

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.

Recommended citation: Jooyeon Rhee and Nissim Otmazgin, "Expanding Transnational Dialogue in Asia through Hallyu", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 14, Issue 7, No. 4, April 1, 2016.

Bibliography

Choe, Youngmin. 2014. "Preface," in *Korean Popular Culture Reader*, ix-xi, edited by Kim Kyung Hyun and Choe Youngmin. Durham: Duke University Press.

Chua, Beng Huat. 2007. "Conceptualizing an East-Asian Popular Culture," in *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader*, 115-127, edited by

Chua Beng Huat and Kuan-Hsing Chen.

Chua, Beng Huat. 2008. "Structure of Identification and Distancing in Watching East Asian Television Drama," in *East Asian Pop Culture: Analyzing the Korean Wave*, 73-90, edited by Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press.

Dal Yong, Jin. 2016. *The New Korean Wave*. Champaign: Illinois University Press.

Lie, John. 2014. *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*. CA: University of California Press.

Noh, Sween. 2011. "Unveiling the Korean Wave in the Middle East," in *Hallyu: Influence of Korean Popular Culture in Asia and Beyond*, 331-368, edited by Do Kyun Kim and Minsun Kim. Seoul: Seoul National University Press.

Otmazgin, Nissim. 2013. *Regionalizing Culture: the Political Economy of Japanese Popular*

Culture in Asia. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Otmazgin, Nissim and Ira Lyan. 2013. "Hallyu Across the Desert: K-Pop Fandom in Israel and Palestine." *Cross Currents E-Journal*, no.9.

Kim Kyung Hyun and Choe Youngmin (eds). 2014. *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Professor Laura Hein at Northwestern University and Professor Masuda Hajimu at National University of Singapore for their constructive comments on earlier drafts of this issue. We would also like to thank the Freiberg Center for East Asian Studies, the Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, and the World Association for Hallyu Studies (WAHS) for supporting the conference where the papers were initially presented.

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."](#)

Dr. Jooyeon Rhee is Lecturer at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her main research examines gender representation in modern Korean literature. Her research interests include Korean film, Korean diaspora and Korea-Japan cultural interactions.

Dr. Nissim Otmazgin is Senior Lecturer and Chair of the Department of Asian Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His research interests include popular culture and regionalization in Asia, cultural industry and cultural policy in Japan and Korea. He is the author of *Regionalizing Culture: the Political Economy of Japanese Popular Culture in Asia* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), and co-editor (with Eyal Ben-Ari) of *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2012) and *Popular Culture Co-Productions and Collaborations in East and Southeast Asia* (NUS Press and Kyoto University Press, 2013). His recent book (edited with Rebecca Suter), is titled *Stories for the Nation: Rewriting History in Manga* (Palgrave-Macmillan, forthcoming).