

The Korean Wave: Retrospect and Prospect

Introduction

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The Korean Wave (*hallyu* in Korean) marks a historical point and celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2017. The Korean Wave primarily started with a few well-made television dramas that were popular in East Asia, and the local cultural industries have advanced several cultural forms, including K-pop and digital games, which have gradually penetrated global markets. This Special Section focuses on the origin of the Korean Wave, and the articles emphasize either theoretical challenges in *hallyu* studies or empirical cases of *hallyu* in various areas of the world. The primary purpose of this Special Section is to explore the history of the Korean Wave as a catalyst of regional and global change by analyzing the evolution, structure, mechanisms, and strategies employed by the music, television, film, digital games, and animation industries in the global markets and their shifting relationships with the state. As the foundational basis for the articles in this Special Section, our goal in this introduction is to provide several key dimensions of the Korean Wave to help readers understand the nature of the emerging local popular culture and digital technologies as a new trend.

Keywords: Korean Wave, transnational popular culture, cultural flows, hallyu, globalization, digital technologies

The Korean Wave, symbolizing the rapid growth of Korea's cultural industries and their exports of cultural products in Asia mainly since 1997, marks a historical point and celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2017. When Korean culture started to penetrate several Asian countries in the late 1990s, it was considered a fad by some Asian audiences because Korea had never developed popular culture that was well received in other countries. However, since then, Korea has continued to develop several forms of popular culture that have penetrated other parts of the world.

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The Korean Wave (*hallyu* in Korean) primarily started with a few well-made television dramas that were popular in East Asia, and the local cultural industries have advanced several cultural forms, including popular music (K-pop), animation, and digital games, which have gradually penetrated global markets. The interest in Korean popular culture and digital media has triggered the growth of several relevant areas, such as tourism, Korean cuisine, and Korean language. Due to the increasing role of the Korean Wave for the national economy and culture, the Korean government has substantially changed its cultural policy, in particular to capitalize on the Korean Wave as a means of soft power to enhance the national image.

Admitting to the explosion of the Korean Wave in many fields, this Special Section focuses on the origin of the Korean Wave, which is the rapid growth of local popular culture on the global scene. The articles emphasize either theoretical challenges in *hallyu* studies or empirical cases of *hallyu* in various areas of the world. The primary purpose of this Special Section is to explore the history of the Korean Wave as a catalyst of regional and global change by analyzing the evolution, structure, mechanisms, and strategies employed by the music, television, film, digital games, and animation industries in the global markets and their shifting relationships with the state. It also provides an empirically plausible framework to examine their operations.

For the past decade or so, we have witnessed a set of slow but steady changes in studies of the Korean Wave. Many scholars in the early stages had been interested in representational and ideological aspects of culture and the media text and on the content of cultural products. Some scholars began to shift their attention to the bigger picture, including cultural policy and industry. At the same time, research began to extend beyond case studies covering specific areas in the world by building certain conceptual and theoretical frameworks and attempting to explain the Korean Wave as a hybrid and transnational phenomenon. Unlike previous works, which focused almost exclusively on either the representational and ideological aspects of culture and the media text and on the content of cultural products or the cultural market and industry, we look at the wider picture—the way the massive production and export of cultural commodities transform Korea's cultural market, the way the cultural industries change government policies toward their operations, and their consequential impact on the cultural lives of the people. The articles also discuss the distinctive features of different cultural forms, highlighting the specificity of cultural institutions, cultural products, fan culture, and the nature of work.

After providing a retrospective on the growth of *hallyu*, we collectively develop new perspectives, because it is time to advance non-Western theories and new theoretical perspectives. We are certain that this collection of articles will contribute to a better understanding of the characteristics of the new Korean Wave currently undergoing reorganization in the Korean cultural industries and the global cultural markets. Throughout the discussions, we hope to shed light on current developments and place them in a perspective that has relevance for future transnational cultural flows and productions. In other words, we believe that this Special Section will put new ideas on the agenda, and it will be global in terms of readership.

As the foundational basis for the articles in this Special Section, this introduction discusses the histories and major characteristics of the Korean Wave. Our goal here is to provide several key dimensions of the Korean Wave to help readers understand the nature of the emerging local popular culture and digital technologies as a new trend.

Major Characteristics of the Korean Wave in the 21st Century

Cultural flows have been some of the most significant subjects in media and communication studies since American films started to penetrate other countries in the early 20th century. Due to the significant role of popular culture in people's daily activities around the world, many countries—from the United States and the United Kingdom to a few non-Western countries such as Mexico and Brazil—have developed their cultural products and exported them to other countries. As is well chronicled (Schiller, 1971), the global cultural flow had been identified as a one-way flow, from the United States to other countries. However, since the early 1990s, several non-Western countries, such as Mexico, Brazil, and India, have developed their popular cultures and exported them to other countries, which has been seen as an indication of the possibility of contracultural flow (Thussu, 2006). Korea has uniquely added one more case to the argument of contracultural flow due in large part to the rapid growth of its cultural products in global markets. The Korean case is especially interesting because the Korean Wave is welcomed by countries around the world—from East to West and from developing to developed nations—yet its popularity was limited to neighboring East Asia during its early stage. The sudden growth of Korea's popular culture has been significant, potentially indicating the emergence of local popular culture, and, therefore, its global penetration, which might change the contours of the global cultural markets.

In fact, the rapid growth of Korean popular culture and digital media technologies in global markets draws attention to the ways in which "the intensifying scale and speed of the transnational flows of people, capital, and media has disregarded, though not entirely, the efficacy of demarcated national boundaries and ideologies" (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 52) As a reflection of the Korean Wave phenomenon, several previous works have emphasized two distinctive perspectives: the celebratory achievement of local popular culture in the Asian markets and mutual interactions between the local and global forces through collaborations. Several scholars (Dater & Seo, 2004; Jung, 2011; Shim, 2008) argue that contraflow as a form of transnationalism has happened in Korea since local popular culture engages with Western popular culture.

However, it is important to understand that the transnational process is not politically, economically, culturally, and technologically equal. The transnationalization of local popular culture cannot be simply used to indicate international collaboration, nor contracultural flow (Higbee & Lim, 2010). In the transnational cultural studies as exemplified in the Korean Wave, we should "interrogate how culture-making activities negotiate with the national on all levels, from cultural policy to financial sources, from multiculturalism of difference to how it reconfigures the nation's image of itself, as well as the crucial role of transnational forces" (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p. 18). Therefore, we must "scrutinize the tensions between the national and transnational" (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p. 18), which will provide a better perspective for theorizing local-based transnational popular culture in global markets.

The Korean Wave is most distinguishable from other local-based transnational popular cultures such as in Mexico and Brazil, because it has developed several forms of popular culture and digital technologies at the same time and exported them to both Asian countries and Western countries. Japan has developed various forms of popular culture—including manga, animation, and console games—and exported them to many regions. As Mia Consalvo (2006) points out, Japan indeed advanced console games and has become a global leader in the game market. Interestingly, Japan is arguably part of the

West due to its advanced economy and technologies, as Stuart Hall (1996) argued. Korea is, thus, the only country to actualize both the growth of domestic cultural industries and the export of several cultural products and digital technologies. It is, therefore, crucial to understand the Korean Wave phenomenon through its own key dimensions, including the growth of the Korean Wave as transcultural popular culture and digital technology developed by a local force.

The popularity of Korean culture in terms of export has been increasing. The export of Korean cultural products between 1998 and 2015 increased by 21.4 times, from U.S.\$189 million in 1998 to U.S.\$4 billion in 2014 (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2015). The term *hallyu* was first used by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Korea in 1999, when it produced a music CD to improve public relations by bringing Korean pop music to China. The CD's title in English was *Korean Pop Music*, while its Chinese version was *Hallyu—Song From Korea*. The term gained widespread popularity as Chinese newspapers represented the success of Korean singers in China as *hallyu*. The Korean Wave became real with a few television programs, and in the late 1990s, two television dramas, *What Is Love All About* (1997) and *Stars in My Heart* (1997), became popular in East and Southeast Asia. Korean broadcasters intensified their efforts to export several programs, such as *Autumn Fairy Tale* (2000) and *Winter Sonata* (2002) as well as *Dae Jang Geum* (2003), all of which became huge hits among Asian audiences in Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, and Hong Kong between 2002 and 2006 (Hanaki, Singhal, Han, Kim, & Chitnis, 2007). The acceptance of Korean cultural products in Asia in the early 21st century has been strengthened by local films and popular music. Since 2001, Korea has seen an increase in its export of domestic films, such as *Silmido* (2003), *Tae Guk Gi: The Brotherhood of War* (2004), *King and the Crown* (2005), and *The Host* (2007). However, until this stage, the Korean Wave was mainly an inter-Asian cultural phenomenon, because with few exceptions, local popular culture could not penetrate Western markets, including North America and Western Europe. At its initial stage, then, the Korean Wave could not be a strong example of contracultural flow, but rather represented an inter-Asian cultural flow.

Since the late 2000s, the Korean cultural industries have developed new forms of culture, including both online gaming and music, and they have reached as far as the United States, Chile, and France. The Korean online game industry has grown swiftly, and online gaming is the country's most significant cultural trade product. When the Korean game industry accounted for 67.2% of the exports of the country's cultural product in 2014, many Western countries enjoyed Korea's online games (Jin, 2010; Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2015), as did Asian countries, including China (Yoon & Cheon, 2014). Korean popular music has become one of the most important cultural forms in recent years. As Psy's "Gangnam Style" proved, K-pop has become a new growth engine driving *hallyu*, with newly decorated idol group musicians (e.g., Big Bang, Girl's Generation, JYJ, and BTS) becoming popular in both Asian and Western countries in the 2010s.

Several significant dimensions are driving the growth of local popular culture in the global markets. The most significant part of the nascent *hallyu* trend is the evolution of social media and its influence in the realm of local cultural products, because fans around the world, including North America, heavily access social media to enjoy K-pop, digital games, and films (Jin, 2016; Lee & Nornes, 2015). With K-pop, which is globally popular primarily due to songs becoming YouTube sensations, social media have shifted the notion of global cultural flows of local popular culture. Korea-based smartphones and

relevant applications, including Kakao Talk and Line, have also become important components of *hallyu*. The cultural markets for Korea have consequently changed. While Asia has been the largest cultural market for the Korean cultural industries, other parts of the world, including North America, Western Europe, and Latin America, have gradually admitted Korean popular culture—both its audiovisual products and digital technologies. Likewise, the current Korean Wave has seen major changes to its fan base in Asian and global markets.

As the Korean Wave has become a global phenomenon, several academic disciplines, including media studies, Korean studies, Asian studies, and sociology, are keenly aware of the significance of Korean popular culture as non-Western-driven cultural flows. As the main characteristics of the Korean Wave have changed, academic discourses on *hallyu* have proliferated (Jin, 2016; Y. Kim, 2013; Kim & Choe, 2014; Lee & Nornes, 2015). Several Asian countries, such as China and Japan, also pay close attention to the Korean Wave, partially because they plan to use their own popular culture and digital technologies as part of national soft power.

With the growth of local popular culture as shown in the current *hallyu* phenomenon, we expect in the near future that non-Western perspectives will challenge central assumptions and arguments developed by Western perspectives. In other words, after historicizing the contemporary Korean Wave, we now need to discuss the integration of Western and non-Western perspectives in media and Asian studies, the uses of theories of global comparative research, the relevance of non-Western theories and models, and successful and failed efforts at theoretical cross-pollination.

Some good reasons exist for a new and innovative perspective on the Korean Wave. First, in the past two decades there have been a few significant macro-level political economic developments that scholars need to address. These include the consolidation of the media conglomerate as the prototypical firm in the cultural industries, concentration and competition in cultural and media markets, the emergence of new sites of cultural production, and the responses of established players to the opportunities and threats of new media technologies. Second, examining the meaning of the rise of Korea's cultural production and consumption centers for the world's media structure is significant for analyzing the relations between globalization and popular culture and digital technologies. Third, by emphasizing the impacts of Korea's popular culture and digital culture in both Western (e.g., North America) and non-Western countries (e.g., Latin America and Asia), this project analyzes the myriad ways in which Korean popular culture and digital technologies have constructed global fan culture.

Most of all, it is important to examine whether Korea will continue to become one of the most significant local-based transnational forces in the realm of global culture, and therefore, we have to carefully historicize and analyze the new Korean Wave, which will provide meaningful resources to challenge, develop, or create new perspectives in the near future.

Works Included in This Special Section

Ben Han examines the transnational popularity of K-pop in Latin America. The article argues that K-pop, as a subculture that transforms into transcultural fandom via digital mediation, further results in its

accommodation into Latin American mass culture. The article also engages in a critical analysis of K-pop fan activism in Latin America to explore the transcultural dynamics of K-pop fandom. In doing so, the article provides a more holistic approach to the study of the Korean Wave in Latin America within the different "scapes" of globalization. Han argues that K-pop is a uniquely established youth subculture that transforms into transcultural fandom via digital mediation, eventually resulting in its accommodation into Latin American popular culture through legitimate digital platforms to reach transnational status. To understand the complexities of K-pop as a transcultural fandom in Latin America, Han employs a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach. Accordingly, he draws on interviews, surveys, and blogs of fan activism to engage in a critical analysis of K-pop fandom in Latin America.

David C. Oh's article reveals that White fans produce YouTube reaction texts that demonstrate limited hybridity, which is open to the symbolic meanings of K-pop texts and the resistive practice demonstrated in deep commitments to non-White music and performers, but that is constrained by White racial logics that support postracism and gendered logics of their local spaces. Oh focuses on the most popular YouTubers who primarily upload K-pop fan reaction videos. Of the 123 English-speaking YouTubers, he sampled White individuals and groups. To focus the analysis, he sampled 8 music video reactions and analyzed 40 reaction videos. For the analysis, Oh used an audience reception framework in cultural studies. He also understood that the audience's reception is complicated by the production of their own texts and the cultivation of their own audiences (Jenkins, 2003). They not only are fans of K-pop, but develop their own fans through the production of K-pop intertexts. Studying the reaction videos raised unique challenges because they blur audience reception and textual representation.

Jae-Seon Jeong, Seul-Hi Lee, and Sang-Gil Lee's article investigates how *hallyu* is appropriated and experienced by Indonesian fans in their daily lives. They carried out interviews in 2013 with 12 Indonesian people who had already participated in 2006 as interviewees in their qualitative research on the Indonesian reception of the Korean television drama *Dae Jang Geum*. The article first examines the historical development of the *hallyu* phenomenon in Indonesia and its changing aspects in parallel with the country's rapidly digitalized mediascape. The authors then consider the salient features of the appropriation of Korean pop culture by the research participants and investigate their hybrid cultural resources and experiences. They especially focus on how the interviewees construct and use a certain imaginary concept of "Koreanness" as a consequence of negotiation in relation to symbolic power. They argue that *hallyu* can be conceptualized as a complex cultural-economic process through which the symbolic power of the Korean state is exercised and imposed on its transnational audience. This implies that *hallyu* helps the Korean state to augment and accumulate national symbolic capital, assigning a certain kind of prestige, authority, and glamour to Korea or the so-called Koreanness in the audience's consciousness and imagination.

Michelle Cho's article examines television as a crucial medium for shaping the Korean public's response to the success of *hallyu* in ubiquitous news reports, variety shows, and celebrity interview programs. Many K-pop idols have been cast in serial narrative television shows that fictionalize *hallyu* creative industries. These conspicuously metatextual shows domesticate transnational idol pop celebrities by contributing layers of televisual intimacy to their star personae and by seeming to expose the inner workings of the entertainment industries. The essay focuses on two notable examples, *Dream High* (2011,

KBS2) and *Answer Me 1997* (2012, tvN), to consider the implications of this proliferation of popular narratives about media production and reception on South Korean television. Cho argues that the intertextual presentation of K-pop on Korean television negotiates a complex relationship between popular culture and public culture in South Korea. To support this claim, she integrates the hermeneutic activity of close reading with a discussion of industry structures and practices. Cho's analysis of the relation between broadcast television in Korea and the globalizing project of *hallyu* endeavors to foreground broadcast television as an arena of state control and public morality *as well as* an engine of transnational flows of cultural commodities.

Younghan Cho and Hongrui Zhu examine the recent popularity of Korean television shows, their format contracts, and various remakes in China. The article develops a theoretical frame referred to as the inter-Asian perspective. It suggests reframing the television format phenomenon between Korea and China as cultural assemblages and as an inter-Asian wave. With a focus on the format phenomenon between Korea and China, the study provides a nuanced theoretical frame for explicating recurring and reciprocal pop flows in the region. While Western program formats such as quiz shows attained unprecedented success in several Asian countries, considerable development in Asian television programs was also made both by the adoption of foreign program formats into local settings and by the invention of unique new programs. Asian media studies considers "not just the West-East trade flow, but the equally important East-East and East-West dynamics of television program trade" (Keane, Fung, & Moran, 2007, p. 4). In so doing, Asian media studies deploys a hybrid thesis for exploring the issues of adopting and localizing global (Western) formats to local customs, cultural codes, and regional tastes.

Kyong Yoon's article explores how Canadian-based fan audiences engage with Korean pop music and how they negotiate their sense of identities. Drawing on in-depth interviews with young K-pop fans in three Canadian regions, the study addresses how transnational media flows are integrated with the audience's realities of, and desires for, cultural, spatial, and personal mobilities. By exploring how local fans experience (im)mobilities in the global flow of the Korean Wave, the study suggests the importance of rethinking transnational media phenomena and discourses from the lived culture of local audiences, who are increasingly transnational and thus may oscillate between different senses of belonging. The study focuses on the way in which fan audiences' subject positions and identity work are articulated with the mobility of transnational media in particular local contexts. It also explores how Asian Canadian fans' cultural affinities with K-pop may not be free from neoliberal forces exercised through a particular mode of affect.

Finally, Gooyong Kim examines the sociocultural implications of a K-pop idol group, Girls' Generation (SNSD), and the group's debut on *Late Show with David Letterman*. Kim discusses how the debut warrants a critical examination of K-pop's global popularity. Investigating how the current literature on K-pop's success focuses on cultural hybridity, the article maintains that SNSD's debut clarifies how K-pop's hybridity does not mean dialectical interactions between American form and Korean content. Furthermore, the article argues that cultural hegemony, as a constitutive result of sociohistorical and politico-economic arrangements, provides a better heuristic tool, and K-pop should be understood as a part of the hegemony of American pop. Kim also examines how the dominant K-pop (*hallyu* in general) scholarship's hybridity discourse supports a cultural logic of transnational capitalism, which ignores how its

hybridity is produced in a specific political economic structure of cultural production. To this end, by analyzing SNSD's successful music videos "Gee" and "The Boys," Kim emphasizes that one should understand K-pop's cultural hybridity in terms of both its intrinsic nature in its content and, more importantly, within the structural contexts of Korea's culture industry.

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