

*On This Topic*



# Transnationality of Popular Culture in the Korean Wave

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## Introduction

Korean popular culture and its digital technologies are everywhere. From Japan and China in East Asia, the U.S. and Canada in North America, and to Chile, Argentina, and Brazil in Latin America, many global fans currently enjoy Korean television dramas, films, popular music (K-pop), and digital games. Once small and peripheral, Korea has now emerged as one of the most significant non-Western hubs for the production and circulation of transnational popular culture and digital technologies. Taking on non-Western local forms, Korean cultural and digital creations have rapidly become global sensations, as is especially illustrated by the music group BTS's worldwide success towards the end of the 2010s and the early 2020s. Korea's export of its domestic cultural goods and services to foreign countries has increased exponentially by as much as 44.1 times, from US\$188.9 million in 1998 to US\$8.3 billion by 2018 (KOCCA 2019).

Over the past 20 years, the major characteristics of Hallyu have

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fundamentally changed. While the early stage of Hallyu starting in 1997 was based on television dramas and films circulated within Asia, the recent Korean Wave beginning in the late 2000s has expanded towards fans in North America, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. Particularly notable are K-pop idols, webtoons, and digital games that have attracted many Westerners in their teens and twenties, encompassing powerful consumers and users for Korea's local popular culture. This is a phenomenon barely presented in the first stage of Hallyu, which targeted Asia as its largest market (Jin 2016; Lee and Yi 2020). The global circulation and consumption of Hallyu has been particularly influenced by the use of social media by youth all over the world. Via social media and digital platforms such as smartphones, young fans encounter and engage with the cultural content developed in Korea; no longer are these experiences limited to the television or living room. The social media-saturated aspect of Hallyu has thus become a symbol of the contra-flow of locally produced popular culture towards global markets.

The recent shifts of Hallyu, known as the new Korean Wave (Jin 2016) or Hallyu 2.0 (Lee et al 2015), have led media scholars, cultural creators, and international fans to understand the historical evolution of the Korean Wave in light of its new characteristics, including the acknowledgement of its exported cultural commodities, technological developments, the transnationality of several cultural content, the role of social media/digital platforms, and most importantly, its reception by global fans. These changes also demand the contemplation of the role of storytelling in local popular culture. Korean film directors, webtoonists, music creators, and K-pop idol groups advance these innovative forms of storytelling by highlighting culturally hybridized content. The articles in this special issue collectively attempt to investigate the transnationality of Hallyu in various socio-economic and cultural contexts. By doing so, they also explore whether non-Western perspectives within the global cultural flow challenge the central assumptions and arguments developed and driven by Western ideas and values.

## **Transnationality in Korean Popular Culture and Digital Technologies**

Transnationality has become one of the principal theoretical frameworks for analyzing the flows of people, capital, technology, and culture beyond their national boundaries in the 21st century, with the Korean Wave being one of the exemplary singularities. Transnationalization mainly refers to “a condition by which people, commodities, and ideas cross national boundaries and are not identified with a single place of origin” (Watson 1997, 11), and the Korean Wave has become one of the nascent transnational popular cultures with global dissemination. In this era of globalization, cultural content and digital technologies acutely actualize transnationalization, while the cultural industries target global consumers rather than just national audiences. As is well documented by Iwabuchi (2008), the systems of power and dominance in the multidirectional flow of popular culture have maintained the supposed supremacy of Western players, with Hollywood serving as the most recognizable factor in the global markets. As Thussu (2006) also points out, popular culture used to flow from a handful of Western countries (in particular the U.S.) to non-Western nations. But the contour of these flows has changed alongside the growth of non-Western culture.

Hallyu’s significance lies in its ability to alter the direction of traditional cultural flows. Since the early 1990s, several countries, including Mexico, Brazil, India, Japan, and more recently Korea, have developed their local cultures by introducing them to other regions. The massive surge in popularity of wide-reaching Korean cultural content challenges the norms of global status-quos (Swan 2018). Along with the recent surge in enthusiasm for Hallyu in many parts of the world, Korea has actualized this counter-cultural flow (Thussu 2006), allowing for Korean popular culture and digital technologies to rapidly expand through diverse platforms and forms, including social media and transnational exports.

With the flow of K-pop into North America and Europe, Western fans now enjoy popular music originating in Korea. This development was instigated especially by the debut of BTS—a seven-member boy band—on the world stage during the American Music Awards in 2017 and

the successful completion of their global tour, including concerts in the United States, United Kingdom, and France in 2019. Since 2017, American audiences have also been exposed to several forms of Korean television programs. The American drama *The Good Doctor* borrows from the Korean drama of the same title (*Gut dakteo*) that began in 2013, while *Better Late Than Never* and *The Masked Singer* are formatted after the Korean drama and reality show *Grandpas Over Flowers* (*Kkotboda halbae*; 2013–2018) and *The King of the Masked Singer* (*Bokmyeongawang*; 2015–present), respectively. There are also many avid players of Korean-made online and mobile games, while artists around the world adapt Korean webtoons for their films and television dramas.

Utilizing their local experiences, Korean cultural producers have certainly developed their status as key players in the global markets while demonstrating their potential to advance transnational culture. Global interconnectivity in contemporary society is multidimensional in such a way that it enables the enrichment of global culture through a variety of local content (Jin 2019). As several scholars argue (Cho 2005; Swan 2018), up until recently, cultural exchanges between West and East have not been equitable, with the West dominating; however, the new Korean Wave surely marks a global shift in the transnational flow of culture and digital technologies.

Of course, this kind of development does not necessarily translate into an increasing role for local culture. Yet it is also undeniable that the rapid growth of local cultural products in the global markets has sparked serious discussion on the possibility of transnationalism as driven by local forces. At the same time, it should also be pointed out that the future of transnationality remains controversial due to the success of Korean cultural content and digital technologies being limited to fandoms, while mainstream audiences (with a few exceptions) remain out of reach. Although Korea has increased its cultural penetration of Western markets, a vast gap exists between regional penetration and global presence, suggesting that local-based transnationality has not yet fully arrived (Jin 2016).

Another major concern related to the discourse of transnationality is that only a few non-Western countries such as Brazil, India, and Korea

have become distinct players on the global scale, while the majority of non-Western countries still cannot develop their own unique local cultures for global markets. The Korean Wave, therefore, is an exception rather than a norm in the transnationalization of local popular culture. Furthermore, it is unclear whether in the foreseeable future the Korean Wave will go beyond the niche of fandom, resulting in its enjoyment by general audiences around the globe.

### Shifts in the Cultural Production and Consumption of Hallyu

Transnationalization has changed the contours of the cultural production and consumption of Korean popular culture around the globe over the past two decades mainly due to these distinct factors: the flow of non-physical cultural content in the forms of format and remake, the emphasis on (transmedia) storytelling, and the popularity of social media as the new consumerist instrument of local popular culture. These elements gradually stimulate new forms of cultural flow.

To begin with, the flow of non-material forms of culture has been on the rise. In the early stage of Hallyu, corporations in the cultural industries produced and exported canned or finished content, selling television dramas and films as physical VHS and DVD forms or sending out K-pop on CDs. Producers and distributors in the new Korean Wave era have shifted their way of exporting culture. Specifically, the flow of cultural products has changed as their creators disseminate the contents through various forms, including television format, film remakes, and K-pop on social media. Transnationality in the Korean Wave has fundamentally shifted from the export of physical goods to the communality of non-physical materials. A typical example of this change is the Korean television format that is exported to other countries as a license to remake a copyrighted program. By definition, *television format* refers to a “total body of knowledge systematically and consciously assembled to facilitate the future adaptation under license of the program” (Moran and Malbon 2006, 7). Remakes concern films which use an earlier movie as their major source material. In

the 2010s, Korean cultural industries have focused on exporting the rights to television formats and film remakes rather than selling finished materials, as evidenced by the aforementioned *The Masked Singer* and *The Good Doctor*. Since cultural creators in many countries produce similar television programs and films by means of adaptations or remakes, the influence of these new forms of cultural flows is significant. A good case is the 2014 Korean film, *Miss Granny* (*Susanghan geunyeo*), which has been remade in roughly eight countries, including Japan, China, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

Secondly, storytelling has become one prominent factor in the global popularity of Korean culture in recent years. As the surge of local popular music (K-pop) and the webtoon goes to show, powerful storytelling plays a vital role in developing local culture and augmenting the global popularity of Korean cultural content. As McLaren and Jin (2020) point out in this special issue, BTS's promotion on the world stage is made possible in part by their effective integration of storytelling in the creation of their music. RM (Rap Monster) of BTS has related how in his high school years, when he was aspiring to become a K-pop singer, he composed (rap) lyrics on scrap pieces of paper and hid them between his school workbooks, and later used those stories to make songs (*South China Morning Post* 2018). With the growing popularity of webtoons, transmedia storytelling has especially offered itself as a new source for cultural production as the flow of cultural content across various media platforms (Jenkins 2006). Due to webtoon's main characteristics, including its diverse genres and themes that appeal to readers with varying tastes (Sohn 2014; Hwang 2018), many creators heavily rely on these tropes and archetypes as storytelling sources for films, television dramas, and games. As Jeong's article (2020) in this special issue argues, webtoon has emerged as one of the latest cultural products to be exported, not only because of its popularity in its own right, but its potential for transmedia storytelling.

Lastly, social media and digital platforms have clearly changed the transnationality of the Korean Wave. Social media has made a pivotal contribution towards disseminating Korean cultural content in global markets, notably exemplified by BTS's international surge in popularity as supported by ARMY—Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth—a BTS fan

base that thrives on social media. Transnational cultural products created in non-Western countries, such as Korea, benefit from the emergence of these various social media platforms, meaning that global fans tend to rely on YouTube, Viki, and Facebook as the most efficient way of accessing and enjoying locally produced popular culture (Jin and Yoon 2016). During the first-ever ASEAN-ROK Culture Innovation Summit held in Busan (Korea's second-largest city) in November 2019, Bang Si-Hyuk, the founder and CEO of Big Hit Entertainment that houses BTS, stated, "Global audiences have become fanatical about the music videos where Korean singers sing in Korean language and dance. Globally, the lyrics, dialogues, and messages of BTS are translated and shared worldwide, which have made BTS into The Beatles of the YouTube generation and a hero at the periphery. Conversely, the success of BTS has proved the existence and value of YouTube technology [sic]" (Benjamin 2019). Tech-savvy youth around the world have shifted their habits of consuming popular culture by relying on social media and multidimensional digital platforms, implying the rise of social media as one of the most significant breakthroughs in both the dissemination and the consumption of popular culture (Swan 2018).

The Korean Wave, backed by new forms of cultural flow and social media, is continually expanding. Its transnational power is not yet fully realized, but its enormous potential signifies its impact from locally grounded popular culture and early 21st-century digital technologies. Undoubtedly, the asymmetrical and unbalanced power dynamics between the West and East has not yet disappeared. With the increasing role of Western-created digital platforms such as Netflix, the flow of cultural content from Western to non-Western countries still intensifies. Nonetheless, what should be kept in mind are the new opportunities Hallyu presents to challenge and change the status-quo, even if one step at a time.

### **Summaries of Papers: A Roadmap to the Articles**

The articles in this special issue present historical, political, and cultural analyses to advance our understanding of the dramatic transnationalization

of the Korean Wave in the wake of globalization. The articles discuss a variety of features of Hallyu, underlining the specificity of K-pop, webtoons, films, and migrations. First, Jieun Lee and Hyangsoon Yi examine female artists in K-pop, focusing on the sense of strong womanhood that is presented in their works. In search of the intersections between the Hallyu phenomenon and feminism, this article investigates K-pop women singers' media presentations and performances as crucial to understanding women's positionality within contemporary Korean society. The authors critique the figure of *ssen-unni* (strong sister), who evokes a feeling of empowerment in young female fans. Examining how the diverse and often contradictory messages of women's liberation and freedom have been produced, disseminated, and consumed, supported by the evolving image of the *ssen-unni* before and after Hallyu, the authors claim that the contemporary representations of femininity by women performers in K-pop reveal not only the limitations, but also, the potentials of change for the cultural topography of Korean society.

Dal Yong Jin's article focuses on K-pop's global reception. Due to the close but complicated relationship between the Japanese and Korean music industries, J-pop and K-pop have several important commonalities and differences. By analyzing the transformation of K-pop in tandem with Japanese influences, through a convergence between political economies and the historical approaches of textual analysis, this article identifies several key elements that contributed towards the growth of K-pop. The article does not attempt to determine the main reasons for the success of K-pop and/or the failure of J-pop in the global markets. Instead, it compares several major features of distinction, including their idol production systems, copyright issues, and hybridity of the two popular music genres, thereby mapping out J-pop's influences on the remnants in the K-pop sphere, as well as the ways in which K-pop serves as J-pop's model. Jin's writing aims at investigating the contemporary cultural stages and transitions of popular music in Korea occurring within the unfolding logic of the cultural globalization known as hybridization.

Jaehyeon Jeong then explores the social, global, and technological conjuncture exemplified by the globalization processes of Korean webtoons

(portmanteau of Web and cartoon). Based on twelve interviews with a variety of actors working within the Korean webtoon industry, including publishers, agencies, and platform providers, this article discusses the diverse global and local factors that both emphasize and complicate transnational media flows in the new media environment. The author explains the driving forces of Korean webtoons' global expansion in terms of the small-scale domestic market, the growth of smartphone dependence, the emergence of a paid service model, and the rise of China's pan-entertainment strategy. Focusing on the mutually constitutive relations between global and local, this article also posits Korean webtoons' overseas expansion as an example of the disjunctive globalization process and decentralized transnational cultural power.

Courtney McLaren and Dal Yong Jin examine BTS's prominence as it continues to raise questions about transnational and transcultural flows in an ever-evolving age of digital technology and social media. The role of such technology and media strategies both inside and outside the context of industries and fandoms has been extensively explored in Hallyu literature. Thus, this paper seeks to add to the extensive body of literature by examining the BTS phenomenon as a product of transnational and transcultural hybridization as mediated by the use of digital platforms and technologies within the Korean entertainment industry, idols, and fan bases. Of particular importance in this article is the transcultural media flow of meaning and affect, which is underexamined in both Hallyu studies and examinations of transnational fandoms. This article first outlines the theory of hybridization within the context of the Korean Wave and conducts a brief historical analysis of Western influences that contribute to K-pop's hybrid categorization. It then explores the uses of social media and digital platforms by the Korean entertainment industry and participatory fandom in the distribution and consumption of K-pop products. Finally, it examines BTS within the context of these hybrid industry practices and strategies in order to identify the ways in which social media plays a part in the global popularity of BTS, suggesting that BTS's appeal lies not only in the global circulation of transnational content across borders, but also in the flow of meaning, experience, and affective relationships as constructed by BTS and

their fans worldwide.

Next, Moonyoung Chung and Heebon Park's paper offers an intermedial and intercultural reading of *The Handmaiden* (2016), Park Chan-wook's film adaptation of Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002). Park's transcultural screen adaptation, representative of a postcolonial hybridizing trend in Hallyu, transfers Waters' Victorian setting to colonial Korea during the 1930s. By doing this, the film expands the novel's focus on the issues of class and gender to those of race, equality, and power. Relocating the Victorian manor house to a pro-Japanese mansion of colonial aesthetics and fetishes, Park prompts his female protagonists to decolonize its psychic and social structures in the process of becoming-maids that effectively decouples the predominant power/class relationships in its closed environment. Originally pawns in their masters' sexual, mercenary, and autocratic games, the two heroines of the film come to subvert the male pornographic hierarchy of class, race, and power inside the colonial milieu by reducing these gaps between them and performing the roles of maids of decolonization. With their successful performance as equal participants in a satiric, self-reflexive pastiche of the Hollywood aesthetic, Park expertly balances the dynamics of hybridity and the politics of gender, class, and colonialism while offering a hybrid *third* space in which to explore the ending of the film as the two women sail to Shanghai. *The Handmaiden* demonstrates the dynamic force of Hallyu through its symbolic decolonization of Western cultural hegemony, its depiction of global and personal power shifts, and its new vision as suggested by this hybrid space.

Finally, Kyong Yoon analyzes the role and meanings of diasporic audiences in the transnational flows of Korean media and popular culture. Drawing on in-depth interviews, the study examines how Hallyu actively affects and is affected by young Korean diasporic audiences in Canada. Growing up, the young interviewees were exposed to Korean media and popular culture through their immigrant families. From these experiences, they gradually became selective and critical audiences of the Hallyu phenomenon, reexamining and negotiating their identities and socialities by consuming this hybrid and transnational cultural content.

The articles in this issue confirm that transnationality embedded in

the Korean Wave presents a set of intriguing and challenging issues to be fully investigated in conjunction with the flow of cultural products. While the Korean cultural industries are still operated under a power structure and hierarchies dominated by global forces, they have managed to develop global outreach. The transnationalization process is no longer a one-way process. Rather, as the articles in this special issue elucidate, Korea has in unprecedented ways transformed its status into that of a non-Western-based cultural center. While this remarkable phenomenon does not guarantee the independent operation of local culture, especially amidst the powerful players of the established global markets and their status quos, it nonetheless encourages further research of the Korean Wave as a recognizable force of both domestic and international popular culture. Through the hybridization process, Hallyu's significance transnationalizes itself independently around the crux of Western culture.

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