The Korean Wave:

Cultivating a Global Fandom

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Abstract

The Korean wave or hallyu refers to Korean music, drama, film, and even fashion and cuisine that have swept the world since the late 1990s. At first, it was Korean pop culture that diffused naturally to neighboring countries. Later, the government made efforts to maintain and reinforce Korean culture in general worldwide, by supporting producers of culture in the entertainment industry. In this paper, we focus on the consumers and fans, that is, the fandom of hallyu. We utilize government documents, news reports, and qualitative data from interviews with entrepreneurs and fans to trace how the global fandom of hallyu was formed around the Internet. We also use the concept of meme, or cultural DNA, to illustrate how the hallyu fandom self-cloned and diffused unpredictably in all directions. Finally, we seek to discover how Korean cultural entrepreneurs and fans together cultivate hallyu, as this has implications on cultural policy.
South Korea has been emerging as a powerhouse for the production of transnational pop culture which spread first to neighboring Asian countries, later to the Middle East and North Africa, and more recently to Europe and the Americas. This phenomenon is referred to as “the Korean Wave” (hallyu in Korean). In this paper, we will use the term, hallyu, which was first coined by the Chinese press to refer to the unprecedented popularity of Korean television dramas in the late 1990s in China and Japan (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2011). Later, the rave for Korean drama expanded to include not only music, dance, and film, but also literature, fashion, and even Korean cuisine and became the driving force in Korea’s tourism. The Korean government picked up on this phenomenon fairly quickly and went on a nationalistic campaign to promote hallyu in different ways. However, there is some concern that, in doing so, it is threatening to hinder the potential of the movement. There are relatively few academic studies of this surprising phenomenon written especially from the perspective of the consumers and fans, that is, the fandom of hallyu. This paper examines how cultural entrepreneurs and fans together cultivate a global fandom of hallyu and it discusses implications on cultural policy that needs to allow hallyu to take its natural course.

Today, Korean newspapers, magazines, and television programs are replete with copious information on hallyu. They are literally mass producing even more data as we speak. The abundant data on hallyu provides a sound foundation for an analysis of the phenomenon. In this paper, we examine various cases and narratives about hallyu produced mostly by the Korean media and government as well as by individuals who blog, post, or upload to various social media sites. In these ways, we see hallyu as not only a transnational, but a hyper-national phenomenon.

As hallyu spread like wildfire around the world and turned into serious business for many entertainment companies, it became attractive for Korean artists to go abroad for bigger markets where they could draw larger crowds and sell more tickets. According to Bernie Cho, head of music distribution label DFSB Kollective, “many top artists make more money from one week in Japan than they do in one year in Korea” (cited in Williamson, 2011). Using the export model, entertainment companies have been going outside Korea’s borders since the Korean market is too small for them to recoup their investment in “manufacturing” the competitive artists as products. Fortunately, this move has paid off in spades.
Just to give some examples of the hallyu craze, on June 10th, 2011, young fans swarmed to Le Zenith de Paris, one of the largest concert venues in France, to hear pop singers from South Korea. The young fans were not only from France, but also from all over Europe, shouting out the singers’ names in unison, dancing together, and singing along in Korean. The French media covered the event extensively, with Le Monde and Le Figaro publishing articles declaring that the Korean wave strikes Europe and that it hits zenith. Hallyu has attracted the attention of the media not only in France, but also around the globe. This is evident in articles written about hallyu, in the New York Times and the Washington Post as early as in 2005 and 2006 with such titles as “South Korea Adds Culture to its Export Power” (Onishi, 2005) and “The Star Power of Seoul’s Men” (Kashahara, 2006). In fact, in 2011, Big Bang, a Korean boy band, ranked among the top 10 albums in the iTunes chart in the US and in 2011 and 2012, Korean performer Rain was voted among the most influential 100 persons of the year by readers of Time magazine (Williamson, 2011).

Interestingly, hallyu can also take place in Korea, when, rather than Korean pop musicians going abroad, sometimes international fans fly in to see them perform in their home turf. For example, in 2011, the Dream Concert was held in Gyeongju Civic Stadium where about 20 K-pop bands performed. A fandom of nearly 20,000, including approximately 5,000 overseas fans mostly from China, Japan, and Southeast Asia but also from Latin America and Europe, showed their devotion to the K-pop stars, waving colored balloons, neon sticks, and cell-phones. Co-organized by the Visit Korea Year committee, the city of Gyeongju, and the Korea Entertainment Producers’ Association, the event was generously supported by Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MCST) and the Korea Tourism Organization. Given Dream Concert’s success in 2010 and 2011, the government made this an annual event.

Hallyu’s success coincided with an increase in Korean exports (Oh, 2001) despite the recent economic downturn. When the Korean government took notice of hallyu’s economic benefits, it began to focus on its instrumental value. As the country enjoyed its new international identity, the government capitalized on this phenomenon by making concerted efforts to maintain and reinforce the spreading of Korean brands and culture worldwide. Thus, government policy regarding hallyu took two forms: regulation1 and promotion2 (Korea Communications Commission, 2011a). The MCST invested nearly US $1 billion to launch an ambitious initiative to open Korean cultural centers in foreign countries to “export” Korean culture. In 2011 alone, it opened cultural centers in Australia, Spain, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Coll, 2011). It also took the initiative to transform the country’s core infrastructure from analogue to digital (Korea Communications Commission, 2011b). In addition, it formed a variety of government (or semi-government) agencies and services3 under the control of the MCST,4 charging them to promote hallyu via numerous venues. In turn, these agencies and services nurtured the dissemination of Korean culture as commodity, as can be seen in any tourism brochure celebrating Korean pop stars who have actually come

1 Regulation includes “screen quotas, adjusting the profit-sharing rate between content providers and network providers, enhancing intellectual property rights, and quotas for local and traditional content providers” (Shin, 2011). As professional songwriter and musician, Helienne Lindvall (2011), stated in Guardian, “the fact that South Korea has very strict anti-piracy laws – including a three-strike rule for illegal downloaders – has helped turn around the fortunes of the country’s music industry.”
2 Promotion includes “supporting export by government affiliated agencies, developing the labor capacity of cultural industries (developing man-power), building facilities such as studios to be shared by cultural industry entities (creating infrastructure), loaning the capital for film-makers or content providers (budget support for the industry), [and] advertising for copyright campaign.” (Shin, 2011)
3 These include the Cultural Content Industry Office, Korean Tourism Organization, Promotional Group for Asian Hub City of Culture, Korean Culture and Information Services, Visit Korea Committee, and Presidential Council on Nation Branding, among others.
4 It appears that there is a political reason for the MCST to be so interested in hallyu, which has had such visibility that it serves as an excellent tool for the Ministry to expand its influence among the government agencies.
to be called “hallyu stars.” Hallyu stars are also often advertised front-and-center in various tourism-related Korean websites.

In essence, the government appears to be collaborating with the business sector. Korean businesses have also taken advantage of the economic benefits of hallyu as they promoted exports of their goods (Cho & Kang 2005; Han & Lee 2008; Kim et al. 2008; Lee, Scott, & Kim 2008). Eventually, the business sector collaborated with the Korean government to leverage the benefits of hallyu to Korea’s economic gain. In doing so, the Korean government has been criticized for hurting and limiting hallyu’s potential. This is not to say that the government is unaware that its capitalistic approach is problematic. However, as is usually the case, there is an inconsistency between understanding and practice. For example, on April 26, 2012, MCST and a number of major business associations across industries in Korea, as well as specific industry associations came together to create one organization, which they temporarily named “The Association to Support Hallyu.” Although a number of research institutions, various artist membership organizations, and entertainment companies were invited to join, both the Ministry’s and the business sector’s focus is clearly on using hallyu to promote Korean brands and support various Korean businesses more than to share Korean culture with fans around the world.

With focus on the benefits of hallyu as big business, some important pieces that compose the hallyu phenomenon get left out: the fandom of hallyu is overlooked, while the “Korea” in hallyu is overemphasized. As Coll (2011), a CNN correspondent, worries in his article titled “Korea is Killing its Own Wave,” “policy makers and nationalistic observers . . . [are] threaten[ing] to wash out the movement and impede its natural course” and the government may be “doing a disservice to the actors, singers, producers and directors whose talents and appeal have naturally drawn worldwide support and enthusiasm.” In fact, in reaction to Korea’s nationalistic approach to hallyu, which threatens to alter the natural direction hallyu would take, there has been an anti-Korean wave movement in Japan. For example, some Japanese nationalists demonstrated in front of the Fuji TV station to express their resentment of the domination of Korean drama in Fuji’s TV programs (Smart, 2011).

Korean artists are also compromised by the focus on big business. In 2010, while the Korean entertainment industry grossed more than US $60 million just for K-pop, the artists saw little of that money because they are locked into so-called “slave contracts” and long exclusive deals (Williamson, 2011). However, as artists get shortchanged, the entertainment industry naturally looks the other way, out of self-interest. Korea is notorious for its economy that is driven by business conglomerates, called chaebol and we argue that hallyu has also been framed from the perspective of chaebol. Although chaebols have succeeded in many fields of business and brought much wealth to Korea, they have also suffocated the small businesses, hurting the sustainability of Korea’s economy. Likewise, as the Korean entertainment industry grows, there is growing concern about “starving artists,” despite the prospering hallyu business.

As we conducted our research, we observed numerous narratives in social media such as YouTube,

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5 The Federation of Korean Industries, the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industries, the Korea International Trade Association, the Korea Federation of Small and Medium Business, the Korea Federation of Banks.
6 These business associations include Korea Cosmetic Association, Korea Food Industry Association, Korea Tourism Association, Korea Automobile Manufacturers Association, and Korea Association for ICT Promotion.
7 These include Samsung Economics Research Institution, Hallyu Strategy Research Institution, and Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange
8 These include Korea Entertainment Producer's Association, Korea Artist Manager Association, Samhwa Networks Inc., etc.
9 South Korean form of business conglomerates, global multinationals that own a number of international firms.
Facebook, and various personal blogs about how global fans encountered hallyu and how hallyu influenced their lives. From June, 2011, we set Google alert service to inform us about any texts created on the Internet that include key terms like “Korean Wave” and “hallyu” in English and in Korean. Later, we also added the Japanese and Chinese terms for hallyu. At midnight every day, we received email notices notifying us of any mention of these terms on the Internet that day. This enabled us to “spy” on the public, so to speak. To date, we have received nearly 3,000 notices. From these, it was clear that the Internet is instrumental in keeping hallyu alive and thriving. Sohn (2011), professor of Journalism at Sejong University, also pointed out that the major reason that hallyu has been popularized even in places farther away from Korea, like Europe and Latin America, is that creators and users can easily share their creations and feedback in the virtual space of the Internet.

Our research indicated that the Korean mass media, especially TV documentary programs and reality shows, increasingly report narratives of hallyu fans around the world. For example, an SBS TV program in Korea delivered an in-depth story of Johanna, an enthusiastic hallyu fan living in Peru, who at last was able to travel to Korea to attend a K-pop concert. According to Global Star Date, another special documentary on KBS TV, other hallyu fans from different countries came to Korea to meet hallyu stars in person. From their narratives, we learn that the Internet plays a significant role in connecting fans to hallyu.  

Indeed, scholars have discussed the influence of IT on the spread of hallyu (Chang, 2008; Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Chung, 2012; Jin, 2012; Jung, 2009; Kim, 2011a; Kim, 2012b; Kim, 2012c; Korea Herald, 2008; Ravina, 2009; Russell, 2008; Shin & Roh, 2012; Shin, 2011). They claim that the highly developed IT culture and infrastructure in Korea influenced the ease of developing and transmitting hallyu. For example, Chang (2008) pointed out that the Internet even institutionalized and reintroduced Korean breakdancing and b-boying as a mainstream culture. According to Chang, Korean b-boying was introduced to global audiences via the Internet from the early 2000s when Web 2.0 was a buzzword and later enjoyed global popularity. Once considered a sub- or marginal culture of Korea, b-boying was re-introduced to the Korean public based on its reputation abroad. Today, it has become a major art form that the government is promoting on the top of its list of hallyu “products.” Annually, the Korean Tourism Organization even hosts R-16 Korea, which is now the most well-known government-sponsored b-boy competition event (Chang, 2008).

Through analyzing the narratives we gathered online and from observing various reports and news articles in the mass-media, we also discovered, or rather confirmed our suspicions, that there are many dimensions to the fandom of hallyu. Many young fans around the world experience hallyu as a unifier, as an outlet to achieve self-realization. There are some, however, who regard hallyu as something to bash because they perceive it as cultural invasion. In any case, the fandom of hallyu has unprecedentedly gained momentum to expand its realm around the world due to the Internet’s low threshold to create online communities like fan-sites and fan-forums. That is, the rapidly growing size of the fandom has been facilitated through the Internet.

In this paper, we examine how the global audience has accepted Korean pop culture and how it formulated a group identity of hallyu fans, that is, the global fandom of hallyu. To do this, we use the biological concept of “meme” as a cultural transmission agency (see also Park, 2010). The concept of “meme” was coined by Dawkins (1976), a biologist, and it was adapted to culture by Graham (2002), a moral philosopher. Similar to the transmission of genes, a “meme”—cultural idea, behavior, or even style—is diffused interpersonally from one mind to another repeated through speech, writing, and through  

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10 Sohn (2009) also reports observing the role of the Internet throughout her meta-analysis of studies on hallyu.
gestures and actions (Graham, 2002). The “meme” model can help us understand how *hallyu* flows among the fans in the virtual environment of the Internet so much faster than face-to-face communication. Since people do not distinguish their face-to-face communication from their interactions via social media (see Chang 2011), cultural transmission through virtual space can be explained by “meme.”

At first, scholars and journalists who followed *hallyu’s* development focused on the “Asian”ness or “Asianness” of Korean culture, when it became popular in neighboring countries like Japan and China (Lee, 2010). At that point, *hallyu* represented a successful amalgamation of Western and Asian cultures. Within the Asian context, Japanese and Chinese fans perceived *hallyu* as a fancy cross-cultural phenomenon, but still based on Confucianism, which they shared with Koreans. It appears that later, a second Korean wave of K-pop and other *hallyu* forms swept to more remote corners of the world, as the social media took off and fans spread the word through virtual personal channels like MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter.

However, as *hallyu* diffused to non-Asian cultures, Asianness as a meme of *hallyu* could no longer explain the new direction that *hallyu* took. Now a significant meme in *hallyu* that differentiates it from other foreign cultures is the visuality that young fans find easy to mimic in groups, like making exaggerated, sexy gestures and wearing provocative makeup and alluring costumes. In fact, fans have come up with a lot of jargons to indicate the visuality of the *hallyu* stars. For example, they call some female Korean idols a “bagle” to depict a girl with a “ba” by face but with a sexy, “gl’amourous body.

Because of their visuality, the dances, songs, and styles of K-pop boy- or girl groups that are popular outside of Asia are easily learnable through the Internet, say, by watching YouTube clips. This can be proved by tons of video clips of flash mobs of K-pop in almost every big city, even in unexpected places like Almaty in Kazakhstan where no K-pop groups have ever gone before. And young French fans even demonstrated by conducting flash mob dances to bring more *hallyu* stars to their cities. As we gleaned from the narratives of *hallyu* fans, the exotic appeal of the Korean wave gives fans a sense of emancipation because they can taste in it something surprisingly different from their own music and dance. There were many stories like Johanna’s journey to Korea which we mentioned earlier that depict *hallyu* fans who achieve self-realization through *hallyu.*

It was the artists and the fans combined who created *hallyu.* As Beom-Joon Yang, Universal Music Group’s Korean managing director, said, “We think the combined popularity of Korean megastar icons like Rain, Korean television soap dramas, top-quality music production in Korea, and a genuine love for Korean culture overall around Asia, have [contributed] to making K-pop part of mainstream pop culture” (cited in Lindvall, 2011). Indeed, the visuality of *hallyu* may be attributed to the megastars, like Rain and JYJ in K-pop and Bae Yong Joon (or Yon-sama in Japanese) or Jang Keun-suk (or Keun-sama) in K-drama. These megastars have been the object of cultural imagination that makes fans live vicariously through them.11 *Hallyu* stars, even though they are megastars, have been very responsive to their fans. For example, JYJ recently toured Latin America on the request of fans in the region.12

The fans’ power over *hallyu’s* success can be observed in their influence to revive an artist group abandoned by the biggest entertainment company in Korea. For example, two years ago, three members of TVXQ, the most successful Korean boy band, took to court its management company, SM, for not sharing the profits from their enormous success. Eventually, SM lost the case, however, it was anticipated that JYJ which was newly formed out of the original band would soon disappear since SM is the biggest

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11 Lee and Ju (2011), in their article "The Meaning of Korean Dramas in Japanese Fandom: Re-emerging Sentiment of ‘Asianness’," argued that "when viewing the Korean dramas the perceived nostalgic sentiment among middle-aged Japanese fans is closely connected to their cultural imagination of ‘Asianness’" (p. 438).
12 However, the keen relationship that hallyu stars have with their admirers also has a side effect of stalker fans (saseng fans).
and most powerful Korean entertainment company. However, the fandom of JYJ was even more powerful to support this new band, so much so that today, JYJ has the most globalized fandom, encompassing fans in Europe, Central Asia, and Latin America.

As we have argued, it is the combined efforts of fans and artists that created and led to hallyu’s success. Reflecting this interactive phenomenon between Korean artists and their fans outside, some scholars use the terms hallyu 1.0 and hallyu 2.0 (Sohn, 2011). While hallyu 1.0 is a one-way flow of Korean pop culture from artists to fans outside of Korea, hallyu 2.0 is a multidirectional process. That is, the fans of Korean pop culture are not just consumers of things Korean, but rather, co-creators (or even co-opetiters). For example, simply by googling the terms “Korean wave” or “hallyu,” one can observe K-pop accumulate and grow as mobs of fans participate in singing Korean songs and dancing to them.

Given the enormous hype surrounding the hallyu fandom, many scholars are observing that hallyu is no longer a thing Korean, but more of a transnational phenomenon, owned equally by the fans as it is by the artists. For example, many articles in books such as Hallyu: Influence of Korean popular culture in Asia and beyond edited by Do Kyun Kim and Min-Sun Kim explain hallyu's hybridity and pluralistic characteristic. According to Jung (2009), “contemporary Korean pop culture is built on such unavoidable transnational flows, as its multi-layered and multi-directional mobility has created various socio-cultural contacts that take place across, beyond, and outside national and institutional boundaries (p. 483).”

According to Choi (2004, cited in Jung, 2009), in the cultural exchange that takes place between artists and fans, or “transculturation,” there is no fixed sender and receiver. There are “constant role changes, or turn-taking, in cultural exchanges. . . . Culture can be exchanged and crossbred in various directions” (p. 478). That is, the distinction between the sender and the receiver or the creator and the user is blurred in transculturation. This is unlike the dominance and the exchange perspectives that operate on a cultural hierarchy, where the exchange is unidirectional. Rather, as can be seen in many narratives of hallyu fandom, hallyu is a multidirectional and highly interactive process.

This paper sought to trace how the global fandom of hallyu was created through the Internet by transmitting hallyu’s unique memes of Asianness and visuality. We found that hallyu is no longer a one-way flow from Korea to outside Korea’s borders. Therefore, it is also not a nationalistic imposition when Korean culture is exported and in turn consumed by its eager fans. Unlike Sinocentrism in China and Pan-Asinanism in Japan (See Lee, 2010), both of which ended up with imperialistic enforcement, we have found that the Asianness of the Korean Wave can allure both Asian and non-Asians without imposing Korean nationalism. This is because, as we discovered, hallyu has come about through co-creation among Korean cultural entrepreneurs and their fans, that is the hallyu fandom. From reviewing the reports published by various government agencies, we found that the Korean government also recognizes the unique creative process of hallyu. We therefore conclude that more attention is needed to the phenomenon of co-creation taking place between hallyu artists and their fans.

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13 Co-creation and co-opetition (i.e., cooperative competition) have been recognized as important characteristics of the users of the Internet. See Hutter et al. (2011) and Qualman (2009).
14 According to Jung (2009), “popular cultural products and cultural consumption in the 21st century have become increasingly transnational and hybrid, as national, cultural, and ethnic boundaries around the globe become less clearly defined. Also, consumers of popular cultural--members of the so-called digital generation--are familiar with transnational and hybrid cultural products through digital world (pp. 483-484).”
References


