

The True Origins of Pizza: Irony, the Internet and East Asian Nationalisms

ピッツアの真の起源—イロニー、インターネット、東アジアの国家主義

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The True Origins of Pizza: Irony, the Internet and East Asian Nationalisms

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On September 30, 2011, an outfit named GumshoePictures uploaded on YouTube a video entitled “The True Origins of Pizza,” which, in the format of a brief documentary (3:44), reminiscent of those seen on such stations as the Discovery Channel, investigates an apparent historical puzzle: a series of speakers, from academics to a blogger and a representative of the “Korean Culinary Center,” are interviewed and advance evidence that pizza originated in Korea and had been “stolen” by Marco Polo, much as he had reputedly brought back noodles from China to Italy as spaghetti. Before we engage in an analysis of this remarkable well-produced clip, let us first encourage readers of *The Asia-Pacific Journal* who have yet to see this video to watch it, unencumbered by any spoilers or the authors’ own opinions. At this point, viewers conveniently have a choice of watching mirrored versions: one in English, without the distraction of text crossing the screen in front of them; a version with Korean subtitles, uploaded on October 4, also by GumshoePictures; and a version with Japanese subtitles, uploaded on October 12 by “CoreanCulture.” We embed all of them below, for reception of the clip has differed according to context, and readers may wish to examine the comments on each separately: as of October 28, the first had 451,000 views and a roughly 1,400 to 200 like to dislike ratio; the

second had slightly fewer views (356,000), but a strikingly different 1050 to 1,150 like to dislike ratio; while the third had 63,000 views, and an 800 to 200 like to dislike ratio:

[Link 1](#) | [Link 2](#) | [Link 3](#)

The First Buy One, Get One Free Garlic Bread Promotion

Presumably, readers of the *Asia-Pacific Journal* who have viewed the clips and read thus far will realize that what they have witnessed is a clever and unusual ad campaign for Korea’s Mr. Pizza chain in the form of a spoof, rather than a true assertion that pizza had been pilfered from its rightful owners, the Korean people. Mr. Pizza, though perhaps little known outside South Korea (henceforth Korea), is in fact now the largest pizza chain in the nation and is increasingly emphasizing overseas markets (China and the United States, in particular). The chain started out in 1990 as a franchise associate of the Japanese brand, Mr. Pizza, which was then seeking a partner in order to expand its business into Korea. Japan’s Mr. Pizza has since all but disappeared, and the Korean branch acquired the trademark of Mr. Pizza.¹

This well-crafted piece of advertising deserves careful analysis, because the level of skill and irony that went into its making are noteworthy among commercial ads anywhere, not least in Korea where it satirizes the potentially sacred cow of Korean nationalism and a local penchant to assert that occasionally surprising products emanate in the first instance from Korea (e.g.

Korea's National Institute of Biological Resources' claim that the most popular type of fir used for Christmas trees in the West originated in Korea).²

While those who view the clip until its climactic revelation of a Buddha statue with a pizza box on its head will not mistake how firmly tongue has been planted in cheek for its creation, the video starts off in a significantly more deadpan style and contains several small touches that can readily elude casual viewers or those unfamiliar with the larger context in which this video originates, and thus we begin with a detailed reading of the ad in its entirety.

It opens with a People's Republic of China academic speaking from an office at the fictitious "National University of Kwang-yang," a Chinese vase clearly visible on the table behind him. Although the English voiceover and the Korean subtitles do not capture literally his statement that "Marco Polo took our fatherland's noodles and turned them into the West's 'spaghetti,'" (the latter word given disdainful emphasis by the use of hand quotation marks), they certainly do convey an air of authority and dismissiveness: "If they can take the spaghetti from the greatest civilization, the Chinese people, they could easily have taken pizza from 'those other people.'" The rather disparaging refusal to name the Koreans in contrast to the great "central country" thus immediately places the clip within the context of heated international disputes over history in East Asia, such as the contentious debates between China and Korea over the legacy of Koguryo/Gaogouli, discussed by Yonson Ahn and Robert Eng at the *Asia-Pacific Journal*.³ Quarrels about which nation had the right to claim the earlier kingdom as part of its own history drove not only fierce scholarly debate but a significant deterioration in relations between the two countries.

Likewise, the notion of cultural theft invokes Korea's registration of the Gangneung Danoje Festival as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural

Heritage, unique to Gangneung; Chinese authorities had sought to have it co-registered with *duanwujie*, the Dragon Boat Festival, arguing that the Korean holiday, which is held on the same day and is named with the same Chinese characters, derived from China. When Korea prevailed in convincing UNESCO that the Gangneung Danoje Festival was uniquely Korean, the Chinese media grew more vocal in accusations about Korean theft of Chinese culture, and recent years have seen increasingly outrageous claims about the Korean origins of Chinese figures such as Confucius, Sun Yat-sen and Yao Ming, although it often remains unclear whether such claims are advanced by Korean ultra-nationalists or Chinese "trolls" seeking to stir up trouble online.⁴

At this point the clip cuts to a shot of a Joseon-era Korean genre painting, in which a group of people are gathered around a table eating a large circular concoction, which, while likely to be a traditional Korean form of savoury pancake such as *asbindaeddeok*, is treated as a pizza. The shot is accompanied by a title that reads "Disputed Origins" and the studied use of the traditional Korean instrument, the *gayageum* gently parodies Western documentaries' evocation of an Oriental mood, with the corresponding Orientalist promise of insight into the mysteries of the East for its audience.

As the video tells us, the documentary makers' story begins with a lone protester outside a Brooklyn pizzeria who is carrying a sign inscribed with a photo of a bearded man with a large red x drawn across his face, below which is written what turns out to be the Korean word 도둑 (*doduk*, "thief"). While the lone zealous protester is itself a familiar figure from Korean popular nationalism, for those in the know there is more humor to be gleaned: 도둑bears, at cursory glance, a more than superficial resemblance to the Korean word 독도 (*dokdo*), the Korean name for the Liancourt Rocks, a

pyramidal duo of islets surrounded by numerous outcroppings, contested with Japan, who have claimed the territory for themselves as Takeshima. As has also been widely discussed, the dispute over this small archipelago has inflamed much nationalist tension between Korea and Japan over the past decade.⁵

Moreover, the choice of Brooklyn as the site for the protest is hardly accidental, for it also alludes to ads that members of the Korean-American community have taken out in the *New York Times*⁶ proclaiming that “Dokdo Island is Korean territory,” and diaspora New York City dry cleaners who created plastic bags for clothing delivery inscribed with that very announcement, as also recorded by the *New York Times*:⁷



Even viewers unfamiliar with Korea and its recent international disputes, however, might suspect at this point that they are witnessing a comically understated piece of wit, for the portrait of Marco Polo itself is not drawn precisely from any known depiction of the renowned explorer, but combines existing portrayals, it seems, with a send-up of the Zig Zag man, an image associated with a popular brand of cigarette rolling papers, used on occasion for marijuana as well:



As the video goes on to tell us, the picture leads the documentary makers to “a website espousing all sorts of theories and accusations.” The attention to detail here and the knowledge of nationalist Internet memes at 0:38-0:41 borders on the astonishing. The blog’s user name, visible in the top left-hand corner is AngryKor33 (i.e. Angry Korean 33), the 33 surely referencing the 33 nationalists

who formed the core of the March 1st movement of 1919 and signed a declaration of Korea's independence during the Japanese Occupation. The background to the blog entries is without doubt a shot from the 2002 World Cup, with thousands of supporters of the Korean national team clad in garb showing their support for the Red Devils at a stadium behind an unfurled *taegeukgi* (the South Korean flag), similar to the image below:

The first blog entry, dated February 23, 2008, contains a map that gained currency on the Internet in Korea with its dream of a "Corea" that vastly extends its boundaries, even turning Japan into its colony, and has its origins in the rather loopy web personality John Titor, an internet poster who claimed to be a time traveler from 2036, and wrote of a radically altered future geopolitical landscape.⁸ Although the full text of the entry is hard to make out on the YouTube clip, one can see that our putative blogger writes approvingly of how cool (*meotjida*) such territorial boundaries would be, and the video thus pokes fun at both the most outrageous recidivist claims, and eventual aspirations, of Korean nationalism. The spelling Corea itself references the allegation that the Japanese colonial powers changed the orthography so that Korea would come after Japan in Western alphabetical order.⁹



The next entries, however, are easier to discern if one pauses the video. They satirize passionate nationalism in hilariously

exaggerated fashion: the February 12, 2008 entry, for example, reads "Dokdo is ours! Dokdo is ours! Dokdo is ours! Shouting these words millions of times isn't enough! Dokdo is ours! Really, if our nation is weak, we'll suffer all manner of harm. We must reclaim our cultural treasures! Realize that pizza is ours too! Oh, so much to do!" As the computer screen scrolls down to the blog entry for February 6, 2008, we see a picture of one of the famous turtle boats supposedly designed by Yi Sun-shin, a revered icon for his role as savior of the nation in warding off the Hideyoshi invasions of 1592. The entry reads: "What would Admiral Yi Sun-shin think if he were alive today? Please forgive your shameful descendents who have been unable to protect pizza!! L If Admiral Yi Sun-shin had lived in the Koryo Dynasty, he would have ridden his turtle boat all the way to Italy, chased Marco Polo down, given him hell and brought pizza back!"

The filmmakers then tell us that they tracked down the blog's creator and main contributor to a suburb outside of Seoul and, in order to illustrate the journey, the viewer encounters an animated sequence, typical of such documentaries, of a plane crossing the Pacific Ocean to Korea past Japan and over the East Sea, a map to which we shall return. We now meet "Han Sang-jun, a history major dropout and passionate conspiracy theorist" who is bursting with indignation: "I hate Marco Polo. He stole one of our national treasures." His phrasing involves a humorous but hard to capture mix of a respectful and pejorative term which the voiceover translates as "I hate Marco Polo." Although a reasonable rendering, his Korean statement "*Ibuni doduk nom ijiyo*" might more literally, if awkwardly, be translated as "this respected gentleman is a thief bastard." (A careful listening to the Korean under the voiceover suggests that the blogger uses the words "indigenous food" rather than "national treasure"). In his cluttered room, we catch glimpses of the Korean flag, a poster that proclaims (in

English) “Dokdo is Korean territory” with Yi Sun-shin posed as in his statue on Seoul’s central thoroughfare, several images of the Italian explorer with an “x” marked through them, and, in a self-parodic piece of product placement, a stack of empty Mr. Pizza boxes beside him. That Han himself is a history dropout appears to be a sly reference to the economics student dropout whose surprisingly accurate predictions of such events as the Lehman Brothers collapse electrified the nation for several months in 2008 and led him to be tagged with the nickname Minerva.¹⁰



After the blogger comes a second dapper academic, purported to be from the much more real Koryeo (Korea) University, who announces that “pizza is indeed ours” (*pija dangyeoni uri geojyo*). The evidence, he notes, has largely been lost but “fortunately” new artifacts are continually being discovered, and we are then shown a shot of archaeological remains amusingly reconstructed to resemble pizza-related objects, such as the paddle for retrieving a pizza from an oven, set out as if in a museum display.¹¹ One should note how well each interviewed actor captures his or her imagined counterpart, both in sartorial and locutionary style: the next speaker “Young-Hwa Choi” of the “Korean Culinary Center” wears

elegant *hanbok* and uses a polite informal, more feminine style than the academic, as she tells us that throughout Asia various food products resemble pizza, but the closer one gets to Jinju, the closer one approaches the “classic” pizza, depicted as what looks to be an American-style pepperoni pizza.¹² In another example of attention to detail, the shots of the various pizzas across Asia at 1:35 come with the small notation “Courtesy of Hang Jung University Press” in the bottom left corner, providing the map with the false authority of a fictitious press. Italy, the speaker asserts, “owes us an apology.” Her statement is put forth gently but resonates with Korean demands for apologies, especially from its erstwhile colonizer, Japan, for its actions during the Occupation.¹³ At this point, in true Discovery Channel fashion, our “mockumentary” cuts away to a supposed vice-president of the Italian Culture Centre who provides a counterpoint and laughs away the claims as no less absurd than if Korea were to arrogate for itself cappuccino or the Ferrari.

Next, in one of the clip’s most inspired strokes of marketing acumen, the voiceover asks “Then is there anyone still in the region making pizza the original way?” and introduces us to Woo-Hyun Jung, the “owner and CEO” of Mr. Pizza. Jung, indeed the genuine head of the corporation, has recently been designated one of the top businessmen in Korea for 2011,¹⁴ and his refusal to take himself too seriously is not only amply demonstrated in what follows, but on the Mr. Pizza website, where one of his titles is given as CLO: Chief Love Officer.¹⁵ The camera first shows him standing with a warm smile on his face, hand on chin. He then beckons his interviewers to a table, leaving visible behind him a portrait of himself in exactly the same pose—in sunglasses. Jung tells us that his father, grandfather and all of his ancestors made pizza and we see a succession of portraits of such ancestors posed in similar fashion, hand on chin, and all, apparently, photoshopping Jung’s features onto images that draw on Korean portraiture styles in accurate

reverse chronological order.¹⁶



Jung cheerfully announces the pedigree of pizza making in his family, all in a strongly, and perhaps deliberately, marked Korean accent that causes pizza to be pronounced as “picha.” He then reasserts his claim to making “original pizza” and denies ever having claimed to invent pizza. But when asked if the two are not in fact one and the same, a wonderfully droll look of consternation passes his face before he perseveres: “we are original picha.”

At this point the video, for those who just might possibly have been treating it seriously thus far, plays its trump card: unbridled Monty Pythonesque silliness. Realizing that the “conclusive evidence” will not be forthcoming from Jung, the filmmakers seek another avenue for proof in Buddhism. One “Dr. Dong-Gil Park” of the “National Buddhism Association” leads us to a piece of “undeniable evidence” from Gwanchok Temple in Buyeo, which has an unusually sculpted statue of the Mireuk Buddha, National Treasure No. 218, from the Goryeo dynasty, the period during which Marco Polo would have been in Asia.¹⁷ Pointing to two rectangular objects atop the Buddha’s head, he asks a rhetorical question: what could that first box possibly be? The Buddhism scholar asserts in a deadpan voice that it could only be a pizza box. To heighten the climactic effect and impart authenticity, the background *gayageum* music from elsewhere in the video switches to the Korean flute, the *taegeum*, and music that evokes a vaguely Buddhist atmosphere. The scholar then goes on to reveal his own theory: although for years people have disputed the meaning of the second box, he believes that it represents the first “buy one, get one free garlic bread

promotion of the time.” We then return to the representative of the Korean Culinary Center who advances, seriously, as if documentation were unnecessary, another remarkable claim: “Actually, we also invented garlic bread.” The video ends in mock-dramatic fashion, as the documentary makers ponder whether pizza could really have originated in Korea, and an even more startling question: could it have come with free garlic bread?

Anglophone and Korean Reactions

All well and good, and hopefully viewers of this creative piece of advertising will have had as hearty a laugh over it as the co-authors. We invite those who enjoyed it to view additional clips uploaded by GumshoeProductions [here](#), which add further humorous evidence for pizza’s original Korean provenance from such areas as linguistics. But what we had originally regarded as simply a piece of ephemera, well worth sharing with friends and fellow Asian Studies aficionados, has turned out to be a topic that merits the attention of readers as an important case study in understanding media flows, internet nationalism and the contested nature of reception in the Web 2.0 era. In what follows we try to unravel the various strands in the complex circulation and reactions to this video across the diverse fora in which it wound up being discussed. We admit freely that, as per the notorious adage that began with Peter Steiner’s New Yorker cartoon, “on the Internet no one knows you are a dog,” and thus we are limited in how much we can ascertain about the national and ethnic identity, even when self-professed, of various commenters beyond what cues exist in linguistic usage (itself a measure that can be faked and will become increasingly unreliable as tools such as Google Translate improve).

With that caveat in mind, however, let us consider the discourse that developed around this video in various contexts. First of all, an immediate question is who the commercial’s

makers had in mind as primary target audience. As a production in English, albeit released almost simultaneously with Korean subtitles, it would appear that the intended audience for this production includes both new consumers in the US as Mr. Pizza expands its operations, and Korea's more transnational and cosmopolitan consumers, whether expat or Korean citizens, most of whom, almost by definition, would possess high-level English skills. GumshoePictures has remained silent (presumably deliberately, in order to enhance the effect of this piece as an underground, "cool" viral marketing campaign) about its identity amidst all the internet buzz, although clues may be unearthed within the video as to the company behind it; if nothing else, it is clear that members of the production team spent time in the US and Korea making the video.¹⁸

Let us, then, consider the comments more or less in the order of the clips' linguistic release. English-language comments on the ad were largely highly favorable, at least initially. Several Koreanists, self-identified Koreans, and foreign expats in Korea reacted to the ad with delight, seeing it as representing a significant moment in Korean popular culture both for the target and style of its wit, and taking Korea's ability to poke fun at its nationalist foibles as a sign of a country increasingly confident of its global stature.¹⁹ The YouTube page itself, in keeping with the medium, which encourages very brief replies, had several English response which commended the makers of the video on their cleverness. But before long several less flattering comments appeared, often from those who were apparently not native speakers of English, and who displayed concern at Korean nationalism being made the butt of a joke and the possibility for its humor to be misunderstood.

A more detailed set of reactions came from those who took the trouble to go to the GumshoePictures Channel page on YouTube

instead of merely leaving a short comment on the video itself. Most comments in English were positive, e.g. that of user "[seconddeath](#)" who wrote, "I must say, this will go over a lot of people's heads, but wow it was brilliant, subversive, and utterly hilarious. Haven't laughed this hard since Old Spice Guy commercials. Hats off to you!" This user was joined by "[youbustubus](#)": "Loved it. If created by Koreans then the most impressive example of self-deprecating humor I've ever seen. The indisputable claims for pizza's Korean origins shed light on similar claims of Korean origins." Those who sought out GumshoeProductions seemed to have knowledge of the Korean context and appreciated the way the ad refused to take itself seriously and further indicated that in sharing it with Koreans, reactions were positive. "Roughneckrhino," for example, added: "I freaking love it! I'm a middle school teacher here in Korea and have shown it to most of my classes and they love it too. Keep up the great work. I hope to see more from you guys." Of course, it is crucial to know precisely how this teacher contextualized it for his students before screening the clip, for such contextualization can make a crucial difference, as adumbrated by a negative comment from user "[1tephania](#)":

"Dear Mr. Pizza,
Your commercial is dumb. Humour is too subtle to be caught by most people, and when people do get it, it's too weak to make them laugh. Your marketing campaign also has the potential to unleash some ferocious nationalist sentiments that run high in East Asia and people originating from the region. So, in and all, a badly advised idea created by some dufus, who is most likely to be of an Asian extraction.
Sincerely,

A potential customer"

And while one might disagree vehemently with "1tephania" that the humor is overly subtle and when caught too weak to evoke laughter (one witty riposte that was given several thumbs up on the YouTube clip read: "Clever advert. Too bad it requires an IQ of over 20 to understand – they'll lose customers because of that."), "1tephania" was correct about its potential to unleash "ferocious nationalist sentiments," as we shall see below.

In addition to comments left on the YouTube site itself, the clip was discussed in over 100 posts at the Marmot's Hole, the most widely read English-language blog on Korea, but one whose notorious comments section is often filled with vitriol, some of it racist ([link](#)). Commenters there were generally impressed with the ad but a debate developed, largely carried forth between two transnational Koreans ("Yuna" and "The Korean", the latter of whom operates his own well-known blog, Ask a Korean), about satire in Korea, and whether the nation had the ability to mock itself collectively or its satire could only be directed at the Other (including internal Others, such as one's political opponents). As "Nambangui horangi" (one of this piece's co-authors) argued in the Marmot's Hole comment section, following "Yuna," for the first minute it is easy to be taken in by the ad's matter-of-fact seriousness and to relate it to zealous expressions of Korean nationalism. What is unusual, though, in addition to the sending up of usually taboo targets, is the mode of the clip's satire as, at least initially, it involves the use of very understated dry irony that relies on the shared knowledge of being in on a joke, which is not a usual mode of comedy in Korea.²⁰ On this latter point "The Korean" agreed, but noted, fairly enough, that just because Monty Python-style humor is largely alien to Korea, it hardly means that its people are a humorless lot and incapable of self-satire

even if certain topics, such as nationalism have generally been off-limits. Similar, briefer discussions occurred on James Turnbull's blog *The Grand Narrative* and Matt VanVolkenburg's *Gusts of Popular Feeling*.

Although comments in Korean on both the English and Korean-subtitled versions of the clip on YouTube included those who fretted that foreigners might take the ad seriously ("What if an Italian sees this and thinks we're really trying to claim pizza as our own?"), the ad also garnered a significant number of positive responses in Korean. A frequently used adjective from Korean-language commenters to describe the clip has been *chamshinhada* (original; innovative), and many Korean users have added the local emoticon ㅋㅋㅋ, which indicates a chortling reaction to the video. Certainly, though, those who went to the GumshoeProductions page to write in Korean did generally, though not uniformly, oppose the ad. They either expressed concern about the airing of dirty laundry, as it were, or were unwilling to accept self-satire as a proper mode of discourse in this situation. Below are translated samples:

"WLKrep": I don't know what you were hoping to achieve with this video, but thanks to you, the Republic of Korea has acquired the shameful image of a country that distorts history.

"1godqhrgek": Please don't make ads with this sort of subject matter again. Even if you were intending to be original and to do it well, this is an improper, unpleasant topic. Please, it would have been better not to attach an English title....Wouldn't it be okay just to change everything to Korean? Koreans are not intrinsically masochistic; they've been through a lot in relation to origin debates,

and of course you can say you made the ad with fake, humorous content, but because it feels like the Koreans who appear here seem to have the same point of view as Korea-haters, it's really distasteful. Somehow it seems like an ad that Japanese Korea-haters will really like.

“boxstory”: 스텝으로 신고Earning money while sucking the marrow from the nation...You are a heartless human being. What does vermin mean? An idiosyncrasy of YouTube is that few viewers watch a video to the end, and all the more so if the video clip is irritating. You are stupid, and greedy to boot. This isn't bravery; it's trash. You lack understanding of originality and are like a fattened pig that can't feel a prod even from a decent-sized jab. Original? Take a look at the comments attached to the video. Is this innovative? Humans who are filthy vermin—they're talking about you. There are people with power and money, but no talent. You.

“kagoon0709”: This is totally original ha ha ha. And you people who can't take it as a joke, lighten up. It's really fun. And the video is high quality as well.

Two larger Korean news outlets, the *Kookmin Ilbo* and the *Chosun Ilbo*, hardly known for their progressive leanings (the *Kookmin Ilbo* is church-owned, while the *Chosun Ilbo* is perhaps the most notoriously conservative of Korea's major newspapers) covered the ad and monitored the response that it received.²¹ Both articles essentially offered summaries of the clip and pointed out its clearly comic intent, but the *Kookmin Ilbo* piece asserted (not

necessarily correctly at the time of its publication) that the majority of Korean viewer reactions left on YouTube grimaced at the ad. The comments left in response to the articles themselves in these venues, however, were certainly consistently negative. The opinion on the *Kookmin Ilbo* that received the most “recommendations” was a typo-ridden, unpunctuated rant from “100Grape,” whose flavor we attempt to capture below in our own rendering:

What's going on here isn't that people around the world are going to treat this is a joke because they don't think of pizza as Korean but that people around the world are going to think Koreans are ridiculous your disgracing the nation especially since treating this ridiculous nonsense and the *Hwandan Gogi*²² as a conspiracy theory on the same screen with Dokdo makes considering pizza Korean in the same category as considering Dokdo Korean really this is treason to the Korean race

The one attempt to inject an opposing voice and argue for simply treating the ad as a comic piece (albeit dismissing its critics as *hanshimhada*, or “pathetic”) by user “Jeong Hyo-rim” was met entirely with “dislikes.” The comment section in the *Kookmin Ilbo* thus offers evidence of how discussion in a given venue can be both determined by its larger discursive culture and directed, if not outright hijacked, by the most strident voices.

Japanese Reactions

For the first few days of the video's circulation on YouTube, comments remained essentially confined to those with at least some command of English and Korean. Within a few days,

however, the video leaped into the Japanese blogosphere. A Japanese-subtitled version originally was uploaded on *Nikoniko douga* ("Smiley Videos," a Japanese equivalent to YouTube) on October 9 by "ponta,"²³ and then placed on YouTube on October 12, by "CoreanCulture." Meanwhile, overnight on October 12, the Korean-subtitled version added 30,000 hits, but went from carrying a 6 to 1 like to dislike ratio to evening out at 400 apiece, presumably as a result of having been signalled on *2-channeru*, Japan's largest Internet forum and a hotbed of xenophobic nationalism and anti-Korean sentiment. In the additional traffic, many readers of the Japanese-version chose to register their displeasure.²⁴ CoreanCulture's YouTube profile shows that the user self-identifies as a 28-year-old Japanese, who joined YouTube on October 12, suggesting that he or she did so specifically to make the Japanese-subtitled version available. The name, however, presents a conundrum: was the poster a proud Korean(-Japanese?) who felt that by making it available with Japanese subtitles on YouTube its humorous intent would become clear for those whose English might not have been able to cope with the clip's subtle humor, or a nationalistic Japanese who chose the name sarcastically?

While the more positive like to dislike ratio on the Japanese-subtitled version leaves open the former possibility, it is important to note that the translation of the scene with blogger Han Sang-jun in particular does contain significant differences from the English voiceover. Where the English states "the picture on his poster led us to this website, a site espousing all sorts of theories and accusations," the subtitled version reads "from this image, we arrived at this anger-filled website." Likewise, where the English speaks of a "passionate conspiracy theorist who is the main contributor and blogger," the Japanese subtitles might more accurately be rendered as "the blogger who disclosed the facts and posted on this issue." Since the Japanese subtitles elsewhere display

more fidelity to the English,²⁵ the above discrepancies stand out. It is not impossible that the subtitler chose to remove the point that the blogger is a conspiracy theorist and that his accusations are potentially misguided, instead representing him as an angry Korean, disclosing "facts," and thus contextualizing such images as the Dokdo poster, the World Cup trophy replica on the CEO's desk, and the usage of the term "East Sea" differently for Japanese viewers.

While impossible to determine the national or ethnic identity of any given commenter, however, one may readily extract patterns among Japanese-language posts on sites where this video was reproduced. As of October 28, the Japanese subtitled-version itself on YouTube had 275 comments, the majority of which, unsurprisingly, are in Japanese. Here one encounters those who seem to read this clip non-ironically, as yet another example of Korean cultural arrogance and insistence on the Korean origin of non-Korean products, as well as those who appear unsure whether to find it funny or be offended. Still others recognize elements of parody but are quick to seize upon what they see as anti-Japanese propaganda wrapped within a sugar-coated pill, especially in the video's less conscious expressions of a Korean world view at points where a Korean would "naturally" expect a particular representation, such as using an English map that contained the name "East Sea" rather than the "Sea of Japan."²⁶ User SamuraiTogo went so far as to post his own clip which claims to uncover "The real Korean aim of 'The True Origins of Pizza' commercial" ([link](#)): a subliminal campaign to woo the world towards accepting improper nomenclature for the body of water between the two countries, by inserting the map at four separate points.

The placement of this video initially in *Nikoniko douga* may have also promoted a jingoistic viewing experience for its Japanese audience. Like *2-channeru*, the site is known for its

nationalist affinities, and the clip is juxtaposed with four “related videos,” all of them anti-Korean (i.e. “Koreans taking over the world”; “China’s rage over Korean cultural theft”; “Korean kids’ comics on the comfort women”; and “seriously crazy Koreans”), which would predispose viewers to interpret the clip in similar fashion. Several elements in the video contribute to the potential for nationalistic readings by Japanese viewers, for it evokes not a few negative local stereotypes of Koreans: a zealous blogger; a placard-holding protestor; dogmatic insistence on the Korean origin of objects associated with foreign cultures. The twist here, of course, is that the clip is a spoof made by the Korean pizza chain itself, and humor arises in the recognition of caricature, but Japanese viewers without knowledge of Korean would have no access to, say, the uproarious excesses of the blogger’s page, as discussed above. Nonetheless, several of those writing in Japanese made comments to the effect that “I didn’t think Koreans could make fun of themselves.” Whether such self-parody was seen as funny, however, depended on an individual’s positionality: in addition to those who saw an attempt at dishing out subliminal propaganda, some Japanese viewers read the clip, counter-intuitively and/or ingeniously, as a subversive attempt to make other Korean-origin stories into a “joke” and thereby alleviate the accusation of dogmatic nationalism on the part of Korea. Some, therefore, in reading hostility in the advertisement, responded with hostility in turn.

Such antagonistic comments are consistent with those found on *2-channeru*, where participants regularly dispute theories on the purported Korean provenance of Japanese cultural icons such as *kendo*, sushi and cherry blossoms. Such critique of “Korean origins” is a well-established sub-genre within Japan’s Internet anti-Korean discourse, and the video rapidly attracted the attention of Japanese nationalists. On the day the YouTube video with Japanese subtitles appeared, over 4,000

comments were posted on *2-channeru*’s “East Asia News” board, one of the major venues for online expressions of hostility toward Korea. While its readership may include lurkers who do not necessarily agree with the consensus of discourse but refrain from confronting it, the general viewpoint has been that, though the ad may have been an attempt at humor, the joke had fallen flat because of the history of disputes over cultural origins, with which *2-channeru* users are well familiar. In other words, the Japanese commentators read this clip within the “local” context of *2-channeru* antagonism toward Korea and begrudge the irony. Interestingly, while this line of argument is reproduced in comments on the Japanese-subtitled YouTube clip, the hate-speech and more generalized racist critiques found on *2-channeru* is tempered. Japanese-language comments left on the Korean-subtitled YouTube clip, on the other hand, have been much more racist, xenophobic and contemptuous in tone (at times even cruder than those found on *2-channeru* itself), perhaps representing those whose virulently anti-Korean sentiments embolden them to venture into “enemy” or global territory.

Indeed, one surmises that many YouTube commenters arrived directly from *2-channeru*, for they displayed familiarity with its discursive practices, sharing similar terminology, expressions and general language features. These include the use of mock Korean such as the verbal ending “-nida,” the term “uri-ginal,” (from the Korean word *uri* or we, often used in the Korean expression *uri nara* to refer to “our country,” i.e. Korea) and the *2-channeru* slang coinages “warota” (the local equivalent of LOL) or “neta” (topics that are planted by trolls). On *2-channeru* one can find suggestions made to spread the link in order to show either “Korean cultural theft” or “a pathetic Korean attempt at self-parody,” and some users reported linking the YouTube video on overseas websites such as the English-language 4chan, an online community modeled after *2-channeru*,

and an Italian site discussing the Soccer World Cup.

Of course, some Japanese commenters were impressed by the sophisticated self-parody. But more saw the self-deprecation as bordering on “masochistic” on the part of its Korean makers (and “unfunny” as a result). In either case, one should note that many who post “nationalistic” comments on YouTube and *2-channeru* in Japanese recognize the video’s farcical intent. However, knowledge that the clip is a well-made commercial by a Korean pizza chain branching out into the United States does not stop them from reading it as problematic. Rather the video’s self-parody becomes an opportunity for well-rehearsed anti-Korean messages and feelings, and not a few posts fixated on the CEO’s pronunciation of “pizza” according to Korean phonology, which lacks a /z/, as “picha.” The accent, quite probably part of the comedy, is taken by Japanese commenters as a sign of Korean inability to speak English properly, bestowing another opportunity to mock Korean parochialism and lack of self-awareness. So wrapped up are some commenters in the idea of Korean cultural theft that they even suggest, likely ignorant of Korean music, that the video’s soundtrack has been played on the *koto* and *shakuhachi* in order to subliminally seduce its audience into thinking that these Japanese instruments as well originated in Korea.

Overall, one finds much cynicism in the postings on *2-channeru*, where taking things seriously is a major faux pas; the task for commenters becomes how to respond in the website’s *lingua franca* of irony, yet still challenge Korea and Koreans. In some cases the use of “humor” arises from mock claims to be Korean, and this typical *2-channeru* mode is also found on YouTube, where user “Mol9999” wrote, for example, “Stop criticizing our Picha! Here we are not talking about Pizza, but Picha! You have never savored our original Picha made from dogs meat and shit and kimchi, DO

NOT make fun of our Picha!”²⁷ For this reason (i.e. they “know” it’s a joke despite choosing not to “get” it), the repeated reminder that “it’s just a joke” has not slowed the barrage of nationalistic abuse.

Clearly, however, as noted above, many international commenters on YouTube have no awareness of the Japanese (or Korean) readings and react with delight at the evident self-parody. For such users, what then becomes offensive is not Korea’s “nationalistic” reference to Dokdo or the East Sea, but ostensibly racist and humorless Japanese reactions, which are in turn met with irritation and hostility. Moreover, many ripostes in this forum are likely to originate in Korea or other countries in Asia with a nationalist axe to grind against Japan, as tipped off by slightly non-native usages in such remarks as: “Japanese Nationalists gone mad here. Seriously, they have to realize more stupid comments will make them look bunch of idiots lol lol (“The45p”), or even “FUCK YOURSELF shameless japanese” (“db015077”).²⁸ The international nature of the video, with its basic Anglophone presentation, shifts the ground of nationalistic competition to a global forum in which multiple voices compete for a hearing. Xenophobic comment metamorphoses into discussion of whether one is sophisticated enough to “get” the joke; such debate has been most evident on the English and Korean-subtitled versions on YouTube, where one encounters numerous comments such as that of user “dogboybloo”:

Japanese people are incapable of comprehending sarcasm in a complex advertising way, too sophisticated for their simple minds. As I am reading these inane comments, it’s pretty safe to say there are a lot of idiots in this world...totally inept in an personality and lacking any sort of

substance or depth either. It's that or they are some 20 year old unemployed failure that is compensating that to write hate against korea on youtube Lol.

As the days have gone by, the tone of discussion has deteriorated, expletives have increased, and an increasingly high proportion of comments have been removed or flagged. The YouTube "comment" section has turned into an unedifying battleground for competing nationalisms, with less and less discussion of the video itself and more about who is to be considered racist.

Decoding Ironic Humor in the Global Context

Irony can be a risky strategy in the absence of obvious cues to tip it off, as anyone who has ever had an intended attempt at humor in e-mail misconstrued knows well. This factor lies in part behind the striking differences in the like/dislike ratios of mirrored versions of the same video. Moreover, when in-group discourse such as that of *2-channeru* leaves its immediate context, we encounter strong reaction against it by those who don't share the same sensibilities. Even the same internet site can, as a result of contingent circumstance and circulation, develop different "cultures of commenting" on different mirrored webpages. We have made clear our own subject position in regard to this Mr. Pizza ad as New Zealand-based scholars who work on questions of East Asian nationalisms and national identity in the Web 2.0 era: we find it a stroke of genius. Many academic friends with whom we have shared it have agreed. Yet, we also recognize that our position is merely one possible reaction and can hardly be taken as authoritative. YouTube commenters are regularly asking each other "Is this a joke?" or "Should one find this funny?" Indeed, part of the humor is that for several seconds, we too, on a first viewing, were uncertain whether we were seeing an

expression of East Asian nationalistic debates over product origins *in extremis*.

In the continuing anonymity of GumshoePictures and absence of commentary from the commercial's creators, it is impossible to determine whether they anticipated the strong reactions that the commercial might spawn among either Korean or Japanese viewers with nationalist sensibilities. The video's creators may well have assumed their irony was so obvious in having the literally "crowning" piece of evidence be pizza and garlic bread takeaway boxes on top of the head of a statue of a Mireuk Buddha that they would not offend sensibilities in East Asia, any more than they expected to offend Italians, all the more so in allowing the purported VP of the Italian Cultural Centre to dismiss the Korean claim out of hand. But, irony as a mode of humor also depends on shared knowledge and viewpoints between the producer of a text and his or her audience. Where that mutual understanding is absent, the possibility for misinterpretation increases significantly. While some Westerners dismissed the notion that other East Asians might read this video negatively because of its (seemingly) obvious self-deprecating humor, other Korean commentators, as we have seen, took Mr. Pizza to task for the possibility that they might enflame tensions, and some Japanese commentators indeed assumed an underlying propagandistic motive in the continuing Japanese-Korean online competition for soft power. In other words, positionality supplies many viewers with both too much and too little information to enjoy the clip as simply light-hearted lampoon.

And to be sure, as we demonstrated above, a substantial portion of the burlesque is only accessible to those who can read Korean and have familiarity with the context of nationalist debates over historical and territorial issues in Northeast Asia. The humor is in fact at such a level of subtlety that some of the cleverest

jokes will be recognized only by those who are willing to pause and savor the care that has been put into skewering conspiracy theorists such as Han Sang-jun at 0:38-0:41. The complexity of the text is further demonstrated by the variety of responses it has evoked in the international context. How, indeed, do viewers read Han Sang-jun? Japanese viewers of anti-Korean orientation notice a decidedly unfunny character who confirms their worst prejudices about rabid Korean nationalism. For others, this “borderline joke” lies somewhere between the overly sophisticated and the callous, leaning towards insensitivity. Korean nationalists, however, have just as readily interpreted the ad as slighting Korea’s territorial claim to Dokdo, by bringing it down to the same level as the mock claims of pizza’s true origin. Western viewers for whom pizza is a quintessentially Italian product might simply enjoy the absurdity of the video, but those who view it within the subculture of East Asian online nationalist debates may have differing responses. Indeed, even the co-authors, one a Koreanist and the other a Japanese Studies specialist, discovered only late in working together on this article that they had reacted to one sequence in very different ways: the demand for an apology struck the Koreanist co-author as humorous but not sharply pointed, whereas the Japanologist saw a serious Korean female in traditional dress and immediately linked the scene, within a Japanese framework, to demands for apologies over the comfort women issue, which supplies the scene with such a potentially edgy subtext as to raise questions of crassness.

Meanwhile, little doubt exists that bringing Mr. Pizza to the attention of all through the magic of global dissemination of a viral clip on YouTube has brought its brand to the attention of a wider international public, diminishing Korean national stature in the minds of some, while enhancing it in the minds of others. Some who view the YouTube clips and then read the comments may come away with concerns over

lingering and malignant racism in Japan. We are also well aware that in writing this article we may not only be further promoting the Mr. Pizza brand but implicating ourselves within a larger debate over reception. Publishing in a well-known and readily accessible venue such as the *Asia-Pacific Journal* confers a possible air of authority upon our interpretation among some communities, while opening the door for new combative dialogue with others. One of the co-authors has already been subjected to abuse on a widely read English-language blog that takes a nationalistically pro-Japanese (or perhaps better put, unapologetically anti-Korean) viewpoint, as a result of an article she published here about the notorious *Ken-Kanryu* (the “Hate Korea Wave”) manga.²⁹ The case suggests not only the extent to which researchers in the Web 2.0 era, particularly those writing for an online journal, become part of the international circulation of discourse but also the extent to which assumptions about identity and background continue to inform reactions about expressed viewpoints:

...people say and write stupid things about other people and cultures all the time, owing to their limited perceptions, language abilities, and contact with the natives. Sakamoto Rumi on the other hand should know better. Shame on you.³⁰

If nothing else, the rapidity of contemporary media flows is allowing surprising global conversations to take place with often unexpected results.

Finally, in the interest of full disclosure, the other co-author wishes to point out that Mr. Pizza is indeed the favorite restaurant of his five-year-old daughter in the neighborhood they inhabit when living in Korea. Nevertheless, he is in no way affiliated with Mr. Pizza and is not (yet) receiving any free garlic bread promotions

from them. Indeed he finds their tomato sauce far too sweet. But his respect for their corporate brand has increased.

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See the following recent *Asia-Pacific Journal* articles on related themes:

[Rumi Sakamoto](#), 'Koreans, Go Home!' Internet Nationalism in Contemporary Japan as a Digitally Mediated Subculture

[Rumi Sakamoto](#), "Will you go to war? Or will you stop being Japanese?" Nationalism and History in Kobayashi Yoshinori's *Sensoron*

[Rumi Sakamoto and Matthew Allen](#), "Hating

'The Korean Wave'" Comic Books: A sign of New Nationalism in Japan?

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Notes

¹ See [here](#) and [here](#) for more on the company.

² See [this link](#). The original title of this article was in fact, 'Christmas Tree Originated From Korea.'

³ See [here](#) and [here](#)). See also [this link](#).

⁴ For a sample of an online piece on the putative Korean origins of Sun Yat-sen, see [this link](#). Matthias Schwartz offers an excellent portrait of trolling culture in "The Trolls Among Us," from the *New York Times Magazine*, August 3, 2008, available [here](#).

⁵ For more on the dispute, see e.g. [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), as well as Sean Fern (2005), "Tokdo or Takeshima? The International Law of Territorial Acquisition in the Japan-Korea Island Dispute," *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 1: 78-89; Kantoro Serita (2007), "The Takeshima Dispute: A Radical Proposal," *Japan Echo*, Vol. 34, No. 1: 32-46; Hong Nack Kim (2009) "The US and the Territorial Dispute on Dokdo/Takeshima between Japan and Korea, 1945-1954," *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2: 92-127; and Stephen Epstein (2010), "Distant Land, Neighbouring

Land: Japan in Contemporary South Korean Discourse” in *Complicated Currents: Media Flows, Soft Power and East Asia*, ed. by Daniel Black, Stephen Epstein and Alison Tokita, Melbourne: Monash University ePress, pp. 1.1-1.15. For the official Japanese position, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘Outline of Takeshima issue’ ([link](#)), while the Korean government’s official position may be found on the Korea Culture and Information Service [website](#).

⁶ ‘Do You Know?’ 9 July 2008 *New York Times*.

⁷ See [this link](#).

⁸ For more on this quirky figure, see [this link](#).

⁹ See, e.g., Barbara Demick, “Breaking the Occupation Spell: Some Koreans See Putdown in Letter Change in Name,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2003.

¹⁰ Park Dae-sung, or Minerva, was held in detention for three month for spreading false rumors by the nervous Lee Myung Bak government in a notorious case of internet censorship until he was finally acquitted. For more, see Eric Fish, “Is Internet Censorship Compatible with Democracy? Legal Restrictions of Online Speech in South Korea,” *Asia Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law*, Volume 10, Number 2, 2009, pp. 43-96(54) and Mattathias Schwartz, “The Troubles of Korea’s Influential Economic Pundit,” October 19, 2009, [link](#).

¹¹ Matt VanVolkenburg of the Gusts of Popular Feeling blog draws an astute connection here with the way Korean archaeologists have occasionally put “square pegs into round holes” in order to reconstruct nationalist pasts ([link](#)), as detailed in Hyung Il Pai’s *Constructing*

“Korean” Origins: A Critical Review of Archaeology, Historiography, and Racial Myth in Korean State Formation Theories. Cambridge, Mass., and London: [Harvard East Asian Monographs](#), 2000.

¹² The appearance of a spokeswoman from the “Korean Culinary Center” calls to mind the increasing attention to the role of food in expressions of soft power in East Asia. See James Farrer, (2010). “Eating the West and Beating the Rest: Culinary Occidentalism and Urban Soft Power in Asia’s Global Food Cities” in *Globalization, Food and Social Identities in the Asia Pacific Region*, ed. James Farrer. Tokyo: Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture, available from .

¹³ Cf. Alexis Dudden, (2008). *Troubled Apologies among Japan, Korea and the United States*. New York: Colombia University Press.

¹⁴ [Link](#).

¹⁵ [Link](#).

¹⁶ We thank Frank Hoffmann for the image and references to some of the other pieces of artwork that seem to be drawn upon humorously here ([link](#)) and elsewhere in the [video](#).

¹⁷ [Link](#).

¹⁸ As user Hamel, in a fine bit of internet sleuthing, pointed out on The Marmot’s Hole thread, when the screen of the blog is shown on the video, the URL bar is shown with the address <http://www.addictmediafilms.com>. Although the website does not currently exist, and according to Hamel’s Whois Lookup search has never been registered, he did discover a

company named Addict Media Films whose on-line resume lists one of its producers and assistant directors. The firm has an impressive list whose clients include Samsung, Hyundai Card, McDonalds, Daum TV, and SK Telecom. The firm's headquarters is located in Seoul, and the producer and assistant director's name clearly suggests Korean origins or descent, albeit with degrees in film and television production from California. It remains unclear whether they initially pitched the idea to Mr. Pizza or vice-versa, but there is little question that the producers of the ad are both tremendously knowledgeable about the context and think outside of the box of blind nationalism.

¹⁹ We acknowledge here our gratitude to Andray Abrahamian, who first drew our attention to the clip. It is worth remarking that one co-author perhaps played a minor role as a vector in the (admittedly inevitable) viral transmission by sending it on to contacts in the Korean blogosphere who posted it on their blogs, at which point hit counts for the video began to rise rapidly.

²⁰ Chae Man-shik's *Jisuk* ("My Idiot Uncle"), for example, engages in a similar form of understated irony, but the object of his satire is Koreans who slavishly followed Japanese customs during the colonial period. More recently, some of the best local ironists (e.g., early Bong Joon-ho films like "Memories of Murder" and "Barking Dogs Don't Bite") use this mode in a dark way, where the humor comes from the blackness of the comedy, rather than the subtle nod and a wink that the Mr. Pizza ad relies on for much of its length.

²¹ Links 1 and 2.

²² The user appears to have assumed that the map depicting Korea as having extended into

China comes not from John Titor's imagined future, but a bound volume of four historical records, almost universally viewed as spurious, the *Hwandan Gogi*, that spoke of Korea's extension in ancient times into the Chinese heartland.

²³ *Nikoniko douga*, while similar to YouTube, has a unique function allowing viewers to post comments at relevant points of the video clip. The site thus acts at least as much as social network as a video-sharing site.

²⁴ For *2-channeru*'s anti-Korean discourse, see Rumi Sakamoto and Matt Allen, "Hating 'The Korean Wave' Comic Books: A Sign of New Nationalism in Japan?" ([link](#)); Rumi Sakamoto, "'Koreans, Go Home!' Internet Nationalism in Contemporary Japan as a Digitally Mediated Subculture" ([link](#)).

²⁵ One could quibble over additional minor points, such as rendering "the closer you get" as "the more one looks," but these issues arise in virtually every translation.

²⁶ International naming of this body of water has been a contentious issue between the two countries; the Korean government insists on "East Sea," while the Japanese government maintains that the English name "Sea of Japan" is correct. See [here](#) and [here](#) for each respective state's official position.

²⁷ This particular posting is in English, but the ironical-racist stance expressed exemplifies a typical *2-channeru* subject position.

²⁸ The above is in no way meant to suggest that the site commentary is homogeneous. One finds, for example, comments defending Japanese written in a mixture of English and Korean, criticizing 'stupid Asians' for not

getting the joke, or blaming “white men” for “stealing everything.”

²⁹ *Kenkankryū* (“Hating the Korea Wave”), a best-selling anti-Korean *manga* that

popularized online hate-Korea discourse, devotes an entire episode to “Korean theft of Japanese culture,” ranging from martial arts to contemporary popular culture.

³⁰ [Link](#).