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# South Korean Culture Goes Global: K-Pop and the Korean Wave\*

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to understand the explosive consumption of South Korean cultural exports in Asia, and its reproduction in South Korea. The more commonly available explanations about the success of Hallyu, which cannot adequately explain why Hallyu has taken Asia by storm while popular cultures from other Asian nations have not, include the following: (1) cultural proximity; (2) common historical and cultural legacy; (3) common 20th century experience of rapid industrialization in the region; (4) rapid increase in intra-regional trade, investment, tourism, etc.; and (5) the development of information technology (IT) industry and other modern industries in South Korea.

We offer three alternative scenarios to help explain Hallyu's success

**Key words:** Hallyu (Korean Wave), globalization of culture, hybrid culture, Han, Hanp'uri

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using global and local cultural explanations. First, Hallyu is analyzed from the perspective of an alternative form of globalization of culture from the South implying the diversification of world cultures. Neither rejecting nor reacting to the dominant cultures of the West, we postulate that Hallyu is more an alternative and revision of the US-dominated cultural globalization. Second, taking a more region-bound perspective, we analyze whether Asia’s history of colonialism and the fight for supremacy between two regional super powers — i.e., Japan and China —, have led South Korea to become a more palatable cultural hegemon in the region. Third, the paper uses the Korean concept of “Hanp’uri” (dissolution of “Han”) to understand how Hallyu has been embraced in South Korea as a source of national pride and helped its reproduction. Finally, we argue that the future of Hallyu will rest on whether it can become identified as a new world culture with distinct traits of its own and enrich the world’s cultural scene.

## I. Introduction

*Hallyu*<sup>1</sup>. (or the Korean<sup>2</sup>. Wave) — i.e., exports of South Korea’s popular culture — hit the shores of China and Southeast Asian nations with great force since the late 1990s, and finally hit Japan like a tidal wave in 2003 with the arrival of *Yon-sam* a<sup>3</sup>. and *Winter Sonata* (*Kyōul Yōnga*). Bae Yong-jun<sup>4</sup>, the male star of South Korea’s hit melodrama, *Winter Sonata*, earned the

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1. “Hallyu” means Korean Wave or Wave from Korea. Romanization of Korean words is based on the McCune-Reischauer System.
  2. Korea refers to South Korea, and the two will be used interchangeably in the paper.
  3. This word is a combined word with his first name “Yon-jun” and “sama,” which is a Japanese honorific given exclusively to highly respected persons.
  4. Korean names will be written as they are commonly used in Korea, with the family name followed by the given name. However, the names of Korean authors, who have published in English, will be written as the authors have done.

Viet Nam War.

The driving force of the Hallyu in Viet Nam as well as other Southeast Asian countries and even Muslim countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia has been the TV dramas. The drama ‘Brother Doctors (*Ŭiga hyôngje*)’ was introduced nationwide in Viet Nam in 1999 with great success, and turned the main actor Jang Dong Gun as the most popular actor in the country (Hyundai Research Institute 2004). Kim Nam Ju, the actress from another hit TV drama ‘Model,’ became a fashion icon in Viet Nam. And LG Debon, a South Korean cosmetic company, became the market leader after it quickly cast Kim in its TV advertisements (Hyundai Research Institute 2004).

South Korea’s rapid industrialization spearheading the region’s economic growth along with Japan; rapid increase in intra-regional trade, and in particular South Korea’s exports of information technology products such as digital TVs and cell phones have all contributed to the success of Hallyu in Asia. This Asian version of modernity was embraced in the region as a more palatable alternative to the West and to the troubled powers in the region. Thus, the success of Hallyu in Asia should be understood within a broader context of global and regional political and economic dynamics.

## V. Hanp’uri (Dissolution of “Han (한, 恨)”)

While Hallyu inundated Asia and hit the shores of far-away lands such as Mexico,<sup>15</sup> Egypt, Israel and most recently the US,

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15. In 2002, Mexico’s public broadcasting company Mexiquense aired two South Korean TV dramas resulting in a small South Korean cultural boom. The department of Korean Language Studies was established in the top national university Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in February 2004 is a result of such interest in South Korean culture (Korea International

the South Koreans were having a euphoric moment of their own. As the reports of overseas success of Hallyu reached South Korea, the South Koreans attached meanings beyond a cultural phenomenon.

Hallyu led to the dissolution of the long-held Han after centuries of being invaded by surrounding super powers, colonialism, and war. Han can be translated as “bitterness and anger, unfulfilled wish, unrequited resentments, or long accumulated sorrow and regret over one’s misfortune” (Shin 2003). “Hanp’uri” means releasing Han, and in the Korean context, the ways of releasing Han can include dance, music in Shamanist rituals, and direct revengeful acts. The collective forms of Hanp’uri can be presented in labor movements, anti-government protests, and even in the zeal for economic development (Shin 2003). Suddenly centuries-old “Han” was lifted as South Koreans were ridding themselves of the deep-held resentment and forced sense of inferiority vis-à-vis its neighboring super powers of China and Japan.

Historically the Chinese empire had invaded the Korean peninsula numerous times, and Korea was subjugated as its subject. Many important schools of thought, culture and religions originated from, or passed through, China to Korea. The historical relationship between China and Korea were that of the core and periphery. Thus, China’s embrace of Hallyu gave a sense of superiority at last to South Koreans – Koreans were giving culture to China and not vice versa.

Japan’s influence on Korea includes historical invasions as well as the 20th century colonialism (1910-45) and economic domination in the post-WWII era. The harshness of the colonial legacy, which extended much beyond politics and economy to the arena of culture and education, had left an indelible mark on the