

## Theorizing the Korean Wave: Introduction to New Perspectives

### *Introduction*

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Admitting to the significance of the institutionalization of Hallyu studies, this Special Section aims to create a space for discussions surrounding the possibilities for the advancement of non-Western theories or new perspectives amid the continuing Korean Wave phenomenon. As the outcomes of the April 2021 Vancouver conference, the articles included in this section investigate the recent surge of the Korean Wave, and they seek to shed light on current debates centered around the Korean Wave and place them in a renewed perspective that furthers future transnational cultural research. As the foundational basis for these articles, this introductory article discusses the major characteristics of the Korean Wave. It also documents the existing theoretical frameworks that scholars in various fields adopt, use, and criticize, which are mainly developed by Western countries. Finally, it proposes the necessity of the development of new theoretical approaches.

*Keywords: the Korean Wave, transnational culture, Hallyu, transnational proximity, K-pop, digital platforms*

The Korean Wave (Hallyu), symbolizing the rapid growth of Korea's cultural industries and the popularity of local popular culture around the globe since the mid-1990s, has been a global sensation in the early 21st century. As one of the most diverse and dynamic non-Western cultures, Hallyu, including digital Hallyu, signifies the continuing possibility for the growth of Korean culture on the global stage. Korea has become one of the major non-Western countries that meaningfully exports almost all of its cultural forms, including television programs, film, popular music (K-pop), and animation, as well as digital technologies, such as digital games and smartphones, to both the Global North and the Global South. The Korean Wave was initially popular in East Asia; however, some Korean cultural content has become viral in many parts of the globe since the early 2010s. From North America to Western Europe to Latin America, global audiences have begun to enjoy Korean cultural products and digital technologies.

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Date submitted: 2021-08-10

<sup>1</sup> This article was supported by the 2021 Korean Studies Grant Program of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2021-C-009) and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea/the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2019S1A3A2099973).

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In recent years, the Korean Wave has been evolving with developments in digital platforms and social media such as YouTube and Netflix, leading to a fundamental shift in the Korean Wave tradition. Unlike a previous decade when global audiences had to purchase CDs and VHSs, they now enjoy Korean cultural content on over-the-top (OTT) platforms and social media platforms. Whenever K-pop idols, such as BTS, Blackpink, Twice, and EXO, offer concerts, hundreds of thousands of fans gather together, either online or offline, to support their favorite musicians while enjoying K-pop performances. Global audiences also enjoy cultural content, including several Netflix originals on OTT platforms.

The current development of Hallyu studies misses two focal points: the theorization of the Korean Wave and the possibility of the construction of the Korean Wave as an academic entity. There is a vast collection of interdisciplinary work and research that has been conducted by scholars in such fields as media studies, Asian studies, Korean studies, film studies, sociology, and anthropology. Considering the surge of academic publications on Hallyu, there are only a few outcomes that develop new theoretical grounds. Much of the research on Hallyu thus far has emphasized its economic and managerial aspects or conducted the form of case studies in various areas, leaving a gap in the creation and advancement of new theoretical frameworks. In addition, there have been a limited number of attempts to build Hallyu as a major academic discipline. Therefore, it is crucial to consider new perspectives that drive the Korean Wave to the level of new grounds. Instead of simply chanting the growth of Hallyu, it is essential to carefully and critically reorient current Hallyu studies to develop further tangible theoretical frameworks, which will also be foregrounded for the development of institutional breakthroughs.

Admitting to the significance of the institutionalization of Hallyu studies, this Special Section aims to create a space for discussions surrounding the possibilities for the advancement of non-Western theories or new theoretical perspectives amid the continuing Korean Wave phenomenon. Given the enduring growth of Hallyu, we explore various relevant and vital issues: how Western views, assumptions, and arguments embedded in globalization, cultural studies, political economy, critical race theory, and gender studies can be challenged by non-Western perspectives; the integration of non-Western and Western perspectives in media and area studies; the uses and theories of global comparative research; the relevance of non-Western theories and models; and the successes and failures of theoretical cross-pollination.

As the foundational basis for the articles in this Special Section, this introductory article discusses the major characteristics of the Korean Wave. It also documents the existing theoretical frameworks that scholars in various fields adopt, use, and criticize, which are mainly developed by Western countries. The primary aim is to provide several vital dimensions and existing theoretical trends of Hallyu to help readers understand the nature of these emerging Hallyu studies as new development. We as a group seek to shed light on current debates centered around the Korean Wave and place them in a renewed perspective that furthers future transnational cultural research and education.

### **Major Characteristics of the Korean Wave in the Early 21st Century**

Hallyu studies over the past two decades has touched on various subjects and dimensions. As the Korean Wave itself is diverse in cultural genres, from television dramas to film to K-pop, many media scholars selected one particular cultural genre as a major study subject, while others focused on any specific

area in cultural production, including production, circulation, and consumption. Cultural policy related to the Korean Wave has been frequently analyzed as well. One common nature of these studies was their emphasis on transnationality as the Korean Wave implies the rapid penetration of Korean cultural content in the global markets (Hong, 2020; Jin, Yoon, & Min, 2021; Longenecker & Lee, 2018; Yoon, 2017). From marketing studies to audience studies, theoreticians must consider transnationalization as one of the most significant subjects to be interrogated. However, the theoretical foundations that media scholars use are mostly Western-based or U.S.-originated perspectives. There are no peculiar theoretical frameworks created and advanced by non-Western scholars based on local or regional perspectives.

In fact, several scholarly works (Jang, Nahm, & Kim, 2014; Malik, 2019) adopted cultural proximity, emphasizing the importance of geo-cultural proximity in international media consumption, to explain why East Asian countries liked Korean popular culture (Straubhaar, 1991, 2021). Here the geo-cultural similarity is identified as a primary factor that facilitates the flow of media texts within the same regions, which means that local audiences tend to prefer their own local or national cultural content and otherwise that of similar cultures and languages (Straubhaar, 2021). Employing cultural proximity, several scholars (Cho, 2011; Iwabuchi, 2001) point out that intra-Asian cultural flows within the same region have been made possible as cultural consumption has been driven by the desire for and feeling of cultural proximity among Asian audiences.

Other scholars who focused on audiences used transcultural affinity, which emphasizes the crucial role of fans, beyond national boundaries, but focuses on the differences in gender, ethnicity, and race (Han, 2017; Larkin, 2008). By focusing more on ongoing and flexible affinities between the text and the audience than on inherited aspects of cultural proximity, they argued that media texts offer cultural and emotional resources to audiences who are even far away from the geo-cultural contexts where the texts are produced (Annett, 2011; Chin & Morimoto, 2013). As Korean popular culture has expanded its presence in many parts of the globe beyond Asia, a handful of media scholars (Min, Jin, & Han, 2019; Yoon, 2017) focused on transcultural affinity to explain why global audiences enjoy Korean popular culture.

A few previous works appropriated hybridity as one of the significant theoretical norms in explaining the current growth of Korean popular culture. The concept of hybridity has been used to analyze global cultural flows as a synergetic process through which new cultural forms and meanings are generated (Jin et al., 2021). Echoing and appropriating postcolonial studies, hybridity is regarded as "a sign of empowerment or as a symptom of dominance" in critical media studies (Kraidy, 2005, p. 5). With reference to Hallyu, empirical analyses have explored how particular cultural texts of Hallyu engage with hybridity and what cultural meanings emerge in such hybridity (e.g., Ono & Kwon, 2013), which explored the complex interactions between global and local cultural powers. In particular, Kraidy (2005) proposed a critical version of the cultural hybridity thesis—what he named "critical transculturalism," referring to a framework that redefines cultural fusion (hybridity) as a social issue, through which structural power relations and agency are articulated with each other; thus, the framework pays due attention to "hybridity's ability and inability to empower social groups to have influence over the course of their lives" (p. 151).

Meanwhile, the Korean Wave has been identified as the symbol of contra-flows or counter-cultural flows—the cultural flow of popular culture from non-Western to Western countries. Therefore, the notion of contra-flows has often been used as the major theoretical framework to discuss whether the Korean Wave

not only resists American dominance (Schiller, 1976) but also penetrates the global cultural markets. While earlier discussions focused on the dominant influence of American popular culture, recent studies have increasingly addressed the diversification of cultural flows. We cannot deny the significant contribution of these theoretical frameworks mentioned earlier in tandem with the Korean Wave as many scholars, students, and policymakers learn a great deal of Hallyu from these previous works. They are well executed and presented. With particular reference to the rise of several non-Western media texts, Thussu (2006) emphasized the potential of the global circulation of media products emanating from non-Western countries. However, as Thussu (2006) himself suggested, the contra-flows should not be simply celebrated as the rise of counter-hegemonic or alternative culture; there are disparities and complexity in contra-flows, and more significantly, dominant cultural flows, such as Hollywood film industries, are still influential in many areas of the world. While the Korean Wave has become an alternative cultural force in the global cultural markets, it does not mean that American influence is waning; therefore, we need to be very careful in interpreting the cultural flows of Korean cultural content in the global cultural sphere.

The situation surrounding the media environment has rapidly changed, and therefore, existing theoretical norms cannot properly represent the current characteristics of the Korean Wave. Admitting to some critical changes, we identify the three most fundamental shifts that influence the recent surge of the Korean Wave: the increasing role of digital platforms, including social media and OTT service platforms, the growth of the digital Korean Wave, and the expansion of global audiences beyond fans. These major characteristics have greatly influenced the vicious circle of Korean cultural industries, meaning that they play a key role in shifting the major characteristics of the Korean Wave.

Digital platforms have influenced both cultural creators and consumers. On the one hand, social media platforms like YouTube have changed people's consumption habits. Until the introduction and use of social media platforms, again, people had to buy CDs and DVDs to enjoy popular culture. However, with social media, people don't need to purchase these materials, as they simply access them online. The material possession has been outdated. On the other hand, OTT platforms like Netflix have created a new form of cultural consumption. Previously, Korean cultural creators had to secure individual contracts in different countries, and therefore, the process took an extended period. However, with only one agreement with Netflix, they circulate their cultural content in more than 190 countries at the same time.

Digital platforms contribute to the viral circulation of Hallyu and its participatory culture. Hallyu industries have rigorously exploited digital technologies and thus developed a new revenue model of pop culture. Global fan audiences appropriated digital platforms in their process of translating, sharing, and interpreting Hallyu (Jin et al., 2021). The K-pop industry's strategic exploitation of YouTube contributes to the virality of BTS's music videos; however, perhaps more importantly, audiences' bottom-up experiences of transnationalism accelerated the virality of Hallyu. By engaging with Hallyu's digital mediascape, global audiences who otherwise would not have been intensively exposed to such non-Western media are integrated into transnational cultural flows and reimagine their possible lives (Jin et al., 2021).

The recent popularity of Korean popular culture and digital technologies asks media scholars to carefully contemplate this unprecedented phenomenon and critically advance new theoretical approaches. Although existing theories are very useful, they did not witness the current boon of the Korean Wave in the

global cultural sphere, nor experience the significant role of digital platforms. This timely discussion will shed light on our debates on the Korean Wave, symbolizing non-Western-based cultural programs and their global penetration, competing with the global forces.

### **Works Included in This Special Section<sup>2</sup>**

Dal Yong Jin discusses the reasons why global audiences enjoy Korean popular culture beyond cultural proximity and transcultural affinity. By identifying numerous major commonalities involved in Hallyu that resonate with global (fan-) audiences, in particular, global youth, he examines why global audiences consume locally created cultural content in their own countries, although they have no cultural linkages or affective affinities. The notion of transnational proximity introduced in this article is not based on linguistic and geographical cultural affinities but on the “universal uniqueness” that global audiences share. In other words, transnational proximity is based on universal sociocultural experiences, including social inequality, youth culture, beautiful storytelling, and fascinating choreography in the late-stage capitalist society. The article textually analyzes a few contents in K-pop, film, and dramas to determine whether transnational proximity works as a new frame in understanding the global popularity of the Korean Wave. Eventually, it articulates transnational proximity as a new theoretical framework in explaining the nascent flow of Korean popular culture in the global cultural sphere.

Irina Lyan investigates the continuing fascination with the outstanding success of Korean popular culture beyond national and regional borders, known as the Korean Wave or Hallyu, through the mediatized emotions of shock and surprise. More specifically, by studying emotions, she employs Erving Goffman’s seminal work on stigma and its management to understand the ambivalent reception of this so-called global success. For this purpose, she follows the media coverage of Korean popular culture by one of the mainstream media stages, *The New York Times*, measuring the emotional tone of its 112 items between 2002 and 2021. By identifying and analyzing three major categories: (1) enchantment with a cultural miracle, (2) fascination with fans, and (3) disenchantment due to global success but local failure—she questions the celebration of non-Western cultural globalization from the margins as, by definition, an ambivalent and partial project.

Jungmin Kwon argues that the K-pop space, which on one level appears to be homogeneously cishetpatriarchal, actually encompasses multiple configurations of gender and sexual identity. Nonetheless,

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<sup>2</sup> Originally, we also had an article by Jaeho Kang (2022). However, because of his personal academic reason, we decided to publish it as an independent article. Since it was initially included in the Special Section project, I believe that it is ideal to explain it briefly in this section. Kang’s (2022) article critically examines the theoretical issues arising from key debates on the transnationality of the Korean Wave within the fields of communications, media, and cultural studies. He believes that despite the significant contributions of transnationalism in comprehending the globalization of the Korean Wave, its analytical application necessitates a more nuanced viewpoint for investigating post-Hallyu 2.0. He attempts to present an analytical framework by reconstructing the issues of transnationality with particular reference to the transurban, translocal, and transmedia. As a result, he wants to prove the theoretical imperatives of the transnational approach toward Korean Wave studies in the third Hallyu era.

academic discussions about gender and sexuality in K-pop have been significantly weighted toward the idea of soft masculinity regarding male performers, thereby muffling other possible interpretations. This article suggests a new term, K(Q)ueerness. The term refers to the aesthetics, imaginations, practices, performances, and ideas of K-pop players and sublates binaristic identifications, including masculinity and femininity and heterosexual and homosexual—as well as Butler's (1993) distinction between performance and performativity—to embrace the multifarious expressions of gender and sexuality surrounding K-pop. This article aims to highlight diverse modalities of K(Q)ueerness and increase queer sensibility within the K-pop studies discipline and K-pop fan communities.

Ji Hoon Park, Kristin April Kim, and Yongsuk Lee's article investigates how Netflix has altered the practices of Korean drama production and the theoretical implications of this influence in the study of the Korean Wave by using the concept of platform imperialism. Despite the potentially positive contributions of Netflix in increasing the reputation of Korean dramas, Netflix's aggressive international content strategies pose a significant challenge to the Korean media industry. Because Netflix acquires all IP rights to Netflix Korean originals and the global streaming rights to numerous Korean dramas, neither production companies nor Korean television stations gain profits commensurate with the global popularity of Korean dramas. Netflix's strategic use of the Korean Wave and the aggressive acquisition of Korean dramas' IP rights as a marketing tool may ultimately work to consolidate the continued dominance of U.S.-based platforms.

Ji-Hyun Ahn focuses on K-pop as a music genre, a cultural product, and a system that has become increasingly transnational and hybridized. She believes that all aspects of K-pop have now transcended Korea's national borders, from production to consumption and from the performers' nationalities to their music and fashion styles. There have even been some intriguing experiments in creating K-pop groups composed mainly of non-Korean/Asian members, such as EXP Edition and CoCo Avenue. Interestingly, these groups have faced vigorous pushback from K-pop fan communities and generated heated controversy regarding the definition of K-pop. She, therefore, considers "what is Korean about the genre" from the perspective of the reactions of international K-pop fans to and discourse about those groups. More specifically, she analyzes the comments sections of each group's official music videos on YouTube and takes into account the online magazines and newspaper articles about the groups and the associated comments sections. In this way, she studies the boundaries of K-pop as it is being made and remade.

Kyong Yoon examines how overseas audiences are not only the end users of the Korean Wave but also translate it through their participatory practices, such as the production of user-generated content by analyzing interview data on global K-pop. Acknowledging that the translation of cultural content is always open to continued cross-cultural decoding by different stakeholders, including various audience members, he identifies two modes of cultural translation practices—producerly and semiotic translation—through which audiences participate in transnational cultural flows. Given that audiences are constantly involved in the cultural translation of media texts produced in a geoculturally distant context and through digital platforms, the article examines audiences' experiences of cultural translation and the reconfiguration of audiencehood in the era of transnational digital media.

Jinhee Park's article studies Korean television shows that have been prominent on Netflix. K-dramas have become a default search keyword—K-drama is considered a "genre" alongside action, anime, comedy, and romance. By analyzing two K-dramas streaming on Netflix, she theorizes how K-dramas adopt new media and technology both as subject and narrative devices by incorporating the pertinent characteristics of each technology into the narrative. She argues that Netflix K-dramas depict current information and communication technology and simulate the potential complications that arise when virtual gestures surpass or replace the real. This research theorizes how the enmeshment of the digital and physical space transforms spatial boundaries, televisuality, and screen. By doing so, she evaluates Hallyu content as the site of technological hybridity and televisual studies.

Finally, Taeyoung Kim examines the changing characteristics in defining the Koreanness of Korean popular culture (K-Culture). Based on interviews with cultural bureaucrats and television producers, he finds that creators emphasize universal values and transcultural characteristics in their cultural products to increase cultural exports. As the Korean Wave becomes an increasingly important agenda in policy contexts, state authorities redefine successful Korean content through Koreanness. Combined with other elements in the production and distribution of Korean cultural products that indicate the globalization of Korean cultural industries, the findings of interviews explain that the meaning of the prefix "K-" is defined by the global popularity of products and market logic.

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