

# **Re-Orienting Tourism: Japanese Tourism in Korea and Asian Cultural integration**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the implications of the popularity of the Republic of Korea as one of the major tourist destinations of Japanese women for Japanese tourism, as well as for intra-Asian tourism. Reflecting the colonial past, Korea represented a feminised “other” in postwar Japan. In the 1960s and the 1970s, it used to be a popular destination as a site of sex tourism for Japanese men. Since the 1990s, however, the configuration of Korea as a site for male sexual pleasure has been replaced by a new reality: Korea as a primary destination of Japanese female tourists seeking for culinary delights and shopping. The popularity of Korean popular culture over the past few years has led to the further increase in the number of Japanese tourists in Korea, with some of them paying a visit to locations that they saw in popular Korean TV dramas such as “Winter Sonata”. I will examine how these shifting meanings of Korea and other Asian countries are redefining Japanese tourism in Asia and its implications for popular perceptions of Asia in bringing Japan closer to its neighbours. In doing so, I argue that intra-Asian tourism has the possibility of promoting regionalism and a sense of cultural solidarity in a region that has long been divided by memories of history and differences in political and/or economic systems. Overall, I aim to situate these issues in the context of a growing sense of cultural regionalism in East Asia.

## **Introduction**

This paper aims to situate Japanese tourist practices in Korea<sup>1</sup> in the context of growing cultural flows, in particular, *Hallyu* (the Korean wave), that have circulated within East and Southeast Asia and beyond, as well as of a sense of cultural regionalism that this phenomenon has produced.

In the fall of 2003, a Korean drama, “Winter Sonata” became a big hit in Japan. According to the Korean Economic Research Centre, the popularity of Bae Yong Joon, the male actor who played the role of protagonist in the drama, generated the profit of worth \$3 billion (Cho 2005: 167-168).

The drama, in particular, has gained enormous popularity with Japanese women who say that the unsophisticated filming style and heartfelt emotions of the characters make them nostalgic for Japan before its rise to wealth. The popularity of the drama has had a significant impact on its economy and society: it has boosted Japanese travel to South Korea, interest in Korean popular culture and registrations at dating agencies that specialize in introducing Japanese women to South Korean men (Japan Times 26 November, 2004). The Korean Wave, as a cultural phenomenon, has played an important role in promoting intra-Asian tourism, as well as cultural interactions and exchanges across the countries of East and South East Asia. In this paper, thus, I examine Japanese tourism, in particular, Japanese women’s tourism to South Korea as part of these cultural flows and interactions.

### **Promoting “Dynamic Korea” across Asia: Processes of place-making and globalizing Korean culture**

Korea has seven world heritage sites as designated by UNESCO. They are Seokguram

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) is referred as Korea.

Grotto and Bulguksa Temple, Haeinsa Temple's Janggyeong Panjeon, Jongmyo Shrine, Changdeokung Palace Complex, Suwon Hwaseong Fortress, Gyeongju Historic Areas and the Gochang, Hwasun, and Ganhwa Island Dolmen sites. In addition to these heritage sites, Korea has a list of heritage places which could be registered as world heritage sites in the future. They are the Samyeon Fortress Wall, the Underwater Tomb of King Muryeong, Gangjüngul Kiln Sites, the Seoraksan Nature Reserve, Hahoe Folk Village in Andong, Yandong Village of Wolseong, sites of fossilized dinosaurs throughout the south coast and the natural heritage of Jeju Island (Korea.net 2006).

As in other countries, these world heritage sites and possible world heritage sites as mentioned above constitute the essence of tourist attractions in Korea. Accordingly, a tourist visiting Korea may schedule his/her trip to include one of these heritage sites. Moreover, the country now has an important cultural capital to boost its tourism: *Hallyu* (the Korean wave). More specifically, the Korean wave has enabled Korea to market the positive images of the nation to other countries, in particular, to other Asian countries, through TV dramas and films. Although these TV dramas and films are produced in Korea, they aim to reach wider audiences and viewers beyond the national boundary of the Republic of Korea. By transgressing territorial boundary in their circulation and consumption, these cultural products have differed significantly from national cinemas<sup>2</sup> that largely characterised the situation of Korean cinema before the 1990s.

Cultural products have been an important part of tourism in Korea even before the arrival of the Korean Wave. Pusan International Film Festival<sup>3</sup>, for instance, has succeeded in attracting a large number of movie fans to Korea every year and is now considered to be the biggest film festival in the Asia-Pacific region. Yet the Korean Wave has heralded a new age in Korean tourism by bringing about a significant growth in the number of tourists as well as in the tourism-related revenues. In this respect, the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) estimates that the number of inbound tourists reached 6 million in 2005, up from 1.12 million in 2004. Moreover, in relation to this significant rise in the number of tourists, the

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<sup>2</sup> The national cinema in Korea before the 1990s mainly focused on the theme of the "oppressed": its popular theme ranged from the exploitation of prostitutes, the handicapped, to the social protest of factory workers. As these topics suggest, the viewers of these national cinemas were largely limited to Koreans. But they capture the spirit of the *minjung* social movement which was based on the belief in, and emphasis on, the agency and power of ordinary people in transforming society in Korea.

<sup>3</sup> Pusan International Film Festival takes place every October or November in a southern port city, Pusan. It showcases contemporary Asian films as well as cinematic works from around the world. A number of film directors and actors come to the festival to promote their films and to engage in a discussion of their recent films with the audience after the screening. The film festival has become one of the biggest cultural events in Korea.

tourism industry in Korea has also made a huge profit from this trend. It is estimated to have benefited by some \$1.07 billion from the *hallyu* travelers in 2005 and the figure continues to rise steadily in 2006 (MCT 2006).

The Korean Wave needs to be situated within the shifts in post-Cold War geopolitical framework<sup>4</sup> that facilitated changes in how Korea engages with its neighbouring countries, as well as in the ways in which the country projects its image onto the outside world. In relation to this, the Korean government has invested its efforts in creating a regional initiative. Upon its inauguration on 25 February 2003, for instance, the Roh Moo-hyun Government of the Republic of Korea launched a new regional initiative aimed at creating a “new Northeast Asia”, and the Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Business Hub (PCNEABH)<sup>5</sup> was established (Kim and Lee 2006: 87). In relation to this attempt to construct a regional cooperative initiative, Seoul as the capital of Korea has gained increasing significance: policymakers and urban planners have set the goal of developing Seoul and its surrounding areas as a Northeast Asian hub of business and finance. In particular, the development of its information and communication infrastructure has been promoted extensively in Seoul, making Korea one of the most developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region in terms of its citizens’ extensive use of IT technology (Korea.net 2006c). Together, these processes have paved the way for major developments in tourism infrastructure, including the establishment of Incheon International Airport.

During the term of the previous Kim Dae-Jung administration in 2002, the slogan “Dynamic Korea” was chosen to promote an image of Korea that reflect the “sense of great growth potential that the nation aspires to and the forward-looking values of the people” (Korea.net 2006b). The current Roh Moo-hyun administration continues to promote this national brand image after concluding that it is a best representation of Korea as an energetic nation pursuing for the future potentials (Korea.net 2006b).

It is in this context of promoting the energetic image of Korea, as well as an active engagement to establish Korea as a “hub” of the Northeast Asian region that the Korean

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<sup>4</sup> There are two trends that mark the shifting political framework of South Korea in engaging with its neighbors since the end of the Cold War: a closer economic cooperation with China as well as a policy of a closer engagement with North Korea.

<sup>5</sup> The Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Business Hub (PCNEABH) was subsequently reorganized into the Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative (PCNEAH) to include such objectives as regional peace-building as well as cooperative projects for community-building in the region.

Wave has gained enormous significance in tourism in Korea. Indeed the successful intersections of the tourism and the Korean Wave are the products of the synthesized efforts between the government, the local governments and the media. The government formed the background for achieving success in tourism by promoting the image of “Dynamic Korea”, actively encouraging the growth in tourist industry in Korea. Moreover, the state-run KTO has been promoting approximately 60 filming locations from popular TV dramas on its website ([www.knto.or.kr](http://www.knto.or.kr)) since 2004 (MCT 2006a). The local governments, in the hope of attracting more tourists, hosted and invested in drama sets, especially those for historical dramas. Some 31 sets have so far been built in 26 cities and counties, with the investment of regional governments totaling 49 billion won, and with the aid of production companies and broadcasting stations which have been planning sets for that purpose since 2000 (MCT 2006a). These sites proved to be of great significance to *hallyu*-related tourism in Korea. For instance, since opening in October 2004, the Daejanggeum Theme Park, a film set for the 2003 drama, the “Daejanggeum”, has attracted over 189,000 visitors; while Nami island, a location for romantic scenes in the 2002 drama “Winter Sonata” draw the largest number of the *hallyu* travelers in 2005, with more than 295,000 tourists visiting the venue (MCT 2006a).

In order to sustain the momentum of the Korean Wave, Culture and Tourism Minister Kim Myung-go recently announced that the ministry would put more emphasis on Korean traditional arts. In particular, the ministry will develop a “6H” approach: that is, to promote and stress six types of Korean traditional culture, including “hangeul” (the Korean alphabet), “hansik” (Korean food), “hanbok” (Korean traditional dress), “hanji” (mulberry paper) and “hankuk eumak” (Korean music) as unique Korean brands (MCT 2006b).

### **From “Feminized Other” to a Closer Relationship with Its Neighbour: Japanese Tourism in Korea**

Since 1945, the dominant the image of Korea for the Japanese was that of “close but remote” country. This image represented the dominant Japanese perceptions of Korea and other Asian countries as places that were close to Japan only in geographical terms; at the same time, these places were constructed as sites that were socially and culturally distant from the everyday lives of the Japanese<sup>6</sup>. In this context, cultures of other Asian countries

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<sup>6</sup> Kim and Lee (2006: 84) points out that Japan has been criticized for becoming too “Westernized” and that this is the result of the fact that Japan has been under the US security

were rendered irrelevant and trivialized since the Japanese wished to imagine themselves as part of the “developed West” rather than as part of “Asia”. Until the 1990s, thus, most of the Japanese were looking toward the West such as European countries or the USA for imagining and yearning for something “foreign”. For almost half a century, tourism, as a way of experiencing “different” cultures, was inflected by this Western orientation that dominated the social and political structure of postwar Japan.

Reflecting the increasing income of the middle-class family and the higher evaluation of yen, international travel has become one of the common modes of spending leisure time among the Japanese since the 1980s. For instance, it ranked second in the number of tourists to overseas destinations among East Asian countries in 2001 (Ministry of Land and Transportation 2004).

Yet the Japanese tourism until the 1990s was largely oriented towards the USA or Europe. There were some exceptions to this pattern: some Asian countries or regions have always been exempt from the Western orientation of Japanese tourism as sites of sex tourism of Japanese men. Mackie points out that as middle-class Japanese became prosperous enough to become tourists in the 1970s<sup>7</sup>, a particular pattern began to emerge: statistics on tourist travel to certain Asian countries —first South Korea, then the Philippines and Thailand— showed that an overwhelming majority of these travellers were male (2003: 204-205). In particular, Sex tourism to South Korea was termed as “*Kiseng*”<sup>8</sup> Tourism” and represented as orientalized forms of sex tourism in which Korean women wearing traditional Korean dress entertain their customers. This form of tourism was tied closely with the racialization and sexualization of Korean woman as the “exotic other”. Furthermore, it represents the construction of Korea as feminized “other” in this period when Korea was a “close but remote” country for the majority of the Japanese who still viewed the country with the previous colonial configurations of power.

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umbrella since 1945, which enabled Japan to acquire Western liberal values and capitalist ideals to a significant degree. They also point to the influences of the *Datsuan'yūō* (Abandoning Asia and entering into the West) tradition that began during the processes of Japan’s modernization in reinforcing this trend.

<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, under military governments, Korea vigorously pursued state-led economic development. In this context, *Giseang* tourism, as well as prostitution around US military bases, was implicitly accepted as part of state practice for prioritizing economic growth.

<sup>8</sup> *Kiseng* is similar to Japanese *Geisha* in that they perform traditional music or arts and that they are differentiated according to their artistic credentials. *Kiseng* in sex tourist context, however, had little in common with these artistic traditions. Rather, the term “*Kiseng*” was used to stress “exotic” nature of this tourism in relation to Japanese male tourists who sought for tourist experience that was both racialized and sexualized.

In 1990s, Japan saw many changes in terms of its regional identity and orientation. Part of this shift stems from its social and economic situation in which it found itself amidst the prolonged economic recession and the increasing ageing population, causing a sense of anxiety among the Japanese toward their uncertain future. At the same time, other Asian economies were beginning to show dynamic growth, as illustrated by the rapid economic development in China. These socio-economic processes resulted in a call for bringing the country close to its neighbours. As Iwabuchi points out, this “return to Asia” project needs to be contextualized in the shifting map of geo-political and economic contours of the Asia-pacific region:

Over the 1990s, Japan’s gradual tilt toward Asia was clearly visible. Following a long retreat after the 1945 defeat, Japan began actively reasserting its identity as an Asian country, in response to the rising economic power of other Asian states as well as to the changing post-Cold War geopolitical landscape (Iwabuchi 2003: 151).

It is in this context that the number of Japanese tourists to other major Asian counties has shown significant growth. The table below shows the number of Japanese tourists to other major Asian counties from 1999 to 2003:

Table: The number of Japanese tourists to other major Asian counties from 2001 to 2005:

Destinations	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
China	2,385,700	2,925,553	2,254,800	3,334,255	3,389,800
Hong Kong	1,336,538	1,395,020	867,160	1,126,250	1,210,848
South Korea	2,377,321	2,320,837	1,802,171	2,443,070	2,439,809
Thailand	1,177,599	1,239,421	1,042,349	1,212,213	
Singapore	755,766	723,422	433,972	598,807	588,500

Source: Ministry of Land and Transportation (2006)

The decline in the number of Japanese tourists to other Asian counties in 2003 largely accounts for the impacts of SARS on overall tourism in East Asia in the same year. Apart from that, the table suggests a steady growth in the number of Japanese tourists to other Asian countries.

Japanese Women have played a central role in the Korean Wave in Japan as well as in other cultural interactions with other Asian countries<sup>9</sup>. Iwabuchi (2002: 571) points out that the “gendered transnational desire” is apparent in the intra-Asian cultural flows. In particular, the recent popularity of Korean dramas in Japan suggests that masculinity represented by popular Korean male actors has been central to the popularity of the Korean Wave in Japan and contributed to the success of those dramas in Japan. In this context, Japanese women have also been taking a leading role<sup>10</sup> in Japanese tourism to Korea compared to Japanese males who used to dominate the flow of Japanese tourists to Korea in the 1960s and the 1970s. As Asuna (2004: 93-94) points out, since the 1990s, women’s magazines such as *Crea* and *Hanako* have played crucial roles in constructing the positive image of tourist locations in other Asian countries as the places of accessible “paradise” among Japanese women. In this context, Korea has now become one of the primary destinations of Japanese women tourists seeking for culinary delights and shopping, as well as tourism related to popular Korean dramas.

This shift indicates how Korea —as a place imagined and represented as a feminized site of sex tourism for Japanese men in the past— is reinterpreted and reimagined as a place that Japanese women can now consume and enjoy as travellers. This shift is a product of social, economic and cultural transformations that has taken place in both Korea and Japan since the 1970s. The different meanings attached to Korea suggest that we need to pay more attention to “the ways in which places themselves come into being as a result of gender, race, class, and other social relations moving through and locating in those places” (Silvey 2006: 75). She further illustrates this place-making practice as the result of the intersections of social processes in Bangkok:

The sex work district in Bangkok, for example, takes on its allure and its stigma, its meaning as a site of livelihood generation, and its international fame in the context of historically layered gendered, raced, and classed migrations. Phat Phong is produced in

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<sup>9</sup> During the 1990s, Hong Kong pop stars such as Andy Lau and Jackey Cheung became popular among some Japanese women who took interest in popular cultures in China, Hong Kong as well as other Asian countries. Although the scale of the popularity of these Chinese stars was much more limited compared to the “Korean Wave”, it laid the important foundations for the subsequent “Korean Wave” which took place in Japan in early 2000s.

<sup>10</sup> In the early 1990s, as the number of female tourists saw rapid growth in Japan, Japanese women’s “romance tourism” with beach boys in Bali or Phuket attracted media attention and criticism in Japan (Iwabuchi 2002: 571). The criticism of these female tourists, in particular, can be considered as part of wider criticism of women’s mobility and of their shifting lifestyles and preferences.

the context of centuries of Orientalist fantasies about Asian women's sexuality; it was a rest stop for mostly male, American troops headed to battle in Vietnam; and is today the main destination for low-income women (and men) seeking to supplement their families' incomes. The meanings ascribed to Phat Phong as a place then influence who migrates there, for what purposes, and with what consequences for their bodies, their identities, their national military or economic goals, and their position within the global economy (2006: 75).

Silvey's account of Bangkok indicates how the meanings ascribed to a certain district in Bangkok impacts upon the nature of migratory flows to the city. Yet it has resonance for the flows of tourists as well. As I have mentioned above, the different meanings attached to Korea—a site of sex tourism in the 1970s and a site of female-centred tourism for culinary delights and shopping in the present—points to the ways in which meanings ascribed to Korea have shaped the practices of gendered constructions of Japanese tourism in Korea.

To illustrate some patterns of Japanese Tourism in Korea, I provide three examples of schedules of packaged tours from Japan to South Korea below.

Tour Example 1: “Korean Wave Travel Exclusively for Women: Exploring fine cuisine and beauty in Korea”

Day 1: Arrival in Seoul, Duty free shopping

Day 2: A visit to Korean Palaces and shopping in Myondong

After having dinner in Yeouid<sup>11</sup>, a fashionable area in Seoul, participants are invited to experience Korean beauty-treatment

Day 3: Duty free shopping and a visit to Dondaemun Market

Tour Example 2: “A Trip to Seoul: Tracing the past and present of Bae Yong Joon”

Day 1: Arrival in Seoul, Duty free shopping

Day 2: (Morning) Breakfast at a Bae Yong Joon's favourite restaurant and a visit to a

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<sup>11</sup> Yeouid, an islet on the Han River, was the area often flooded during the rainy season. Faced with the problem of the rapid population growth in Seoul in the late 1960s, the government devised a plan to promote the development of this area. As a result of this development, Yeouid was transformed into a planned residential and commercial district dubbed as the “Manhattan of Seoul” in the 1970s (Korea.net 2006c).

university he attended; Lunch at a Bento shop that Bae Yong Joon used to frequent in his university days

(Afternoon) Visits to BOF (office of Bae Yong Joon) and a Bae Yong Joon's shop "Gorilla in the Kitchen", which opened in 2006; Duty free shopping

Day 3: Korean food shopping

Tour Example 3: "What is Your Favourite Korean Drama? : Studying Korean dramas and language"

Day 1: Arrival in Seoul, Shopping

Day 2: (Morning) A lecture on Korean dramas and actors

(Afternoon) A lecture on how to cook some popular Korean dishes, which is followed by tasting of these dishes

Day 3: (Morning) A lecture on Korean language using the scripts of Korean dramas

(Afternoon) Visits to locations in popular Korean TV dramas

Day 4: Korean food shopping

As the above examples of tours indicate, most of the Japanese visits to Korea are centred around Seoul, the capital of Korea. As a global metropolis that provides various forms of entertainment, tourist attractions and an extensive choice of dining and shopping experiences, Seoul is regarded as the centre of Japanese tourism in Korea. After experiencing 35 years of Japanese colonial rule<sup>12</sup>, Seoul has emerged as a mega-city as a result of more than four decades of rapid growth and industrialization. With the population of 21 million, approximately 84 percent of government bodies and institutions, 88 percent of Korea's largest companies, and 60 percent of most popular universities are located in the metropolitan area around Seoul, thus representing the concentration of political, economic and cultural dimensions of the nation in the capital and its surrounding areas (Korea.net 2006c).

As major cities in the Asia-Pacific region compete for "hub" status in search of more investment, the growth in tourism or improvement in the image of the overall nation to the

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<sup>12</sup> Japanese colonial rule in Korea lasted from 1910 to 1945. During this colonial rule, Seoul was called as Geyonsong. The colonial government planned a infrastructure of the city to accommodate an influx of Japanese residents and soldiers. By 1935, the number of Japanese residents grew to 124,000, accounting for 28 percent of the population (Korea.net 2006c).

world, cities, as the central site for place-making, need to display their “local” characters and to emphasize these elements to improve their competitiveness and attractions. In other words, being one of the “global cities” is not enough for cities to differentiate themselves and lure in more tourists. In this context, a number of cities in the Asia-Pacific region have taken part in this “hubbing” competition, which include processes of place-making practices such as “Dynamic Korea”, “Malaysia: Truly Asia”, or “Uniquely Singapore”. As Chang Kyu-sihk, a historian at Yonsei University points out, “While Seoul is strengthening its position as a global city, it is also seeking a cultural life of its own” (Korea.net 2006c). It is this cultural specificity and locality, as well as the positive images of Korea produced by the Korean dramas, that accounts for the flows of Japanese tourists to Korea in the recent years.

Overall, shifting meanings of Korea and other Asian countries have redefined Japanese tourism to a significant degree. More importantly, this redefinition of tourism has included a shift toward “re-orientation” of tourism that has signified increasing attention to, and interest in, other Asian countries. This shift marks a new turn in the ways in which Japan engages with other Asian countries, thus opening up the possibility of bringing the Japanese closer to its neighbours.

### **Regionalism in Asia, Cultural Integration and Tourism: The Role of cultural interactions and tourism in promoting a regional identity**

Tourism in modernist discourse, or tourism that is based on the hierarchical relationship between the West and the non-West, as well as between the North and the South, has promoted the distinction and construction of boundaries between “us” and “other”. By setting foot on “unknown territory”, tourist, in this context, “discovers” the social and cultural differences from his/her homeland, which may be used to justify the unequal relationship of domination and subordination, while perpetuating the representation of “others” as barbaric and backward in these “exotic” places. As Caren Kaplan puts it:

The tourist is not, however, free to move about willy-nilly in a libertarian world. If the tourist traverses boundaries, they are boundaries that the tourist participates in creating: that is, an economic and social order that requires “margins” and “centres”

will also require representation of those structural distinctions. The tourist confirms and legitimates the social reality of constructions such as “First” and “Third” Worlds, “development” and “underdevelopment,” or “metropolitan” and “rural.” Created out of increasing leisure time in industrialized nations and driven by a need to ascertain identity and location in a world that undermines the certainty of those categories, the tourist acts as an agent of modernity (1998: 58).

Kaplan’s analysis of the “tourist as an agent of modernity” can be considered as an account of Western tourist practices in non-Western places. To understand and explain intra-Asian tourism, in particular, tourism in cities in Asia, we need to contest and question the dichotomies that these tourists have confirmed or legitimated in their practices of tourism. In other words, intra-Asian tourism needs to be conceptualised in a way that transcends these dichotomies. In this respect, I argue for the analytical framework in which we view intra-Asian tourism as one of the ways to promote the building of regional identity and mutual understandings within the region rather than as practices to ascertain and reproduce categories that are based upon the binary hierarchies between places.

Since the 1990s, efforts have been made to build regional cooperation mechanism in East Asia such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) +3 (South Korea, China and Japan) and APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), which includes Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific regions. Yet despite these efforts, there is much less cooperation within East Asia compared to other regions due to the existence of mutual distrust and the history of confrontations. In view of these obstacles, Kim and Lee (2006: 91-95) supports the idea that “cultural alternatives” such as exchanges and cooperation in education, culture, history, arts, tourism, and sports play a greater role in building the basis of regional cooperation and identity. Moreover, they also stress the importance of the “Korean wave” as a cultural resource that can provide a new popular culture of the Northeast Asian region (93).

As we have already seen, cultural flows that cut across national boundaries have played central role in promoting intra-Asian tourism. In this respect, the phenomenon of the Korean wave provides us a good example of the connections between tourism and cultural flows. Moreover, the Korean wave has also raised significant questions about the intersections between the intra-Asian cultural flows and the growing sense of regional identity in East and Southeast Asia. In particular, in view of the processes of growing

cultural integration that are taking place in this region, scholars of cultural studies or anthropology have called for the need to take the circulation of cultural flows into account and regard these flows as a starting point for establishing regionalism in the Asia-Pacific region. Wong (2001; cited in Cho 2005: 165-166), for instance, points out that “the Korean wave, as an Asian event, is an ideal opportunity to construct an Asian regional community”. Similarly, Cho (2005: 177-179) suggests that the circulation of popular culture across the region is narrowing “the geographical, social and psychological distance between Asians” and that these flows of popular culture, such as the Korean wave, provides us with “new contact zones”, thus enabling us to take interest in the cultures of people in different countries who have been “othered” for decades in modern history.

Since the 1990s, countries in the Asia-Pacific region have gone through major social, economic and political transformations. In particular, the countries in East Asia have faced a number of challenges and opportunities that are based on the differences in geopolitical and economic frameworks. Furthermore, these challenges stem from continued distrust between countries, namely between China and Japan, territorial issues between countries in East Asia, as well as increasing regional rivalry between these countries. These issues have strengthened the boundaries between the countries, dividing people further apart on the basis of particular nationality and ethnicity.

Despite these obstacles to increase cooperation and mutual understanding in this region, cultural flows and tourism have proved to be of central importance in reconceptualizing the boundaries of individual nation-states and in promoting a sense of interconnectedness across the borders. The intersections of tourism and cultural flows may provide us with the possibility of promoting regionalism and a sense of cultural solidarity in a region that has long been divided by memories of bitter history and differences in political and economic structures. Moreover, this cultural regionalism, by reinforcing the sense of simultaneity and connections across the countries in East Asia, has the potential for bringing about possible shifts in political perceptions of other Asian countries “from below”, paving the way for improving overall relations between peoples and countries.

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