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ARTICLE

Commentary: Recombinant Korea in Late Interdiscursivity

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Abstract

The papers in this special issue, "Localizing Hallyu: The Semiotics of the Korean Wave in Media and Discourse," observe how Korea-sourced popular semiotic forms recombine anew, and are recontextualized afar, through various pathways of mediatization. The authors analyze commodified semiosis in an era of late interdiscursivity. Under the conditions of late interdiscursivity, the relationship between intertextuality and interdiscursivity is profoundly stretched: tight but simplified intertextuality intersects loose but elaborate interdiscursivity. The ubiquitous presence of Korean cultural forms around the world signals both the continuity of South Korea's export-oriented economic trajectory, as well as its adaptation to and well-timed entry point into late interdiscursivity's cultural-industrial conditions.

Keywords: interdiscursivity; intertextuality; Korean wave

In 1984, historian Bruce Cumings argued that the rapid economic development of South Korea following the Korean War (1950–53) could not be explained without understanding the role of the industry life cycle in the Northeast Asian political-economic system. Cumings focused on the generative synergy between, on the one hand, South Korea's post-liberation national ambition as a developmental state under a military dictatorship, and, on the other, a regionally broader and historically deeper political economy of empire—the violent expansion of the Japanese empire from the late 19th Century through the first half of the 20th, and the United States as an imperial presence in Asia Pacific throughout the 20th. Under these historical conditions, Cumings argued, South Korea (like Taiwan) was able to ascend rapidly in the postwar period through well-timed entry points into a series of ascending industry life cycles: textiles, steel, automobiles, and light electronics. These were country-specific phases of development that passed from one part of the empire and post-empire to another. Thinking back to the rise and fall of agricultural sectors in the early 20th Century, Cumings wrote: "If there has been a miracle in East Asia, it has not occurred just

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since 1960; it would be profoundly ahistorical to think that it did. Furthermore, it is misleading to assess the industrialization pattern in any one of these countries: such an approach misses, through a fallacy of disaggregation, the fundamental unity and integrity of the regional effort in this century" (1984, 3). Fast forward four decades, through South Korea's democratization and recovery from the Asian Financial Crisis, and we can see what looks like a sustained trajectory of the export-oriented economy extending into the domains of advanced technology and popular culture—two sectors of global capitalism in which "Korea" (of the South) is a leading global brand.

The papers in this special issue, "Localizing Hallyu: The Semiotics of the Korean Wave in Media and Discourse," each address an aspect of the legacy of South Korea's export-oriented economy, focusing specifically on how its exported cultural commodities are "taken up" and recontextualized abroad.[1] Examining commoditized fragments of Korean popular culture that now circulate globally, they track the way ideas of "Korea" materialize semiotically in places and imaginaries beyond the peninsula. Through these papers, and through the case of Hallyu more generally, we behold what we might call, riffing on Werner Sombart's term (with a healthy dose of facetiousness), an era of *late interdiscursivity*. Whereas recontextualization is an unavoidable empirical fact of all sign use, in late interdiscursivity recontextualization is the constitutive social fact of global culture.

To make sense of this, let us recall the distinction between interdiscursivity and intertextuality, especially the way these terms refer to differently organized arrangements of indexical and iconic modes of signification. Michael Silverstein (2005) understood interdiscursivity as the more general and "primordial" relational property across events and actions, and intertextuality as the more specific structural property of compositional likeness. For Silverstein, interdiscursivity foregrounds its temporal and directional dimensions, while intertextuality—as logically achronic and directionally neutral—does not. Whereas the relationship between intertextuality and interdiscursivity is a fundamental dynamic for all social reproduction, the relationship between the two in late interdiscursivity is profoundly stretched: tight but simplified intertextuality intersects loose but elaborate interdiscursivity. (The productive modifier construction "late+[morphologically derived abstract noun]" as the formula for the phrase "late interdiscursivity" might itself be taken as an example of this semiotic stretching.) These features of late interdiscursivity become the conditions for the multiply recombinant processes of global mediatization, or the ubiquitous "lamination of a process of commoditization upon a process of communication" (Agha 2011, 173; see also Agha 2007). The digital "meme" is a most obvious symptom of this stretched relationship between tight, thinned out intertextuality and loose, wide-ranging interdiscursivity (and the meme-coin is this configuration's exploitative expression). To return to Cumings's formulation regarding South Korea in 20th Century, let us say that, in the 21st Century, the ubiquitous presence of Korean cultural forms around the world is a testament both to the continuity of South Korea's export-oriented economic

[1]On three Korean waves before "The Wave"—namely, classical music, Protestant missions, and martial arts (Taekwondo)—and a broader history of the social, political-economic, and diasporic infrastructure of cultural export more generally, see Harkness (2025).

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trajectory, as well as to its adaptation to and well-timed entry point into late interdiscursivity's cultural-industrial conditions. Responding to these facts, the papers in this special issue take up the dense coupling of tight but simplified intertextuality and loose but elaborate interdiscursivity through ever-new sites of recontextualization. The papers do so by observing how Korea-sourced semiotic forms recombine anew, and are recontextualized afar, through various pathways of mediatization.

Joyhanna Yoo's paper, "Locally Global: Entextualizations of the K-morpheme in Contemporary Korean Popular Culture," addresses the conundrums of late interdiscursivity head on. The "K-" prefix, as Yoo points out, is being applied to an ever-expanding list of things that can be branded as "Korean" (thus comparable to the "late" modifier construction mentioned above). Alongside the tightly consistent, simplified intertextuality of "K-" constructions, self-styled media professionals—"influencers"—have emerged to manage the wide-ranging, ever-expanding, seemingly uncontrollable interdiscursivity of semiotic domains that new K-intertexts open up. The job of influencers is precisely to perform their own self-branded expertise by metadiscursively generating, constraining, directing, and predicting interdiscursive relations. They do so by presenting themselves as authorized speakers of and on the expanding list of things that intertextually tight, meme-ified "K-" constructions denote. But as Yoo notes, this parasitic work manifests, as she puts it, a "shift in Korean popular cultural branding from the fully export-based focus of years past (that is, from one context to another) to a more locally global orientation whereby globally networked audiences are recruited to be cultural and national consumers and experts." Yoo's examples show that the linkage between the K- prefix and the K-influencer profession is at work across a number of ideological and political-economic shifts: from the *denominazione di origine controllata* of traceable sourcing ("from Korea") to a recombinant feature matrix of identification-in-circulation and value-in-potential ("Korean style"; "Korean quality"; "Korea-ish" [see Inouchi's paper, this issue]); from a history of cultural export to the manipulations of global brand; from the developmental state to speculative liens on the promise of Korea's continuing global relevance. From Yoo's findings, we also infer the temporal shift from earlier nation-building claims regarding five millennia of civilizational history to contemporary industry-cycle panics about the relative longevity of the K-trend itself. Like the semiotic processes of genericide described by Robert Moore (2003), each time the K- prefix is added to a class of commodities or commodified practices, it widens the gap between "Korea" as an historically locatable national origin and the global semiotic debris that collects in the various wakes of the "Korean Wave."

Elaine Chun's paper, "Korean Words in the OED: Race, Gender, and the Modern English Speaker," pours cold water on gleeful media celebrations over the inclusion of Korean words into the Oxford English Dictionary. Chun does so by developing a critical analysis of the subtle metapragmatics by which the inclusion of Korean words into the OED is gendered and raced and, like Yoo's analysis, by which non-Korean populations are recruited as cultural experts on Korea. In Chun's account, expertise on Korean words in global circulation has historically been authorized through the unmarked speaker of English. The history of the study of Korea in Europe and the United States confirms empirically that the original global K-fans were indeed missionaries and emissaries, soldiers and peace corps volunteers, businessmen and English teachers. Generations of English speakers from the US, the UK, and elsewhere found

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their way to Korea and returned home as experts who introduced, celebrated, and pronounced upon Korean people and things. In the era of late interdiscursivity, however, Korea-sourced semiotic forms have rapidly expanded and recombined at levels of semiotic complexity that exceed the ability of the older, colder scholarly Koreanist to properly recognize, let alone authoritatively participate in. Overtaken by the speed, excess, affect, and scales of absorption of these newer Korean forms in the speech of the feminized Korea Fan, the figure of the Koreanist, Chun suggests, recedes as a legitimate authority on Korean words in global circulation. And yet, as Chun recognizes, the OED is a thoroughly intertextual institution by design, with a consistent mode of interdiscursivity-constraining enregisterment and firm *intra*discursive commitments across its entries. The effect is to continue to invoke the Koreanist as the listening subject of Korean words in English. The feminized Korea fan, then, rather than being presented as an authority on Korean knowledge, is instead absorbed through the nested metapragmatics of the dominant listening subject, becoming yet another object of Korean Studies.

Ayumi Inouchi's paper, "Koreaish: Aesthetics, Qualia, and the Sensory Emergence of Korea among Japanese Young Women," maintains a focus on the political dimensions of interdiscursive form but shifts from the denotational textuality of words and word constructions to the aesthetic textuality of feeling. Inouchi's analysis foregrounds the semiotic domain of rhematics, where complex sign phenomena are characterized by the Peircean category of firstness. In particular, Inouchi follows the rhematic cline (Harkness 2022) from language to feeling, i.e., from the Japanese word *kankokuppo* (Koreaish)—a recently innovated rhematic symbolic legisign—through rhematized indexical processes that combine the intensification and deintensification of various intersemiotic features, finally leading to a synthesized feeling-state of "soft unity." Here, Inouchi observes that the sensuously "blurred boundaries" of soft unity in Japan, linked via the lexicalized qualisign of "Koreaish" to enregistered forms of gendered personhood, allow for a balancing of two seemingly incompatible tendencies: progressive feminist liberation (via independent consumer choice) and post-feminist conservatism (via feminized beauty conformity). The clearly articulated aesthetic—indeed, rhematic—intertextuality across various semiotic media (visual, tactile, embodied), which manifest the feeling of "soft unity," makes its interdiscursive reach even more expansive. The rhematic tightening and simplification of aesthetic intertextuality across semiotic modalities affords a loosening and elaboration of interdiscursivity's indexical targets, linking oppositional political orientations within feminized Japanese imaginaries of "Koreaish"—imaginaries that themselves may be persistently, even increasingly, distant from the women, things, and gender politics of "Korea" itself.

Finally, in the paper by Christian Go and Leif Andrew Garinto, "Civic Stanning and the Semiotics of K-Pop Fan Activism in the Philippines," extremes of recontextualization in late interdiscursivity are vividly and consequentially at work. In their account, Filipino K-pop fans take up Korean popular forms for local political ends. These actions manifest the relation between a tight but simplified intertextuality—conjoining emblematically saturated combinatoric elements, such as song lyrics, image fragments, and K-pop lightsticks and other concert swag—with loose but elaborate interdiscursivity. Korean popular culture is reappropriated by Filipino youth for the

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expression of civic values, their locally preferred forms of political messaging, and their preferred presidential campaign. Go and Garinto interpret the successful intertextual replication of K-pop combinatorics within the multidirectional interdiscursive space of progressive politics as evidence of value alignment between local Filipino youth culture and globally circulating Korean popular culture. It does seem to be a plausible interpretation of the ethnographic and media material they analyze. However, more generally, this stretchy interdiscursivity is, by definition, an expansive process of reindexicalization; whether or not their values truly align, "Korea" undergoes recombinant processes in the service of Filipino political aspirations.

A consistent theme across all four papers is the way local institutional forms, with their own histories, ideologies, and processes of semiotic reproduction, selectively incorporate Korea-sourced forms of popular culture. While that fact itself is a generally predictable function of culture, the particular selection, uptake, and recontextualization of forms is not predictable. Under the conditions of late interdiscursivity, we really cannot say what lies beyond the interdiscursive edge of our collective experience. And we cannot know just how "late" it is. As these four excellent papers demonstrate, the Korean Wave probably has more to teach us.

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