

The K-Wave On-Screen: In Words and Objects

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Reviewed by SUKLAL SAREN

The K-Wave On-Screen: In Words and Objects by Jieun Kiaer, Emily Lord and Loli Kim is one of the three-book series of Routledge Studies in East Asian Studies. The book reflects the key aspects of linguistic translations of Korean words and objects through popular Korean literature and adaptations, historical drama, web series, and films on digital media platforms or OTT like Netflix and YouTube. It outlines the distinction between Korean traditional culture and popular culture. The book remarkably emphasises the translatability and multidimensionality of the K-wave. This book highlights the translingual and transcultural significance of Korean popular culture. The book discusses the discourse of the non-Eurocentric perspective of Korean popular culture worldwide. The rapid increase of Korean fandom and ‘K-beauty, K-culture, K-food, K-style’ is moving beyond popular culture to ‘high culture’. The book explores the linguistic involvement of Korean foods, dresses, and products in popular productions such as *Parasite* (2019), *Squid Game* (2021), *Pachinko* (2022), *Sky Castle* (2018), *Kim- Ji-young: Born 1998* (2019), and *Kingdom* (2019).

Raymond Williams in his book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976) defines the term ‘popular’ as “well-liked by many people”, “inferior kind of work”, “work deliberately setting out to win favour with people”, and “culture made by the people for themselves”. Also, John Storey outlines in the book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1993) that popular culture is a culture that is ‘leftover after high culture’. Popular culture is inferior to the standard morals and aesthetics of high culture. The new era of ‘The Korean Wave’(Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008, p. 2) is technologically advanced and it has an impact on the commercial industry. However, The K-Wave has moved beyond the ‘low culture’ to influencing ‘high culture’ in the Western regions for its unique and semiotically productive linguistic involvement. The dynamic nature of the new

K-Wave urges a sense of universalism. The visibility of K-Wave on-screen provides Korean culture, tradition, and identity among foreign viewers.

Chapter Overview

The book is composed of seven popular Korean fiction, film, adaptations, and web series and is divided into eight chapters. The introductory chapter studies the denotation of ‘K-ness’ and its societal influence beyond Korea. The beginning chapter identifies the importance of translation in the non-Korean markets. It emphasises the necessity and understanding of translation in the Anglophone target audience. It pointed out the transnational, translingual, and transcultural dimensions of the K-Wave. It promoted a non-Eurocentric viewpoint. The K-wave reached across cultural disparities due to productive linguistic involvement and technological advancement. Also, the first chapter discussed the detailed background and three phases of the Korean Wave. In the beginning Kiaer, Lord, and Kim mentioned the Victoria and Albert Museum’s poster printed as ‘*Hallyu! The Korean Wave*’ is written in the Korean *Hangeul* language. They discussed that the K-wave embodies the Korean tradition, language, and culture. It is popularised globally by popular K-pop bands, films, web series, television shows, foods, and dresses. They claimed that K-culture contributes to curiosity and universality in the hybridity. Here, they gave the example of the play of Korean popular words such as ‘*Bunsik*’ (food made from flour) ‘*Chingu*’ (friend), ‘*Oppa*’ (older brother), ‘*Chimaek*’ (chicken and bear), and ‘*Popgi*’ (sugar candy) among the foreign fandoms. They talked about the inclusion of Korean verbal language and non-verbal gestures in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

The second chapter is about the Korean popular television series *Squid Game* (2021) created by Hwang Dong-hyuk. In this chapter Loli and Jieun discussed some objects and words such as training suit, mask, spoon, *dalgona* (whipped coffee), *ddakji* (traditional South Korean game) *mugunghwa* (hibiscus), and *kkanbu* (friend). They both analysed how these words and objects shaped the Korean linguistic aesthetic and narrative globally. Through these words and

objects, Loli and Jieun reflected Korean dress, food, economy, education, and class hierarchy system. Those trendy verbal and visual contents reconfigured the dynamic aspect of Korean tradition.

The third is about the first non-English film *Parasite* (2019) directed by Bong Joon-ho. The film won an Academy Award in the Best Film category. This Korean film remained a rival to the dominant Anglophone-Western films. The film shook Hollywood's popularity. Through this K-Wave moved into the mainstream. The reception of the film successfully facilitated the Korean culture and diversity at large. Jieun and Loli discussed the objects and words depicted in the film *Parasite*. They elaborately analysed the word 'banjiha' which means low rents and living conditions in South Korea. They exemplified *banjiha's* neighbourhood, bathroom, window, entrance, bed, staircase, and art that captured the hierarchy, the unequal status of foods, clothes, and class system. They showed how the use of 'hanbok' was lost in Korean culture due to the use of luxurious wearing of sophisticated clothes. They even discussed the hierarchy of 'food politics' or food hierarchy in Korea by using the word 'Ramdon' (Korean dish). Through this word, they questioned the impoverished urban development that caused heavy rainfall and floods in South Korea. They brought attention to the issues of rapid urban growth of housing, population, and problems of rehabilitation. They talked about the connection between 'neighbourhood and one's Korean identity' (Kiaer, Lord & Kim, 2024, p. 40) in the film. Jieun and Loli used objects such as 'University certificate', and 'Scholar's rock' in the film *Parasite* to contextualise the Korean symbol of luck and success.

In the third chapter, Jieun and Emily discussed the Korean popular dark comedy *SKY Castle* (2018). They both talked about Korean universities, standardised admission, syllabi, language, and career status for social and cultural mobility. For example, they used objects from the film such as 'university exam', 'English', 'Parental capital', and 'College coordinator' to represent the Korean culture through the Korean-ness.

The fourth chapter is about the South Korean popular historical television series *Mr. Sunshine* (2018) directed by Lee Eung-bok. This historical drama reveals many Korean cultural objects such as

hanbok(suit), *Jangot* (long coat), hair, newspapers, ‘Jemulpo harbour’, candy, and cake culture. Emily and Jieun discussed Korean traditional food flavours such as *tteok* and *yugwa* (hard candies). The chapter emphasised the popular ‘cake culture’ depicted in the Korean historical drama *Mr. Sunshine*. The chapter also discussed the use of *Hangeul* words such as ‘*haoche* (tasty)’, and ‘*mianha*’ (sorry) written in the film. They analysed the influences of Korean-ness in Western contemporaneity. Through the chapter, they discussed comparatively the Korean tradition, identity, modesty, and identity of the Joseon dynasty which became popular internationally by the K-Wave on screen.

Next, the chapter titled ‘Pachinko’ is about the *New York Times Best Seller* book of Korean Literature published in 2022 of the same name. The chapter attempted to discover the past of fundamental language, dress, customs, and food of the Joseon dynasty presented in the book *Pachinko*. Jieun and Loli talked about the unpredictable ‘Pachinko machine’ (gambling machine) that requires skill to win money. This gambling machine conveys many cultural and historical aspects of Korea. They mentioned the white colour which signifies cultural identity for the Koreans. Jieun and Loli gave examples of objects such as white rice, and white hanbok. They spoke about the development of television (VHS) and shifting to online streaming platforms like YouTube and Netflix in Korean culture. Popular Korean content is being accessed by Western foreign fandom. They talked about the Korean diaspora and the purchase of Korean traditional items from commercial websites like Amazon.co.uk, Etsy.com, and eBay.

Chapter Seven is about the film *Kim Ji-yong Born 1998* (2019) directed by Kim Do-yong. The film is adapted from the bestselling novel of the same name by Cho Nam-joo. The film is based on the concept of gender and sexism in Korea. The chapter provided the concept of contemporary Korean womanhood and issues such as gender inequality, hierarchical society, and the #MeToo movement of 2016 in South Korea. Jieun and Loli used objects such as ‘female voice’, and an apron or ‘*apchima*’ to represent Korean traditional womanhood.

The final chapter is about the television series *Kingdom* (2019) directed by Kim Seong-hun. This periodical horror series depicts Joseon's historical words and objects. Jieun and Loli demonstrated words and objects from the opening scene such as 'Dragon' (*yongbo*), 'glutinous rice in the mouth' (*banham*), *Gat* (Korean traditional hat), *binyeo* (hairpins), *yukjeon* (beef pancakes) and 'clown'. These words and objects reflect traditional Korean-ness and are potentially popular among non-Korean fandom. The chapter demonstrated the snowball effect and hybridity by the numerous K-contents presented through the internet, social media, and online streaming platforms.

Critical Assessment

The book predominantly targeted South Korean literature, films, and web series. Jieun, Loli, and Kim focused less on the North Korean traditional content. The figures used in the book are mostly in black and white. It would have been easier to comprehend the Korean words and objects if given colourfully. The book hypothesised solely on the multidimensionality of Korean popular culture. The authors could have attempted to add an extra chapter on the Korean translation culture and linguistic involvement. The book did not discuss much about technological advancement, commercial marketability, and audience reception. The introductory section 'De-westernised and de-colonised discourses' of the K-Wave could have been elaborated in detail. Figures of some of the elements or objects in the popular films and web series are not given. The book is devoid of the argument of cultural translation. The chapters of the book are chronologically well structured. The comments made through dialogues, opinions, and personal experiences by the three authors did not seem appropriate. These potential errors in the book are not expected by the global fandom.

However, the book's strengths contribute valuable discipline in the areas of Korean Studies, Media and Film Studies, Literature and Film Adaptations, Popular Culture and Media, and Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. The book explores the South Korean subculture, K-pop films, web series, dramas, Korean traditional language, culture, foods, and dress. The book brings broader concepts such as

translingual, transcultural, transnationalism, hybridity, and diaspora. The book profoundly encompassed the dynamic nature of Korean-ness through the analysis of words and objects. The book extensively illustrated the difference between *K-* and *Korean*. The contextual analysis of Korean popular products, elements, and words signifies transcultural appeal among the foreign fandom. Readers, scholars, and linguists would benefit from reading this book.

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