

Affinities between the ROK and the UAE

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At first glance, describing the Republic of Korea as the darling of the United Arab Emirates may seem bizarre and random. But there can be no doubt that the younger generation of UAE citizens particularly university students are absolutely smitten with all things Korean. It makes sense: closer analysis reveals a solid foundation of economic, social, and cultural affinities that suggest the relationship between the two nations, and their peoples, will only increase in the coming decade.

The Presidential Council on National Branding is perhaps the most formal and official promoter of Korea, and it has proven to be very successful. The ostensible goals of the strategy, launched in 2009, are to embrace multiculturalism, to promote global citizenship, to promote technology and commerce, and to encourage culture and tourism. As a platform from which to promote Korea, the Council, alongside the Embassies and a host of Ministries, Foundations, and other organizations have been tireless in making connections and encouraging the spread of the “Korean wave.”

But even before these formal efforts, forward thinking TV executives recognized the popularity and potential of Korean dramas for the Arabic market. As early as 2007 Arabic-dubbed episodes of Dae Jang Geum were being aired out of Dubai. Exposure to Korean television shows like this set the stage for familiarity by creating a channel of access to an aspect of Korean culture. Similarly, marketing efforts by major companies including Samsung, LG, Hyundai, Kia, and others strove to associate Korean products with high quality, value for money, and reliability. In so doing, these attributes became associated not only with the products, but with the brand of Korea.

Here at Zayed University (Dubai and Abu Dhabi, UAE), we have witnessed amongst students a

massive interest in Korean culture, arts, and language. Through the ZU King Sejong Institute, generously supported by the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, hundreds of students have participated in Korean language courses and participated in study trips to South Korea. Even greater numbers have joined the University's Korea Club, and various other organizations and friendship societies across the UAE, that afford an opportunity to share their interest in various aspects of Korean culture, from films to K pop, from Tae Kwan Do to Korean cuisine.

Well before "Gangnam mania" the South Korean global brand was clearly on the rise. Psy's hit song is only the latest and perhaps most widespread iteration of this trend. As a gentle satire of consumerism and luxurious living, Gangnam Style simultaneously pokes fun at a lifestyle that is crassly commercial and that celebrates the desirability of such excesses. As William Pesek notes, "Koreans are coming to the realisation that GDP gains do not necessarily result in commensurate gross domestic happiness." Doubtless, perhaps subconsciously, this mixed message resonates with young Emiratis who overwhelmingly benefit from their nation's vast wealth, but who also are beginning to question the sustainability and desirability of hyper-consumerism.

South Koreans are still growing into their status as a regional powerhouse with global influence at risk are the traditions and patterns that have served them well over centuries. Similarly, the UAE has launched headlong into a similar role, with the same concerns over losing their unique identity and dismissing their heritage. Both the Korean and Arabic languages are inextricable components of their respective cultures, but both are being challenged by the increasing use of English in commerce, in education, and in popular culture. Such struggles for national identity and traditionalism in a globalized society are very real and amount to another of the affinities between the two nations.

In trying to understand UAE-students' obsession with South Korea, there are several generally accepted drivers. Surely the economic and commercial relationship between these two nations is the foundation upon which interaction rests. Whether it be the nuclear reactors that KEPCO has been contracted to build, the strong sales numbers generated by Korean firms in the UAE, or the oil and gas industry, young people are always seeking ways to differentiate themselves from other graduates in the competition for the best jobs. Rightly, students know that if they can demonstrate an interest in a key commercial partner's language and culture, they give themselves an advantage in the job market.

This is not to say that students' interest is purely mercenary far from it. Rather, of all the many possible cultures to choose from, there is something about South Korean culture that resonates strongly with young people in the UAE. Perhaps it is the shared importance of family and elders that is an inextricable part of both Korean and Emirati societies. Or maybe it is extreme swiftness with

which both nations have risen in social and economic status over the past fifty years. It may be respect for tradition and the traditional arts, like tea ceremonies or calligraphy or textile weaving or pottery, all of which have deep histories in both cultures. Then again, it may be the desire to invent an indigenous popular culture that will project their identity into the contemporary world. In all likelihood, all of these shared elements contribute to the accessibility and affinity between Emirati and South Korean cultures.

One of the most promising aspects of youth-driven national friendships is that students intuitively know that human interaction is the key to cultural understanding. As a result, UAE students are clamoring to spend time in Korea to further understand the culture and language, and to make friends. Dozens of UAE students volunteered to spend time as greeters at the UAE pavilion at the World Expo 2012 in Yeosu. Similarly, when at Zayed University we host visitors from South Korea, or when we produce the annual Abu Dhabi Korean Film Festival, the students insist upon peer-to-peer contact. Such interactions are invaluable and will no doubt lead to greater social and cultural understanding. Given that both the UAE and ROK governments have ambitious plans for tourism to serve as an economic pillar, there will be ample opportunities for mobility and travel between the two nations.

The UAE and the ROK are natural friends, with much to learn from each other. From the highest levels of government to the most casual exchange of cultural output, bilateral relations between our nations have enormous promise. The Korean wave has rolled into the Arabian Gulf's warm waters, and the local population fully approves.

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