Pop City
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Published by Cornell University Press

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Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and the Selling of Place.

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In the 1980s, South Korea witnessed a sudden boost in the number of cultural spectacles created out of political necessity on the part of the then-military dictator, Chun Doo-hwan, whose military regime began with a coup after Park Chung-hee’s assassination in 1979. Chun’s consolidation of his authoritarian power involved the merciless suppression of the Gwangju Democratic Movement in 1980. To divert the nation’s attention away from politics, Chun promoted the so-called 3S (screen, sports, and sex) policy. Accordingly, a professional baseball league was established in 1982, and Chun himself threw the first pitch at the opening game. Professional sports events were aired on color television, a medium that was then being disseminated nationwide. In 1981, Seoul won the right to host the 1988 Summer Olympics and the 1986 Asian Games. A vast number of erotic films were produced in the 1980s since, ironically, state censorship actually promoted sexually suggestive cinema. Sexually explicit posters and banners were displayed at movie theaters and elsewhere so that nudity even dominated the urban landscape. The sex industry boomed, with a mushrooming of bars and red-light
districts. The abolition of the nightly curfew drove people to so-called places of amusement.

Since the development of Gangnam, real estate speculation (*budongsan tugi*) has become a prominent secondary mode of wealth accumulation for the upper classes. The continuing influx of people to Seoul from the rest of the country has yielded multiple rounds of creative destruction in the metropolis’s residential spaces. The restructuring of residential neighborhoods is conducted through the wholesale demolition of obsolete districts and the construction of high-rise apartment complexes on a gigantic scale. As the bulldozing of existing houses is accompanied by the large-scale displacement of tenants, the lower classes bear the brunt of redevelopment. Property owners enjoy an increase in the value of their properties through the heightened density, improved physical conditions, and beautified surroundings that result from the redevelopment process. Since the incessant movement of the population to the greater Seoul area sustains the demand for housing, surplus value can be created merely by engaging in rounds of property selling, thus leading to rampant real estate speculation. Urban restructuring in the Seoul metropolitan area since the 1980s, therefore, has taken the form of reducing the life span of apartment complexes, thereby further advancing the redevelopment process. With only a few exceptions,¹ government policies have worked to aggravate real estate bubbles by relaxing regulations and increasing reconstruction densities. Speculative urban development has been a main feature of South Korea’s urbanization (Shin 2016).

In the Korean Wave era, cultural spectacles shifted from being state organized to being industry driven and instigated by global demand. While the speculative real estate market still thrives, local municipalities now tend to practice speculative urbanization to advertise their areas. The combination of pop culture spectacles and speculative urban promotion has led to the proliferation of splendid sites throughout the country.

I have discussed how the globalization of Korean popular culture has changed the Korean urban landscape by creating fantasized images attached to places. Beyond the merely accidental spatial consequences of the Korean Wave, I highlight the coproduction of culture and place: how cultural content is produced by inserting places into it or by utilizing spatial agglomeration, and how the images and meanings of a place are created by television dramas or K-pop idols. The linkages between popular culture and cities have grown out of the needs of both the culture industry and municipalities. While
the two pursue different goals—financial capital in the case of the industrial players and political capital in that of the urban players—both share the same speculative nature. The pop culture industry is innately speculative because audiences use cultural commodities in highly volatile ways, causing some products to garner more or less profit than expected. The Korean Wave, however, has rendered the Korean pop culture industry more speculative still, driving the industrial players to gamble on the probable overseas popularity of their products. Despite its inherent uncertainty, the global rise of Hallyu seemed to guarantee the success of every Korean commercial entertainment venture, prompting numerous people to jump into the industry and gamble on the ostensibly attainable prospect of achieving a megahit. I have discussed the speculative character of the industry by examining (1) supply-driven, small-sized independent drama producers and their spontaneous, improvised practices in creating dramas, and (2) the profit-diversification strategies of pop music agencies. Due to their risk-taking and short-term profit-seeking tendencies, Korean pop culture producers require greater financial sources, leading them to launch the new practice of inviting cities to act as sponsors. The cultural sponsors—Korean municipalities—are also engaging in speculative efforts as they seek instant popularity and run risks with their culture-associated place marketing. The reason speculative projects among Korean cities are in vogue lies in their urban aspirations and the political ambitions of their urban governors. In the context of the country’s decentralization and the globalization of Korean popular culture, the profit-seeking practices of the culture industry have neatly dovetailed with the desires of Korean cities for sensational promotion.

The speculative ventures by both the industry and the municipalities, however, require the continuing global popularity of Korean popular culture. Only a steady global demand for Korean pop culture can absorb the oversupply of cultural content. For culture-mediated place marketing to succeed, the cultural hype needs to be translated into actual inbound tourism. Thus, the efforts to gain material and political capital by Korean cultural producers and cities can only be successful when there are steady commitments from global fans. Since the mid-2000s, triangular transactions have been taking place that involve the profit-seeking culture industry, the passionate desires of fans, and cities’ branding strategies. Both the Korean culture industry and municipalities have utilized fan-tourists’ affective and participatory engagement with Korean popular culture and culture-associated places.
The appropriation of consumer desires and commitments is what lies behind the adventurous moves by producers and municipalities to speculate on future forms of popularity. Thus, the continuous growth of the Korean culture industry and the sustainability of culture-mediated place promotion rely on maintaining the alluring charm of Korean dramas and K-pop music and idols to ensure global fans’ constant devotion and loyalty. In this book, I suggest that the globalization of Korean popular culture has resulted in local impacts that interact with changes in urban governance and the urban political economy. Conversely, the prospects for culture-associated urban policy trends in Korea hinge on the future performance of Korean popular culture in the global market.

In early March 2017, a critical incident occurred that adversely affected the constant overseas demand for Korean entertainment and steady stream of foreign tourists—that is, the U.S. government’s deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system. While the United States and the Park Geun-hye administration insisted that this action was a countermeasure to North Korea’s continued provocations, China is uncomfortable with the radar’s proximity to its soil, viewing THAAD as an extension of U.S. strategic interests in the region. Criticizing the South Korean government for undermining bilateral relations by hosting the missile system, the Chinese state encouraged its citizens to boycott South Korean products and companies (Mullany and Gordon 2017). Chinese authorities recently called for the closing of retail stores owned by Lotte, Korea’s eighth largest conglomerate, because of its agreement to make land owned by the company available to the THAAD program. As anti-Lotte sentiment grew, the conglomerate is on the verge of entirely withdrawing its retail business from China, while it is also suffering from drastic sales decreases in its duty-free business (70 percent of which comes from Chinese travelers) (Premack 2017). Beginning on March 15, 2017, the Chinese government (unofficially) instructed travel agencies to stop selling group package tours to South Korea. Chinese people, among whom a sense of nationalism is strong, are supportive of the state’s action; for instance, 3,400 Chinese tourists refused to disembark when they arrived at Jeju via a cruise ship on March 5, 2017, while tour guides and the drivers of 80 tour buses waited to transport them around the island. From March to May 2017 alone, the number of Chinese tourists in Korea plunged to around 800,000, a decrease of more than 55 percent from the year before. Korean entertainment has been another
affected area. Many K-pop concerts were canceled altogether and Korean celebrities were barred from doing endorsements in China. The case of Song Joong-ki, who garnered huge stardom across Asia by appearing in the drama Descendants of the Sun, exemplifies this phenomenon. While the megahit drama brought him several endorsement deals in China where appearance fees are several times higher than in Korea, the ban led advertisers to replace their product endorsers.

At a time when the negative consequences of such international disputes fall primarily on the tourism and commercial entertainment sectors, Korean municipalities’ pop culture–led place selling is also threatened directly. One representative example is Incheon’s sponsorship of Goblin: The Lonely and Great God (Seulpeugo Chanranhan Sin Dokkaebi 2016), as the Incheon Film Commission (IFC) paid part of the production cost and supported the on-location shooting. The sponsorship is part of the “Inspiring Location Incheon” project, according to which IFC invites cultural creators to the city and helps them with location scouting, under the motto “Infusing imagination onto space by filling it with diverse stories.” Written by the top drama writer, Kim Eun-sook, and casting top celebrities including Gong Yoo, the drama series was packed with commercial potential. As the television series became the talk of the nation, Incheon’s many previously ordinary places that were featured in the drama (e.g., an old bookstore) emerged as romantic places. As a promotion measure, the city runs a blog exclusively dedicated to the Goblin tour and posted a self-produced short video in which a young couple hangs around the Goblin filming locations in Incheon. IFC also engaged in interactive communications with audience-tourists via social media by posting weekly quizzes to allow people to guess the drama locations in the city. Those who uploaded their “proof photo” showing that they had visited the drama locations were also awarded small gifts. The drama series particularly struck the fashion industry through product placement. Gong Yoo, a model-turned-actor who performed as the protagonist “Kim Shin,” received multiple sponsorships from high-end luxury brands—including Givenchy, Burberry, Lavin Paris, and Tom Ford—and all of the clothes that Gong wore in the drama were eventually sold off despite their exorbitant prices.

Although multiple indicators, including its ratings, demonstrate that Goblin was a commercial success, it remains in question whether the drama producer and city sponsor, who primarily targeted the larger Chinese market, were fully satisfied with the outcome. The drama series’ overseas
promotion encountered trouble due to timing. When the domestic airing of *Goblin* ended in late January 2017, the producers and sponsors were busy with the overseas promotion. Even without the official distribution in China, the drama series already garnered huge popularity among Chinese and the title-role actor Gong Yoo was listed in the top ranks of search words on Weibo, China’s largest social media site. When the deployment of THAAD was announced and the Chinese government responded with highly critical voices, however, all *Goblin*-related content, as well as other Korean pop culture content, suddenly disappeared from Weibo except for the short official preview video. China’s travel boycott of South Korea exacerbated the situation at the most critical time to promote *Goblin*-inspired tourism to Korea. Having enjoyed megasuccess in the drama-induced tourist inflows from China by sponsoring *My Love from the Star*, the city of Incheon’s expectations regarding *Goblin* were extremely high. The sponsorship and promotion of *Goblin* is part of the city’s attempt to transform itself from a port city into a “city of media and culture” (*yeongsang munhwa dosi*). The mayor proactively supported the media creators and actually visited *Goblin*’s shooting sites to deliver meals and snacks to the director, staff, and actors. Against Incheon’s all-out efforts, the THAAD turmoil was entirely unexpected and dealt critical blows to the city’s *Goblin*-related place promotion. In response to China’s travel boycott, not only the city of Incheon but also the Korean Tourism Organization in general have hastily shifted the target area from China to Southeast Asia by holding more information sessions in the region about traveling to Korea while also increasing the number of flights. Efforts to cultivate new markets, however, will take years to bear significant fruit.

The aftermath of THAAD obviously speaks to the vulnerability of “soft power.” Despite the Korean state’s proactive efforts to utilize the Korean Wave to cultivate positive images of the country and develop new markets, audience reception is not always positive, particularly in foreign markets. As the anti-Hallyu movements in Japan, Taiwan, China, and other areas show, the reception of popular culture can be a contested site of negotiation (Nye and Kim 2012). Moreover, it remains questionable how the breezy, superficial, style-oriented Korean popular culture might work in actual and specific international relations. As much as popular culture can operate as a powerful tool to touch and lure audiences, the THAAD storm indicates that it is also vulnerable to shifts in issues of diplomacy, security, and national-
ism. I mentioned above how Korean municipalities attempt to address local problems of fiscal deficiency and low recognition status through transnational means by attracting foreign tourists. The aftermath of THAAD, however, demonstrates how local policies can be rendered impotent in the face of national disputes and policies.

Despite such risks of fragility, more and more Korean municipalities are practicing pop culture–related place selling. Not only Incheon but many other cities are fostering a “media city” image by establishing local media commissions, encouraging place placements in films and drama series, or constructing film-shooting complexes. Utilizing the now-established Busan International Film Festival (BIIF), Busan has promoted its “Cineport Busan Plan” since 2004; Bucheon announced its plans to develop the Bucheon Film and Culture Complex in 2014, which will function as an infrastructural complement to Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival (BiFan), capitalizing on its extraordinary natural scenery, Seoguipo City has also been promoting itself as a “media city” since 2015; and Cheongju established the city’s media commission in 2017, also as part of a “media city” project. As discussed in detail in chapter 2, Cheongju City has been embroiled in conflicts with residents who were excluded from the decision-making process and have thus suffered from various problems caused by the city’s drama sponsorship. Remarketing on the more frequent cases of drama shooting in the area, however, one local news channel conveyed the state’s perspective by saying, “Despite the inconvenience citizens and students would experience, the city government is promoting the media city project because of its contribution to the local economy and publicity.” Despite its uncertainty, vulnerability, and limited sustainability, popular culture still dominates the urban policies of Korean municipalities in the decentralized era.

It is intriguing to note the differences in urban practices between Korean municipalities and those in Japan and China, which are also experiencing decentralization these days. Japan’s historical and spatial development trajectory is very similar to that of South Korea; however, it would be more accurate to claim that South Korea imitated Japan’s development practices in its post–Korean War economic development. Japan’s post–World War II development path entailed uneven geographies that benefited only selected regions, the Tokyo-Yokohama region in particular. Given the center–periphery disparity, rural problems became even more acute in the decentralization era that coincided with the burst of the bubble economy in the
1980s, constant economic recession since the 1990s, and population decline and the aging of its society. Japanese regions have carried out various efforts to achieve greater autonomy and self-reliance. Locality studies, a form of community mapping, emerged as a popular technique “as part of a larger boom in agrotourism, heritage food, and other initiatives designed to reinvigorate regional localities” by awakening rural places’ unique resources (Love 2013, 113). Although these practices are sometimes criticized as neoliberal decentralization efforts to shift the responsibility of rural socioeconomic decline to individual municipalities, they can also empower and unite local communities (ibid.). Place branding based on product promotion is another popular practice to promote a region’s agricultural/fishery/forestry products and to attract tourists, such as the Japan Brand Development Assistance Program’s promotion of registering trademarks consisting of “name of a local area” plus “name of product” (Rausch 2008). Although there are elements of selling places and attracting tourists, the measures to practice decentralization in Japan basically involve a protection of industry that requires local residents’ participation. The balanced mutual cooperation between the local state and local society in the Japanese model reveals contrasts to Korean municipalities’ state-dominated place-selling efforts. In chapter 2, I briefly discussed some Japanese municipalities’ place-promotion tactics, mainly sponsoring Korean television dramas in the hopes of attracting drama fans both from Japan and the rest of Asia. Even in those cases, community support was critical because multiple local groups and residents in general provided part of the funding, accommodated the on-location shooting, and provided psychological support.

In China, decentralization is more tightly interlocked with urban projects. Exercising its exclusive power of land ownership, local states have emerged as the most active developers in China and urban development has manifested new accumulation regimes in the transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy. You-tien Hsing’s (2010) research suggests that China’s decentralization is intertwined with local states’ capacity to consolidate their power through land ownership and the control of various development projects. Urban development projects include multiple forms, from infrastructure installation to image creation, most of which undertake commercial and residential development through the state’s control of land, which entails massive evictions and displacement of residents and tenants. By hosting China’s new, massive numbers of middle-class, as well as international tourists, the
construction of houses, condominiums, hotels, and consumption spaces provide local states with both political and economic capital. Given the state's legal ownership of land, local governments at multiple levels—provincial, municipal, township, and village—engage in fierce competition among themselves and other state institutions/agencies to “represent the state.” Local state building configures, and is configured by, its territorial authority through initiating development projects.

Japanese local governments’ community-centered policies and the Chinese state’s use of land ownership as powerful resources contrast with Korean municipalities’ state-dominated, image-oriented, and tourist-focused place selling via Korean popular culture. Such differences elucidate the particular lack of resources Korean local states can mobilize despite their developmental aspirations, even though all three countries confronted decentralization within a context of significant urban–rural, center–periphery disparities. While Korea's decentralization ignited pervasive place selling, its actual practices have taken place together with the globalization of Korean popular culture. Initially, the prearranged transactions\(^\text{12}\) between the cultural producers and cities were developed to utilize popular culture’s ability to construct and advertise place images through its affective, sensational, and increasingly global power. Over time, however, Korean municipalities have recognized and harnessed the highly skilled and devoted labor provided by passionate fans, in the form of sharing personal experiences about pop culture–featured places, as a critical means to internationally publicize their areas. Despite the risks involved, due to its cost-saving but sensation-creating nature this user-appropriating mechanism of place selling will further spark the cities’ interests and utilizations of media entertainment content.