

# Japanese Pop Culture Boom

## Inspiring South Korean Entertainment Industry

By CHUNG Ah-young

The smash success of *"Boys Over Flowers,"* a South Korean television drama based on the eponymous Japanese comic series by Yoko Kamio, is arguably the biggest story of the local showbiz industry so far this year. Of course, *"Boys..."* was a proven product, having been already converted into a hit television series in Taiwan and Japan before reaching Korean shores. But the immense popularity of the show, which made its relatively unknown main actor Lee Min-ho the country's most sought-after celebrity and even had a mobile telephone carrier roll out *"Boys"*-themed handsets, surprised even the optimists.

*"Boys"* is just the latest among a long list of Japanese cultural products that are captivating the South Korean audience across a variety of media, including television dramas, movies, musicals, and more recently, computer games. Books are getting a lot of love too. After *"Boys"* was aired, the sales of the original comics increased by more than 20-fold at South Korean bookstores. No wonder artists and producers are desperate to discover the next goldmine in Japanese content.

Perhaps, a good candidate is *"Kami no Shizuku (Devine Drops),"* a comic book series written by Tadashi Agi and illustrated by Shu Okimoto that revolves around a sibling rivalry between two brothers on a mission to find the world's 12 greatest wines. The series has been such a success in South Korea that some Seoul-based wine importers claim that the bottles mentioned in the stories account for more than half their sales, proving that cartoon hero Shizuku Kanzaki has become the Robert Parker of Korean oenophiles.

Naturally, South Korean television producers are already working on converting the series into a television drama, which will star popular Korean actor Bae Yong-joon, affectionately called by his legion of Japanese fans *"Yon-sama."* The drama will be produced starting next year by Keyeast Inc., which also happens to be Bae's management agency.

*Manga*, or Japanese comic books, have long been loved by South Korean readers. Of the 4,095 comic book series published in 2006, about 70 % were translations of *manga*. This includes more than one million copies of *"Devine Drops,"* which was published in the latter half of 2005.

It's hard to imagine the South Korean entertainment scene without the influence of Japanese cultural items such as *manga*, *anime* (animation) and television dramas, which frequently provide the creative source of successful showbiz products.

*Manga* and *anime* are clearly the most influential Japanese cultural imports here. Japanese comic books continue to occupy the best-seller lists at bookstores, and the buzz generated by the popular, fan-driven Internet sites on Japanese *manga* and *anime* series often contribute to commercial success when the works are converted into television shows and movies.

The production, distribution and consumption of *manga* and

*anime* are driven by consumer demand that exists in all parts of the world, with South Korea being one of the more enthusiastic markets.

There are countless websites and blogs that provide Korean translations of popular Japanese comics and animations. This strong translation culture has also spawned a reverse trend, opening new opportunities for Korean comic artists, some of whom are exporting their works to Japan.

The current Japanese cultural boom represents a dramatic change from just several years ago when the South Korean government enforced strict restrictions on the import of Japanese cultural products. However, things have changed since the government lifted the ban in phases from 1998.

The products of Japan's popular culture, including theater performances, television and radio broadcasts, books and music, had been prohibited since the end of World War II in 1945 when Korea achieved its independence from Japanese colonial rule. Perhaps, the anti-Japanese sentiment of Koreans at that time made the ban on cultural imports an easy decision for policymakers.

In 1998, the government lifted a ban on the sales of Japanese animations, movies and publications in the first stage of gradual market opening to Japanese cultural products.

In the past few decades, Japanese popular culture had reached the South Korean public through media such as satellite broadcasting and the Internet. Now, a massive number of Japanese cultural products, including films, pop music, cartoons, animations and television dramas, are flooding the South Korean cultural scene and becoming fashionable. This trend gained further momentum when South Korea jointly hosted the 2002 FIFA World Cup finals with Japan.

Japanese *manga*, which represents the largest comic industry in the world with hundreds of weekly and monthly publications, is being enjoyed by readers around the world and inspiring various spin-offs and alternations in different markets.

Among the South Korean movies made in recent years, blockbusters such as *"200-Pound Beauty," "Highway Star," "Black House," "Kidnapping Granny K"* and *"Lovers Behind"* were all based on the Japanese originals.

The South Korean movie industry, in particular, is where Japanese *manga* are having a major influence. From 2002 to 2005, only two South Korean films were based on Japanese content, but the number rose to three in 2006 and eight in 2007, including the hit, *"Highway Star."*

Industry watchers say the South Korean entertainment industry's reliance on Japanese cultural products will only increase because Japanese *manga* and novels have massive popularity around the world.

The gap between the Japanese and South Korean cartoon markets is big, with the Japanese market, worth around 4 trillion won,

Photos: KBS



A scene from "Boys Over Flowers," a South Korean TV drama based on the eponymous Japanese comic series by Yoko Kamio. It abides by the timeless formula in which a rich boy falls in love with a working-class girl. (Courtesy of KBS)

Photos: ©KAMIO Yoko/Shueisha Inc.



This 1992-2004 Japanese comic series "Hana-yori-Dango" was the original of South Korea's TV drama "Boys Over Flowers" which became a smash hit. Its publisher says it has sold more than 59 million copies.

being about 40 times larger than the South Korean market, which is worth around 124.2 billion won.

"Old Boy," a Japanese comic book series created by Garon Tsuchiya and Nobuaki Minegishi, was adapted into a widely acclaimed South Korean film, "Oldboy," in 2003 by Korean director Park Chan-wook.

Japanese *manga* and *anime* are also inspiring the South Korean computer game industry. "Keroro" and "Dragon Ball" are among the Japanese animations developed as games by South Korean online game publishers. The increasing Korean-Japanese co-productions present new possibilities for better chemistry between the two countries over the sharing of cultural content.

Animations and games have a close relation in that they have an overlapping group of users and similar storylines.

Despite the Japanese cultural boom, however, South Korean game publishers rely more on Korean cartoons and animations to develop game titles as Japanese copyright holders have shown less interest in developing the games. And there is also the tough challenge of converting the unique styles of Japanese animations into three-dimensional (3D) graphics, which have become conventional in South Korean online games.

However, with a number of Korean online games based on Japanese *manga* and animations becoming commercially successful, Japanese animation makers are showing growing interest in the online game market.

"Sgt. Frog (Sergeant Keroro)," a *manga* by Mine Yoshizaki which was later made into a television animation series directed by Junichi Sato, has spawned two popular online games in South Korea — "Keroro Racing" and "Keroro Fighter." "Sgt. Frog" is popular in

South Korea for its humorous plots based on the bumbling attempts of frog-like aliens, led by Sgt. Keroro, to conquer Earth. However, Keroro is forced to do meaningless chores and errands for his adopted human family after his army abandons his platoon on Earth.

"Dragon Ball Online" is a multiplayer online role-playing game being developed jointly in South Korea and Japan. The computer game version of "Dragon Ball," first introduced as *manga* in 1984, is based on a storyline set 216 years after the conclusion of the original cartoon series.

"Dragon Ball" creator Akira Toriyama currently has a great deal of creative control over the project, both supervising the story and artistic designs, including characters and plots. It has been known that Toriyama has been working on the project for the last five years, presenting a good example of collaboration between South Korean and Japanese content creators.

### Behind Cultural Power — Otaku

What is the biggest strength of Japanese content? It is creativity. In Japan, popular cartoons or novels are frequently adapted into television dramas and films, creating synergy effects between different platforms.

Critics of South Korean television dramas have complained that they rely too much on stereotypical "Cinderella stories." So the creativeness of Japanese shows, although some are taken as bizarre here, comes as fresh to local viewers.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that the engines behind Japanese creativeness are the fanatical followers of comic books and animations, commonly called *otaku*, who are also a major consumer force. The word *otaku* became conventional in the late 1980s when it was used to describe a person, usually male, with exceptional interest in particular subjects, mostly *manga* or *anime*.

The people now describing themselves as *otaku* have evolved as a Japanese subculture, and are now finding brethren in North America, Europe and Asia, including South Korea where an increasing number of fans are proudly describing themselves as "oh deok hoos" or "oh deoks," following the pronunciation of the Japanese term.

Toward the end of the 1990s, the *otaku* culture began to flourish as *anime*, *manga* and games become a crucial part of Japanese soft power.

According to the Nomura Research Institute, there are about 2.85 million people in Japan who could be described as *otaku*. Once a fringe group, they have become an economic force, spending \$2.5





Photos: KBS



A scene from the South Korean drama, "He Who Can't Marry," which is based on a Japanese drama with the same name and portrays the daily episodes of a man described as an *otaku*, a role played by popular heartthrob Ji Jin-hee. (Courtesy of KBS)

### 'Softer' Power

billion a year on comics, animations, computer games, action figures and other copyrighted products. This is one of the most distinguishable characteristics of Japanese *otaku*, who contribute as an influential consumer group, unlike South Koreans, who are accustomed to downloading free music files and films on the Internet instead of buying copyrighted products.

Now, *otaku*-inspired consumer culture also seems to be expanding outside Japan. Devout consumers with the willingness to spend money are found all over the world as Japanese-style cartoons, games and other cultural products are becoming hip in dozens of other countries. The global *otaku* stay connected with Japanese popular culture by watching animations, reading translated *manga* and thus contributing to a word-of-mouth promotion for Japanese cultural products.

In South Korea, youngsters can be found in costumes from a *manga* show (*cosplay* or costume role play), a kind of Japanese sub-culture centered on dressing as characters from *manga*, *anime*, video games or sometimes movies and Japanese pop music.

And a recently aired South Korean drama, "He Who Can't Marry," which is based on a Japanese drama with the same name, portrays the daily episodes of a man described as an *otaku*, a role played by popular heartthrob Ji Jin-hee, reflecting that characters with "dorkier DNA" are becoming hot leading men in the South Korean showbiz. The acceptance of "*otaku* culture" in South Korea reflects not only the popularity of Japan's cultural content, but also its distinctive consumption patterns.

*Cosplay*, dramas, *manga* and *anime* are not the only cultural exports that have proved popular in South Korea. Many Japanese novels written by authors such as Kaori Ekuni are popular among South Korean readers.

Of the 100 best-selling books at Kyobo Book Center, the largest bookstore in Seoul, the number of Japanese novels rose from 15 in 2003 to 42 in 2007, exceeding the number of Korean titles on the list. In the country's publishing market as a whole, publications translated from Japanese accounted for 8.6%, or 53,225 items, of all publications in South Korea in 2007.

Soft power, the art of influencing people, has a growing impact in many countries these days. The concept has different meanings and origins but, mostly, the source of soft power comes from a country's culture that is found attractive to people in other countries.

As South Korea is attempting to lengthen the Korean pop culture boom in Asia by strengthening its support of the local content industry, Japan is also seeking to strengthen its soft power by promoting its cultural products.

But it is important to notice soft power can bring a backlash from users and consumers, too. Although the so-called "Korean Wave" has swept Asian countries in recent years, it also creates anti-Korean sentiment in some countries such as Japan and China due to the aggressive marketing strategies, nationalistic content and cynicism in local markets over the limited content and genres.

Japan may face the same problem too, although it is well-placed in terms of exercising its soft power. The country has the benefit of having both its traditional and contemporary culture enjoyed by consumers worldwide. Asian consumers have embraced Japanese cultural products such as *sushi*, *karaoke*, J-pop, fashion, electronic gizmos and games, television dramas, *manga* and *anime*.

However, Japan still has an image problem in East Asia today as a country that is seen as slow to show remorse for its past militarism and imperialism. Particularly, South Korea and Japan have been already at odds over a variety of volatile issues, including Japanese politicians' repeated visits to Tokyo's Yasukuni war shrine, where high-profile war criminals are honored, and other matters relating to Japan's aggression before and during World War II. There are also territorial disputes, regarding the islets of Dokdo, and a flap over Japanese school textbooks authored by right-wing scholars.

To seek to better influence other countries through culture, Japan should properly use its cultural power in a "softer" way and acquire a new benign image, which coexists uneasily with, rather than supersedes, the negative images of the past. **JS**

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