Disney in Korea: A Socio-Cultural Context of Children's Popular Culture
by Lena Lee

Since the Disney Company has been established in the late 1920s, it has become exemplary of popular culture for children and families (Gabler 586). In Disney films, certain American characters and values have been consistently represented and reinforced, which construct childhood so as to reconcile it to consumerism. In particular, Disney animated films often contain similar characters, themes, and values, such as individualism, freedom, great romance, and American social norms of the white middle class (Bryman 56; Giroux 47; Kasturi 44) that are continually and intentionally presented. Many Disney films for children have been denounced in that they tend to produce and maintain specific forms of American cultural power and hegemony for children across the world by means the cultural imperialism. For instance, Disney films construct the United States as "the happiest place on earth" and encourage children to understand who they should be, what societies are about, and what it means to construct a childhood world in an existing social environment—namely, the United States (Best and Lowney 441; Giroux 45). Because of this hegemony, Disney films have been the target of criticism for their pretense as a pure, sacred place for children, in which cultural homogeneity and historical purity are emphasized, while complex socio-global issues, like the cultural differences and struggles of various groups, are ignored.

The messages conveyed in Disney's films are then important socializing agents as regards the identities of children. Furthermore, the Disney Corporation is seen as a place for safe and wholesome family entertainment by most people because it has been closely connected to innocent childhood and fantasy. The Disney Corporation is incomparable and unique to any other corporations by considering its products pure, innocent, and pleasurable. Thus, many American people hardly notice any of the social ideologies and economic power embedded in Disney: Rather, like a person of Wasko's study and many undergraduate students in my classes, they often say, "They're [the Disney company and its leaders] making so many people so happy. And they do it so well—how can one not be awed by their success?" and "I watched and enjoyed many Disney films when I was young but I am alright without having any bias or assumptions. Why do we have to worry about those, then?" (Wasko 3)

The Disney company and its films have been considered a great and sometimes detrimental influence on children around the world as well. The corporation's tremendous impact on children throughout the world has resulted from its stupendous national and global success since the mid-1930s. Disney's global phenomenon has been denounced for universalizing a certain form of childhood as natural and ideal in contemporary society through globalization and children's easy access to the media. It has been said that Disney[1] urges homogenous global culture by Americanizing it; if this is true, Disney has had an impact not only on local but also on national cultural identities. This standpoint considers the cultural imperialism of Disney to exercise a great influence on the minds and perceptions of children in other cultures by portraying and celebrating American mainstream social values such as individualism, romantic love. From this perspective, Disney has disseminated American cultural messages to other countries, thus contributing to the Americanization of children. The ordinary U.S. Citizen, as this occurs, remains relatively unaware of the cultural products of other countries. In sum, Disney provides the paradigm for behavior and values not only in the United

States but also in foreign counties by implying that "what is good for Disney is good for the world, and what is good in a Disney fairly tale is good in the rest of the world" (Zipes 40).

In spite of the criticism on Disney mentioned above, there is an area of study that has often been neglected—namely, local culture and its influences on audiences'—namely children's—understanding of Disney films. As an example of American popular culture for children, Disney films have usually disseminated American cultural messages to other countries, thus contributing to the so-called "Americanization" of children while the United States remains relatively unaware of the other countries' cultural products. It is plausible that Disney's various products are considered an important form of popular culture not only for young children in the United States, but also for those in many other countries. Therefore, various studies of the Disney movies are sometimes persuasive in their critiques of the relationship between popular culture and social ideology. However, their perspectives are often insufficient to understand children's interpretations of a cultural text by overlooking the fact that the children interact with and are influenced by their socio-cultural circumstances. In order to attempt to begin this line of discussion, this paper particularly looks at the case of Korean context in relation to Disney.

Disney's reputation in Korea is not an exception to its popularity elsewhere. When Disney's Mickey Mouse was included in the daily Korean newspaper Chosun Ilbo in the late 1930s, many Koreans were well-acquainted with Disney and its famous characters. In the 1950s, Disney animated films were shown in Korea after the Korean War, starting with *Peter Pan* in 1957. The Walt Disney Korean Company also was established in 1992, and Disney Channel in Korea has 1.8 million subscribers in 2009 (The Walt Disney Company 2009).

Koreans' perception of Disney is intertwined with the Korean socio-political background in two ways. First, it has to do with a positive image of the United States and its culture, which has been prevalent in Korea since before the 1990s. This positive image is due to American military support for South Korea during the Korean War, as well as the current economic boom in Korea. This positive perception of the United States, once merely an ally, has thus expanded to the recognition of its cultural products. These were seen as good, beneficial, and instructive, when compared to those of Japan, whose cultural products were considered bad and immoral in light of Japanese colonization of Korea. Thus, from the Korean liberation from Japan in 1945 up to the recent past, the Korean government prohibited Japanese cultural products, while encouraging those of the United States. Most Japanese cultural products were not imported to Korea before institution of the third open-door policy to Japanese culture in June 2000, after which some forms of Japanese animation were allowed to play in Korean theatres. However, the regulations on Japanese animated films were eliminated by January 2006. Therefore, Japanese animated films have been heavily regulated by the Korean government because of Japanese colonization, whereas American animated films experienced no administrative restrictions before the 1990s (Kim and Lee 188). For instance, Korean advertisements for some Disney products and for Paramount's *Gulliver's Travels* indicated that Disney films were recommended by the Korean Minister of Education (Huh 37). This Korean policy led the Korean people to ardently welcome American cultural products. American economic power also induced Koreans to value its cultural products. Just as Americans have a positive perception of Disney, Koreans, too, did think of Disney as ingenuous and educational by relating it to American economic status and political power in the world. It is for this reason that Disney films have become a symbol of American economic success and modernization.

Second, this positive image changed to some degree after the 1990s. One reason for this change is derived from the fact that the Korean animation industry didn't fully develop after the establishment of the Walt Disney Korea in 1992 (Kim and Lee 190). In fact, this negative aspect to Disney unavoidably resulted from the economic difficulties in Korea at that time because of economic liberalization which had proceeded since the mid-1980s. The catalyst to accelerate the move toward such liberalization had various sources, one of which was the United States' growing economic pressure of free trade in vital areas of the Korean economy. In addition, the United States had also demanded that more of Korea's various capital markets open up. Thus, many Korean firms had to survive the severe economic situation in response to the increasing free trade and open markets. As a result, such American economic claims made Koreans feel that Korea had serious economic challenges that were caused by the United States.

Furthermore, in the late 1980s, the failure of the Korean democratic movement after dictator Jung-Hee Park was attributed to ex-president, Doo-Hwan Chun, but also to the United States. Because in 1980 the United States helped President Chun to put down the movement, then anti-American sentiments have been strong since that time. It is not surprising, therefore, that serious concerns about and even condemnations of Disney's industrial influence and its domination of Korean animation and video markets were raised after 1990.

Yet, it is important to note that though anti-Americanism still exists in Korea, Disney is as popular as ever and its animated films are still considered good for children. One reason for this persistently positive view of Disney may be the importance that Koreans place on learning English. In Korea, proficiency in English and experience in Unites States are of greater value than proficiency in other languages and experiences in other countries for being admitted to good universities and getting good jobs. As a result, most Koreans consider English essential for success in Korea and around the world. Korean parents often purchase Disney films to improve their children's English because Disney video tapes are more available than any other companies' products because of Disney's domination in video markets in Korea. Many Korean families have Disney's original English videotapes, rather than those with Korean subtitles or dubbing, because they use these videotapes as educational tools. In addition, it is very difficult to get the classic Disney films with Korean subtitles or dubbing because they are already out of print. In this way, Disney films have functioned not only as entertainment but also as an educational tool since the 1990s.

Another reason for Disney's popularity may be many Korean parents' positive experiences with Disney films. Disney films remind Korean parents of their own childhood memories, which create a bond with their children. As one of Korean parents said, many Korean parents recall their childhood when they see their children watching a Disney film just as they did as children (Lee 26). In addition, Disney animated films seemed to play an important role for Korean children as means of entertainment, which was rare in Korean society after the Korean War. Due to their positive experiences with Disney films, then, many Korean parents still tend to trust the quality of Disney films.

Moreover, Korean parents highly value the fact that many Disney animated films are based on the classics of Western literature that are well-known in Korea. Many of the parents of

my informants considered such Disney films as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* Disney's masterpieces, rather than *Jungle Book*, *Bambi*, or *Peter Pan*. In the same vein, many Korean parents are familiar with Disney films based on famous Western folklore, such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, much more than many other films, such as *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*. Every Disney film released in the United States is not always shown in Korea, because Koreans have different cultural tastes and sentiments that determine each film's success in Korea. For example, *Pocahontas*, *Heracles*, and *Tarzan* were not shown at theatres in Korea. Usually only one or two Disney animated films are shown each year, but many of them are released on video in Korea. The literary quality of these films leads them to believe that children's viewing of Disney films is just as educational as their reading a work of classic Western literature.

The emphasis on morals in Disney's stories also makes many Korean parents view Disney films as educational for their children. Several informants' parents said that a story's ethics and morals are very important because these parents believe that many young children must learn morality in order for them to be virtuous. Thus, Koreans tend to think that children can learn from stories Disney animated films such as "Classic Disney," *Toy Story 1, 2,* and *3*, and *Finding Nemo*, which always promote virtue and punish evil. Thus, like any other didactic Korean folklore, Disney animated films' moral content meets Korean parents' criteria for the type of story suitable for a child's learning.

After all, the Korean socio-historical context is a pivotal factor in considering whether Disney is good or bad for children in Korea and in allowing Koreans to perceive Disney and its films differently from those of other countries, including the United States. From this point of view, it is possible that the Korean social, cultural, and historical backdrop has also influenced Korean children's unique interpretations of Disney animated films. A Korean child's socio-cultural experiences have an influence on his or her interpretations of American popular culture—in this case, Disney films.

In conclusion, the dynamic of globalization of Disney films is not a simple, one-sided process in which cultural artifacts always flow from one site—namely, the United States—to another—for example, Korea. Instead, the two cultural sites always influence each other in the process of the globalization of the films. Since reading a cultural text is not only a personal reaction to it, but also a socially situated practice, a reading of such a text is inevitably related to the con-texts within which texts are seen as social productions (Derrida 158). Thus, the various meanings attributed to a piece of American popular culture have often been modified by and negotiated with local audiences. Depending on each reader's different situation and experiences, a cultural text will have a variety of different meanings and uses. From this perspective, the influence of Disney films on a child should be examined with considering the context into which it is produced, circulated, and consumed.

[1] In this paper, "Disney" is mostly indicated as its films and theme park for children.

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