

# Expanding Transnational Dialogue in Asia through Hallyu

**Jooyeon Rhee, Nissim Otmazgin**

The transnational dissemination and consumption of contemporary Korean culture, better known as Hallyu, has encouraged a wave of academic writing from various disciplines, forming one of the major new developments in the field of Korean studies (Kim 2014, 12). This issue attempts to contribute to the burgeoning scholarship on Hallyu by demonstrating how the consumption of Hallyu delineates multiple borders in various societies-national, cultural, gender, class, and ethnicity-borders that are constantly shifting and transforming.

## Introduction

There has been a tendency to conceptualize Hallyu as a global phenomenon and treat its dissemination solely within the global-local paradigm in the scholarship. The literature on Hallyu typically emphasizes the ways the globalization of Korean media industries, the internet, and social media have propelled the swift dissemination of cultural content worldwide (Dal Yong 2016). The few observers who have chosen a regional approach have focused on the "East Asian" region merely as a reflection of globalization in a distinct geographical area (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). It has been also pointed out that exclusively emphasizing Hallyu's global appeal could result in its detachment from the specificity of Korean history and culture (Choe 2014, ix). There are only a handful of studies that provide an in-depth explanation as to how Korean popular culture developed since the colonial era. Some recent publications that do so include *The Korean Popular Culture Reader* (edited by Kim Kyung Hyun and Youngmin Choe 2014) and *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (John Lie

2014). These works both provide a comprehensive historical understanding of the global-local relations embedded in Hallyu and explain its socio-cultural context and origin.

The study of Hallyu was also influenced by Koichi Iwabuchi's theory of "cultural proximity"-Hallyu appeals to audiences in Northeast Asia for its cultural familiarity. And yet, within Northeast Asia, the consumption pattern of Hallyu raises questions related to the "global" appeal of Hallyu since some of the internationally popular K-pop pieces such as Gangnam Style do not appeal to Japanese audiences (Lie 2013), while proving highly successful outside of the cultural geography of this region. It is challenging to apply this theory when investigating the popularity of Hallyu in other parts of the world such as Iran and Israel where the introduction of Korean culture has been made quite recently mainly through the consumption of Hallyu. It seems that Confucian virtues embedded in Hallyu products are translated as "Muslim" in Iran (Noh 2011) while the secular Jewish communities and religious Muslim communities in Israel find Hallyu as a common cultural ground where they build communication networks (Otmazgin and Lyan 2013).

As the aforementioned cases demonstrate, we cannot understand Hallyu's transnational appeal without an in-depth attention to local cultural production/consumption patterns and the multiple social positions of audiences in receiving countries (Chua 2007, 129). As the authors try to show in this issue, the transnational cultural flow is experienced differently by different groups of people in their distinctive cultural contexts. The emphasis on

cultural sentiments embedded in Korean popular culture or its mere "globalization" overlooks the specificity of the accepting culture and the dialogues it encourages.

This issue thus pays special attention to what we see as a neglected dimension in the study of Hallyu, that is, its potential to generate cultural and social dialogue across Asia. Each author attempts to show how Hallyu has become a conduit for local audiences to rethink their positionalities. The papers identify universal issues such as gender equality and human rights violations that derive from patriarchal nationalism and transnational labor, for example, while imagining the consumers' relationship with others through recognizing differences. The essays all depict consumers of Hallyu as active cultural agents who engage with social problems that concern their everyday lives. In short, these papers demonstrate the potential of Hallyu to produce constructive cultural dialogues across multiple borders away from official or state-led communication channels.

As some of our authors demonstrate, consumers of popular culture challenge or bypass official or state-led domestic policies regarding nationalism (Ainslie), multiculturalism (Rhee), and gender roles (Nagayama and Creighton). The fluidity of popular culture, in other words, enables us to rearticulate the "borders" imposed by official channels. Furthermore, this special issue calls for a greater commitment to inter-disciplinarity in the study of Hallyu as a way to analyze and conceptualize this phenomenon's wider trajectories such as the redefinition of gender/ethnic identities and the cultural construction of spaces in multiple senses: political, social, cultural, and economic. This is because the production and consumption of Hallyu involves various processes, and negotiations, which cannot be comprehended only through a singular disciplinary lens.

This special issue centers on three major developments where Hallyu has played a significant role in producing dialogues among different members of a society. First, it examines the shifting concept of "Asia," and the formation of Asia as a "region." The celebratory notion of "Asianness" or "Asian values" is reassessed, reconstructed, and challenged, since more often than not it tends to underscore hegemonic cultures such as Confucian tradition while ignoring multiplicity across religion, ethnicity, gender, and class. In this sense, the "region" is more of an analytical unit than a fixed geographical entity that embodies shared cultural, economic, and societal characteristics among Asian countries. (Otmazgin).

Second, this issue examines how Korean popular culture creates a communicative social space in the receiving nations (i.e. Japan and Thailand). Audiences of Korean television dramas in Japan are not mere consumers in the economic sense; rather, they participate in the public sphere by organizing social activism. Within Japan, the consumption of Hallyu triggers audience responses regarding class and ethnic divisions in their society, as it does in Thailand. Hallyu fandom also provides an opportunity to critically engage with historical issues revolving around Japan's imperial past. The discrimination against Korean residents in Japan and the territorial dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima are good examples (Creighton). In addition, an investigation of trans-local consumption of Hallyu in Thailand demonstrates how consumers' social positions play a crucial role in shaping ideas about their national, cultural, and ethnic identity in relation to their perceived notion of "Koreanness" (Ainslie). Consumers' response to Hallyu often embodies social criticism of the economic gap between urban and rural areas and the hegemonic notion of nationalism in Thailand.

Third, the dense transnational acceptance of

Hallyu raises new questions and suggests innovative frameworks to think about changes in contemporary Asian societies such as the redefinition of gender, feminism, and femininity (Nagayama's paper) and the notion of ethnicity (Rhee's paper). The acceptance of Hallyu illustrates how the representations of gender and ethnicity in Korean popular culture not only explicates the specific social condition of the receiving country but also expands a communicative space for members of the society to articulate their concerns pertinent to their own society and history. In Nagayama's paper, a group of feminist scholars and activists utilized Hallyu as a way to reach out to wider audiences to stress the urgent need to deconstruct hegemonic gender norms. The group, as Nagayama shows, has demonstrated the value of collaboration between academic and activist communities in Japan where their use of popular culture has enhanced public interest in gender issues. Similarly, Rhee's analysis of films shows how native Koreans' deep-seated notion of ethnic homogeneity is challenged by the surge of migrants in South Korea, motivating them to reassess ethnic identity in its transnational context. As the two papers show, stories of marginalized social groups are often dismissed in the transnational production and consumption of Korean popular culture. These papers demonstrate that Hallyu creates a self-reflexive moment for consumers, thus directing them to reevaluate the meaning of national, ethnic, and gender identity critically.

### Summaries of the Papers

In "A New Cultural Geography of East and Southeast Asia: Imagining A "Region" through Popular Culture," Nissim Otmazgin seeks to show how popular culture can advance understanding of an "Asian region" with Hallyu as a case. Contrary to the conventional approach to "regionalism" and "regionalization" in the disciplines of political science, geography, and economics that focus on the

impact of trade, finance, industry, and technology across East Asia, Otmazgin demonstrates how transnational features of popular culture such as Hallyu enable us to see the dynamic process of "regionalization." This article reviews the literature on regionalism and then examines the urban consumption of Hallyu in East Asia. Consumers in various cities in East Asia perceive their region as a "community" through Hallyu. That sense of community affects institutional policies and practices of regional formation such as markets and cross-border media collaborations. But more importantly, it generates both expected and unexpected impacts on people through their joint consumption of the same cultural products. That consumer experience leads to a sense that they share a lifestyle with people in other parts of Asia, which in turn reshapes their notion of the region.

In the second article, Mary Ainslie critiques the conventional consensus that the process of "regionalization" is formed through popular culture based on cultural familiarity. That consensus often ignores the ethnic/religious diversity and economic divisions in Southeast Asian countries. Further, current work on Hallyu in Southeast Asia concentrates on young urban consumers whose consuming power is treated as a form of resistance against state control. However, Ainslie focuses more on "translocal" consumption of Hallyu in order to illustrate how consumers with various economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds conceive of their Thai identity in different ways through their engagement with Hallyu. Her empirical evidence is gathered from interviews of Hallyu fans, especially Korean TV drama fans, in both central Bangkok and the economically and ethnically disadvantaged farming province of Chaiyaphum, where the majority of people are ethnically Lao. Both urban and rural consumers engage with Hallyu actively, although in different ways. In this regard, consumers' social position plays a significant role in shaping their ideas about

their nation and its international relationships.

In "Through the Korean Wave Looking Glass: Transnationalism, Consumerism, Tourism, and Staging Japan-Korea Relations in Global East Asia," Millie Creighton covers the on-going formation of Korea-Japan cultural and historical dialogues that derived from the consumption of Hallyu in Japan. By exploring Hallyu tourism and fandom by Japanese consumers, Creighton shows that Hallyu can enhance mutual understanding between Korea and Japan in which colonial legacies have imposed challenges to their cultural relations and interactions. She addresses some of the current disputes between the two nations such as over Dokdo/Takeshima islands and racial discrimination against Korean residents in Japan in order to show how Hallyu can be deployed to ease political tensions between the two nations and between Koreans and Japanese within contemporary Japan.

Chikako Nagayama's paper, "Women's Entitlement to Desire?: Japanese Feminists as Korean Wave Fans" discusses the liberating effects of Hallyu by focusing on its female audience's resistance against and negotiation with dominant gender norms and patriarchal nationalism in Japan. The essay examines *Goodbye Hallyu* (2013), a collection of essays written by multiple feminist scholars and activists. The book was edited by the popular feminist writer, Kitahara Minori, who was motivated to publish it in resistance against the mainstream media's xenophobic and sexist attacks on middle-aged women, attacks that have become more prominent since the emergence of the Abe administration. Kitahara and the other contributors criticize the male-centrism, misogyny, and exclusionary nationalism that are behind the media's sexist attacks on female Hallyu fans, and the xenophobic attacks on Koreans living in Japan. Nagayama finds Kitahara's book noteworthy for advocating both of the two dominant approaches in feminist movements, namely

radical feminism and transnational feminism. This article first contextualizes how the category of "middle-aged women" Hallyu fans emerged and then examines how dominant ideologies of feminized domestic work and romantic love are represented in mainstream Japanese media. It then analyzes fan voices and their activities at the intersection of race and gender.

Finally, Jooyeon Rhee examines how Korean films can provide a critical site to re-assess the hegemonic notion of ethnic Korean identity through depictions of the lives of migrant workers and foreign brides in contemporary Korea. While the inter-Asian mobilization of people into Korea poses serious social challenges, this social dimension of Korea is rarely portrayed in Hallyu products, because the promotion of Hallyu is almost always directed towards markets outside Korea. Rhee problematizes state policies on labor regulations and multiculturalism, and social discrimination within Korea. She views patriarchal nationalism as an ideology that reproduces the gender and ethnic hierarchy between Koreans and migrants, showing that audiences respond to multicultural and migrant policies in ways that provide an opportunity for native Koreans and migrants to critically engage each other.

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## SPECIAL FEATURE

### ***Hallyu: The Korean Wave and Asia (1 of 6)***

[Nissim Otmazgin, "A New Cultural Geography of East Asia: Imagining A 'Region' through Popular Culture."](#)

[Mary J. Ainslie, "K-dramas across Thailand: Constructions of Koreanness and Thainess by contemporary Thai consumers."](#)

[Millie Creighton, "Through the Korean Wave Looking Glass: Gender, Consumerism, Transnationalism, Tourism Reflecting Japan-Korea Relations in Global East Asia."](#)

[Chikako Nagayama, "Women's Desire, Heterosexual Norms and Transnational Feminism: Kitahara Minori's \*Good-bye Hallyu\*."](#)

[Jooyeon Rhee, "Gendering Multiculturalism: Representation of Migrant Workers and Foreign Brides in Korean Popular Films."](#)

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