

## Ten Myths About the Korean Wave in the Global Cultural Sphere

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This article discusses 10 of the most common myths about Hallyu. These myths do not encompass all misunderstandings and problematic standpoints relevant to Hallyu. Instead, I selected these major issues as they were concomitantly repeated whenever I read media reports, academic publications, and social media threads on Hallyu. Some were encountered at academic conferences I have attended over the past several years. I do not attempt to provide any grand statements; I want to offer a steppingstone for Hallyu scholars, cultural creators, and global fans to discuss these major myths more carefully, rather than simply taking them for granted.

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The Korean Wave has symbolized one of the most identifiable non-Western cultures and digital technologies around the globe. From television dramas to films to music, several forms of Korean popular culture are gaining soaring popularity in many parts of the globe, including Asia, North America, Latin America, and Europe. Digital technologies and relevant cultures developed and created in Korea, including smartphones, mobile instant messengers, webtoons, and esports, have also increased their global presence in the early 21st century. As can be seen in the cases of *Parasite* (Kwak, Moon, Bong, Jang, & Bong, 2019), which earned four Oscars in 2020, and BTS—a seven-member idol group that has earned several awards at the annual Billboard music awards in recent years—Hallyu has been recognized by global cultural creators, audiences, and fans. Consequently, the Korean cultural industries have increased the export of popular culture and digital technologies to the global markets, from only \$188.9 million in 1998 to \$6,240 million in 2018 (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2019).

With the rapid growth of Hallyu around the globe, many countries, including Japan and China, have been eager to learn about the reasons for the surge of the Korean Wave. Some believe that Korea's advancement of its own cultural contents and digital technologies is because of a handful of elements, such as supportive cultural policies and effective marketing strategies learned from the Japanese government and cultural industries. Several theoreticians also claimed that Hallyu was a fad or trend that would disappear over time. Meanwhile, some scholars argue that the Korean Wave has lost its Koreanness because of excessive hybridization, and therefore, commercialization. These beliefs, among others, have been widely adopted by many policy makers, cultural creators, and general audiences without critical observation or careful consideration.

This article aims to discuss 10 of the most common myths about the Korean Wave. These myths do not encompass all misunderstandings and problematic standpoints relevant to Hallyu. Instead, I, as a

media scholar, selected these issues as I observed them to be concomitantly repeated whenever I read media reports, academic publications, and social media threads on Hallyu. Some were also encountered at academic conferences and seminars I have attended over the past several years. I do not attempt to provide any grand statements; I want to offer a steppingstone for Hallyu scholars, policy makers, cultural creators, and global fans to discuss these major myths more carefully rather than simply taking them for granted. I expect that these discussions will comprehensively and historically shed light on the current debates on the role of Hallyu in the global cultural sphere.

### **Did the Korean Wave Start in the Late 1990s?**

Many people who are interested in Hallyu believe that it began in 1997. Although there are several different interpretations, the year 1997 is usually considered the starting point of Hallyu, mainly because the term Hallyu appeared for the first time when a Taiwanese newspaper used it on December 12, 1997, although it did not directly indicate the growth of Korean popular culture (Chen, 2019; Y. S. Hong & Lim, 2018). While being produced as Hallyu, the meaning of the term was not the Korean Wave at that time; in Chinese characters, it initially meant the coldest wind. Other Taiwanese newspapers later followed by using the term Hallyu to warn of the increasing competition power of Korean dramas in the mid-1990s (C. Hong, 2012). The current term Hallyu was coined on October 19, 1999, by a Chinese newspaper that used the expression to represent the success of Korean singers in China (Chen, 2019; S.-K. Hong, Park, & Park, 2017; Jin, Yoon, & Min, 2021). Domestically, in 1999, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Korea produced and distributed a music CD to publicize K-pop in East Asia. The title in English was *Korean Pop Music*, while its Chinese version was called *Hallyu—Songs from Korea*. Ever since, Hallyu has rapidly grown in Asia and later, beyond Asia. In this regard, it is not necessarily incorrect to claim that the Korean Wave, in terms of terminology, started in the late 1990s.

What is significant, however, is that Hallyu has a longer history than global audiences might assume. Pinpointing the origin of the Korean Wave in terms of its practice, which is more important than the derivation of the term, is complicated, as it depends on the ways in which we define Hallyu. We may identify the history of Hallyu within two different perspectives. One is focusing on the outcome in terms of the export of Korean cultural products, which is a popular definition, and the other is emphasizing the ecology embedded in the export of cultural content, which media scholars did not focus on.

On the one hand, global media outlets and several scholars define Hallyu as the spread of Korean cultural productions (Farrar, 2010) and the spread of Korean popular culture (Ko, No, Kim, & Simões et al., 2014). If the export of cultural content is the main or the only component of Hallyu, the Hallyu phenomenon goes back to the early 1970s, as Korean cultural products were already being exported to several other countries. Korean pop singers, such as Cho Yong-phil, Kim Yonja, and Kye Eun-sook, held performances in Japan in the 1970s or the 1980s. In the early 1990s, Kim Wan-sun, who was considered one of the first single-idol singers, performed and earned popularity in Hong Kong (1993) and Taiwan (1994). Korea also exported a few animated television programs to France and several other countries that were interested in knowing about Korea right before the 1988 Summer Olympics. These cases could arguably be the first major examples of Hallyu (C. S. Park, 2014), although this perspective is discussed to a lesser extent. The overall size of exports and the increasing trends of the time should also be considered in Hallyu studies.

On the other hand, the origin of Hallyu can be determined based on the infrastructure fundamentals that drove the creation of popular culture. What this is suggesting is that one needs to understand Hallyu as the development of the Korean cultural industries and the export of cultural content in the global cultural markets. This is significant because the cultural industries are the foundation for the growth of cultural content. Along with the increased export economy of popular culture, the remarkable expansion of domestic cultural industries has contributed to the rise of Hallyu. Indeed, Korea developed the broadcasting and film industries during neoliberal transnationalization in the early and mid-1990s. Until the early 1990s, only three television channels existed. The significant transformation began with the introduction of a new terrestrial commercial broadcasting company, the Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), in 1991, followed by numerous cable channels starting in 1995. The Kim Young-sam government (1993–1998) also enacted the Motion Picture Promotion Law in 1995, which included diverse incentives, such as tax breaks for film studios to encourage *chaebol* to participate in the film production industry (Shin, 2005).

The development of export and the growth of cultural industries were not separate but rather worked together to build the legacy of Hallyu. Although we cannot reduce all dimensions of the Korean Wave to the export of local cultural content, it is necessary to define Hallyu as the growth of the local cultural industries and the export of cultural content in the global cultural market.

#### **Did the Korean Wave Start With a Few Television Programs?**

Many scholars argue that Hallyu started with a few well-made television dramas that were popular in East Asia. It is not unusual to admit the significant role of dramas, as Hallyu began to flourish with the popularity of a few dramas, including *What is Love?* (C. Park, 1991–1992), which were popular in several East Asian countries. *What Is Love?* (C. Park, 1991–1992), which was considered one of the major initiators of the Hallyu phenomenon, was televised by Chinese channel CCTV 1 in June 1997; its viewer rating was recorded at 4.2%, which was one of the highest among foreign programs (H. Y. Lee, 2017). It was originally aired in 1991 and 1992 in Korea and was sold to China in 1994, but its air dates were delayed considerably because of technical issues (e.g., dubbing) and bureaucratic processes.

The broadcasting industry had already begun exporting programs in the early 1990s. In particular, the importation of Korean media products into China came after Korea and China established a diplomatic relationship in 1992 (Huang & Noh, 2009). An MBC drama, *Jealousy (Jiltu)* (S. Y. Lee, 1992), which depicted young couples' love and urban lives, became the first Korean production to be broadcast in China in 1993. Although Japanese television programs were popular across Asian countries, it caught the eyes of Chinese audiences, and Harbin TV aired it in 1993 (Sohn, 2016). Taiwan also imported several Korean dramas in the mid-1990s, although they were relatively unpopular (Chen, 2019). The exportation of these dramas paved the way for Hallyu to emerge in the early 2000s.

However, the early stage of Hallyu started as several cultural forms, including K-pop, which played major roles simultaneously. The early form of K-pop became popular in the mid-1990s when Seo Taiji and Boys performed between 1992 and 1996 (Howard, 2006). The group popularized rap and hip-hop in Korea, challenging and ultimately transforming the conventions of local popular music. The most consequential effect of Seo Taiji and Boys was its invention of a creative form of idol groups while introducing several different

music genres into the Korean music industry (Lie, 2015). The prenatal K-pop led by the group suggests that Hallyu did not suddenly emerge in the late 1990s but has continuously evolved over a long period. K-pop was led by several idol groups, including HOT and Shinhwa, starting in the mid-1990s, and their successes motivated the K-pop industry to develop its current idol system.

Although the total amount of foreign export was as significant in comparison, the film industry was also a major driver. As the Korean government initiated the growth of the domestic cultural industry and the expansion of globalization in the mid-1990s, Korean cinema certainly acted as one of the key players. Several films successfully entered many Asian countries, which drove the growth of Korean cinema in the early 21st century. Though media scholars did not pay attention to it, animation was the major cultural product in the early Hallyu era. The total amount of foreign export in animation was recorded at \$85 million in 1998, much bigger than that of broadcasting (\$10 million) and music (\$8.6 million). Until the broadcasting industry surpassed the animation industry in foreign export in 2004, the leading role of animation in the Korean Wave continued, and the animation industry was a silent powerhouse in the early stages of Hallyu.

The Korean Wave was not driven by any particular cultural form, particularly broadcasting, but several cultural industries worked together to drive the growth of Hallyu in Asia, followed by the global cultural markets. Hallyu could not be fulfilled by any particular cultural sector, which means that Hallyu has been the outcome of the collaborative works of several cultural forms from the initial stage to present.

### **Does Hallyu Represent the Rapid Penetration of “Korean Popular Culture” in the Global Cultural Scene?**

This myth needs to be considered by discussing two major dimensions: one is whether Hallyu has successfully penetrated the global cultural markets, and the other is whether solely popular culture represents the Hallyu phenomenon. In the early stages of Hallyu, it was limited to mainly East Asia, as China, Taiwan, and Japan imported Korean popular culture. From television dramas to films to K-pop, Korea's cultural industries focused on these countries, as they were major importers consuming Korean popular culture. However, in recent years, several regions have become major targets. In 2001, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan were the largest consumers of Hallyu, as the export of Korean popular culture to these countries consisted of 35.3% during the same year, followed by Japan (29.4%), Europe (8.9%), and North America (5.6%), based on the export of television programs and films. Recently, however, the map has changed. In 2018, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan were still the largest at 36.8%, while Japan sustained the second largest share at 19.7%. North America became the third-largest area that imported Korean popular culture (15.9%), followed by Europe (7.3%). The market share of North America and Europe combined increased from 14.5% in 2001 to 23.2% in 2018, meaning Hallyu has increased its presence in Western countries as well to become a global, not regional, cultural powerhouse (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2002; Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, 2020).

Meanwhile, one needs to understand that popular culture is not what Hallyu is all about. Although it could be said that popular culture represented Hallyu's early stage, this is no longer accurate because of the increasing role of digital Hallyu. The Korean Wave started with a few cultural genres. Since the early 21st century, however, several digital technologies and relevant cultural activities have become major parts of Hallyu. Most of all, online gaming jumped onto the bandwagon and became the largest segment of Hallyu in foreign export.

Smartphones, mobile games, instant mobile messengers like Kakao Talk and Line, and webtoons, one after another, have also become new entities in Hallyu, creating the category of digital Hallyu. Many people around the globe have smartphones from Korean brands Samsung and LG that they use to enjoy K-pop and webtoons. Unlike the early stage of Hallyu, referring to the global penetration of Korean popular culture, contemporary Hallyu should be identified as the global popularity of Korean popular culture, digital technologies, and relevant digital cultures, through both cultural trade and digital platforms, such as social media and over-the-top (OTT) services.

The role of global fans has accordingly changed. In the first stage, they had to purchase CDs, cassette tapes, video tapes, and DVDs to enjoy cultural content from Korea; however, because of the advancement of digital platforms, they do not need to buy them. In other words, the major form of consumption among global fans has changed, reflecting the massive use of digital platforms and increased access to both digital and physical content. Given the Korean cultural industries' continuous integration into the global mediascape for more than 20 years, Hallyu could be considered as an entirely new breed of cultural trend. Hallyu is a living creature, continuously evolving; it must be understood as a form of evolutionary transnational culture and digital technologies in the global scene.

### **Has Hallyu Been Driven by the Korean Government?**

One of the most controversial issues is whether the Korean government has played a major role in the Hallyu phenomenon. The Korean government has used legal and financial mechanisms in many fields with its state-led developmentalist approach. It has certainly developed or supported the cultural industries as well. However, the role of the government has not been substantial other than building necessary infrastructure for the growth of Hallyu, as cultural creators and global audiences play major roles. In addition, Korea is not the only country to develop supporting cultural policies, as many countries initiate and support their cultural industries. Therefore, what is significant is whether the Korean government has supported Hallyu enough to differentiate its cultural policies from other countries' cultural policies. One also needs to understand whether the private sectors—cultural industries firms and cultural creators—are major drivers.

Many people, from scholars to journalists to global fans, believe that Hallyu has been advanced mainly through the support of the Korean government. For example, a Korean American journalist Euny Hong (2014) argued, "The South Korean government has made the Korean Wave the nation's number one priority. Korea has multiple five-year plans [during the economic development era], the likes of which most democratic and capitalist countries have never seen" (p. 6). The Korean government partially initiated the growth of cultural industries, which started in 1994 when the Kim Young-sam government (1993–1998) organized the Presidential Advisory Board on Science & Technology. The advisory board submitted a comprehensive report to the president, suggesting that the new government promote media production as the national strategic industry. Following the report, the Korean government focused on "the industrialization of culture and the internationalization of Korean culture" (H. K. Lee, 2013, p. 189). While developing neoliberal cultural policies, such as deregulation, privatization, and liberalization, the Korean government has continued the developmentalist tradition in the realm of culture.

In Korea, the top-down approach with the government being the driving force of economic policy undeniably affects every aspect of public life, including the cultural sector. The Kim Young-sam government consequently transformed its focus, "earmarking 1% of the national budget to spending on subsidies and low-interest loans to cultural industries, launching agencies to promote and expand K-pop exports, and setting up more cultural departments at universities" (Leong, 2014, para. 17). Later, the Park Geun-hye government's main agenda was to increase the allotted budget for the culture ministry to 2% by the end of her term in 2017 ("The 21st Century National Goals," 2013). As of 2012, it was 1.14%, far from the average of 1.9% for other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (H. W. Lee, 2012). It did not go up much, and it was still around 1.5% in 2019. The financial support from the government in the Korean context was still far less than that of other OECD countries. Admitting the differences of national economy among OECD countries, I am certain that the financial support from the Korean government has not been distinctive, meaning the role of the government in terms of its financial support cannot be an essential element to lead the growth of Hallyu.

Furthermore, some administrations particularly hurt the cultural industries, and therefore, Hallyu, instead of boosting it. For example, the Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) administrations made several negative political decisions in the cultural sector, including the creations of an artist blacklist encompassing more than 1,000 antigovernment cultural producers, media scholars, and practitioners. In so doing, these conservative administrations "seriously undermined the freedom of thought and expression" (Sang-Hun, 2017, para. 9).

Meanwhile, cultural creators already started to initiate their plans to advance Korea's cultural industries. Two of the most significant efforts came from the film and music industries. In the film industry, in 1994, when working in its new business division, Miky Lee—who was the granddaughter of Lee Byung-chul, Samsung's former CEO—received an investment proposal. At that time, Steven Spielberg, David Geffen, and Jeffrey Katzenberg were building a studio and asked about whether Samsung was interested. Samsung preferred to focus on hardware, and a deal was never cemented. In 1995, DreamWorks reapproached Lee, and this time, she brought the proposal to her brother, who was the CEO of CJ. CJ decided to invest \$300 million to launch DreamWorks and take a 10.8% stake and distribution rights to its films in Asia, excluding Japan (*FirstPost*, 2020). With the deal, CJ found itself an entertainment player, and about 25 years later, *Parasite* (Kwak et al., 2019), mainly funded by Miky Lee and distributed by CJ Entertainment, won four Oscars.

In the realm of K-pop, Lee Soo-man had already established the entertainment house SM Studio in 1989, which he renamed SM Entertainment in February 1995. This agency developed an in-house production system and produced a string of successful artists (SM Entertainment, 2018). Several entertainment powerhouses, such as JYP, YG, and HYBE, joined the movement, and they have played a pivotal role in the growth of the K-pop boom.

Overall, the role of Korean government in Hallyu is rather complicated, and the growth of the Korean Wave is arguably the result of, sometimes, cooperative and, at other times, conflicting relationships between the public and the private sectors. The government has advanced Hallyu in that it has established necessary infrastructure; however, the private sectors have also taken major roles for the growth of Hallyu as they

develop high-quality cultural content and digital technologies. Eventually, we cannot ignore the significant role of global audiences as they consume Korean popular and digital cultures.

### **Is Hallyu the Result of Copying Japanese Soft Power?**

One of the major myths is that K-culture is nothing but a copy of Japanese soft power. Some believe that the Korean government considered Japanese soft power a benchmark policy and developed Hallyu through global marketing strategies initiated by the Korean government. For example, the *Asahi Shimbun* (2020) states that titled from Korea, led by the popularity of *Crash Landing on You* (J. H. Lee, 2019–2020) and *Itaewon Class* (D. S. Kim, 2020), both distributed by Netflix, reignited the Japanese people's interest in Korean popular culture. These and other television and film products are being highly watched not only in Japan but also in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere in the world, partly because of the national promotional campaign by Seoul.

The *Wall Street Journal* claimed that, for decades, Korea has been in catch-up mode with its neighbor Japan since the Korean War (1950–1953; Ramstad, 2009). It argued that Korea copied Japan's economic development model. However, while Korea learned from Japan, the Korean economy in the post-Korean War period was influenced by the United States, as well, as it provided funds to rebuild its economy. As this implies, many foreign media believed that Korea copied Japanese soft power, resulting in developing the new powerhouse in the global cultural markets, simply because Japan was a powerhouse in the Asian cultural markets in the 1980s and in the early 1990s. There is no doubt that Japan influenced the Korean cultural industries, in particular the music industry, as Korea adopted and appropriated the Japanese idol production system (J. S. Lee, 2009). However, the major characteristics of Korean entertainment houses are notably different from the Japanese system, as they advance a Korean-style entertainment system in terms of training, production, and circulation. Korean ability to copy the Japanese cultural industries was restricted because of several historical and cultural reasons.

To begin with, Japanese involvement in the Asian cultural market had grown since the late 1980s. Several Japanese cultural products, including television programs, film, animation, and console gaming, became popular in some Asian countries. However, Korea banned the import of Japanese cultural products, mainly because of Korea's colonial experience under the domination of Japan between the late 19th and the early 20th century. Korea began gradually lifted the ban against the import of Japanese popular culture starting in the late 1990s (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, 2009). In 1998, President Kim Dae-jung was inaugurated, and his administration started to "loosen the ban on cultural products imported from Japan" (Ro, 2020, para. 4). As the export-oriented Korean Wave mainly started in the mid-1990s, there was no moment for the Japanese cultural industries to directly influence the Korean cultural industries.

Second, the Korean government could not copy Japanese cultural policies, in particular soft power strategies, as the boom of Japanese popular culture in some Asian countries had nothing to do with supportive Japanese cultural policies. The Japanese government had employed a unique stance in the cultural sector because the government did not promote the export of cultural products—and neither did it have direct ties to the cultural sector with some exceptions. This was the result of fear of resurrecting anti-Japanese sentiment and repressed colonial memories and of being seen as engaging in cultural imperialism (Otmazgin, 2003).

For example, in Japan, the public broadcasting system NHK was responsible for providing television programs abroad, and NHK served audiences overseas through NHK World; however, it did not sell television programs to foreign countries, as it was supported by a reception fee from the public, and its first obligation was to focus on domestic broadcasting. They were private broadcasters, including TV Asahi, Fuji TV, and TBS, that initiated the export of domestic programs (Hanada, 2003). In 1994, Dentsu, an advertising agency in Japan, initiated and organized a committee to promote the export of Japanese audiovisual products and to submit a report to the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (Iwabuchi, 2002). In 1997, Japan Entertainment Television (JET), in a joint venture with a key station, TBS, and Jupiter Telecom, started a commercial effort to sell Japanese television programs abroad (Noble, 2000). This shows that the Japanese government did not fully initiate or develop policy measures to support cultural industries and global trade until recently; therefore, the Korean government could not learn from the Japanese government in the realm of cultural policies.

Third, the so-called Cool Japan Initiative, referring to “an instance of Japanese government’s nation branding exercise as part of its soft power projection in which the unique selling point is identified as Japanese national identity” (Tamaki, 2019, p. 108), only started in the late 2000s and the early 2010s. The term Cool Japan first entered the official lexicon in the early 21st century, when McGray (2002) praised Japan’s Gross National Cool, suggesting that its soft power held tremendous potential. Soon after, the Japanese government realized the soft power potential of cultural products and has been hosting Japan International Contents Festa since 2007 (Tourism Agency, 2010, p. 88). Cool Japan itself became more prominent since 2010, when the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry ([METI], 2011, as cited in Tamaki, 2019, p. 114) organized a series of meetings to discuss how to package the concept. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA, 2011), Cool Japan constituted an integral part of the economic growth strategy, and the Cool Japan Initiative considered promoting the contents industry, design, and cuisine to turn Japan into an attractive destination for inbound tourists (MOFA, 2012, as cited in Tamaki, 2019, p. 115). The Korean government between the mid-1990s and the early 21st century had not learned from, or copied Japanese cultural policies—in particular, soft power strategies—as the Japanese government did not advance any significant cultural policies before the advent of Hallyu. This is a very common myth that people misunderstand in the Korean Wave tradition.

### **Does K-pop Generate Hallyu 3.0 or 4.0?**

Several cultural agencies, the media, and media scholars have developed different perspectives on Hallyu over the past 10 years. Based on their own standards, they divided the entire Hallyu period into two to four major eras, such as Hallyu 1.0, Hallyu 2.0, and Hallyu 3.0. Because of the rapid growth of K-pop as the leading cultural content representing the Korean Wave in the 2010s and early 2020s, some claim that Hallyu is now in the Hallyu 4.0 era; however, these categorizations are mostly based on narrow-minded schemes or marketing purposes, instead of reasonable, acceptable, and agreeable academic standards.

These loose categories came from both the government itself and government-funded agencies. For example, Seong-Gak Song (2015)—the president of the Korea Creative Contents Agency, who was appointed by the Park Geun-hye government in December 2014—claimed that the Korean Wave entered the Hallyu 3.0 era starting in the early 2010s, which emphasized Hangul, Hansik (Korean cuisine), and Hanbok, in addition to existing cultural content. He continued to claim that the Korean cultural industry established its position as a



core driving force for creative economy policy of the Park administration, while taking a pivotal role in enhancing nation-branding (Song, 2015).

As such, his main reason for the creation of the term Hallyu 3.0 was directly related to the Park administration's cultural policy, focusing on the creative economy, which hurt the integrity of Hallyu. Meanwhile, Cho and Yoon (2013) divided the Korean Wave era into three distinctive periods (the first period, 1997–early 2000s; the second period, early 2000s–around 2006; and the third period, around 2007–present) based on major regions for the exports of Korean popular culture and primary cultural forms. However, it was mainly limited to K-pop.

In contrast to these attempts, we must develop the periodization of Hallyu to historicize the growth of Hallyu. In my previous work, I already characterized it into two major historical developments: the *Hallyu* 1.0 era, approximately between 1997 and 2007; and the *Hallyu* 2.0 era, mainly from 2008 to 2017, considering the major cultural forms exported, technological developments, fanbases, and government cultural policies (Jin, 2016). Based on this, I propose a new form of categorization, including Hallyu 3.0, as the nature of Hallyu has shifted since 2017.

The noteworthy element of the Hallyu trend during the New Korean Wave era starting in 2008 is massive social media use, because fans around the world used social media to enjoy Korean cultural content. Korea-based smartphones and digital games, both online and mobile, have become some of the most significant components of Hallyu. Hallyu 2.0 has also changed its fanbase. While the early stage of Hallyu was based on a fanbase of women in their 30s and 40s in East Asia, Hallyu 2.0 encompassed all age groups, as K-pop and online gaming attracted many teens and those in their 20s in Western countries.

The government policy has also shifted from hands-off (indirect support) policies in the early Hallyu era to hands-on (direct support) approaches in the new Hallyu era because of changing political ideologies. In the initial stage, the Korean government developed its cultural policy to conduct indirect intervention and deregulation so that the private sector could advance the Hallyu phenomenon. However, the Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and the Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) administrations emphasized a creative content policy and were actively involved in the cultural industries. These two conservative administrations focused on the creative industries as a significant part of the national economy (Table 1; see Jin, 2016).

**Table 1. Hallyu, From 1.0 to 3.0.**

| Major Points                 | Hallyu 1.0         | Hallyu 2.0                               | Hallyu 3.0   |
|------------------------------|--------------------|--|--|
| Period                       | 1997–2007          | 2008–2017                                | 2017–present   |
| Primary Genres Started       | TV dramas, films   | K-pop, online games, animation           | Webtoon, K-pop, mobile games                                       |
| Technologies/Digital Culture | Online games       | Social media, smartphones, digital games | Digital Platforms (Netflix, social media), transmedia storytelling |
| Major Regions                | East Asia          | Asia, Europe, North America              | Global   |
| Primary Consumers            | In their 30s–40s   | 10s–20s included                         | 10s–20s included, but 50–60s                                       |
| Major Cultural Policies      | Hands-off policies | Hands-on policies                        | Hands-off policies   |

Starting in 2017 when the Moon Jae-in administration began, Hallyu has experienced a new trend, namely Hallyu 3.0. During this current period, the major cultural industries are shifting. During the Hallyu 2.0 era, K-pop, online gaming, and new television genres—not only drama but also variety shows—were major drivers. In this contemporary Hallyu era, webtoon, animation, and mobile gaming have become major players, while K-pop continues to grow. The form of export has also rapidly changed as domestic cultural industries have developed transmedia storytelling as one of the most significant cultural trends. As webtoons gain popularity, cultural creators develop webtoon-based big screen cultural contents like films, television dramas, and digital gaming. In conjunction with transmedia storytelling, OTT platforms like Netflix have become one of the most significant outlets for the Korean cultural industries. Until the mid-2010s, the Korean cultural industries mainly exported finished cultural products or television formats and film remakes. In the Hallyu 3.0 era, they work directly with Netflix to circulate Korean cultural content to Netflix subscribers. Several Korean television programs and films have been aired on Netflix, and this trend is expected to grow.

Cultural politics has likewise shifted again. Unlike previous administrations, the Moon government has adopted a unique stance, as it takes the motto of “we support, but not intervene in cultural production.” The Moon government understands that the previous two administrations developed hands-on cultural policies, resulting in serious problems as the blacklist scandal implies. Therefore, the government has instead chosen to use hands-off policies, as the Roh Moon-hyun government designed. The Hallyu 3.0 era is differentiated from the previous Korean Wave era. In sum, it is not desirable to periodize the Korean Wave trend based on only one or two major fields, as Hallyu should be considered comprehensively and historically.

### **Can We Put the K in the Korean Wave?**

With the soaring popularity of Hallyu, many scholars (G. Y. Kim, 2019; Lie, 2012) have discussed the notion of the K in the Korean Wave, particularly in K-pop. What they were interested in was whether Korean popular culture broadly represented Koreanness in content. Contemporary discussions on this subject should be expanded as global fans are rapidly growing, and their acceptance of the Korean Wave has changed. Here, the major discourse has been the nature of hybridization in the Korean Wave phenomenon.

Korean popular culture shows hybridization between Western culture and Korean culture to create a new form of cultural content to attract domestic and global audiences. K-pop demonstrates the mix of Western pop-music conventions—in particular, American hip-hop (Anderson, 2020), the Japanese idol music system, and Korea’s dynamism—and therefore, K-pop is often defined as a blending of different texts and styles. Several entertainment agencies have recruited multinational talents, including Korean American performers, American/European producers and composers, and talented young foreign performers from China, Japan, Thailand, and Taiwan, to appeal to global markets. Consequently, K-pop has been significantly deterritorialized beyond the place of origin (Lie & Oh, 2014). CEO Jin Young Park at JYP Entertainment even said his company has three stages for its global expansion: first, exporting Korean content; second, integrating foreign talent into K-pop groups; and finally, developing entirely foreign talents. Park said, “we believe this is the future of K-pop” (Gibson, 2019, para. 6).

For many global fans, therefore,

K-pop was signified as a playful cultural form rather than as an export from Korea. That is, the K (Koreanness) in K-pop was not always a significant symbolic marker that facilitated the fans' interest in and enthusiasm about Korean culture in general. (Yoon, 2018, p. 377).

Regardless of several important Korean ethos in K-pop, K-pop is recognized as being highly hybrid, which does not contain the perceived elements of Korean culture. The perceived absence of Koreanness in K-pop texts among fans implies that an emphasis on Korea as the place of origin and on the country's exclusive ownership of K-pop might be a false approach to understanding this cultural phenomenon, as fans seem to seek dispersed ownership of K-pop and transnational common elements shaping global K-pop (Choi, as cited in Yoon, 2018). This tendency also "resonates with critics' arguments that, except for its artists' nationality, production system, and primary language, K-pop is not highly associated with Korean cultural characteristics" (Yoon, 2018, p. 377). Lie (2012) especially argues that "as a matter of traditional culture, there is almost nothing 'Korean' about K-pop" (p. 360). He points out that, by attempting to remove Koreanness, K-pop becomes a hybrid commodity that smoothly flows across national boundaries:

It is precisely because there isn't very much "Korean" in K-pop . . . The K in K-pop is merely a brand, part of Brand Korea that has been the export-oriented South Korean government since the 1960s. The Korean Wave in general and K-pop in particular is naked commercialism, albeit with the grateful garb of cultural respectability that comes from prestigious, luxury goods. It would be too much, however, to regard this as having anything to do with traditional Confucian, Korean culture. (pp. 361–362)

However, it is far-fetched to claim that the entire Korean cultural industries have advanced commercially embedded hybrid culture. Within K-pop, several idol groups, including BTS, have developed some Koreanness in their lyrics and dances as BTS's song "IDOL" implies. Although BTS uses English tropes and develops hybrid lyrics, it routinely uses Korean tropes like *Ulssu*, *Jilwaja Johda*, and *Dunkiduk kungduruhruh* in Korean. "IDOL" reflects Koreanness in lyrics and dances, which are some of the major elements for the success of the song in the global markets (Jin, 2020). Bang Si-hyuk, the CEO of HYBE, stated that English mixing itself is not a major reason why global fans like BTS, but because of some Korean words that they might think are interesting (H. I. Lee, 2017). In other cultural areas, *Kingdom* (S. H. Kim & Park, 2019–present) and *Itaewon Class* (D. S. Kim, 2020), became globally popular with no dominant hybrid cultural components, while *Parasite* (Kwak et al., 2019) won Oscars because of its delicate representation of Korean society, such as Korean urban settings and unseen class struggles. As such, some cultural content portrays Korean society, either historical or contemporary, to appeal to global audiences. The Korean Wave continues to develop politicized culture, meaning hybrid, but still dexterously represents Korean uniqueness and specificity, not keeping old cultural tradition but developing contemporary ethos embedded in people's daily lives.

### **Could Hallyu Create Countercultural Flow?**

One of the interesting myths is whether Hallyu has shifted the direction of cultural flow in the globalization era. The flow of popular culture has been a one-way, top-down process from a few Western

countries—in particular, the United States—to the rest over the past several decades, supporting the theory of cultural imperialism theory (Schiller, 1976). Starting in the early 1990s, this trend has shifted as several countries have developed their own cultural content for exportation. They have developed unique cultural products and penetrated neighboring countries, whose languages and cultures are similar or the same. Mexico and Brazil's Telenovela, and India's Bollywood have been examples of the success of local culture confronting Western culture based on cultural proximity as Straubhaar (1991) argued. From this perspective, global interconnectivity is more a multidimensional and complex set of processes that allows the enrichment of global culture through diversity. Of course, the question of whether these countries' popular cultures have penetrated the global markets meaningfully has been thoroughly researched yet remains controversial because the successes of local cultural products have been arguably limited to one or two particular cultural forms and to their own regions with only a few exceptions.

In contrast to this, Hallyu shows unique characteristics mainly because Korea has developed several cultural forms, including film, television programs, K-pop, and digital games, as well as webtoons, that are targeted toward the global markets. It is premature to argue that the entire process of cultural flow has changed, although the Korean Wave clearly shows the possibility of contraflow. Arguably, Hallyu is an exceptional case rather than a general trend, as many third-world countries cannot make cultural products comparable to Hallyu because of the lack of talent, skill, and funds. They continue to receive Western cultural products, and therefore, the one-way flow of cultural content will be continuing, albeit with some variations. In other words, Hallyu can take an accolade as the leading cultural industries to potentially shift the contour of cultural flows in the global scene; however, the global cultural market remains increasingly complex mainly because of the growing role of digital platforms such as Netflix and Disney+. They are mega platform giants that wield enormous power in the global cultural market, in addition to being American corporations. The contraflow of culture has not yet fully occurred, and the global dominance of American culture and digital technologies continues, again, with some shifts.

### **Is the Korean Wave a Fad?**

Another interesting myth about Hallyu is that many people, specifically, some Asian scholars, believed it was a fad, and therefore, it would disappear sooner rather than later. Hallyu has certainly had ebbs and flows. Because of the Wave's relatively small size and influence in its initial stage, media scholars, policy makers, and cultural producers once considered it a fleeting trend (Hanaki, Singhal, Han, Kim, & Chitnis, 2007). In the early 2000s, several Asian countries, including Japan, China, and Taiwan, also witnessed anti-Hallyu movements in response to the rise of Korean popular culture; thus, the Korean Wave boom appeared to dissipate for a while. When Hallyu began entering Asian countries in the late 1990s, this reaction was not surprising, as Korea had never advanced popular culture that had been received well in Asia (Jin et al., 2021).

The same observation has continued in recent years. Several foreign media, cultural industries corporations, and even some global fans still believe that Hallyu is a fad. For example, Liu Xin Hui, promotions manager at record label HIM International, said, "The Korean wave is a fad, and the fervor around it will pass one day" (Ng, 2014, para. 44). Many global audiences also believed that Hallyu was already finished or would end within three to four years, when the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism

(2012) conducted a survey on the Second Hallyu and Korean Image during October and November 2012. Among 3,600 people surveyed, 66.8% of them said that Hallyu would be ending within four years. Though several reasons were identified, the most-significant reason was the lack of diverse content and excessive commercialism, although some people—in particular, in Europe—expressed cultural differences.

However, since the late 2000s, Korean cultural industries have created several new driving forces to expedite the Wave through the social media-driven dissemination of K-pop and other cultural products, including digital games, far beyond Asia. Despite some concerns from a few media outlets and media scholars who claimed that *Hallyu* is a fad because of both protective cultural policies in some Asian countries and the emergence of China and India as new power houses in the realm of popular culture, Hallyu has further advanced, from a regional phenomenon to a global occurrence.

Most of all, Hallyu has continued to add new driving forces or changed its major forces to maintain its position, even a modest one, in the global cultural markets. For example, in the first stage of Hallyu, dramas and films were driving forces, and during the Hallyu 2.0 era, K-pop and online gaming led the growth of the Korean Wave. In recent years, webtoons, webtoon-based transmedia storytelling, and mobile gaming are primary forms of Hallyu. Since Hallyu has also continued to penetrate many parts of the globe, both the Global North and the Global South, the increasing popularity of Korean cultural products will likely not slow anytime soon. The Korean Wave is also an effective example of the convergence of popular culture and digital platforms, which is one of the most unique and remarkable prospects for local-based cultural industries. Given these recent advancements, Hallyu will continue and even intensify its increasing popularity in the global sphere in the future.

### **Where is Hallyu Heading?**

The final myth, not as a widely held false belief but as the establishment of a theory, is where the Korean Wave is heading and with which cultural focuses. There are several dimensions that the Korean cultural industries and cultural creators should bear in mind in the future, and I especially want to propose three major dimensions. First, Hallyu creators need to develop politicized cultural contents instead of K-less hybrid cultural products, although hybrid culture currently symbolizes the growth of Hallyu. Korea must learn lessons from Japan, which was once one of the major cultural forces in the Asian markets. Japan maintained its own cultural stardom in Asia until the early 21st century based on its unique hybridization process, known as odorless Japanese culture; however, this depoliticized Japanese popular culture has lost its grip in the Asian markets and has not been able to penetrate the global markets meaningfully (Jin, 2016). As Iwabuchi (2002) admitted, Japan's reach in Asia, in terms of traditional resonance and imagination, gradually shrank in the early 21st century. The odorless Japanese popular culture—again, meaning “J”-less hybrid culture—was enjoyable for a while; however, this strategy running throughout the Japanese cultural industries over the past two decades finally lost its momentum, albeit with a few notable exceptions. If Hallyu cannot advance politicized hybrid culture, it will mostly like ebb and join Japanese popular culture. Korean culture and digital technologies currently enjoy global attention and popularity; however, unless it develops a new form of culture, Hallyu may follow what Japanese culture experienced. Cultural corporations and cultural creators in the Korean cultural industries should develop long-term strategies; not only marketing skills but also strategies around creating new cultures and digital technologies driven by local

forces with Korean uniqueness (Jin, 2016). The politicization of Hallyu, in terms of its emphasis on Koreanness rather than hybrid culture, should be a priority. Putting the K in the Korean Wave will eventually be beneficial for both local cultural industries and global audiences.

Second, the deep transnationalization of Hallyu must be actualized. Hallyu reveals a transnational momentum that signals a new method of cultural circulation that extends beyond geo-cultural boundaries. The transnational Korean Wave functions as an experiment to explore how cultural globalization can make non-Western cultural resources more diverse and inclusive. Despite the limitations in the Korean cultural industries, such as its rapid and systematic commodification, Hallyu offers momentum to redefine the global and the local while reminding people that culture is always being transnationalized (Jin et al., 2021). Therefore, developing the transnationalization of Korean culture is a major agenda in the process. One instance is the emphasis on webtoon-based transmedia storytelling that will be furthermore intensified because it is not simply implying the export of Korean popular culture but clearly advancing the transnationalization of local cultural content as a source for global big screen culture, such as film, television drama, and animation. The new form of transnationalization through transmedia storytelling will be what the Korean cultural industries must develop.

Third, as the current Korean Wave is also about digital Hallyu, it is critical to advance relevant digital technologies and culture. This is especially significant because Hallyu has continued to increase its reliance on OTT platforms. Over the past two decades, global digital technologies have rapidly grown and shifted because of social media and OTT platforms, and the material possession of Korean cultural content among global fans, which was the main way to enjoy Korean culture, has not been mandatory as people enjoy them on these digital platforms. Most of all, the convergence of popular culture and digital technologies must be continued; and how to lead this trend will be one of the most significant agendas to build another form of legend for the Korean Wave in the future.

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