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Image

Obituaries

Crossword, Sudoku

All Sections

Corrections

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## A most unlikely Seoul sensation

Just two years after landing in Korea, actor Daniel Henney has the country all aflutter.

By Bruce Wallace, Times Staff Writer  
June 17, 2007

Seoul — ONE of the most popular movie stars in South Korea admits he speaks Korean like a 12-year-old. Confesses he wouldn't be able to handle a Korean-language script and isn't completely comfortable expressing emotions in a Korean way. Says the nature of Korean family relationships still eludes him.

Fortunately for Daniel Henney — born in the U.S. to an ethnic Korean mother and American father of British descent — none of these shortcomings hurt if you're always cast as the Asian-looking American trying to navigate love and relationships in Korea. A mere two years after arriving in South Korea with a single suitcase and a one-shot contract for a TV commercial, Henney, 27, has become one of the country's most famous TV and movie stars, a heartthrob who can't go out for coffee in Seoul without attracting a (mostly squealing female) crowd.

In the process, he has created a new acting niche in this movie-mad country: roles for a cultural hybrid with Korean roots, coming in from the West and struggling to master love and relationships. "I definitely wouldn't understand a Korean father-son relationship, but then luckily enough for me, my character doesn't either," says the cheerful Henney about his first dramatic role in the upcoming film "My Father." He plays a Korean who was adopted into an American family, stationed as a U.S. soldier in South Korea and searching for his birth parents. He finds the man believed to be his father: a murderer living on death row.

"Koreans feel the same emotions as everyone else but they express them differently: in the way they argue, the way they shout, the way they pout," Henney says during an interview in a Seoul photo studio. "It would have been difficult if my character was Korean. But he's just an American kid."

"My Father" is Henney's attempt to bust out of the romantic comedy roles that have shot him to fame in South Korea.

The tall American with gentle rather than dangerous good looks was an unknown model-actor in Korea until, after begging network executives to take a chance on a foreigner, he landed the role of Dr. Henry Kim in the 2005 TV romance "My Name is Kim Sam-Sun" ("My

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Wildly popular, the show centered on a Korean woman — a single, slightly overweight pastry chef with a Bridget Jones knack for social missteps — who gets swept into a love triangle. Dr. Henry was merely a supporting role, but it got Henney attention for both his appearance and the fact that he portrayed a handsome, successful Korean American in Korea as something other than a caricature. The last of the 16 episodes was watched by more than half of all Korean households, and the show's popularity sent scripts washing his way.

"Daniel Henney may fit into the exact picture of the ideal man that most Korean women dream of," says Chin Jung-kwon, a prominent South Korean culture critic. "He looks both Asian and Western, shows gestures and manners from both cultures, and speaks fluent English. Daniel Henney is not a farfetched dream, but a dream that could come true."

### Getting noticed

HENNEY followed his first splash with another short TV series in 2006: "Spring Waltz," another light romance in which he played a considerate — if very hot — foreign manager of a musician (his character, Phillip, was written as an Austrian Korean). He also resumed an earlier, aborted modeling career, appearing with Gwyneth Paltrow in a massive campaign for the South Korean clothing brand Bean Pole. His popularity has led to a dozen ad campaigns; he now sells rice cookers, among other products.

He moved to the big screen last year in "Seducing Mr. Perfect" (sometimes called "Finding Mr. Robin" in English), a, yes, comedy about love in a Seoul office. The movie was released last Christmas, and by then Henney was such a phenomenon that the opening was hyped as a head-to-head showdown against Rain, the Korean mega-pop star who was making his movie debut in "I'm a Cyborg." (Instead, both films did good but unspectacular business, blown out of the water by a goofy comedy about plastic surgery, "200 Pound Beauty.")

"My Father" is Henney's attempt to break the typecasting. He still plays an American of Asian descent. But this time, the subject matter is raw: an exploration not only of family ties but of his character's emerging awareness of his Korean identity.

"At times I think the movie was above my abilities," says Henney. "There is some tough stuff. I poured my heart into it, but there were scenes that really pushed the limits of human emotion." The producers are also hoping the adoption theme will resonate in a country that was once the largest exporter of orphans to the United States, and remains the world's fourth largest provider of adopted children. Among the thousands orphaned and sent abroad was Henney's mother, Christine, born in the southern port city of Busan but adopted, along with her brother, into an American family when she was just a year old.

"She always kept the clothing she'd come over in, but she never had the money or the means to find out about her own parents," Henney says. "And there's always a fear of what you'll find." Henney's father is an American, with family roots in England, and the actor says he spent little time thinking about his mixed ethnicity as a kid growing up in small town Michigan, "a very naive place of 1,100 people where all the kids there ever thought about was hunting and fishing. I always just thought of myself as a white guy," he says.

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But race was not ignored. There was teasing from friends, who would bow to him, or tease him about the ramen noodles his mother stocked in the kitchen. And there were racially instigated fistfights as well: two a week, he has told interviewers, though he declines to quantify the scrapping when pressed. "I grew up in a rural area," he says, shrugging at the memory. "You get your racism there."

His first ambition was to play basketball, and he was good enough that scholarships helped him chase that dream through three colleges. He ended up at the University of Illinois at Chicago where he made the team but rode the bench. By then he was also acting in student theater.

His first jobs after university were as a model, work that took him to Europe and Hong Kong. It was in Hong Kong that he first embraced his Asian background, he says.

Tiring of modeling, he settled in New York in 2004 to try stage acting. There wasn't a big demand for Asian Americans off-Broadway. Henney played an Italian, an Irishman, Happy in "Death of a Salesman." He also auditioned for parts on TV's "The O.C." and "One Tree Hill." "I was just getting my feet wet when my manager called encouraging me to come to Korea for a commercial," he says of the May 2005 decision that brought him here for the first time. Two years later, Seoul is Danny's town.

Henney says he is so busy working that he has had no time to find real love here. "I keep waiting for someone to introduce me to some celebrities," he jokes.

He is hoping that the role in "My Father" will expand his résumé enough to tweak more serious interest in Hollywood. Like Rain, who has parlayed his Asian fame (and great abs) into a role in the Wachowski brothers' upcoming "Speed Racer," Henney's Korean stardom has led some American producers to send him scripts. But so far, none have strayed far from the usual Asian stereotype, he says.

"Maybe I'm not in a position to be picky, but I don't want to go in as an action star," he says. "It's all: What kind of wire am I going to be hanging from; what kind of kick am I going to be doing; what kind of car am I going to be racing. Who hasn't seen that?"

Henney insists he could be happy working in Asia only and the potential for wider stardom is enormous. The Japanese, who have a proven market for Korean TV and movie stars, are just beginning to notice the Henney phenomenon, sending reporters to Seoul to interview him. "The Japanese see me as a Korean, not an American," he says.

But he would still like his family to be able to see him on screen, excitedly recounting the buzz he got when he took his mother to see "Mr. Perfect" on a Koreatown screen in L.A. earlier this year, when he was shooting scenes for "My Father" in Pasadena. "It was nice to not have people following me all the time," he says, but he seems pleased to recount that he was spotted by fans a few times, including two middle-aged white women during a visit to Chicago who gushed when they spotted Dr. Henry. They were members of a Korean drama club.

"When I look at the last two years, things look like they were planned," Henney says when asked if coming to Korea was part of a clever strategy to circumvent the American



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competition. "But the fact is it all just happened. The wheel just kept spinning. And I never close any doors, whether they open west, or open east."

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*Special correspondent Jinna Park contributed to this article.*



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