

Surfing the Hallyu towards Creative Futures

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K-culture: A new chapter for a creative economy
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In the late 1990s-early 21st Century, an extraordinary thing happened. Seemingly out of nowhere, huge and growing tsunami of popular culture products came roaring out of Korea and across Asia, soon reaching Hawaii where I live, and eventually elsewhere in the US, Europe and Oceania.

How in the world did that happen? Why in the world did it happen?

Korea was not known for its creativity in popular culture in the way Japan, Hong Kong, and the US—or at least California—are well-known.

What happened in Korea?

I don't know, and I hope someone in the audience today can tell me the details, but someone—or several people—suddenly decided that in addition to fertilizer, oil tankers, automobiles, and electronics, that popular culture could become a valuable export product for Korea. Policies forbidding Koreans from accessing Japanese anime and manga were reversed; policies—backed up by good funding—favoring the development of Korean popular cultural products were quickly put in place; and before you knew it, a Korean wave was rolling across the world with K-pop, soap operas, anime, movies, and electronic games suddenly becoming significant sources of income for Korea.

Many scholars and pop critics inside and outside of Korea sought to explain the phenomenon.

Some said that "Korea's dynamic young generation is the engine behind the success story. Their creativity and imagination is blossoming as a result of the country's newfound economic prosperity and political democracy."

Others agreed that the increased "democratization" in Korea "has also played a role. In movies and music, full-fledged freedom of expression is guaranteed. Previously taboo subjects such as ideological struggles have been allowed, and a full degree of freedom is granted in depicting such subjects."

As such, some people said that Hallyu is perhaps a harbinger of a general flowering of Pan-Asian culture—heralding the emergence of the long-awaited Pacific Century, following the fading Century first of Europe and then of North America.

An owner of a Beijing video and music shop that stocks Korean products was quoted as saying that "Korean pop culture is seen as fresh and edgy, but non-threatening because they're Asian and look like us. So it's easy to identify with them." Korea has never invaded Asian countries and so carries none of the negative history associated with both the US and Japan.

Moreover, Hallyu soap operas initially dealt with personal and social issues in ways that ordinary Asians understand very well in their daily lives unlike the fantastic and typically violent images of US and Japanese popular culture.

At the same time Korea is also modern, fully developed country. It proudly demonstrates to other Asians that they too can catch up and succeed on a global scale while retaining fundamental Asian values.

Some critics disagreed. They said that no such extravagant explanations were needed at all. Hallyu was just a passing fad. It is just the latest new thing and would quickly pass as all fads do. There is nothing new or creative about it. It is nothing more than another example of what Korea does best: imitate and improve on well-known products that creative people in other countries dreamed up on their own. Koreans are just revising and skillfully marketing a product that is known to sell very well.

In part because of the continuing success of the Hallyu even today, the idea of Korea as a creative economy has gained some political traction.

But, a “creative economy” (or a “creative society”) can mean many things. What does or should it mean for Korea?

Here are four possible meanings of a creative economy. Which do you prefer or intend?

—one meaning of Korea as a “creative economy” is to develop policies, programs, and incentives that encourage people to be “creative” by improving existing or emerging technologies, through better design, packaging, branding, software, and orgware in order to have greater economic growth and more jobs. This definition seems to be what the current government means when it said recently that a creative economy means “combining creative ideas with science and information and communications technology (ICT) to help create new businesses, markets and industries and to generate more jobs.”

But, this is nothing new. Korea has been extremely creative in this dimension for many years, from its state-of-the-art high-tech shipbuilding industry, to the products of Samsung going from once meaning “cheap imitations” to now meaning “world-class,

cutting-edge, highly-attractive electronics”. Korea is a creative economy already. It should just be even more creative in the future, perhaps.

--a second meaning of a “creative economy” is one that encourages people to be creative in basic research that might lead to new electronic technologies that are not being developed elsewhere so that Korea will become a world leader in creating new electronic products. Some people say that Korea should become “the Silicon Valley of Asia” fostering the equivalent of Korean Apples that create new world-class electronic products and new globally-popular trends, rather than just improving existing products and trends.

This is a much more exciting idea. It means that Korea needs to become what it has never been before—a risk-taker on the global stage. Because for every product that succeeds and takes-off, a hundred products will crash and burn, along with the thousands of people and millions of won spent on developing them.

Is Korea willing to become a risk-taking society? I hope so, but if so, it must allow people to take big risks and fail, without their lives and futures being destroyed. Many risky new products will fail, and some ideas may seem to be ridiculous, obscene or subversive, but no one should be allowed to become a “failure” themselves if their ideas don’t work out. They should be enabled to try and try again, if they wish, and to fail again and again as well.

--a third example of a creative economy is based on something different altogether. A creative economy is one that encourages greater development not of conventional IT products, but rather the greatly enhanced development of all of the creative arts such as the fine arts, drama, dance, cinema, television, fashion design, interior design, and toys. This is what it means today to be a creative economy in many parts of the world: to recognize that the arts and sports, *per se*, are valuable economic products, and so to encourage more valuable “cultural products.” This was the basis of the first Korean Wave from 1997, soon augmented by greater emphasis on the creation of popular culture products such as K-Pop, soap operas, and electronic games. This third meaning of a creative economy understands that creativity and culture are not distractions from—or mere decorative additions to—a “real” economy. To the contrary, creative cultural products themselves are one of the major bases for a new and even more profitable economy beyond the products of agriculture, industry, and information.

--however, a fourth meaning of a creative economy goes much farther in this direction. It expands the development of creative content products beyond existing forms into research and development of novel forms and novel media. In this fourth meaning, Korea will now focus on developing entirely new modes of culture, entertainment, and sports; going beyond reliance on electronic information technology and finding ways to bring creative content into cutting edge biotechnologies, nanotechnologies, new materials, and especially into space activities including space tourism--so that Korea will become the world’s leader in transforming all economies from their current focus on the maintenance of obsolete industrial/information societies towards becoming new and inspiring dream societies instead.

I favor the fourth meaning. I urge you to consider it to, if you are not already.

Over the last two decades a few futurists have shown that industrial and information societies are transforming into what Ernest Sternberg calls "The Economy of Icons"; what Rolf Jensen designates "The Dream Society"; what Joseph Pine and James Gilmore refer to it as "The Experience Economy" or "The Conceptual Society", and what Virginia Postel writes of as "the substance of style" and the rise of aesthetic value in economic life. All of these people are using different words to describe the same phenomenon. I call these new economy "A dream society of icons and aesthetic experience". It is a society that produces and consumes not information, but aesthetically-exciting dreams.

Rolf Jensen says,

"The sun is setting on the Information Society--even before we have fully adjusted to its demands as individuals and as companies. We have lived as hunters and as farmers, we have worked in factories, and now we live in an information-based society whose icon is the computer: We stand facing the fifth type of society: the Dream Society".

Very importantly, Jensen sees society finally moving from a dependence on writing to the dominance of audiovisual images: "Today, knowledge is stored as letters; we learn through the alphabet--this is the medium of the Information Society. Most likely, the medium of the Dream Society will be the picture". Jensen observes that Henry Ford was the icon of the Industrial Age while Bill Gates is the icon of the Information Age. "The icon of the Dream Society has probably been born, but she or he is most likely still at school and is probably not the best pupil in the class. Today, the best pupil is the one who makes a first-rate symbolic analyst. In the future, it may be the student who gives the teacher a hard time--an imaginative pupil who is always staging new games that put things into new perspectives." "He or she will be the great storyteller of the twenty-first century." "...Steven Spielberg [is] the closest we now have to a Dream Society icon."

I entirely agree with Jensen that this is a possible future of the world. Indeed, it is already around us in many ways. I take this symposium, and the interest your nation's president has shown in encouraging Korea to become a creative economy, to be a recognition of that.

But if change towards exceptional creativity is desired, then changing Korea's educational system is essential. And there have been steps in that direction, but not nearly enough.

But what should the focus of a new educational system be: on identifying and fostering a few creative geniuses, or in bringing out the creativity in every Korean, young and old, richer or poorer? One answer might be to do both, but I believe that nurturing the creativity in everyone is by far the more important. To focus on a few geniuses discourages everyone else from being creative at all, or at least from being as creative as they could be. Everyone is a genius about something, and all geniuses are ignorant or

inept in many other ways. Our educational systems should nurture, celebrate, and use whatever is the genius in each of us.

The essence of traditional education has been to foster convergent thinking: to help everyone learn the one correct answer. For this, rote learning and standardized testing is fine. To produce workers or managers for industrial and information societies, this kind of narrow and conformist education was good enough.

But for a creative economy—for a Dream Society—indeed simply to survive in the worlds of the futures—we need to encourage divergent thinking. We need to help people understand that there are few if any right answers to the challenges of today and tomorrow, and so to encourage learners to find many possible useful, functional, possible answers, and to explore their consequences.

We should not foster a society of a few brilliant winners and many, many losers. To the contrary, we need to recognize that everyone can be a winner in some things and a loser in other ways; that we need to nourish all talents and help everyone work together towards creative and practical solutions to complex challenges.

Now, a word about jobs and job growth.

A truly creative economy will **not** produce more meaningful jobs. That is the secret of Apple's success. Apple makes a lot of money for a few people by employing almost no one and making nothing. While many of its products are now manufactured by “cheap labor” elsewhere in the world, most of those products could be and will soon be produced without any human labor at all. For the most part, we require people to have jobs now not because we need their labor, but because we need them as consumers. More importantly, we need to keep them busy working meaningless so they won't have the time and energy to get into trouble.

We need to understand that an economy of “full employment” like the kind we have tried to have for the last fifty to 150 years is not possible any more—unless energy and economic collapse occurs, in which case demand for manual labor will become widespread again.

Robots, artificial intelligence, autonomous entities, cyborgs, artefacts, ubiquitous technologies have already just about taken over all manual and mental jobs that once upon a time only humans could do. New, real jobs requiring human labor and intelligence will not emerge to take the place of the old, necessary jobs the robots have taken over.

It is time now to strive for a world of Full Unemployment. We must separate “work” from “access to products” that are produced without much if any human labor.

A world free of meaningless make-work should also be a world of great creativity. The one thing that humans still do better than their machines is to create. And people could be

very creative indeed if they were not required to labor all day at body-sapping, mind-numbing jobs.

The Dream Society of the future will be one of leisure, abundance, creativity, and full unemployment!

But, a Dream Society is only ONE possible future for Korea.

No country or company should commit to any one future until it has considered the major alternative futures. A dream society is one alternative future, but there are other futures you must consider as well.

For the past decade or so, I have also been calling the attention of decision makers in Korea and elsewhere to what I call 'The Unholy Trinity, Plus One'. This is a future without cheap and abundant energy; with unstable climate, insufficient food and water, severe environmental pollution; with global population growth and local population decline; without an economy that distributes wealth fairly; and with governments that have lost the ability to govern.

Unless the challenges of the Unholy Trinity are addressed sincerely, you may have no dream society, and no information society, or even no industrial society. You may re-enter an agricultural society once again, at best.

And that is by far too big a risk to take unknowingly.

In order to prepare for this, and for every person in Korea to enjoy a prosperous, meaningful life, I have also discussed with many Korean leaders and citizens the possibility that Korea should become a Conserver Society, if a Dream Society is not obtainable.

No one can predict the future. I cannot, and neither can you or anyone else in the world. We live in a world beyond prediction. But the future is within our influence and perhaps even our control in important ways. We must understand that Korea can no longer follow the leadership of other countries. There are no leaders to follow any more anywhere in the world. That time has come and gone. Korea did well during it, but it is over.

So if Korea really wants to have a creative economy within a creative society, it needs to begin to do the hard, honest, creative work of assessing the tsunamis racing towards Korea from the futures—not only the wonderful new technologies of the dream society, but also the challenges of the Unholy Trinity. After it has done this, then Korea can decide what path to create ahead. Don't put all of your futures in either a dream society, or in the continuation of an information society. That is far too risky.

Be creative and be courageous. I know you can do it. You have done it before. But the challenges are great and the stakes are high, so don't wait. Start here. Start now.

Thank you