

○ CREATING A DIFFERENT WAVE

ANIMATING A MARKET FOR KOREAN ANIMATION

Roald Maliangkay, The Australian National University

Roald Maliangkay received his Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from the University of London, SOAS, where he studied the Korean system of intangible cultural properties with particular emphasis on the preservation of folksongs. Following his graduation in 1999 he has lectured at SOAS, Leiden University, and Amsterdam University, usually taking on courses related to Korean studies and anthropology. In 2006 he moved to the Australian National University where he currently convenes the Centre for Korean Studies while specializing in the history of Korean popular culture industries in the twentieth century. The focus of his publications is diverse, ranging from advertising during the colonial period, to music and censorship under South Korea's military dictatorships, to the phenomena dubbed 'the Korean Wave'.

The South Korean animation industry is today recognized for its technological innovation, and its increasing creativity and productivity. Yet despite its accomplishments, it is often acknowledged that over the years Korean animation artists have adopted many ideas, styles and techniques from their Japanese peers. The strong Japanese influence is not surprising considering many Koreans were employed in the past to do the labour-intensive colouring and drawing work for Japanese companies. The Korean industry has, however, developed significantly, and it now sells products that, in terms of technology, style and narrative, can be compared – albeit rarely compete – with Japanese products (manga). A new generation of Korean animators is keen to establish itself, and foreign producers are increasingly recognizing their potential. Even so, talented Koreans who strive to compete with foreign products have to overcome numerous challenges, many of which are rooted in the relative conservatism of the mainstream animation industry. Making an animated film continues to be a labour-intensive project; since a full-length feature takes years to be completed, considerable investment is required. The risk of targeting the wrong market or alienating an important segment of consumers must be avoided from the outset. Mimicry is thus common in mainstream animation, as movies need to appeal to an audience that, depending on its average age, is often either conformist (parents) or not especially conscious of style (young children). Rather than through a significant innovation of styles, therefore, South Korean¹ animation companies generally try to distinguish themselves in other ways, such as through story-line, selection of voice actors, or technology used. But is care in these areas sufficient to enhance the industry's international reputation? In this chapter I describe the development of the Korean animation industry and consider how it is positioned vis-à-vis foreign products.

Although Japanese and American cartoons and animation feature films have regularly appeared in Korean cinemas since the 1930s, Korea's own animation industry is relatively young. As early as 1936 a certain Kim Yongun and Im Seokgi evidently set up a studio in Seoul and worked on the first Korean animated movie – *A Dog's Dream* (*Gae kkum*), but it is unclear whether the film was actually finalized (Kim 2006: 64). A short black-and-white commercial for Lucky Toothpaste, made in 1956, currently remains the oldest surviving example of Korean animation.² The first Korean animated feature film was Sin Dong-heon's 1967 *Hong Gil-dong*. The success of this film, which was based on a popular seventeenth-century novel about a Robin Hood-like character, spurred other productions, including the 1976 giant robot adventure, *Robot Taekwon V* (*Roboteu Taegwon V*; dir. Kim Cheonggi) (Choi 2007: 12). By 1986 Koreans had produced

as many as 71 animated feature films. Although several have been lost, Kim (2006: 67–69) surmises that a large number were heavily influenced by Japanese animation in terms of visual design.³ This influence was partly the result of the subcontracting of Korean companies by Japanese studios, which were able to cut production costs by having the scenarios written and post-production carried out in Japan, and all the labour-intensive colouring and drawing done in Korea (Han 1995: 98). Another factor was, however, that in Korea Japanese-made productions circulated on pirated videotapes despite the ban on Japanese pop culture, which was lifted in stages only from 1998.⁴ The influence was evident also in *Robot Taekwon V*, which was based on *Mazinger Z*, a popular 1972 Japanese TV animation series that was broadcast in Korea in 1975, and in Yong Yu-su's *Lightning Atom* (*Beon-gae Atom* 1971), which drew its inspiration from the popular Japanese *Astro Boy* (*Atomu*) series (Giammarco 2006).

In the early 1980s increasing expertise allowed Korean companies to produce a growing number of successful cartoons for the domestic and foreign pre-teen market. The total value of Korean animated movie exports subsequently rose significantly, from 186,000 won in 1980, to 6.2 million in 1987, and 62.1 million in 1993 (Han 1995: 95). Series that became very popular in Korea included *Dulli the Baby Dinosaur* (*Agi gongnyong dulli*), *Little Car Vroom Vroom* (*Kkoma jadongcha bongbong*), and, in 1988, *Run, Hani, Run!* (*Dallyeora Hani*). Stylistically, however, few of these series could be seen as innovative; it would take years before Korean animators were able to show their creativity and explore alternatives. Meanwhile, the subcontracting of Korean animators continued, although major assignments now began to come from major American studios, including those responsible for *The Simpsons*, *Spongebob Squarepants*, *King of the Hill* and, more recently, *Family Guy* (see Powell 2009).⁵ In 1995 the total number of feature films and animation series made in Korea was 452, but only 14 of those (3 per cent) were domestically produced. In Japan, by contrast, the number of domestic animated productions was 731, which amounted to 79 per cent of the total 925 Japanese film productions (Han Changwan 1995: 98). In 1998, Mun Seong-gi (Mun et al. 1998: 57–58) argued rather cynically that there was some truth in the common claim that Koreans ‘had the skill but not the know-how’ (*soneun inneunde meorineun eomne*) to be successful in animation. He argued that more work from Japanese companies rarely led to more recognition for Korean animators and that Koreans should therefore make it a priority to do their own post-production

Japanese domination of the industry was not, however, the only factor that hindered the creative development of animation in Korea. Well before August 1968, when the Korean Children's Comics Screening Committee (*Han-guk adong manhwa yulli wiwonhoe*) was established, South Korean military administrations had put in place a system of screening institutions that would eventually encourage artists to adopt anti-communist symbolism, apply self-censorship and avoid sex and blood, unless, of course, it was the blood of foreign aggressors (Choe 1995: 141–142; see also Maliangkay 2008). In the 1970s, the system of censorship and propaganda was expanded, and in 1975 a new so-called Public Performances Screening Committee (*Han-guk gongyeon yulli wiwonhoe*) was placed in charge of the screening of cultural products, including animation. Among the anti-communist feature films was the aforementioned *Robot Taekwon V*, which tells the story of a hero trying to stop a mad scientist from building an evil ‘red’ empire. Another example is the 1978 *General Ttori* (*Ttori janggun*), about a boy growing up under North Korea's cruel dictatorship. Although censorship limited stylistic creativity and placed constraints on

narrative, it did not necessarily impede the development and application of technology. Reports of the Public Performances Screening Committee reveal that post-production censorship was particularly harsh towards popular music, but fairly mild with animation. Because filming was a time-consuming and therefore costly process, directors were apparently unwilling to risk having large sections cut, and self-censorship was prevalent. The unpublished monthly reports of the activities of the committee from 1977 and 1978, for example, reveal that it did not demand major changes to any animation features. In passing Im Jeonggyu's 1977 *Electroman 337* and Kim Cheonggi's *Robot Taekwon V* sequel of 1978, *Showdown with Golden Wing* (*Hwanggeum Nalgae-ui daegyeol*), the committee merely commented that the features lacked emotion (Han-guk gongyeon yulli wiwonhoe, Issue 13: 6; 19: 7). Sometimes it cut unnecessary erotic images, or banned interpretations of science-fiction aliens deemed inappropriate, but usually the changes considered necessary were textual. The committee demanded, for example, that the English term SOS in the title of Kim Hyeon-yong's *Mazinger X: SOS operations* (*Majingga X: SOS jakjeon*) be rendered by a Korean word and told director Kim to make foreign names Korean in the third instalment of the Giant Robot series, 1977's *The Special Underwater Attack Unit* (*Sujung teuk-gongdae*) (Han-guk gongyeon yulli wiwonhoe, Issue 6: 7; 8: 7).

Working conditions thus slowed the creative development of Korean animators for several decades. The greater success of Japanese productions, therefore, reflects not the collective talent of Korean artists but, rather, three major factors that have underpinned the development and commercial success of Japanese animation since the 1950s: the absence of strong censorship of comic art; the large domestic market for both mainstream and independent comics (manga), animation (anime) and related fads and spin-off products; and the popularity of Japanese comic art abroad. The market for comics and animation in Japan is many times larger than in Korea, not simply because of Japan's much larger population, but because unlike Korea, where most people lose interest in these products in their twenties, a large percentage of Japanese adults continues to read comics. Suzuki Matsuo's 2004 movie *Gates of Love* (*Koi no Mon*), for example, which features costume role-play (*cosplay*), manga cafes and real-life scenes from Tokyo's bian-nual Comiket comic book fair, shows the pervasiveness and competitiveness of Japan's comic art scene. In the West, many have come to appreciate the defining characteristics of Japan's comic art scene, including its drawing styles, its use of advanced technology to create lifelike images and special effects, and its complex and sometimes provocatively sexist or violent storylines. Although 'the Korean Wave' (*hallyu*) has generated significant foreign interest in Korean popular entertainment since the late 1990s, Korean animation has not taken off abroad to the same extent as other products, despite the increasing success of Korean comic book (*manhwa*) artists. Attracting foreign interest remains, therefore, a major challenge to Korean animators, but even though they are keen to sell their own products abroad, mainstream animation suffers constraints in pushing the boundaries in terms of imagery, language and story-line.⁶ After all, although animation, like *manhwa*, targets as its primary audience people in their teens and twenties, animation needs to appeal simultaneously to a market that includes both the very young and those in their thirties and forties (the parents of younger viewers) and thus cannot emulate *manhwa* in pushing social norms in its depictions of sexuality and violence.

In 1994, acknowledging the disparity between the number of Korean successes in animation and the productions recognized as Korean-made, the Korean government officially designated

animation a key industry. Since then, it has tried to boost the domestic animation industry by way of tax reductions, the enactment of a quota system for TV animation, and the launch of several supporting institutions. The efforts were thwarted for some time after September 1997, when three large American TV networks discontinued their employment of Korean animation studios during the Asian economic crisis. But today, Korean animators are putting these setbacks behind them as they benefit from significant structural changes. Due to government support, the number of Korean-made animated TV series aired on Korean TV has grown substantially, and currently more than 110 colleges offer courses in animation. Among the major Korean animation events now regularly held are the Seoul International Cartoon and Animation Festival (SICAF) and the annual Korean Animation Award. The Seoul Animation Center was established in 1999 and receives generous support from the city government, some of which – US\$1 million annually – it reinvests in the SICAF. It is home to a museum, academy, library, theatres, and exhibition halls, and regularly holds animation events and programs. Pucheon and Chuncheon are among several cities that have offered support for the development of local animation studios and related events (Lent 2003).⁷

The promotion scheme has already paid off. A growing number of Korean feature films and animation shorts win awards, and Korean studios are now a strong presence at animation festivals abroad. Among the successes are Yi Seonggang's 2002 *Story of Mari* (*Mari iyagi*) – a psychological fantasy about the dreams and thoughts of a young boy growing up – which received very positive reviews worldwide and was awarded first prize at the 2002 Annecy International Animated Film Festival; and Seong Baegyeop's *Oseam* – an adult drama about two young orphans struggling with the feeling of loss – which in 2004 won first prize in Annecy as well as the prize for Best Animated Film at the 49th Asia-Pacific Film Festival held in Fukuoka. It appears that the two main factors contributing to this increasing international recognition are the emergence of a new generation of innovative animators, and the fact that Korean studios are taking production more fully into their own hands. Among Korea's major animation studios today are Sunwoo Entertainment – which in 2000 merged with Anivision, responsible for the animation of *King of the Hill* and many episodes of *The Simpsons* in the 1990s. Apart from its work for numerous foreign shows, including *Family Guy*, the company has produced Yi Seong-gang's *Yobi the Five-tailed Fox* (*Cheonnyeon yeou yeoubi* 2007). Other companies are Studio Flying Inc., responsible for Cho Beom-jin's *Aachi & Ssipak* (*Achiwa Ssipak* 2006) and the upcoming *Mad Monkey* by director Kim Byeong-gap; B-on-D, which produced Yu Jin-hui's *Pumpkin Story* (*Hobak jeon* 2006); and Ocon Inc., which produces mostly TV series, including the successful *Pororo the Little Penguin* (*Pporong pporong Pororo*).

The many successes cannot, however, hide the fact that significant problems remain, one being the lack of substantial financial success among domestic productions, and such success is crucial to nurturing creativity. Some five years ago, John A. Lent wrote:

Despite its seemingly fairy-tale existence, Korean animation does suffer some real-life maladies. Many studios have no production orders and about half of Korea's 20,000 animators are idle during this transition period from overseas to domestic production; feature-length animation films (there were already 105 from 1967 to 1999) have been unsuccessful at the box office, generally not attracting adult audiences; and Korean animation, though superior in technology,

lacks good storytelling, is inexperienced in marketing techniques, and still seeks a uniquely Korean style. (Lent 2003)

According to Joon-Yang Kim (2006: 70), Korean audiences grew resentful when in the 1980s they began to realize that the animated films they saw on TV were actually made by Japanese companies. Since then, however, few measures have been taken to remedy the stylistic mimicry induced by Japanese success in this market.⁸ Of course when one addresses the arguable lack of a specific local style, one must recognize the images' possible subtexts: even though on a visual level, images and their movement may seem identical, they are subject to different interpretations depending on their observers' cultural background (Barthes 1977: 26). And indeed, when interpretation constitutes a form of indigenization, what transpires may be what Appadurai (1990: 32) has described as the heterogenization of culture whereby emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of the local culture, and the creation of a new, localized version of a foreign culture. Even so, Korean animation does not appear to have a rich arsenal of such embedded local references and connotations, and in many cases indigenization has entailed little more than faithfully copying the original into the local language. In order to compete internationally, Korean animators cannot simply build on the local references and connotations found in their *manhwa* and manga, as these will escape foreign consumers. It is therefore imperative that Korean animators explore new territory. After all, even though many Korean comic artists and animators may consider that Japanese animation sets the standard that should be aspired to and be happy to work in what is generally regarded as a Japanese style, this emulation implies neither admiration for Japan as a cultural entity, nor reduced ambition to see Korean art win international recognition.⁹ As the domestic market for animation is becoming more interested in Korean products, Korean studios should benefit from increased commercial opportunities and be able to differentiate themselves further.

Jinny Choo, Manager of SICAF, told me that one important condition for commercial viability is that productions are finished on time. She argued that if a production is finished and released too late, its style, which would have been fashionable and up-to-date technologically when the work began, may have become outdated. Choo proved correct in predicting that despite its US\$3.5 million budget, *Aachi & Ssipak*, which had been in production for approximately seven years, would not do well, arguing that the movie's rather wild drawing styles would already be considered passé by the time of its opening (pers. communication, 4 July 2006).¹⁰ Kim Munsang's 2003 *Wonderful Days* (*Wondeopeul deijeu*), on the other hand, was breathtaking in terms of visual effects, and cost a hefty US\$13 million to make, but because its narrative was convoluted and made little sense to viewers, it failed to deliver at the box office and disappeared from the cinemas after two weeks (Russell 2003). Even though script and style may therefore both be considered of primary importance, a third factor may affect a feature's success. Joon-Yang Kim (2006: 75) argues that keen attention must also be paid to a film's cultural references. In his view, one factor that has impeded the development of Korean animation is the extent to which many animators are influenced by traditionalism, or perhaps even a self-Orientalism, in selecting indigenous imagery for productions:

When meeting with images of Buddhism or Zen style in South Korean animation like *Oseam* (2003) directed by Baek-Yeop Sung... we need to keep in mind that

they must be parts of, and yet cannot be a full representation of, contemporary South Korean society and life. Nowadays, it is much easier to find Christian churches than Buddhist temples in South Korea – thus Christianity can be as representative a religious culture as Buddhism. (Kim 2006: 76–77)

Jinny Choo believes that in order to lure a wider audience, Korean animation studios should follow Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki and, as with his *Pumpkin Story*, tap into local folk customs, stories and legends (pers. communication, 4 July 2006).¹¹ Such a move would mirror efforts made at the start of Korea's animated film history when, shortly after the success of *Hong Gil-dong*, four more films based on old Korean stories were produced, including *Heungbu and Nolbu* (*Heungbuwa Nolbu* 1967) (Cho 2004: 5), which has long been popular as a *pansori* (traditional-style epic drama song) piece. Young Koreans may not always be keen on such indigenous stories, but as long as the retelling is fresh, they certainly stand a chance of broadening the audience for animated productions, especially if they tap into nostalgia or feelings that underpin nationalism. And while searching for alternatives that eschew the norm is vital for the future of Korean animation, I do not expect young comic aficionados to stop checking out the latest manga-style animations readily.

When one looks at the Japanese animated movies that have done well both within Japan and internationally – e.g. Katsuhiro Otomo's 1988 *Akira*, Shinji Aramaki's 2004 *Appleseed* (*Appurushdo*), the majority of Miyazaki's movies – few elements of character and setting within them would be directly associated with modern-day Japan. Nonetheless, one might regard the fundamental themes they deal with as of intrinsic relevance to contemporary Japanese society: the complexity of concepts of good and evil, the use of technology, and the human relationship with nature. It would seem, therefore, that in Korea the lack of success lies not so much in the theme or choice of characters, but in the overall quality of the product. In theory, that is. Unfortunately, few Korean adults are interested in animation or cartoons. As parents, they might be attracted to foreign productions, as they offer the prospect of a good and, in their eyes, pedagogically sound story and a seeming lack of overt violence. Teenagers, on the other hand, are more likely to explore stylistically and technologically novel productions, including those that offer what parents would not like them to see, but they will not buy many movie tickets and are more likely to download the movies they watch online or exchange them on DVDs or flash drives. Although one might expect good movies to sell themselves, advertising and the sale of spin-off products play a crucial role in drawing audiences. Jeong-hun Lee has argued that unlike Japan, where the industry has had tremendous success with spin-off merchandise, in Korea the many small companies were long unable to work together to organize the merchandising associated with their productions and vital to the industry's growth (Lee 1999: 59, 69).¹² But perhaps changes are afoot: following the recent digital restoration of the first *Robot Taekwon V* instalment by Shincine Communications Co. Ltd, which broke the record for ticket sales for a Korean animation with approximately 500,000 viewers in the first two weeks, Shincine's president, Shin Chul, announced plans to use the character in spin-off games, comics, and toys (Choi 2007: 13). And indeed, the character has now reappeared on TV and in the form of toys.

Increased merchandising might well provide a way forward for Korean animation companies and allow them to share in the benefits of the Korean Wave. Also important may be the need for the industry not to be dissuaded by the collapse of the domestic market for DVDs and to

continue its efforts to promote its DVDs abroad. In the end, if Korean animated productions are to succeed, attention to a variety of issues will be necessary. Most importantly, quality is crucial, be it that of the original feature or its marketing and spin-off products. Since Korea does not yet have Japan's reputation with foreign comic or pop art fans, I surmise that only atypical, quality productions will lead to the recognition of Korean animation among foreign audiences. The Korean animation industry is blessed with enormous talent, and the government's promotion scheme has provided the basic ingredients needed to ensure consistency in creative output. If cinemas and TV networks further endorse the industry, they may give it the boost it needs to increase its presence on both the national and the international stages.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Hereafter I refer to South Korea as Korea.
- 2 For images, see Byeong-du Choe 2000: 11.
- 3 According to Yeol Choe (1995: 147), the original drawings of *Robot Taekwon V* were made by Kim Hyeong-bae in 1976, with the feature film appearing in 1977.
- 4 Koreans were able to access and consume Japanese manga by way of satellite broadcasting and the country's pirated media market. See Otmazgin 2008: 76.
- 5 One of the most successful of the Korean animation studios working under contract for foreign companies is AKOM, founded by Nelson Shin in 1985. Among the many TV series and feature films the studio has worked on over the years are *The Simpsons*, *The Simpsons Movie*, *Batman: The Animated Series*, and *X-Men*.
- 6 The conservatism of the market partly accounts for the success of North Korean animators in recent years, and why they can work under contract for South Korean, Japanese and American companies (see Radio Free Asia 2006).
- 7 Pucheon has been organizing an annual international comics festival since 1998. A large comics exhibition complex is currently under construction.
- 8 There are still clear stereotypes to be found in the drawing styles and the characters' expressions of Korean and Japanese TV cartoons. Boman and Wand (2006) have outlined the most common among these stereotypes. They include, for example, a distinction of styles according to the age of the target audience and the protagonists. Cartoons for the pre-teen market, they demonstrate, are commonly drawn very plainly, while those for, and with, teenagers have the oversized eyes, and the palm-tree-like spiky hair that once distinguished manga figures. In contrast, adult characters are drawn more conservatively and in a more life-like fashion, usually with little expression in either appearance or the way they communicate.
- 9 In his study of how forms of Japanese mass culture can generate regionalism, Leo Ching (2000) critically reviews an article by Sakurai Tetsuo in which the latter argues that the success of the Japanese animation series of *Doraemon* across Asia implies that Japan is 'recognized as the forerunner in a developmentalist scheme of social and economic progress.' Although few Koreans deny Japan's economic achievements, in Korea, where *Doraemon* has not been particularly popular, a view of Japan as leading in terms of social progress may well have been shared by some privileged Koreans during Korea's colonial period, but it would not be commonly held today, not even among the many Korean admirers of Japanese comic art. Moreover, as Ching justly points out, the popularity of Japanese pop culture is unlikely to have placed a caveat on the predominance of American culture in the region (Ching 2000: 248; for more discussion of the globalization of culture see Wells 2007: 24–26).

- ¹⁰ Although the movie indeed failed to make a substantial profit, it won the 'Best Animated Film Award' at the 2007 Sitges International Film Festival of Catalonia, Spain.
- ¹¹ See also JTeam Studio's website: <http://www.aanss.com>.
- ¹² Seok-hwan Pak (1999: 265) has argued that comics would disappear without games to back them up, but the increased popularity of Korean comics is disproving this assertion.

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