

JUNIOR CONFERENCE PANEL 3: HALLYU AS A WINDOW TO COSMOPOLITAN KOREA

The Analysis of Hallyu's Sustainability as a form of Pop Culture and Soft Power Diplomacy

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Abstract

This paper aims to answer two main issues confronting Hallyu—first is the Korean Wave's sustainability as a form of pop culture, and second is its feasibility as a tool for soft diplomacy. The researcher has attempted to answer these questions through an analysis of various texts from authors and sociologists whose works focus on South Korea, Hallyu, and its implications on international relations. This paper finds that the reproducibility of a “distinct Korean element” in its visual and auditory media products affirms the possibility of Hallyu's sustainability. Apart from this, other factors suggesting the Korean Wave's longevity are 1) the growing number of transnational and multicultural co-productions and collaborations with Asian neighbors, and 2) the potential of success in other ventures, such as animation, games, beauty, fashion, and

cuisine. Despite the probable success of Hallyu as a pop culture, various texts have suggested that it is an insufficient tool for soft diplomacy. Conflicting case studies in the Southeast Asian regions, problems in crafting a single, representative image for the country, and a one-way flow of cultural exchange pose challenges in establishing the soft power of Korea.

For the past decade, pop culture has been an active channel through which South Korea has communicated itself to the rest of the world. Hallyu was born from the government's push for a "New Korea," and since then, it has brought about economic, symbolic, and even diplomatic advances for the country. However, with Hallyu being largely dependent on constantly changing consumer demand, it is faced with questions regarding its sustainability. Nevertheless the Korean Wave's distinct, recognizable quality, transnational and multicultural collaborations, and potential in non-media aspects suggest its longevity and sustainability. On the other hand, despite the influence of Hallyu's soft power, it is found to be an insufficient tool for public diplomacy, as evidenced by conflicting case studies in Southeast Asian regions, difficulties in establishing a single, representative image for the country, and the asymmetric one-way cultural exchange it continually facilitates.

The longevity of Hallyu rests on its ability to have its own, distinct imprint not only on its receivers and consumers, but also to the rest of the globalized world (Kim, M-s, 2011, p. 487). Affirming this point is Chua Beng Huat, a Singaporean sociologist, who argues that there exists a great possibility for

Korean wave to become a new ‘genre’ in its own right. In a chapter from the book *The Korean Wave in Southeast Asia: Consumption and Cultural Production*, Chua mentions that Korean media products, particularly dramas and music, are gradually establishing a certain, distinct characteristic. This particular quality, when disassembled and molded again to a single assemblage, materializes into a relatively coherent form that is recognizable as ‘Korean’ pop culture (2015, pp. 185-186). Chua does not distinctly point out the features that make up this assemblage of Korean pop culture; instead, he substantiates his claim with case studies. He mentions three cases where elements of Hallyu are incorporated in non-Korean media: the Thai movie *Hello, Stranger*, the Vietnamese remake of *Full House*, and the Indonesian girl group Cherrybelle. He explains that the Thai movie contains scenes that are readily reminiscent of Korean dramas—strolling and playing around amidst the Winter setting, getting drunk by a roadside food stall, making dramatic confessions of love, etc. As for K-pop and its influence, Chua observes that the “Indonesian girl-band [Cherrybelle] is unambiguously and recognisably performing ‘K-pop’ in Indonesian,... willingly mimicking Girls’ Generation in appearance and stage presentation” (pp. 188).

The influence of Hallyu is readily evident in Philippine media as well. Just like the media products of Thailand and Indonesia, the acculturation of Korean elements exists in Philippine soap operas, or teleseryes. Louie Jon Sanchez from the Ateneo de Manila University’s Department of English calls this the “Korean Turn.” According to him, it is a “so called televisual process [that] has introduced innovations, not only

in form but also in content, radically changing the viewing habits of Filipinos reared in dramas of epical length and melodramatic proportion” (2014, p. 3). Following this thought, it is implied that Filipino teleseryes have begun to follow particular patterns or elements of Korean dramas (K-dramas). A particular example is the ABS-CBN drama *Princess and I*, which stars Kathryn Bernardo, Daniel Padilla and Enrique Gil. At first glance, it readily contains Korean elements, such as youthful aesthetics and visuals, elaborate costumes and wardrobe (similar to those in period/historical Korean series), the concept of royalty and monarchical authority (as presented in *Princess Hours*). There is also the premise of mobility of the leads, as seen in K-dramas *Lovers in Paris* and *Descendants of the Sun*. Lastly, the Hallyu-inspired look of the male leads Padilla and Gil are subtle but noticeable touches of the Korean Wave (pp. 10-11).

The adaptation of South Korean elements is similarly applied towards the Filipino music industry. Around 2010, record companies have launched a number of Pinoy Pop (P-pop) groups with musical styles and fashion resembling that of K-pop groups (“K-pop-inspired Pinoy Group,” 2010). This is in line with the concept of the “Korean Turn,” which is mentioned above. Unlike the success of the Korean-inspired teleseryes, P-pop was met with criticism from K-pop fans and non-fans alike. It gave rise to questions of creativity, colonial mentality, and the loss of the Filipino sound, which eventually led to the demise of this style of Pinoy Pop. Despite its failure in the Filipino market, this further affirms that a distinguishable and distinct Korean pop culture indeed exists, and other countries are applying and acculturating it into their own.

Towards the end of his text, Chua Beng Huat also stresses that the adaptability of Hallyu into other cultures is analogous to that of preparing ethnic cuisines of other countries. To make dishes palatable to and reproducible by people of other nationalities, ways of cooking food must be localized, in the same way as elements of Korean media are to be standardized and adjusted based on the producers' and receivers' contexts (2015, p. 189). Just as how Filipinos have created their own version of the spaghetti, the adapters of Hallyu have taken uniquely Korean elements and tailored them according to local tastes and techniques. Although *Princess and I* contains several K-drama elements, as mentioned above, various Filipino sensitivities are infused into the story to keep its unique "Pinoy" charm. As seen in the teleserye, there is still the fondness for love teams (i.e., Team KathNiel vs. Team KathQuen), the prevalence of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in the storyline, and the rich guy-poor girl dynamic. Overall, it goes to show how Philippine media is able to experiment with new methods of storytelling and production while not forgetting its cultural identity altogether. Hence, this very notion of Korean pop culture being distinguishable and reproducible amidst differences in culture makes its sustainability viable.

Closely related to this adaptability across various cultures is the argument that Hallyu can now be defined by "cultural hybridity and transnationality," and that it is not merely confined in the borders of Korea (Park, 2016). One of the trends in South Korean media today is the increase in cross-border production of films, dramas, and even K-pop groups. Claire Seungeun Lee stresses that attributing the success of

Hallyu on consumption and reception alone is inadequate, especially because its strength and scope are also inherent in its process of production and conception (2015, pp. 17-18). Hence, her studies focus on such topics, particularly on what comprises these inter-country collaborations and co-productions, and how these transnational works translate an effect to the Korean Wave.

C. Lee identifies different forms of cross-border productions (2015, p. 25). First is a relocated production where an all-Korean staff goes outside the country for overseas filming. A second form is a “stratified” team composed of both Koreans and foreigners, where filming takes place either in Korea or abroad. Lastly, there is a “negotiated local production,” which is, in simple terms, the export of Korean talents (e.g., editors, musical directors, cameramen) into overseas teams, producing either an entirely foreign film/series, or a co-production with Korea. For instance, Korean-Chinese co-productions have been prevalent for the past few years, giving rise to a cross-cultural set of cast, crew and shooting locations. Some examples are *Mr. Go*, *The Peaceful Island*, *My New Sassy Girl*, and also Chinese remakes of Korean films, such as *20 Again (Miss Granny)*, and *A Wedding Invitation (Last Present)*.

There are various advantages with venturing into these forms of media. Financially speaking, Korean companies are made exempt from paying large media import taxes because of their partnership with China. More importantly, such productions provide not only a room for growth for the talents, but also a wider platform through which they can showcase the art of Hallyu (Kil, 2015). Beyond China, Korean media has also extended its reach to other Asian neighbors. Asako in *Ruby*

Shoes, a film released in 2001, started the trend for Japanese-Korean collaborations. Korean companies, particularly CJ Entertainment, have also ventured into the Southeast Asian market. Apart from the usual practice of co-producing and financing local productions, they have also created deals with Thai and Vietnamese theaters in order to acquire them as exclusive distributors for Korean films (Conran, 2015). Regardless of the form of cross-border production, this diversification of media outlets and distribution channels promotes more than just commercial significance, but also “cultural exchange and communication between countries” (“Going Global,” 2012); this consequently entails a greater probability for the sustainability of the Korean Wave.

Despite the above arguments, it cannot be dismissed that Hallyu still faces pertinent challenges that confront its sustainability. Given the “exponentially larger number of Kpop acts” debuting annually, there is a supposed oversaturation of the K-pop market (“Kpop and Oversaturation,” 2014), insinuating notions of non-innovative “uniformity in plot and style [that] is boring consumers” (Seo, 2013). There is also the occurrence of sentiments and ill-feelings from China and Japan, igniting various Anti-Hallyu movements. These are shown in “Hate Korea” expressions, comical yet offensive parodies, and public announcements of Korean Wave in Japan as a form of “cultural invasion” (Chung, 2011, pp. 78-80).

Hence, to rightfully address the issues mentioned, there is a need to venture into other viable outlets of pop culture, instead of merely relying on the popularity of Korean dramas and Korean pop music. Researchers at the Samsung Economic Research Institute have suggested that expanding the scope of

Hallyu to aspects of daily culture, such as animation, games, beauty, fashion, and cuisine, may be effective measures in sustaining the Korean Wave, as these have been gaining global attention recently (Seo, Jung, Joo, & Lee, 2013). From an economic perspective, Korean cosmetics and games have already permeated a wider international reach, evidenced by the vast increases in their exports. Amore Pacific, one of the leading Korean cosmetics companies, reached a 44% jump in its overseas sales, whereas Korean games accounted for \$3 billion in Korean exports for the year 2014 (Jung-a, 2016). Also, based on market and financial predictions (Tyrimou, 2015; “The Korean Wave”), it can be inferred that the growth in the beauty and skin care industry, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, entails the rise of K-beauty. Hence, these cultural products, together with their gradual rise and presence in both neighboring and distant countries, demonstrates that Hallyu can still thrive even in aspects beyond dramas and music. Although these forms of pop culture are not necessarily derived from media sources, their prevalence in the multicultural world contributes to the sustainability of the Korean Wave.

Hallyu, mainly through Korean dramas and music, have fostered various economic and symbolic gains. Findings suggest that there is a “positive and significant relationship between the Korean Wave and attitude toward Korean products” (Lee, W-j., 2015, p. 349), thereby increasing the probability of purchasing such commodities. This theory has been affirmed by the economic success of the products used and advertised in the 2016 hit military drama, *Descendants of the Sun*. In the first episode, Song Hye Kyo was seen using the

Laneige Two-tone Lip Bar as she prepares for her first date with Song Joong Ki. According to Amore Pacific, Laneige's parent company, "the number of times the so-called Song Hye Kyo lipstick was searched on the Internet surged 11 times after the drama started to air... [It] became a bestseller in March and has sold out in some stores." Aside from this, industry observers had predicted that the drama can generate more than \$3.5 billion worth of "economic effects in terms of exports, domestic spending, and tourism" ("Hit K-drama boosts sales," 2015). On the other hand, in terms of symbolic gains, Hallyu has allowed Korea to be known to the rest of the world. In particular, an interview with a 50-year-old Japanese commented that the "Korean Wave... changed our view, astonishing us with beautiful images of men and women, attractive scenery, and fantastic locations appearing in the dramas," consequently blurring the past notions of Korea as something that is associated with poverty, cheap and course products, and the war (Ko, 2010, p. 145).

This surging awareness within the past decade is in line with former president Kim Young Sam's approach, the "Creation of the New Korea," with Hallyu being the channel for the dissemination of this revamped image (Kim, M., 2015, pp. 464-465). Aside from being known internationally, Korea has also successfully garnered positive perceptions among its audiences. According to Jeong-Nam Kim and Lan Ni, (2011) the general attraction to Hallyu, and the consumption of related cultural products, often leads to an attraction for the Korean ways of life (p. 143). Thus, it is safe to say that this unique charm of Korea is an "invisible national asset" (p. 133) something that is intangible yet very perceptible. This is then

referred to as soft power, which can be utilized by the country as a champion of public diplomacy.

As opposed to the traditional, closed-door form, public diplomacy is the way one country communicates with the citizens of another country. It pertains to “the means and efforts to capture the hearts and minds of the people of other nations... [to] achieve diplomatic objectives that otherwise could not have been accomplished by using hard power” (Cho, 2012, p. 276). For example, although there are still political issues between Japan and Korea (i.e., territorial disputes over an island), the Hallyu phenomenon has eased, to a certain extent, the rift between the two countries. The popularity of Bae Yong-joon has promoted positive feelings of Japanese towards Koreans, and has since cultivated other avenues for developing better relationships of the two countries (e.g., influx of Japanese tourists in Seoul, success of K-pop) (M. Kim, 2015, p. 473). Another example would be what Time magazine calls the ‘soap opera diplomacy,’ which seems to have captured some North Koreans, particularly the youth. Despite penalties and threats of execution, North Koreans are still avid consumers of K-dramas and K-movies, which they smuggle through the black market. Some of them, mostly university students, are already asking about their living conditions, the society, and poverty. In a way, they are starting to form ideas and ideologies of the world beyond their borders, posing a major threat to their government (Cain, 2009). Indeed, there are instances where Korea’s soft power has established positive ties with other nations, or has threatened the power of a competing country’s political regime (Kim & Ni,

2011, p. 143), but empirical findings reveal that it is not enough to serve as a sustainable anchor for public diplomacy.

One of the complications in utilizing the Korean Wave as a form of soft diplomacy is that it entails that Korea's representation towards the world would heavily rely on the image of such pop culture products (Cho, 2012, p. 287). This implies that the impression of people from other countries may stem from what they have seen—or have not seen—from Hallyu, which does not always paint an accurate picture of the country. It is then difficult to cultivate a particular, single image that can aptly put out South Korea vis-à-vis other nations.

Pavin Chachavalpongpon, a Southeast Asian Studies professor from Kyoto University, discussed such occurrences in a chapter from the book *Korea's Changing Roles in Southeast Asia*. Although the advent of K-dramas, K-pop and K-beauty has indeed carved an optimistic view of Korea, actual experiences of foreigners with Koreans—the country's "own cultural messengers" (Chachavalpongpon, 2010, p. 258)—may hamper this positively-built image. His studies suggest that there is an increasing degree of Korean resentment in Southeast Asia, and there are three reasons supporting this: 1) badly behaved Korean tourists in the SEA regions, 2) aggressive missionaries, and 3) rude and unethical businessmen/investors (pp. 258-264). This just goes to show that the reputation and branding cultivated from the Korean Wave is not an adequate substitute for carrying out diplomatic affairs or for establishing strong bilateral relations.

Since it is difficult to regulate and control behaviors of individual people and groups, the government must instead focus on matters that they can implement and oversee, such as crafting cultural and diplomatic policies integrating Hallyu's soft power. Unfortunately, the Korean government has not yet fully prioritized its public diplomacy strategies with respect to Hallyu. Though there are attempts at doing such, overall, "South Korea is devoid of not only a strategy for constructing a solid image of the nation but also a grand vision and plan" (Cho, 2012, p. 277). The cultural ministry has started a campaign called the "Han Style," promoting aspects of traditional Korean culture, such as hansik, hangeul, hanok, and hanbok. However, since these are uniquely Korean facets of life, they tended to appeal more to domestic audiences rather than to its intended target—the overseas consumers (Elfving-Hwang, 2013, p. 18).

As scholars have suggested, successful public diplomacy is facilitated only when there is a two-way, symmetrical cultural exchange, rather than a one way flow (Kim & Ni, 2011, p. 145; Kim, J., 2010, p. 302). But in recent years, the latter has been relatively more prevalent. Cultural products and consumer goods (e.g., cosmetics, fashion, food) are exported overseas with the goal of gaining favorable opinions from its target audiences. Save from the fact that it paints Korea in a positive light, exporting Hallyu products alone does not adequately contribute to diplomatic and cultural exchange, as there is a lack of dialogue and feedback. If the Korean wave continues to be the one-way communication channel that it is, then it will wither, as no country prefers to feel manipulated by or subordinate to another nation (Kim, J., 2010, p. 302). It is

then imperative for Korea to make efforts in establishing closer ties through governmental policies that support and nurture communication.

The main suggestions found across various sources is to make more rigorous investments in cultural and academic programs promoting Korean Studies among foreigners. Chachavalpongpun proposes the following: donation of Korean texts, permanent networks of Korean specialists in universities, and associations/organizations promoting Korean culture. For him, the most effective strategy is to let foreigners “experience it through their own critical thinking and through necessary educational networks” (2010, p. 274). Joong Keun Kim recommends that soft power be utilized by forming “close friendships” with other nations by offering them “its culture, humanitarian assistance, and opportunities for education” (2012, pp. 300-301). The Korean government has taken steps such as the ones mentioned above, but given the backlash on the Southeast Asian regions, it must seek ways to improve such strategies.

Indeed, Korea’s soft power has opened doors and opportunities for the country amid the globalization of the multicultural world. However, without the government’s active intervention, South Korea’s public diplomacy would not be as successful and sustainable as the economic and symbolic advancements that Hallyu has attained for the past decade.

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