From Squid Game to Blackpink how South Korea became culture powerhouse Free 020125

Description

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Evan Barringer was 14 years old when he stumbled onto Full House, a South Korea romcom where two strangers are forced to share a house.

Sitting in his house in Memphis, he hit play assuming it was an Asian remake of a beloved American sitcom from the 1980s. It wasn't until the third episode that he realised they had nothing in common save the name. But he was hooked.

That accidental choice changed his life. Twelve years on, he is an English teacher in South Korea – and he says he loves it here: "I have got to try all the foods I've seen in K-dramas, and I've gotten to

see several of the K-pop artists in concerts whose lyrics I used to study Korean."

When Evan discovered Full House in 2012, South Korean entertainment was a blip in the world's eye. Psy's Gangnam Style was the best-known Korean pop export at the time.

Today, there are more than an estimated 220 million fans of Korean entertainment around the world – that's four times the population of South Korea. Squid Game, Netflix's most popular show ever, has just returned for a much-anticipated second season.

How did we get here?

The so-called Korean Wave swept the world, experts say, when the success of streaming met American-inspired production value. And Korean entertainment – from pop music and mushy dramas to acclaimed hits built around universal themes – was ready for it.

BTS and Blackpink are now familiar names on the global pop circuit. People are swooning over sappy K-dramas from Dubai to India to Singapore. Overseas sales of all this Korean content – including video games – is now worth billions.

Last month, after 53-year-old poet and novelist Han Kang won the Nobel Prize for her literature, online boards were full of memes noting South Korea's "Culture Victory" — a reference to the popular video game series Civilisation.

And there were jokes about how the country had achieved the dream of founding father Kim Koo, who famously wrote that he wished for Korea to be a nation of culture rather than might.

As it turns out, this moment had been in the making for years.

It's all in the timing

After South Korea's military dictatorship ended in 1987, censorship was loosened and numerous TV channels launched. Soon, there was a generation of creators who had grown up idolising Hollywood and hip-hop, says Hye Seung Chung, associate professor of Korean Film Studies at the University of Buffalo.

Around the same time, South Korea rapidly grew rich, benefitting from an export boom in cars and electronics. And money from conglomerates, or chaebols as they are known, flowed into film and TV production, giving it a Hollywood-like sheen.

They came to own much of the industry, from production to cinemas. So they were willing to splurge on making movies without worrying much about losses, Prof Chung says.

K-pop, meanwhile, had become a domestic rage in the mid-90s, propelling the success of groups such as HOT and Shinhwa.

This inspired agencies to replicate the gruelling Japanese artist management system.

Scout young talent, often in their teens, and sign them onto years-long contracts through which they become “perfect” idols, with squeaky clean images and hyper-managed public personas. As the system took hold, it transformed K-pop, creating more and more idols.

By the 2000s, Korean TV shows and K-pop were a hit in East and South East Asia. But it was streaming that took them to the world, and into the lives of anyone with a smartphone.

That’s when the recommendation engine took over – it has been key in initiating Korean culture fans, taking them from one show to the next, spanning different genres and even platforms.

The alien and the familiar

Evan says he binged the 16 hour-long episodes of Full House. He loved the way it took its time to build the romance, from bickering banter to attraction, unlike the American shows he knew.

“I was fascinated by each cultural difference I saw – I noticed that they don’t wear shoes in the house,” he recalls. So he took up Netflix’s suggestions for more Korean romcoms. Soon, he found himself humming to the soundtracks of the shows, and was drawn to K-pop.

He has now begun watching variety shows, a reality TV genre where comedians go through a series of challenges together.

As they work their way through the recommendations, fans are immersed in a world that feels foreign yet familiar – one that eventually includes kimchi jiggae, a spicy kimchi stew, and kalguksu, a seafood and kelp noodle broth.

When Mary Gedda first visited South Korea, she went looking for a bowl of kimchi jjigae, as she had seen the stars do on screen numerous times.

“I was crying [as I ate it]. It was so spicy,” she says. “I thought, why did I order this? They eat it so easily in every show.”

Mary, an aspiring French actor, now lives in Seoul. Originally a K-pop fan, she then discovered K-dramas and learned Korean. She has starred in a few cameo roles as well. “I got lucky and I absolutely love it,” she says.

For Mary, food was a big part of the appeal because she saw such a variety of it on K-dramas. Seeing how characters build relationships over food was familiar to her, she says, because she grew up in the French countryside in Burgundy.

But there is also the promise of romance, which drew Marie Namur to South Korea from her native Belgium. She began watching K-dramas on a whim, after visiting South Korea, but she says she kept

going because she was “pretty much attracted to all those beautiful Korean men”.

“[They] are impossible love stories between a super-rich guy and a girl who is usually poor, and, you know, the guy is there to save her and it really sells you a dream.”

But it is Korean women who are writing most of these shows – so it is their imagination, or fantasy, that is capturing the interest (and hearts) of other women across the world.

In Seoul, Marie said she was “treated like a lady”, which hadn’t happened “in a very long time”, but her “dating experience is not exactly as I expected it to be”.

“I do not want to be a housewife. I want to keep working. I want to be free. I want to go clubbing with my girlfriends if I want to, even though I’m married or in a relationship, and a lot of guys here do not want that.”

International fans are often looking for an alternative world because of disappointment with their own society, Prof Chung says.

The prim romances, with handsome, caring and chivalrous heroes, are drawing a female audience turning away from what they see as hypersexual American entertainment. And when social inequality became a stronger theme in Korean films and shows – such as Parasite and Squid Game – it attracted global viewers disillusioned with capitalism and a yawning wealth divide in their countries.

The pursuit of a global audience has brought challenges as well. The increasing use of English lyrics in K-pop has led to some criticism.

And there is now a bigger spotlight on the industry’s less glamorous side. The immense pressure stars face to be perfect, for instance, and the demands of a hyper-competitive industry. Creators behind blockbuster shows have alleged exploitation and complained about not being fairly compensated.

Still, it’s great to see the world pay attention to Korea, Prof Chung says. She grew up in a repressive South Korea, when critics of the government were regularly threatened or even killed. She escaped into American movies.

When Parasite played in the cinema of the small American town where she lives, she saw on the faces of other moviegoers the same awe she felt as a child watching Hollywood films: “It feels so great that our love is returned.”

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