Imaginary Image:
Disseminating Korean Cultural Ideals

*Ruth Scheidhauer*

In this paper when referring to Korean culture, I imply the cultural ideals transmitted through the modern Korean nation-state. In the last decade "the nation" has become to be seen not merely as the object of political, geographical or economic analysis, but also one of cultural analysis. Cultural analysis allows to object people to more than just citizens of a nation, namely as a symbolic community which creates powerful allegiances to a cultural ideal. This cultural ideal is expressed in the motivation to unify, to create congruence between membership of the political nation-state and identification with a national culture, a way of life. The difficulty that national culture based on official self-representation and image-building is faced with is that its value has to

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*Ruth Scheidhauer* is Ph.D. student at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, U.K. After the study of East Asian Art and Archaeology (B.A. and M.A.) at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, she had been working as an event manager for the Press and Culture Department of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Germany for two years. E-mail: r.scheidhauer@ucl.ac.uk.

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walk the thin line between keeping its uniqueness and to achieve a universal value and acceptance for its culture to market itself as distinct in the world.

I therefore proceed with the understanding that culture or cultural ideals is an essential component of civil society and social relations in the present and future. As a medium for collective memory and reflection, the cultural material of past and present societies can either divide people or encourage a sense of understanding and insight about their identity and roots, their history. As such the dissemination and value promotion of cultural ideals is truly important. At the same time it has to be handled with care and responsibility on a national and especially on an international level for a sensible and successful foreign relation and image building.

In the light of cultural globalisation through tourism and international cultural heritage recognition, i.e., UNESCO World Heritage and even national treasure lists, there is therefore an increasing demand for a universal evaluation of cultural ideals. Ironically, local and national authorities contest these same universal cultural values more than ever before, as these values hold powerful interpretations about history and its relation to the people. The same can be said about Korean contemporary Popular Culture, the Korean Wave, hallyu.1 Particularly historical films, even though fictional, carry strong historic-cultural interpretations, if of material history or if of the education of a set historic narrative.

I will concentrate on two active main transmitters or promoters of Korean cultural ideals: cultural governance (the authorised version of cultural ideals) and popular culture. Both write consensual

1. "I wish to explore the ways in which collective memory and popular culture are peculiarly linked — how the infinitely renewable present of electronic mass media creates a crisis for collective memory, and how collective memory decisively frames the production and reception of commercial culture" (Lipsitz, 1990: 7).