television programs and music. The current popularity of Korean culture, therefore, is unprecedented. Second, middle-aged Japanese women,
who previously did not actively consume popular culture in Japan, originally fuelled this Korean cultural boom. Their admiration for Korean dramas as well as the country's actors is further extended to a positive image of Korean men. Middle-aged Japanese women have created non-political, grassroots connections with Korea that politics and economics could not fully achieve.

**Keywords**

*Hanryu*, Korean culture; Japan; *akogare*; longing

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**Introduction**

Globalisation has blurred the boundaries of economics, politics, cultures and nation states because they interconnect and interrelate in increasingly complex ways (Robertson 1992; Waters 2001). The interconnectivity of the social dimension today is unprecedented in terms of the speed and volume of transactions. Accounts of globalisation seek to detail the massive changes that have occurred over the past few decades in the social world whereby links, transactions and relationships intersect all aspects of the social and material worlds, thus also connecting countries, communities and individuals (Ohmae 1999; Giddens 1990; Robertson 1992; Waters 2001). Popular culture in this interconnected world travels faster than ever and the impact of popular culture cannot be underestimated.

Geographically close yet emotionally distant used to be the précis for the relationship between Korea and Japan; yet, the 21st century heralded emerging transnational contact between the two countries. The Korean television drama *Fuyu no Sonata* [Winter Sonata] triggered the popularity of and interest in Korean culture in Japan as evidenced by the increased interest in the Korean language and Korean food (Hanaki et al. 2007). This prompted a familiarisation of Japanese people with Korean culture and further influenced the positive relationship between the two nations (Iwabuchi 2008), thereby shrinking the emotional distance between the two cultures (Mori 2008).

This Korean culture boom in Japan is worth attention for two reasons. First, because of Japan's past colonialism in Korea, the relationship between the two countries has been rather fraught with difficulty with some Japanese having negative feelings toward Koreans and vice versa. Consequently, even though the actual geographical distance between Japan and Korea is close, the two nations have been distant emotionally.
in the modern period. Under these conditions, cultural exchanges between Korea and Japan have been limited. In fact, since the 19th century opening of the country, on the whole Japanese people have sought and admired western popular culture, predominantly that of the USA, but has never ardently sought popular culture from other Asian countries.

Second, this Korean cultural boom was originally and primarily created by middle-aged Japanese women, even though it is now spreading to other generations as well. It is argued that Japanese women are attracted to the traditional family values projected in Korean soap operas and that they yearn for the values of Korean society (Ahn 2008). Furthermore, when viewing Korean soap operas, Japanese women are fascinated by the features of the male characters, and they interpret such qualities as desirable features for men (Ahn 2008). This gendered aspect is further noteworthy because it is paralleled by Japanese women that admire American or European culture. While the desire for western culture is felt by the younger generation, the desire for Korea is predominantly felt by middle-aged Japanese women. Although Japanese women's desire for western culture has been identified and researched by some scholars (Bailey 2006; 2007; Kelsky 2001b; Takahashi 2006), little is known about the desire for Korean culture in terms of its gender implications. Taking this into consideration, the longing for Korean culture by Japanese women is worth investigating (Hanaki et al. 2007).

The aim of this paper is to review the popularity of Korean popular culture in Japan and discuss Japanese middle-aged women's attraction to its culture as well as Korean actors and men in contrast to Japan's more traditional western desire. This article is organised in the following way. The first section introduces the positionality of Japan in relation to the West and East and demonstrates why it affiliates with the West and maintains distance from other Asian countries. The second section shows Japanese women's western desire (akogare); specifically, why they long for the West and not for the East. Then, the third section provides the background and overview of the Korean cultural boom in Japan, illustrating the way in which Korean popular culture has become a visible presence in Japan. The fourth section discusses the way Korean popular culture has received favour, particularly among middle-aged Japanese women. In the final section, the paper draws concluding remarks.

**Longing for the West rather than for Asia**
Understanding why Japanese have not shown considerable interest in other Asian cultures is explained by the account of Japan's positionality in relation to the West and Asia, which is historically and culturally constructed. According to Iwabuchi (2002), even though Japan is geographically situated in Asia, the Japanese view themselves outside of Asia in their collective cultural imagination. In the Japanese consciousness, Asia and the West project a distinctive representation. Iwabuchi (2002) further asserts that while the West represents modernity for Japan to emulate, Asia embodies the old Japan, which simultaneously notifies Japan's achievement in terms of western values. Through Japan's colonialism in Asia, Japan and Asia evolved into two separate entities: the oppressor and the oppressed. This binary opposition of Asia as traditional and underdeveloped and the West as advanced and modern has affected Japan's construction of its national identity. In order to distance itself from Asia and affiliate with the West, Japan constructed an oriental orientalism against 'other Asia': 'similar but superior' or 'in but above Asia' (Iwabuchi 2002, p. 8). The attitude of the Japanese to place Asia below them is grounded in their accomplishment of advancement – westernisation, simultaneously and ironically, positions Japan as a subordinate to the West (Iwabuchi 2002).

Japan's affiliation with the West further provides an assurance of its superior status compared with other Asian countries. This is observed among Japanese people who highly value western culture and sometimes even negate their own Japanese culture as well as that of Asia. Japan's harbouring of such an attitude and longing for western culture – namely, that of the UK and US – has been studied in various contexts: western men (Kelsky 2001b), western culture (Fujita 2004) and the English language (Takahashi 2006).

In discussing Japan's yearning for western culture, Fujita (2004) points out that Japan's historical encounters with the West have generated an imagined West. The first historical encounter occurred in the Meiji epoch when scholars were sent overseas to learn the advanced industry, education, government and culture of the West. The second encounter was soon after World War II, when the United States imposed political, economic and cultural changes on Japan. These encounters with the West influenced the way in which Japan viewed western countries as modern and advanced.

Japanese people on the whole adore both the West and western culture. This disposition is reflected in Japanese people's substantial interest in Hollywood movies, the English language and American music.
Conversely, Japanese often have a lower opinion of Asia. Although Japan's disposition toward Asia has shifted more positively in recent years, it cannot be compared with Japan's favourable attitude with respect to the West. Hence, Japan's admiration for Korean culture is a novel phenomenon.

**Akogare for the West**

Interest in western countries and culture is prevalent among Japanese women as indicated in the large number of Japanese women that learn foreign languages, travel to the West, study and reside in the West and seek to date western men (Bailey 2006; 2007; Kelsky 2001b; Takahashi 2006). Not all Japanese women long for the West, but this type of desire is common. Although Japanese women became curious about Asia in the 1990s (e.g. Yamashita 2003), such interest remains far less prevalent than is Japanese women's desire for the West, which is historically, socially and culturally built in Japan.

The desire for western culture among Japanese women has been investigated by various scholars (Bailey 2006; 2007; Kelsky 2001b; Takahashi 2006). Their research demonstrates how Japan views the West as superior, and this manifests itself in that many Japanese women possess an admiration for western culture and western men. In this discourse, for Japanese Asia signifies backwardness, male chauvinism and gender inequality.

The Japanese perception of the romanticised West is discussed by Kelsky (2001b) who describes Japanese people's attitudes toward western culture as well as people using the term *akogare*. The literal English translation of the term is yearning. Takahashi (2006) addresses this *akogare* as referring to something impossible or difficult to attain. It can be argued that this very notion of unattainability that is intrinsic to the notion of *akogare* seems to increase Japanese *akogare*. According to Kelsky (2001b), for Japanese people the West is imagined and romanticised as something that Japan does not possess. The dichotomisation of East and West underpins the account of *akogare* that is elaborated by Said's (2003) orientalism. In Said's account of orientalism, the East, or non-West, is perceived by the West as uncivilised, backward, pre-modern and a place where women are constrained and oppressed by oriental men. In contrast to the West, the Orient stands for conditions that are lesser than or undesirable in comparison. The discourse of *akogare* adopts a similar position to the Orient/East and depicts the West as more liberal and egalitarian.
Akogare is indeed a reflection of the hierarchical relations that have characterised western–Japanese interactions in the modern era (Kelsky 2001b). It implies a simultaneous sense of Japanese inferiority and an awareness of Japan's complex East/West 'not-white/not-quite' status in a racialised global hierarchy (Suzuki 2007, p. 13). It underlines the awareness that although Japan's economic dominance is globally recognised, the Japanese cannot be represented in the same terms as western nations because of their non-white Asianness. Affiliation with the West provides Japan with belongingness to the first world that is often comprised of western (white) nations.

Japanese women's akogare for the West is linked to their positionality in Japan, which is grounded in gender inequality and male chauvinism. In Japanese society, women are disadvantaged in both domestic and public spheres. In the latter, their career opportunities are limited simply because they are women; they are often in clerical positions with fewer prospects of career advancement than men have. In domestic spheres, women are expected to take responsibility for all domestic work and are thus restricted to continuing or advancing their careers (Kelsky 2001b). This Japanese situation is a push factor for Japanese women to seek the West, while the romanticised imagined West works as a pull factor.

This discourse of the West is further extended to western men, who, by virtue of association with the West, are assumed to be egalitarian and yasashii (sensitive) compared with Japanese men, who are depicted as conservative and insensitive. Within this discourse, western men are idealised as gentlemen who can offer women a way out of the gender inequality they face in Japan. Finally, it has been asserted that "white men have been viewed in Japan as coveted erotic commodities linked to a kind of transnational social upward mobility" (Kelsky 2001b, p. 156). In Kelsky's study of young, Japanese professional women's relationships with western men, Japanese women are reported to regard western men as follows:

In women's narratives of internationalism, Japanese men embody the feudal, oppressive family and corporate structures of Japan that exclude and demean women, whereas White Western men embody and enable the freedom, equality, fulfillment, and delight of the West. If in women's discourses of Westernization, the intimate relationship of love or marriage imposes the greatest oppressions on them in Japan, it follows that only through the same intimacy with a White man can a woman's ultimate liberation be achieved (Kelsky 2001a, p. 419).
Western men embody, and they are expected to offer, the opportunities and freedoms associated with an idealised conception of what the West has to offer.

This account of akogare facilitates the understanding of Japan's desire for western culture as well as its people because it is grounded in the relationship between the West and East and as such the political and cultural relationship is mirrored in the realm of a personal relationship between western men and Japanese women. However, taking this account further into Japan's yearning for Korean culture, it does not provide an explanation of such situations where both parties are labelled eastern, sharing the same racial identity and similar cultures to some extent. Nevertheless, idealisation is practiced in both accounts; specifically, akogare for the West among the younger generation of Japanese women and akogare for Korea among middle-aged Japanese women.

Hanryu [the Korean boom]

The popularity of Korean culture has burgeoned in Japan. This cultural flow from Korea to Japan is facilitated by the interconnectivity of the contemporary world. This interconnectivity is discussed by Appadurai (1990), who uses the term 'media-scape' to refer to the way media travels across nation-state borders engendering image and information through circulated cultural products. This media-scape encapsulates the way Korean culture is transported beyond its national boundaries and into the Japanese sphere. Prior to this Korean cultural boom, Hong Kong movie and pop celebrities gained some popularity during the 1990s in Japan (Iwabuchi 2002). A general interest in Asia was developed around the same time, such as Japanese women travelling to Bali (e.g. Yamashita 2003). In addition, celebrities from other parts of Asia have influenced the Japanese media in the past few decades such as South Korean singer Kei Unsuku, Kim Yeon-ja, Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng, Oyan Fifi and Judy Ongg. These celebrities and others from Asia have become acclaimed and some have gained the highest music awards as well as recognition in Japan. It is important to note here, however, that although these celebrities come from Asian countries, they have been promoted in Japan. Moreover, they speak and sing in Japanese.

Thus, although this popularity of Asian celebrities and Hong Kong movie and pop stars might have paved the way for a Korean cultural boom, none of these achieved the level of social and cultural influence as the contemporary Korean cultural boom has. Nonetheless, the
Korean cultural boom in Japan indicates not only the popularity of individual celebrities, but also a broader social implication, namely the further understanding between Japan and Korea, which has not previously been observed. This Korean cultural boom in Japan is named hanryu [Korean wave] in Japanese. Hanryu refers to the extensive popularity of Korean popular culture such as movies, music, soap operas, hairstyles and cosmetics across Asia including Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand and Malaysia (Hanaki et al. 2007).

In 1999, the Korean movie Shiri (Dir: Kang Je-gyu) received attention in Japan after it was screened at the Tokyo International Movie Festival, a beginning point of the Korean cultural boom in Japan. Following on from the popularity of the movie, Korean television station Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation and Japanese television station Tokyo Broadcasting System collaborated on the television drama Friends, which was broadcast over two nights. This was the first Korean–Japanese television drama collaboration (Ahn 2008). The popularity of Korean popular culture was advanced further in the same year when the FIFA soccer World Cup was co-hosted by Japan and Korea and the TV drama Fuyu no Sonata [Winter Sonata] was broadcast in Japan in 2004 (Tipton 2008). Fuyu no Sonata, the 20-episode South Korean soap opera, furthered the boom of Korean popular culture. Along with this success, the word kanryu [Korean cultural boom] began to be used to describe its popularity and in 2004 it was converted to hanryu, which is closer to the Korean pronunciation (Ahn 2008).

The main actor in Fuyu no Sonata Bae Yong Joon became a popular icon particularly among middle-aged Japanese women. These Japanese women in their 40s, 50s and 60s purchased $145 photographs of Bae and spent more than $1000 each travelling to visit the filming location used in Fuyu no Sonata in South Korea (Wiseman 2004). When he visited Tokyo in 2004, about 3500 fans gathered at Tokyo International Airport to see him (Wiseman 2004). Many women remain engaged with Bae by downloading pictures and checking his Japanese website to discover his daily schedules. The phenomenon of Bae is estimated to have generated a USD4 billion increase in business between Korea and Japan (Demick 2005).

Following the enormous popularity of Fuyu no Sonata, other Korean soap operas based on pure romance, such as Ōl in [All in] and Rasuto dansu wa watashi to isshoni [Save the last dance for me], as well as movies and music were imported into Japan, revealing an unprecedented level of popularity of Asian popular culture in Japan.
Simultaneously, Korean language schools received more students than ever before and matchmaking agents for Korean and Japanese people received more members. In addition, Korean celebrities became famous in Japan. Korean restaurants attracted more customers and travel to South Korea became popular (Hanaki et al. 2007). It was speculated that this situation was only temporary, and that soon hanryu would cease. However, since the beginning of hanryu, its popularity has not weakened and instead has remained a significant feature of the Japanese media. In fact, it has even increased its appeal (Hanaki et al. 2007). Furthermore, hanryu generates local dialogue within Asian regions where there has been little active interaction before (Ahn 2008).

**Akogare for Korea and Korean men**

Even though the account of akogare explains the gendered desire for western culture as well as western men among some Japanese women, it does not explain these Japanese women's yearning for Korean culture and Korean men, but rather demonstrates a contradictory account.

Middle-aged Japanese women's consumption of Korean soap operas triggers a longing for Korean culture and generates a positive perception of Korean society as well as its men. These Japanese women seem to have difficulty relating to Japanese soap operas, but can connect with those made in Korea. This is because Korean soap operas often involve specific roles for parents, children and relatives, and centre on family bonds, even when focusing on young romances, whereas Japanese soap operas are mostly based on young people's romances and careers (Iwabuchi 2008). For example, *Budoubatake no ano* otoko [The man in the vineyard] is a romantic story about a relationship between a country boy and a city girl who happen to meet in a vineyard, work together and eventually fall in love. Although this drama spotlights the young couple's romance, it also portrays a romance between an older man, who is the landowner of the vineyard, and an elderly woman who lives in the same town. Not simply focusing on young romances is a feature of other Korean soap operas, too.

The other attractive feature of Korean dramas is that they illustrate the subjective exchange of feelings and emotions in a more subtle way than do American and Japanese films and television dramas (Hanaki et al. 2007). For instance, in *Rasuto dansu wa watashi to isshoni*, the way the main characters Hyun Woo and Ji Eun care about and love each other is demonstrated by showing them looking into each other's eyes and holding hands. Overt sex scenes are not shown, unlike some Japanese or American television dramas.
In Korean soap operas, family values are emphasised. In selecting marriage partners, parents and other family members are involved in marriage decisions. Ahn (2008) states that Japanese women are fascinated by the strong family values in Korean society. These are less emphasised in contemporary Japan, because Japan focuses more on the individual than on family values today. Ahn (2008) continues to point out that this loss of Japanese family values has occurred through the process of industrialisation. In addition, some view that Koreans place family above individuals and the country, whereas in Japan the nation and society are placed above family; therefore, close family relationships are far stronger in Korea than they are in Japan (Hahm & Heo 2006 cited in Ahn 2008, pp. 204–205).

Furthermore, the roles played by Korean actors in Korean soap operas are often those of good men who possess a caring and nurturing nature, not showing direct masculinity but rather some feminine attributes (Lin and Tong 2007). For instance, the male characters in Fuyu no Sonata reflect gentleness, goodness, refinement, serenity and intelligence, which are appealing attributes to Japanese middle-aged women (Hanaki et al. 2007). Ahn (2008) states that Japanese middle-aged women consider these attributes the ideal characteristics for men. An article in The Washington Post further explains Japanese women's longing for Korean men. In the article, one Japanese lady mentioned 'South Koreans are so sweet and romantic – not at all like Japanese guys, who never say “I love you”' (Faiola 2006). The popularity of finding Korean men was also discussed in the article, and some women admitted to being members of a matchmaking company that introduces Korean men to Japanese women.

Along with an admiration of male characters, some Japanese women wonder, through viewing Korean soap operas, what might have been in terms of romance. These women tend to favour the idealised notion of love as it appears in soap operas (Lin and Tong 2007). Middle-aged women in Japan are often trapped in gendered roles (Kim 2010): they are rarely treated as 'women' but rather as wives, mothers and daughters. Fuyu no Sonata enabled these women to re-imagine the love stories of their youth (Hanaki et al. 2007). Thus, Japanese women interpret Korean soap operas in their own personal ways, finding meanings in them and relating them to their actual lives, while also fantasising about them. This is similar to Storey's (1996) suggestion that television audiences interpret texts in their own way, so that one television program may mean something different to different audiences.
Akogare has also had further effects. It has triggered many Japanese women to study not only the Korean language but also Korean culture and history. Through this process, Japanese women have shifted their negative images of Korea into positive ones through hanryu, and their everyday lives have also been influenced by engaging in Korean cooking and language learning. Thus, hanryu has not only spread Korean culture, but also transformed national images of Korea, Koreans and Korean–Japanese residents in Japan, who had been an invisible minority (Hanaki et al. 2007).

Mori (2008, p. 140) underlines that ‘a significant number of middle-aged women, who have been marginalized and even looked down upon as merely media consumers, have started a variety of interesting cultural practices after the phenomenon’. Prior to hanryu, exchanges between Korea and Japan were often conducted solely within the political domain, and their relationship had been tense over time because of the historical and ethnic problems between the two nations. However, what has emerged between Korea and Japan through hanryu is a non-political and grassroots cultural exchange.

Japanese middle-aged women are relatively confined to their domestic spheres with limited mobility because of Japanese gender roles and work environments, which make it difficult for them to engage in full-time work, often pushing them into the roles as sengyou shufu [full-time homemakers]. Considering this, Japanese middle-aged women's connectivity between Korea and Japan is noteworthy given that they have never been key players in transnational connections. Ahn (2008) remarks that Japanese women's engagement in hanryu was not anticipated because of their perceived image as feminine and polite.

**Conclusion**

The impact of hanryu in Japan demonstrates the strength of popular culture as well as the broader impact beyond the terrain of culture. Hanryu is a unique phenomenon considering the post-colonial relationship between Korea and Japan and the role of Japanese middle-aged women in this grassroots cultural exchange between the two countries. The relationship between a coloniser and its former colonised subjects is not simply a power relationship, but rather one that is intertwined with the historical, social and cultural result of a globalised world.

Japan's and Korea's histories place both countries on the global stage where there are unavoidable yet sensitive connections. Nonetheless,
hanryu has bridged the two nations, which is all the more remarkable because it was initiated by Japanese middle-aged women who were rather invisible in previous transnational relations. In the broader sense, according to Cho (2005), the circulation of Korean popular culture builds social, geographical and emotional proximity between Asian countries by generating connections in the regions. This means that in the region, where neighbouring countries have been strangers to each other because of the post-colonial history in Asia, new contact zones are emerging and they are finding new selves. Cho (2005) further notes that the West has always been a dominant force among non-western people; however, now they are finding alternative consciousness by sharing popular culture in the region. As a result, these arguments illustrate the emerging cultural affinity across the Asian region. This emergence of Asian identity challenges the western cultural dominance in Asia as well as cultural homogenisation. Consequently, hanryu has created what Shim (2006) calls an imagined community within Asia through popular culture, which is, in this case, grassroots-gendered power.

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Atsushi Takeda completed his doctoral study in 2010, which investigated the experience of Japanese migrant women in Queensland focusing on their settlement experience and transnational connection with Japan. His research interests include transnationalism, international migration, identity, gender, globalisation, popular culture, and qualitative research methods.

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