Roll Over, Godzilla: Korea Rules

Seoul's Pop Culture Takes Asia by Storm

By NORMITSU ONISHI

TAIPEI, Taiwan — Here in one of the first corners of Asia hit by the “Korean Wave” of cultural exports, a television series about a royal cook, “A Jewel in the Palace,” proved so popular that it is now used to advertise South Korea on the Taipei subway. A huge hit in Mongolia, the drama also fueled a boom in tourists from Hong Kong visiting South Korea.

A weepy love story, “Winter Sonata,” became the rage in Uzbekistan after driving the Japanese into a frenzy last year. In Thailand and Malaysia, people devoured “A Tale of Autumn,” and Vietnamese were glued to “Lovers in Paris.” In China, South Korean dramas are sold, and pirated, everywhere, and the young adopt the clothing and hairstyles made cool by South Korean stars.

South Korea, historically more worried about fending off cultural domination by China and Japan than spreading its own culture abroad, is emerging as the pop culture leader of Asia. From well-packaged television dramas to slick movies, from pop music to online games, South Korean companies and stars are increasingly defining what the disparate people in East Asia watch, listen to and play.

The rise of South Korea’s entertainment industry, which began attracting heavy government investment only in the late 1990’s, jumped from 3.5 billion in 1999 to 24.5 billion in 2003. In 2003, South Korea exported 650 million in cultural products; the amount was so insignificant before 1998 that the government could not provide figures.

But the figures tell only part of the story. The booming South Korean presence on television and in the movies has spurred Asians to buy up South Korean goods and to travel to South Korea, traditionally not a popular tourist destination. The images that Asians traditionally have associated with the country — violent student marches, the demilitarized zone, division — have given way to trendy entertainers and cutting-edge technology.

Cindy Hsieh, 22, who was browsing through shelves of South Korean dramas at a video store here, said her parents became fans and visited South Korea last year.

“I used to think that Korea was a feudalistic, male-centered society,” Ms. Hsieh said. “Now I don’t have the same image as I had before. It seems like an open society, democratic.”

South Korean products and stars like Gween Sang Woo, in posters at center and right, are popular in Taipei.

South Korea’s entertainment industry was born for business and political reasons in the late 1990’s. Increasingly rich Asians were thought to be receptive to new sources of entertainment. What is more, South Korea, which long banned cultural imports from Japan, its former colonial ruler, was preparing to lift restrictions starting in 1998.

Seoul was worried about the onslaught of Japanese music, videos and dramas, already popular on the black market. So in 1998 the Culture Ministry, armed with a substantial budget increase, carried out its first five-year plan to build up the domestic industry. The ministry encouraged colleges to open culture industry departments, providing equipment and scholarships. The number of such departments has risen from almost zero to more than 900.

In 2001, the ministry opened the Korea Culture and Content Agency to encourage exports. By the time almost all restrictions on Japanese culture were lifted in January 2004, the Korean Wave — a term coined in China — had washed across Asia.

To South Koreans like Kim Hyun Kyung, a director at Cheil Communications, an advertising agency in Seoul, feeling the reach of their culture for the first time was surprising.

In 2001, during a trip to Los Angeles, she met a Chinese woman who brightened up when she learned that she was Korean.

“She was a big fan of Kim Hee Sun,” Ms. Kim said, referring to a South Korean actress who is now more popular in China than at home. “She was happy that I had the same last name as she did. We were meeting for the first time, but she had a favorable image of Korea.”

South Korean dramas and music have started edging out American and Japanese ones in Taiwan, which caught the Korean Wave early this decade.

Five years ago, Gala TV here paid $1,000 for one hour of a South Korean drama, compared with $15,000 to $20,000 for a Japanese one, said the network’s vice president, Li Tsung Pi. Now, a South Korean drama commands $7,000 to $15,000; a Japanese, $6,000 to $12,000.

“Korean dramas are considered more emotionally powerful, and their actors are willing to come here to promote them,” Mr. Li said. “Because of the Korean dramas, Taiwanese people have become more willing to buy their products.”

Sales of South Korean consumer goods and cars have risen sharply here in the last five years as well. The number of Taiwanese going to South Korea rose from 18,351 in 2000 to 32,553 last year, even though the overall number of Taiwanese traveling abroad fell during that period.

South Korea has also begun wielding the non-economic side of its new soft power. The official Korean Overseas Information Service last year gave “Winter Sonata” to Egyptian television, paying for the Arabic subtitles. The goal was to generate positive feelings in the Arab world toward the 3,200 South Korean soldiers stationed in northern Iraq.

There have been unintended effects too. Copies of South Korean dramas and music are being increasingly smuggled from China into North Korea. One popular drama in the Communist North was “All in,” the true story of a South Korean gambler who went to Las Vegas with only $18 and became a millionaire.

North Korean women began copying the hairstyle of its lead actress, Song Hae Kyo, prompting the authorities there to crack down on “unlady” hair, said Kim Yang Rae, director general of the Korean Foundation for Asian Culture Exchange.

In mid-June, a 20-year-old North Korean soldier, Yi Yong Su, defected across the demilitarized zone into the town of Chorwon in central South Korea. The private said he had grown to admire and yearn for South Korea after watching its television programs, South Korean military officials told reporters.

But the worry of a possible backlash — Taiwan, for instance, is considering levying a 20 percent tariff on Korean programs — impelled the Culture Ministry two years ago to form the cultural exchange foundation, to prevent Southeast Asian countries from feeling that they are regarded only as markets.

“We’ve never had this experience of seeing our culture spread outside our country,” Mr. Kim said about Korea’s modern history. “I’m very proud, but also very cautious.”

At the New Fantasy Travel agency here, about 80 percent of travelers to South Korea pick television theme tours, visiting spots where their favorite dramas were filmed, said the general manager, Louis Wang.

Mr. Wang himself is not a huge fan. But his children, who are, now feel closer to South Korea than to the country that considers Taiwan a renegade province. “They’ve been learning the lifestyle of Koreans, their fashion and their food,” Mr. Wang said. “So now they’re more familiar with Korea’s lifestyle than China’s.”