

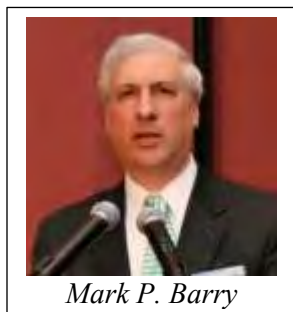
K-Dramas and the Global Reach of Korean Popular Culture

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Unificationists were among the first binge-watchers in the world. Well before our era of watching multiple episodes of a previously aired TV show, many of us became consumed with enjoying Korean historical dramas (*saeguks*) at night. A lot of us started with DVDs of episodes of *Jumong* (whose lead actor met with Reverend Moon in 2007), and followed it up with *Hur Jun*, *Jewel in the Palace* or the modern romance, *Winter Sonata* (filmed at the Yongpyong ski resort). Amazingly, compared to binge-watchers of American television, we enjoyed it all even despite having to read subtitles since K-dramas are in the Korean language. These dramas typically were 20, 50, even 80 or more episodes long (many “seasons” of a U.S. drama are just 13 episodes).

For many Unificationists, our enjoyment of a steady diet of Korean historical dramas began six to eight years ago. If we couldn’t borrow the discs, sometimes we could find a show streamed — often in several 10 minute segments — from various transient websites. Real enthusiasts would learn how to download, through peer-to-peer sharing, “torrents” of episodes of dramas we wanted from fans who uploaded them for other fans. Ad hoc groups of English-speaking Koreans would create often high-quality subtitles for the original episodes so that non-Koreans could understand what was being said.



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For Unificationists, above all, the reason to watch episode upon episode of Korean historical dramas was because of the heart expressed in the ways people cared for one other. It seemed that especially in Korea’s traditional culture, we could see a more idealized form of how people could relate. These drama episodes certainly had good guys and bad guys, and plenty of demonstrations of utmost loyalty and filial piety, but they also had real heart — the kind we would be hard-pressed to find on American television.

The irony is this mini-phenomenon among Unificationists, Western *and* Japanese, foreshadowed the growing phenomenon of the popularity of K-dramas not just throughout Asia but globally, including the United States.

The major Korean television networks had already begun to license some of their programming to Asia, including Japan, China, Southeast Asia and beyond. But they did not anticipate the growing popularity of K-dramas in the West. In 2009, the first licensed site to offer streaming video of Korean dramas to an American audience was launched, called DramaFever. Earlier this month, it had become so successful that it was bought by Japan’s mobile communications giant, SoftBank.

As DramaFever grew, their assumptions about who would watch and why were turned upside down. They presumed that their episodes of primarily Korean dramas (with some Japanese and Chinese shows) —

which could be viewed for free with commercial interruptions or without ads for a monthly fee — would be watched primarily by Asian-Americans. But here's what they found: viewers were mostly *women* ages 18 to 24, of whom 40% were white, 30% Latino, 15% black, and 15% Asian. DramaFever estimates their subscribers watch over 50 hours of episodes each month. Independent research confirms these demographics. So, in 2014, millions of Americans are binge-watching Korean dramas, subtitles and all, much as Unificationists had been doing a few years earlier.

Of course, Unificationists have preferred historical dramas (the good *and* mediocre ones) with some modern exceptions, such as *Shining Inheritance*, *Kimchi Family*, or the recent hit, *My Love from Another Star*. But what the typical non-UC American viewer of Korean dramas prefers are the modern programs, whether romantic comedies or dramas. For members of our movement, we've always had a yearning to better understand the culture from which Reverend and Mrs. Moon come, and the unique strengths it has to advance the providence. But for Westerners in general, watching Korean dramas is an opportunity to explore cultural narratives that differ from their own, and, as entertainment, is a gateway to a culture that seems to have qualities missing in our own. In Iran, for example, Korean dramas often are far more popular than local programming. Korean dramas also are popular throughout Latin America, which is already accustomed to watching *telenovelas*.

In North Korea, K-dramas, though banned outright, have become increasingly popular not just as entertainment, but for the window they provide into the lives of their countrymen in the South. They are prohibited because they influence social consciousness and contradict what North Koreans are taught about the wider world. The awareness that South Korea has a far higher standard of living is becoming pervasive in the North. Episodes are smuggled in from China on DVDs and USB sticks. A good guess is that many young people — and some middle-aged as well — regularly watch South Korean dramas. But if caught watching, North Koreans can be severely punished.



A still (top) and video clip from the end of episode 73 of Jumong, depicting the marriage of Prince Jumong and Lady Sosuhno, the founders of the Korean kingdom of Goguryeo (from about the 2:00 mark). This is the original Korean HD clip; the full episode in SD with English subtitles can be watched [here](#) (image and clip courtesy of MBC).

Some of us have been watching Korean historical dramas pretty much continuously for the past seven years or so (and apparently so have Reverend and Mrs. Moon). They are far more entertaining, enjoyable and edifying than most of what one can find on American television.

That said, after countless hours of watching these dramas — and lots of redundant plots and reused motifs — one can't help but wonder about some of the messages that cumulatively come from these programs. After all, the way some typical characters behave is how Korean directors and screenwriters deliberately have chosen to portray their culture, admittedly first to the Korean audience, but eventually also to the rest of the world.

One could say that many historical Korean dramas present the full range of Korean character, warts and all (e.g., the bad guys always vehemently deny their wrongdoing even when everyone saw them commit the crime). In that sense, Unificationists, having decades of experience working with Korean leaders, can readily relate to the good and bad traits depicted in these dramas. It's a stretch to say that "everything I know about Korea I learned from watching Korean dramas," but it is probably correct to say that Western

Unificationists, at least, watch Korean dramas partly because they remind us of our experience relating to Koreans over many years.

In the last decade, the world has become familiar with the “Korean Wave” or *Hallyu* phenomenon, which until now had been largely associated with Korean pop music. Korea’s pop music is a separate discussion, though it has made significant inroads beyond Asia into Europe and is starting to make an impact on the U.S. But the emergence of Korean dramas as a serious source of entertainment for Americans — not only with the emergence of sites such as DramaFever and other licensed K-drama sites,* but also the fact that selected Korean dramas can be found on YouTube, Hulu and Netflix — is far more significant than music. Film and television, when done well, can be utterly captivating, especially when viewers can immerse themselves into an entirely foreign culture but with universal themes.

For Unificationists who joined decades ago, it is astounding that Korea, a country which in the early 1970s was still poor and had just recovered from the devastation of the Korean War, could rise to where it is not only one of the world’s leading economic powers, but is now a cultural powerhouse.

It would be best to view this new phenomenon not as heaven’s way to Koreanize the world, but as a means to help the world adapt those qualities inherent in Korean culture that could enable it to go beyond the existing conflicts and injustices, which are the staple of daily life. In that sense, we could see the growing globalization of Korean popular culture as a way to help all humanity to better become true individuals, each with one’s unique relationship with God, rather than a method for the absorption of humankind into a Koreanized world culture whose center is Korea.

*others are Viki, SoompiTV, Mnet America, and mVibo

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Photo at top: A still of Kim Soo-hyun and Jun Ji-hyun from My Love from Another Star (viewable link), a hit romantic comedy-drama that aired in South Korea from December 2013 to February 2014 (photo courtesy SBS). An American remake is under development at ABC.