Soompi and the “Honorary Asian”: Shifting Identities in the Digital Age

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Every morning at 7:00 AM, Norwegian James Algaard turns on his computer and joins Soompi IRC: a chatroom for members of a Korean Pop Culture discussion forum. James’ daily entrance into the chatroom is enthusiastically greeted by online acquaintances who know him as <SeungHo>, a connoisseur of Korean Hip Hop and a collector of limited edition sneakers. Seungho Lee was born in South Korea, but was adopted by a Norwegian family; websites like Soompi are his only connection to Korean culture. Thousands of miles away in Los Angeles, it is 10:00 PM when I, an American with a strong interest in Asia, join the same chatroom to spend time with Seungho and thirty other "Soompiers," people from around the world who have come together to form a strong and tight-knit online community. The chatroom itself, shown in Figure 1, is visually mundane—a window that gradually fills with text as different users type; but Soompi IRC is an organic and multicultural part of cyberspace where

Figure 1: Soompi IRC users from Canada and Maryland recount their shared past ("Soompi Irc." Author Screenshot).
people communicate in English, Korean, Mandarin, Cantonese, Spanish, Norwegian, Swedish, Vietnamese, Japanese, Tagalog, and French about every topic imaginable, 24 hours a day.

We Soompiers are representatives of “Generation I”—we have grown up with the Internet and are using it to define ourselves in a more globalized society (Gates 2000). A decade ago, cultural identity for people like Seungho and me was limited by factors like geography, language, and ethnicity; with the emergence of new technology and online communities, we have access to an ever-growing variety of choices for personal expression. Soompi and other cyber communities are at the forefront of a larger movement towards redefining how we culturally relate to one another. This movement will extend past the reach of the Internet and act as a catalyst for cross-cultural interaction and understanding on a level never seen before.

K-Pop for the Masses: A New Look for Globalization

“Generation I” is essential to the discussion of globalization, defined as a “social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding” (Bell 95). Throughout history, international trade has been the force that has fostered the exchange of ideas between the East and West. During the 20th century, the entertainment business in the United States exploded in growth and popularity, spreading the influence of American culture around the world through music and cinema. The concept of American hegemony over global markets was alarming to the budding Asian entertainment industry, and South Korea had other ideas for the future of
globalization: government regulatory agencies began to work closely with film and television companies to promote a modernized version of Asian culture—a hybrid of traditional Confucian values, sentimental romance, and new technology and fashion (Sung). What came out of this initiative was "Hallyu," or the Korean Wave—the enormous rise in popularity of Korean pop culture as represented in film, television, and music starting in the late 1990’s. South Korea, in only a few years, grew to dominate Asia as the main exporter of television programs (Ko); fans from Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, and even Egypt (Figure 2) could easily access the Korean world by downloading media from the Internet. And for the first time in film history, Korean actors like K-Drama lead Bae Yong-Joon and film star Jang Dong Gun became the highest-paid in all of Asia, beating out even American stars for commercial appearances (Faiola). The United States was still the wealthiest and strongest force for marketing music and film, but the Korean Wave and the Internet played a significant role in exposing consumers around the world to a new realm of choices.

Despite the wide reach of the Korean Wave, Americans during the 1990's still had little access to news and information about Korean Pop because of language barriers. Many Korean-Americans, especially those from the 2nd or 3rd generation, felt disconnected from the music and culture their cousins in Asia could easily participate in and enjoy. This disconnect actually
became the motivation for some young Asian-Americans to use the Internet in special ways to forge a new link with Asia and create their own identity (Nakamura, Digitizing Race 185). Online, all that was necessary was for a few dedicated people to translate articles, write music reviews, and add subtitles to television series in English; all on their own and without pay, these individuals worked tirelessly on web-based projects to make Asian Pop culture available to an English-speaking audience, taking the process of globalization into their own hands and creating a cultural bridge between two vastly different worlds.

The most successful of these dedicated web developers was Susan Kang, the founder of Soompi, which is currently the largest community of English-speaking Asian pop culture fans in the world. I had the privilege of interviewing Susan in October of 2008; she described how and why Soompi began, discussed Soompi’s place in the Asian-American community, and even divulged information about how she hopes to improve the site in the future. My first question was how Soompi developed from just a small idea into a labor of love that would cost hundreds of dollars in out-of-pocket web server fees; Susan explained, “At the time, I had recently gotten into K-Pop and the Internet, but I could not find any K-Pop stuff on the web. So I bought a book, learned HTML just by fooling around with it, and that’s how Soompi began!” She purchased Korean media such as magazines and CD's, translating the material so that other Americans on the Internet could experience K-Pop and tell their friends about it. After the population of Soompi had grown to around 50,000, online Korean stores looking to tap into the new American market

“My name is Susan, but people just call me Soomp.” –Susan Kang

Figure 3: Soompi has boosted sales for Korean stores like yesstyle.com by selling ad space (Yesstyle 2008).
began to contact Susan for cross-promotional activities, offering special discounts to Soompi users in exchange for advertising space on the website, shown in Figure 3. Even the Korea Times, one of the most prominent Korean newspapers, took notice of Soompi’s growing influence and published a full article about its function in the Korean Wave (“At Work—Soompi.com”). Before Susan’s eyes, Soompi had become legitimate and important, a hub of activity where K-Pop fans could participate in the worldwide exchange of media and information.

“I <3 Soompi”: How Strangers Can Become Family

Susan’s website began to truly take off after she implemented a content management system, allowing staff and users to enter their own material and turn Soompi into a real forum of discussion. Amy Jo Kim, who outlines the main strategies for developing a successful website in Community Building on the Web, describes the message board format used by Soompi as “asynchronous, which means that people don’t have to be in the same (virtual) place at the same time to have a conversation…It’s great for asking and answering questions and giving the community a sense of context and history” (Kim 34). The asynchronous nature of Soompi encourages individual users to respond to popular

Figure 4: Soompi discussion thread for actress Song Hye Gyo is updated daily with photos, newly translated articles and videos by dedicated fans; the thread has nearly 36,000 posts and 2.8 million views (“Song Hye Kyo” 2009).
discussion topics at their own convenience, and to communicate with people in other parts of the world. Soompi is organized into five main forums, the most popular of which are devoted to K-Pop; the topic for actress Song Hye Gyo, displayed in Figure 4, is the most updated and visited thread on the site. This thread, for example, is filled with the contributions of dedicated Soompiers: updates about the acting career and personal life of Song Hye Gyo, commentary on her current and past projects, and accounts of fan club meetings with photos. Thousands of devoted fans visit and build on the discussion threads of their favorite stars, connecting with each other as they share a common pop culture interest.

Forums outside of the Entertainment section of Soompi are home to an incredible variety of material and opinions, from the best uses of disposable chopsticks to the Canadian elections system. Soompi is an incredibly diverse community, with over 1.2 million visitors from 6 continents, so users often disagree in Forums such as General Discussion or Current Events. Informal “Soompi debates” are an aspect of the Forums that engage members in defending their views in front of a varied and sometimes unpredictable audience. For example, a popular thread about “Wannabe Asians/Wasians” brought to light a significant point of disagreement between Soompiers who find people of other ethnicities obsessed with Asia to be “weird and annoying,” and non-Asian Soompiers who resent being labeled as wannabes for having an interest in other cultures (“Wannabe Asians” 2008). Kuroioshare, whose post is shown above, hoped to shed light on her own life as a positive and intelligent example of cultural appreciation, and contrast it with the limited and distorted version of Asian culture consumed by many anime fans (“pocky” is a Japanese snack now popular in the U.S., and an “otaku” is “an overly-obsessed person”). After
over 80 pages of commentary, the thread unfortunately descended into name-calling and racial
bigotry, neither of which is tolerated by the Soompi staff; the topic was recently closed. Susan
defends the choice to strictly regulate the content posted on Soompi: “From the start, I always
wanted Soompi to be a place that’s safe for your little brother or sister...I understand that people
want to talk about whatever they want, but there has to be some semblance of order.” Daniel
Shim from Toronto, Canada agrees, and has observed, “The Soompi community itself watches
out for each other like a neighborhood.” The idea of Soompi as a peaceful and family-friendly
community is important, because users of diverse backgrounds can usually discuss their differing
views within a larger context of common ground and shared responsibility.

For Daniel, Susan, and the vast majority of other Soompiers, the Forums and
accompanying IRC chat room can unquestionably be referred to as communities, even if they do
not exist within the same physical space. However, it is necessary to examine further how an
online forum should be compared to a traditional or “real” community, because the differences
between a face-to-face conversation and a text-based chat are naturally so numerous. Howard
Rheingold is the premier scholar in the study of digital culture, and has thoroughly addressed this
issue in his renowned 1993 work, The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic
Frontier. He recognized even fifteen years ago the significance of Generation I and the rise of
digital culture, and included in his book the 1991 honors thesis of Elisabeth Reid from the
University of Melbourne; her analysis of IRC chat rooms lends an academic and sociological
perspective to a previously untouched medium of communication. According to Reid, "IRC
habitués have evolved rules, rituals, and communication styles that qualify them as a real culture
according to criteria defined by prominent social scientists" (Reid, 180). She is referring to
specific sequences of text that users feel compelled to enter if they wish to assimilate into the
chat and be recognized by others in the room; surprisingly, these “rituals” have remained constant across different versions of IRC, different communities, and almost twenty years.

In Soompi IRC, it is customary for new members to give their age, sex, location, and links to photos of themselves in order to be fully accepted into the community. In addition, a user who has been absent for at least a month will be met with others typing her name repeatedly in all capital letters, including exclamations, “hearts” (typed as <3), and emoticons such as ‘:D’ or ‘^^’ upon returning to the channel. These traditions transform a completely anonymous and text-based communication utility, applying a layer of trust, humanity, and integrity to the platform that would not exist otherwise (if users did not care so much about building and maintaining the community). Louie Chen, who joined Soompi IRC earlier this year, feels that “You all [the IRC community] seem to be really open with each other, like the whole ‘family’ thing. I like how we still keep in touch and care about each other, even though everyone’s so far away” (Chen). Soompiers realize that without the online community, there would be few if any opportunities easily available to share interests, experiences, and friendship with so many people from different countries, and they invest much of their time and energy participating in the cross-cultural exchange. Suddenly, Soompi IRC means much more than an online meeting place for a random group— it symbolizes a new kind of culture entirely, one that “helps to destroy any sense of intolerance [between members] and...to foster a sense of community” (Reid 185).

“This Site is My Life”: Soompi Addicts and the Asian Fix

For the past decade, most scholarly research on cyber culture has focused on the type of social interaction that takes place within the digital medium. Rheingold, Reid, Kim, and Nakamura have all helped to build the foundations for the study of online group behavior. But
there is another important part of Internet life that is only beginning to develop with the current generation of web users—how membership in an online group affects a person's self-perception in relation to others in real life. Nessim Watson is a Professor of Communication at Westfield State College, and has devoted years to the study of American mass media and cultural representations. After spending two years participating in and studying an online fan club, he concluded that, "those youth formed a community which created not only individual benefits for participants but also a group strength" (102). It is those "individual benefits" that should provide the next source of material for research. The strong allegiance to a web-based group is not something that an Internet user logs in and out of—they take this allegiance with them and it influences their decisions and behavior in the real world: their mode of personal expression, their opinions about other groups, and especially their cultural identity.

Soompi is one of the best venues to observe the brand new phenomenon of people gaining a real sense of culture from an online source. According to Quantcast, a free internet ratings site, Soompi.com has 30 million page views per month, with a full 66% accomplished by “Addicts,” or users who log on more than once every day (Quantcast). For them, Soompi is the most convenient place to get their fix of Asian culture.

This makes sense, and is in line with a report published in 2006 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, *Asian-Americans and the Internet: The Young and Connected*; data from this report is displayed in Figure 5. According to the study, English-speaking Asian-Americans “are the Net’s most
active users…and have made the Internet an integral part of their daily lives” (Spooner, 2). For hundreds of thousands of people in this demographic, Soompi has definitely become an important force in their personal lives and decisions, and in some cases, is the only website visited besides social utilities like Facebook (“What Would You Do Without Soompi?”). They can use Soompi to build their knowledge of Asian culture, and to form new connections with other people they can relate to around the world. In September of 2008, a discussion topic was posted on the Forums: “What Would You Do Without Soompi?”

Certain self-proclaimed “addicts” left replies such as, “I probably wouldn’t be so into Asian stuff,” and “I would be a lot less knowledgeable about the world.” For thousands of Soompiers, the Forums are where they learn Asian-specific modes of fashion, style, speech patterns, and other cultural behaviors of expression.

This part of personal development is extremely important in the case of Asian-Americans living in predominantly non-Asian areas, without an “Asian group” of friends to participate in cultural activities with. Prominent scholars in Asian-American studies constantly emphasize the unique relationship between the Asian-American community and New Media, and its power to change traditional ideas about identity, culture, and the potential fluidity of both (Nakamura, Digitizing Race 184). Lisa Nakamura recognizes in Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet that “Interactive media like the Web can question identity while building discursive community in ways that other static media cannot.” It allows anyone who wishes to contribute to the evolution of Asian-American culture to effectively “log in” and express their approval, resistance, or creativity in the largest Forum on the planet, all while strengthening the bonds of a real community. Daniel Shim relates his own experience: “I was born in Canada in white
communities & I grew up to be like them. Soompi has given me knowledge about Asian culture that I would not get from my school or family” (Shim). To follow that point further, Nakamura adds that the Internet provides a Forum for “questioning a rigid and essentialized notion of Asian American ‘authenticity’” (185). This is extremely important—the idea of culture being inextricably linked to ethnicity, language, and geographic location becomes irrelevant in the face of rising online communities, the organic and global nature of which forces the issue of what makes a person “Asian,” or “American.” Since Daniel joined Soompi and began to use the Internet as a tool for personal expression, his popularity online has grown enormously: his YouTube videoblog, in which he comments on events in his daily life and makes fun of Asian stereotypes, has over 100,000 subscribers and is the 4th most popular comedy blog in all of Canada (Figure 6, YouTube 2009). Without having grown up around many Asian young people, Daniel has been extremely successful in navigating the cultural landscape with the help of his online community, even producing his own ideas about Asian-American identity as a New Media celebrity. For young people like Daniel in Toronto and Seungho in Norway, Susan Kang says that “online is pretty much the only place they feel like they can connect to other Asians.” Soompi makes it not only possible, but easy for Asians who live in a non-Asian place to immerse themselves in Asian culture and comment on it—an unprecedented step in the separation of culture and a static location.
“We’re All Asians Here”: The New Fluidity of Race Online

The single most important factor in differentiating online communities from ones in real time and space is the control an individual has over releasing personally identifiable information. On Soompi, a user can choose if and when to reveal things like gender, race, and country of origin; the user profile provides a short form to display a person’s photos, sex, and location, but all of these fields are optional and not used very often. On the left in Figure 7 is the information displayed for Susan Kang: her avatar, a picture of her child, is an indirect hint to gender, age, and race; her status as Member No. 1, Founder, and five yellow hearts distinguish her as the highest-ranking user on Soompi. To the right is the avatar for Ashley—an African-American who has chosen to represent herself with fan-art of a Japanese Pop star and a joking insult to a popular Korean boy-band. Before writing each of her 13,831 posts on Soompi, Ashley has made the decision of whether or not to reveal her racial background in a discussion topic; she believes that at times it is relevant to the discussion and other times, it is not—but most importantly, she has the choice. The simple format for visual expression on Soompi lends itself to the detachment of race as a visible label from the people on the Forums. Rather, race is only introduced when it is the subject of focused discussion, and thus cannot function as a tool by itself to divide users, or even to bring them together.

Figure 7: Soompiers represent their identities through avatar; shown here are Susan, a Korean-American from Los Angeles, and Ashley, an African-American from New York (Soompi Avatar, 2008).
Lisa Nakamura argues in her book, Cybertypes, that online communities have the potential to “create a sense of racial identity that is flexible, hybrid, and de-essentializing” (Nakamura 129). The idea that a person must “look Asian” or “speak an Asian language” to participate in the modern construction of the Asian identity is rendered obsolete when Soompiers are not forced or even encouraged to display their race or any other information on the Forums. Because these communities are a resource for knowledge of Asian culture that is built by and open to a diverse group of people who appreciate it, Nakamura observes that “‘Asianness’ becomes a series of situated knowledges…defining race in such a way as to detach it from the body. If you “get” it, you are functionally, at least in the moment you are reading and “appreciating” it, defined as…Asian” (130). Soompi represents an open invitation for people of all races to learn the intricacies of Asian culture and apply them in the form of changes to their own lives—and when non-Asian members display their knowledge of Asian culture by typing in Japanese or laughing at a Korean joke, they are sometimes accepted into the community as honorary or de facto Asians, in the same way as an ethnically Asian person who happened to grow up in a non-Asian environment. There have been many times in the past three years that someone in Soompi IRC has identified the room as sharing a common cultural background, by saying “We’re all Asians here.” This implied acceptance of non-Asian Soompiers into the Asian community is significant even if the statement is said jokingly, because it means that on the Internet, race is no longer static, exclusive, or dependent on physical attributes.

If it is truly easy in the Internet Age for an Asian to “get in touch” with the Asian culture online, then it is also easy for someone who is not Asian to do the same. Demographic statistics (also provided by Quantcast) show that 40% of Soompi users identify as non-Asian (20% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic, and 9% African American), and that almost two-thirds of the Soompi
population lives outside the U.S., in countries like Australia, Singapore, Canada, and Spain. Susan Kang explains that, “the audience in the beginning was meant to be just any English-speaking fan of K-Pop--so my tagline was K-POP FOR THE MASSES, the masses encompassing anyone and everyone, not just Koreans.” Soompi now has a broad audience racially and geographically, and Susan reveals that the “lifestyle” sections of the Forums (fashion, tech, cars, games, etc.) are meant to “expand to Asian-Americans who are not necessarily into K-Pop…of course, we are always open to non-Asian-Americans as well.<3” The nature of the message board format therefore helps to facilitate discussion about both Asia and other topics of common interest between members of undisclosed backgrounds. It is this system that allows non-Asians to integrate seamlessly into the world of Asian culture, further erasing stereotypes and misconceptions about how people of different ethnicities present themselves and their interests online and in real life. Katherine Lee, a veteran Soompi user, does not feel negatively about non-Asian Soompiers, and recognizes that Asians also participate in the consumption and appreciation of other cultures: “I mean it’s cool, people like different things. It’s the same as when we [Asians] listen to Black music” (Lee, Katherine). An extraordinary example of how music and the Internet have opened new doors for cross-cultural exchange is Natalie White, known online as “Pumashock.” This talented African-American singer from San Francisco composed and performed her own arrangements of famous Korean Pop songs in early 2009; her YouTube videos “went viral,” or spread rapidly across the Internet, with K-Pop fans from all around the world discussing what she had accomplished. A few months later, Natalie received a call from one of the largest Korean television networks, asking her to perform on their popular talent-search program, “Star King.” Natalie remembers, “This whole experience has been unreal.
I had no idea that so many people would watch my videos, and that Star King would fly me out to Korea” (White). Online support for Natalie was incredibly strong, even to the point of stirring negative action towards Korean celebrities who behaved in racially insensitive ways. A video allegedly showing Korean Pop singer Kim Taeyeon’s negative attitude towards Natalie was translated, subtitled, and spread in February, 2009 by anti-fans in order to organize protests for Kim’s next concert in the United States (Stand). Natalie White’s fame in the Korean Pop world would not have been possible without online communities like Soompi of people who appreciate the music together, no matter what race the performer might be. Soompiers of any race can benefit from experiencing diversity on a rapidly-integrating platform within the context of appreciating Asian pop culture.

**Digital Diplomacy: The Future of Globalization**

Online communities function as a positive forum for cross-cultural interaction. By focusing on interests and types of personal expression that anyone could adopt regardless of race, location, and language, these communities open the doors for millions of internet users to experience different cultures and communicate with different people. In that same way, online communities provide a meeting place for a globally distributed group of individuals who would not be able to connect with a community they truly identify with, if it were not for the internet. These individuals, empowered by the sense of community they experience online, have the ability to influence others, making an impact in their own “real life” environment—and we are already beginning to see the effects of this movement in connection with the Korean Wave of entertainment.
During the year 2006, when the first Korean Drama was broadcast in Egypt, a growing sense of friendship and affinity between the two countries was translated into international reforms and political action. Fans of the Drama ("Winter Sonata," a sad romance starring Bae Yong-Joon and Choi Ji-Woo) were “dazzled by the similarities between the Korean and Egyptian cultures” and launched their own online forums, so that K-Drama fans all over the world could spread and share their appreciation (Emam). Hundreds of students at Ain Shams University in Cairo demanded that a Department for Korean Studies be opened and expanded; the South Korean Ministry of Information and Communication responded, and sent volunteers to Ain Shams to teach internet and personal computer skills (Figure 8). These will be the skills necessary to push forward a new relationship between Egypt, Korea, and the rest of the world; now more than ever, people are realizing the importance of the online community and its potential to make a real impact. In March of 2006, the Egyptian State Information Service reported, “Egypt's General Authority for Investment and Free Zones and the South Korean Trade Representation Office in Cairo have signed a memorandum of understanding to promote joint investments and trade exchange through the exchange of investment and trade data” ("Egypt, S.Korea sign MoU to boost joint investments"). Within the same year, tourism between Egypt and Korea saw a full 48% increase, and trade increased by 21% (Figure 9). Out of digital diplomacy, the opportunities for real diplomacy and

Figure 8: At the Egypt-Korea Internet Plaza in Cairo, Korean volunteers teach internet and computer skills to Egyptians of Ain Shams University. (“Korea Students Teach Internet in Egypt”).
exchange have truly expanded—but more importantly, so has the desire of normal people to explore the rest of the world.

That desire has grown particularly strong in my own heart, because I feel deeply connected to not only Americans, Koreans, or Egyptians but people of all cultures; being a part of Soompi and the online world has helped me to realize my place in the global community. This experience has motivated me to join VIA’s American Language and Culture Program for Asia/U.S. Exchange at Stanford, shown in Figure 10, as a host, and to travel to Korea in Winter 2008 and visit the students I so easily related to and connected with during the program. All of us in Generation I have been presented with unique opportunities to educate ourselves about other cultures. What we as individuals receive out of being a part of online communities amounts often to much more than what we are able to contribute; the tension and unfamiliarity between people of different backgrounds is somewhat diminished in the face of a common cultural experience shared online. We are already beginning to witness the benefits of digital worlds for the individual with an open mind, but we are only on the cusp of what online
communication could mean for the future of international exchange, cooperation, and understanding.

Figure 10: Soompi has given me the desire to be a host for Asia/U.S. exchange at Stanford, and the cultural knowledge necessary to relate to and connect with my students (VIA ALC 2008).
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Miscellaneous


Soompi Images: Primary Research

“Song Hye Kyo, ~*the PERFECT PACKAGE*~…*TALENT*BEAUTY*CHARISMA*…”


Soompi IRC (Figure 1). Author Screen shot. 10 November 2008.


Soomp! (Figure 5). Soompi avatar of Susan Kang. Author Screen shot. 10 November 2008.
