The Korean wave in Indonesia: from Asian pop culture to Korean pop culture

Imron Rosidi

Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim, Riau, Indonesia.

Abstract The Korean wave is the popularity of Korean pop culture that occurs in several regions worldwide, including Indonesia. This phenomenon needs to be investigated to discover the historical roots that contributed to the Korean Wave. This article is based on research using post-modern ethnographic methods. Based on this method, it was found that the popularity of Korean pop culture or the Korean wave is related to the history of the popularity of Asian cultural products previously popular in Indonesia, such as Hong Kong films and Taiwanese dramas. This finding reinforces previous findings, which state that cultural closeness or proximity is one of the factors contributing to the popularity of Korean pop culture in several regions of the world.

Keywords: Asian popular culture, Korean popular culture, popularity

1. Introduction

According to Sung Sang-Yeon (2008), the Korean Wave includes the popularity of Korean television dramas, movies, online games, fashion, and popular music outside of Korea. However, Korean television dramas are more popular in Indonesia than other Korean cultural products. Korean movies, for instance, are not widely known but only acknowledged by a few youths who watch Korean movies online because Korean movies are not shown in theatres. Korean pop music is highly celebrated in Indonesia, but familiarity with the music genre comes only after exposure to Korean dramas. This is because Korean television drama usually opens with a Korean soundtrack that invites viewers to listen and enjoy. Moreover, consumers of Korean dramas tend to emulate their favourite actors and actresses’ sense of fashion, including hairstyles.

Korean pop culture has been famous in Indonesia since the 2000s. This raises a question on how is its historical process to be accepted by Indonesian audiences. This question is important to know the historical roots of the popularity of Korean pop culture in Indonesia. Thus, this article is useful to provide an overview of another perspective on the popularity of Korean pop culture in Indonesia. Several studies conducted by researchers explain the popularity of Korean TV dramas (Rosidi 2016; Rosidi 2020; Rosidi 2020; Rosidi, 2022; The Korea Herald 2008; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Ainslie and Lim 2015). These researches, however, do not discuss the linkage of previously popular Asian television dramas in contributing to the popularity of Korean pop culture in Indonesia, especially Korean TV dramas. This article thus aims to find out how far the contribution of Asian cultural products which first came to Indonesia in the popularity of Korean TV dramas.

2. Material and Methods

In recent decades, there has been growing attention to focus more on the “other” rather than the “author” in doing ethnography. This is called “post-modern ethnography”. The “other”, in this case, refers to the “people’s voice” rather than the “author’s voice” (Ibrahim and Noorshah 2012). Fontana (2004) says that since the 1970s, scholars have filtered down post-modern ideas into anthropology. This signifies the importance of “dialogue” between the researchers and the natives, not based on the “researchers’ understanding” only. Fontana criticises some scholars, such as Van Maanen, who focus on the authorial voice rather than the native voice. Postmodernists should obtain validity in reporting ethnography by minimising the authorial voice and remaining trustworthy to the phenomena reported. Fontana (204, p. 212) argues:

“post-modern ethnographers seek to deconstruct or to eradicate the dominant position of the ethnographer. This is done not by making the ethnographer “disappear” but by making the informants selected “public.” Given that the ethnographer is a part of the study, to speak of “understanding” based on empathy with the natives gives the researcher a privileged position and misses the point.”

This is also supported by Smith (1999), who encourages research that emphasizes the indigenous perspective. According to her, researchers should have a “place” for indigenous people to “narrate” and “tell” so that there is a balance between the author’s and indigenous peoples’ voices in their research. She acknowledges that “indigenous people across the world have other stories to tell which not only question the assumed nature of the ideals and the practices that they generate but also
serve to tell an alternative story...”. This does not mean that the researchers should not have their understanding on the phenomena but “they attempt to minimize their authorial bias by letting the natives speak for themselves as much as possible.” Therefore, in this study, the narrative or storytelling approach is employed. The narrative is closely related to “tell” the youth’s engagement with Korean television dramas. This post-modern ethnography hopefully can discover the native’s perspective, i.e., Muslim youth, on Korean television dramas so that their voices are narrated in this study. There are twenty informants selected based on two criteria. They were Asian television drama fans and are now fans of Korean television dramas. These informants are interviewed to know how they love Asian television dramas and Korean television dramas.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Between foreignness and similarity

Huat (2008) examines the element of transnational television dramas, which supports their popularity. He argues that “foreignness” is vital in consuming transnational cultural products. Sometimes, audiences love consuming transnational cultural products because they provide “foreign” elements. The popularity of Korean television dramas has mainly been amongst the ethnic-Chinese population within Asian countries. However, language differentiations are also apparent in their circulation in Pop Culture in China (Singapore, mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). As a result, a television drama in these regions is usually dubbed in a particular Chinese language and subtitled in another. Dubbing has played a key role in domesticating a Korean drama called ‘Jewel in the Palace’ so that it is consumed fashionably amongst ethnic Chinese audiences in East Asia. However, the popularity of this imported television drama is also due to its “foreignness” that attracts the audiences’ attention. This television drama portrays the sense of “difference” or “foreignness”, such as images of the “foreign” settings and “historical” or “traditional” costumes used by its characters. Therefore, according to him, the “exoticism” of the foreign and the practice of dubbing television drama is integral to the viewing pleasure.

However, the similarity of culture is also vital for the reason behind the popularity of Korean pop culture. A study by Ida (2008) portrays the cultural consumption of Taiwanese television dramas among urban Kampung women in Indonesia. Her study reveals that the popularity of East Asian dramas – as transnational television programmes aired on Indonesian television – not only comprises unconventional platforms for the local viewers, but they have also delivered the local audiences a sense of similarity with their cultural tenets and experiences. These East Asian television programmes have complemented national television programmes. They have become another optional source of television productions in the current Indonesian television business.

Her finding suggests two important points. Firstly, East Asian cultural productions (specifically East Asian dramas) have provided an alternative cultural production that challenges Western cultural products. The Asian values in the drama plots differ from those of the West and have attracted Indonesian audiences. Secondly, the similarities in cultural values in these dramas have been regarded as an important factor in their success amongst Indonesian audiences. In this case, “cultural proximity” is in line with her study.

Achieving a “peripheral nation’s export” depends on cultural and geographical proximity. The key argument is not on “cultural proximity”, but the newness and appeal of the stories and actors in the television productions have been a main element. However, it has to be noted that although there are several resemblances in culture between East Asians and Indonesians, there are also some cultural differences between them. This is because the similarity of culture viewed in television productions is insufficient to ensure how well the viewers will watch it. This can be seen because several national television dramas in Indonesia cannot attract Indonesian viewers. They provide a similar or same culture to their audiences.

3.2. From Asian pop culture to Korean pop culture

The popularity of Korean pop culture in Indonesia fundamentally began with the introduction of a Taiwanese television drama titled ‘Meteor Garden’. With Taiwanese actors and actresses with beautiful and cute physical features, this drama succeeded in attracting many Indonesian viewers to follow their performances in every episode aired on television. While Japanese cultural products such as manga managed to maintain and capture the interest of many Indonesians, Korean and Taiwanese television dramas, have taken over Japanese dramas and movies in popularity. Korean cultural products have become the most recent in Indonesian television compared to Japanese and Taiwanese products. Notably, “most fans of Korean cultural products were first fans of Japanese or Taiwanese products.” (Mariani 2008).

However, before the rise of Taiwanese drama, Mandarin television serials were broadcasted much earlier in Indonesia. The following is a narrative by Hamdah, a youth and vendor who resides in Pekanbaru and currently loves watching Korean TV dramas, about the popularity of Mandarin television series. Hamdah says:

“I remember that I was about 11 years old at that time when Hong Kong television serials were famous in my village. I loved them very much but my parents and other older people regarded that watching television serials was a ‘bad’ habit for us. Basically, I was a student at a Pesantren (Islamic boarding school)
in my village and all students in this Islamic boarding school were prohibited to watch TV (Hamdah, personal communication, September 18, 2019).”

At that time, television was still considered luxurious for youths living in rural areas of Indonesia. Only a select few have it. Furthermore, because he was living in an ‘Islamic’ village, television was regarded as a negative form of media. This is because it negatively impacted the development of the Islamic boarding school in his village. Some Muslim youth preferred watching television to participating in the teaching and learning process in the Islamic boarding school. Some people tried to stop youths from watching television programmes, especially the Hong Kong serials. They usually caught students and punished them. However, these young audiences did not give up watching East Asian television serials. Another informant who is a Korean pop culture fan, Abid, says:

“At that time, I forgot the year, but it was probably around 1995 when there was a Mandarin serial titled ‘Drunken Fist’ broadcasted by TPI (Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia or Indonesian Education Television), a private television station. It was broadcasted at 7:30 pm. Every Wednesday night, I watched this mandarin serial together with my friends. I watched it in a group. This is because only one person owned a television set in the village then, so when this Mandarin television serial was broadcasted, people sat in a crowd in front of the television. I loved watching it since the fighting story dominated this television serial. And the female character was very pretty. It was a Kung Fu fighting story and a love story (Abid, personal communication, September 19, 2019).”

Their encounter with Korean pop culture has historical roots several years earlier when they were fans of Hong Kong television serials. Another Korean fan, Hariyanto, also recognises this. He says:

“In my village, at that time, ‘Perusahaan Listrik Negara belum masuk’ (there was no electricity). But, the television owner had his own electric generator set to produce electricity so the television could be turned on. Besides ‘Drunken Fist’, I also consumed two other Mandarin serials: ‘The Grand Canal’ and ‘Condor Heroes’. They were famous amongst us. These two mandarin television serials were broadcasted by Indonesian private television stations, namely RCTI (Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia) and TPI (Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia), during prime time. Now, after moving to Pekanbaru, I no longer consume them. I now consume Korean television dramas. The story is different from the Hong Kong television serials mentioned before. Now that I am living in Pekanbaru, there is no one to prevent me from consuming these Korean television dramas like before (Hariyanto, personal communication, October 5, 2019).”

Based on the above narrative, the intervention attempts by older people in that village show that the rise of television as a form of new media was regarded as a "new imperialism" on students' morality. Secondly, despite the primitive conflict between the Chinese and non-Chinese people in the country, this did not hinder local viewers from watching Hong Kong television serials and Mandarin movies aired on national private television channels. However, the popularity of Mandarin television serials of today no longer reaches the same height of fame as in the 1990s. After the early success of Mandarin television productions, some private television companies looked for East Asian TV productions. They were from Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. Some East Asian television dramas attracted many viewers in Indonesia (Ida 2008).

Although the massive ethnic Chinese market supports Asian cultural product flow, as many reside mainly in Hong Kong, Singapore, and other regions, its reach has also included different types of consumers, namely the Muslim youth. Chua Beng Huat (2012) argues that Korean pop culture’s fame is indeed "dependent on the massive ethnic Chinese market of consumers. This market comprises locations where ethnic Chinese are the predominant population – China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore." This is not to state that non-ethnic Chinese do not become consumers of Asian cultural products. In Indonesia, for instance, many consumers of Korean television dramas are not ethnically Chinese.

In the Indonesian context, Korean television dramas were well-received by Indonesian viewers. One was the ‘Winter Sonata’, popular among young Indonesians in 2002. In the following years, Indosiar, an Indonesian television specialising in Asian dramas from Korea and Taiwan, broadcasted several television serials. In 2005, a Korean drama titled ‘Full House’ became popular among young Indonesians. Many Indonesian audiences acknowledged that their enthusiasm for Korean television dramas started after watching this drama series. Because of its popularity, this Korean television drama was re-broadcasted by Indosiar many times (Mariani 2008). ANTV, another private Indonesian television, aired a Korean Television drama ‘Fullhouse’. Indonesian audiences successfully received this drama, increasing the company’s rating to the top twenty. When ANTV aired reruns of this drama in the morning, its rating shares escalated to 10%. In 2013, B-Channel, a private television in Indonesia, screened this drama series again.

However, it is to be noted that audiences did not well receive some Korean television dramas broadcasted on Indonesian television in Indonesia. In September 2013, for instance, there were three Korean television dramas broadcast on two different television channels. The first was Indosiar broadcasting two Korean television dramas titled ‘Jewel in the Palace’ and ‘Full House Take 2’. The first Korean television drama was screened from 4:30 to 5:00 pm, followed by the second one from 5:00 to 5:30 pm. It is interesting to note here that Indosiar discontinued the broadcast of these two Korean television dramas
as they were not popular enough amongst their viewers. The third Korean television drama at the time was screened on Trans TV. To attract more viewers for this drama titled ‘That Winter, The Wind Blows’, Trans TV tried creatively dubbing the drama series with voiceovers by several famous local artists, such as Indra Bektı. With the slogan, ”Drama Korea dengan warna berbeda” literally translates as ”Korean television drama with different colours”, Trans TV used this particular method to gain more profit from this broadcast. With great confidence, this drama series was broadcasted in prime time from 6:00 to 6:30 pm. Unfortunately, this method did not work as well as expected, and Trans TV canceled this drama. It was clear that the motive for canceling the broadcast was unsatisfactory ratings.

The popularity of Korean pop culture in Indonesia has inspired the development of Indonesian soap operas (sinetron or sinema elektronik) on Indonesian television. On January 14, 2007, as quoted by Ramadhan (2012), Kopmas reported that Korean television dramas inspired approximately 60% of Indonesian soap operas in the early 21st century. Whereas 20% of Indonesian soap operas were adapted from Japan, followed by 10% from Taiwan and only 10% from the USA. Numerous Korean television dramas were adapted into Indonesian soap operas. Some of them are ‘Demi Cinta’ (For Love), adapted from the Korean television drama titled ‘Endless Love’; ‘Ciuman Pertama’ (The First Kiss), adapted from the Korean television drama called ‘Playful Kiss’; ‘Benci Bilang Cinta’ (Hate Calls for Love) adapted from Korean television drama ‘Princess Hours’; ‘Liontin’ adapted from Korean television drama ‘Glass Shoes’; ‘Cincin’ (Ring) adapted from Korean television drama ‘Beautiful Day’; ‘Darling’ adapted from Korean television drama ‘My Lovely Samson’, ‘Kakak Iparku 17 Tahun’ (My Sister in Law is 17) adapted from ‘My Sister in Law is 19’ (Ginanti 2017) and many others. This indicates that Korean television dramas play a significant role in developing Indonesian soap operas.

However, it is important to note here that the appearance of some Indonesian soap operas suspected of adopting Korean television dramas cannot be neglected in this global media era. Korean television dramas are indigenised into Indonesian soap operas. Appadurai (1998) argues that ”what these arguments fail to consider is that at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies, they tend to become indigenized in one or another way: this is true of music and housing styles as much as it is true of science and terrorism, spectacles and constitution.”

4. Final Considerations

Korean pop culture in Indonesia has been famous since the fame of previous Asian pop cultures, such as Hongkong TV serials and Taiwanese TV dramas, supports it. Several interviewees had memories of their fondness for watching Hongkong TV serials in the past. This preference was revived with the presence of Korean TV dramas, Korean films, and Korean music. This shows that the similarity or proximity of culture contributes to the fame of Korean cultural products in Indonesia. This finding reinforces previous findings, which state that cultural closeness is one factor contributing to the popularity of Korean pop culture in several regions of the world.

Ethical considerations
Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding
This research did not receive any financial support.

References

https://www.malice.pub/ojs/index.php/mr


