

Book Review**Yoon, K. (2022). *Diasporic Hallyu: The Korean Wave in Korean Canadian Youth Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.****Moisés Park^{OR}**Modern Languages and
Cultures, Baylor University,
USA**Corresponding to**
Moisés ParkModern Languages and
Cultures, Baylor University,
Waco, TX 76798, USAEmail: Moises_Park@baylor.
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Hallyu has been a central topic in several publications in the past two decades, with an increasing multidisciplinary scholarship. Kyong Yoon has been active from the very early stages of Korean Wave studies. For *Diasporic Hallyu*, nevertheless, Yoon focuses entirely on an understudied aspect, namely the diasporic lens, combining ethnographic methodology as well as cultural, historiographic, postcolonial, and (social) media studies. His ethnographic methodology is a needed and refreshing way to avoid the triumphalist attitude that the Korean Wave is a dominant force that is unmatched by any other “national” cultural exports or on the contrary, that it is a fleeting trend, lest we consider two decades ephemeral. The book has a demographic focus ignored in most publications: diasporic Korean youth, recognizing the spectrum of diasporic backgrounds (1.5 generation and second-generation Korean Canadians in their teens and twenties). The monograph “develops the framework of the *diasporic dimensions* of Hallyu, revealing that Hallyu is far more than outbound flows of made-in-Korea cultural content” (p. vi). While Won Jung Min has developed similar methodologies and research in the Americas and other regions, Yoon adds his contribution with the Canadian case of the Korean diaspora reception and reflection. His project examines how Korean youth in the Canada “make sense of who they are without necessarily relying on the White dominant cultural frame or an essentialized mode of ethnicity” (p. vi).

He mentions that “over 60% of [a] survey respondents predicted that the Korean Wave would fade out within 4 years” (p. 2). However, the “wave” has been supported by the “Korean government’s initiatives and investments in cultural industries,” but at the same time, “technology-equipped fans have led the Wave as a cultural trend of grassroots transnationalism” (p. 3). In other words, the propagandist aspect of Korean Wave as a soft power is no longer the dominant discourse, but

part of the dialectic relation between alleged soft power and activist fandom. And though “the Korean Wave has been perceived as ebbs and flows with a clear national origin—Korea” (p. 4), the book problematizes this “linear discourse” by convincingly acknowledging the limiting imagery of the “wave” or “ebb.” This phenomenon is not unilateral and/or unidirectional, but hybrid, multidirectional, and oftentimes, unpredictable. Yoon expands the evolving and realistic demographics of the fandom. The study of Korean Wave fandom can often be reduced as diasporic consumption, or exclusively as the fetish of non-Korean counter-hegemonic orientalists, when in fact, the dichotomy is a caricature of extremes. Yoon’s emphasis in diaspora challenges the binary and addresses the hybridity and heterogeneity of diasporic reception.

The emphasis on diaspora has its most original and daring proposition: “Hallyu is metaphorically diasporic in that this cultural wave reveals that not only Korean migrants but also other global media audiences are becoming diasporic through mediated and embodied experiences” (p. 5). The book insists on a much deeper reformulation of the Korean Wave itself, and the limited conclusions that the fandom is a predictable demographic with reductionist reasons for the consumption of Hallyu. Namely, that Korean Wave is consumed solely or mostly by the entire diaspora, or that the content itself has an appeal that is irresistibly global and universal. By redefining Hallyu as a diasporic (not just global) force, but also a unifying phenomenon, the book’s thesis and antithesis culminate in a daring synthesis.

Hallyu has often been treated as soft power from a South Korean neo-hegemony or a global but fleeting trend that mimics Anglo hegemony. “Diaspora can create ‘new identities which have no affiliation to the nation-state form’” (p. 6): Yoon is careful in focusing even more on the evolving entities that produce, consume, transform, and reformulate the phenomenon, as he discerns attitudes towards Hallyu with generational, racial,

and ethnic distinctions. In particular, he affirms early in his project that “diasporic youth of Korean backgrounds who have some familiarity with Korean culture and language do not inherently identify with Hallyu” (p. 6). Thus, voices that are included in the project are not necessarily members of the diaspora who fit the profile of stereotypical Hallyu fans. Moreover, he proposes that “the diasporic lens offers an antidote to both the nation-statist understanding of culture and the post-national (and de-politicized) imagination of hybrid cultures” (p. 10). Conclusions from the ethnographic work gravitate towards a reformulation of the “homeland”: “diasporic young people engage with media from their *ancestral* homeland in relation to the media of their *current* homeland” (p. 10). Though “those who did not access Korean media were excluded,” an important distinction was made as those who engaged with media as a way to reconnect with an ancestral identity.

Yoon’s self-categorized positionality as “a first-generation immigrant, male, middle-aged researcher may offer some limitations” (p. 14) is instrumental in providing transparent processes to conduct ethnography. These self-examining moments legitimize the study as a project that goes beyond mere quantitative data that can so often be manipulated to arrive to premeditated hypotheses and outcomes. The collective work of the oral history conducted by Yoon and other researchers, however, is an exemplary methodology that we are increasing seeing in Korean Wave studies. Additionally, “this book might be a set of snapshots of their interviewees’ experiences and thoughts in a particular moment of their life stages while interacting with the researcher” (p. 14). Documenting current attitudes towards Korean cultural products, will be important in future studies that revisit this reception from an ever more diverse diasporic community, including more biracial, multiracial, second and third-generation Koreans, Korean adoptees, those who return to the “homeland,” native Korean nationals

who visit and/or live abroad, those who identify and advocate for pan-Asian solidarity, partners of Korean nationals and/or immigrants, and non-Korean and non-Asian fans.

The second chapter “Growing up Korean Canadian in the Time of the Korean Wave” documents “how diasporic Korean youth in Canada grow up with an understanding of their cultural differences” (p. 21) in the turn of the century. “They internalize the White-dominant cultural frame that presents a view of themselves as the other” (p. 29). In other words, interviews confirm the effects of Anglo hegemonic experience, which cannot be equated to the Korean American experience, or the diaspora in the rest of the Americas. The Korean Canadian experience is unique in the “recent rise of the Korean Wave (or Hallyu) [as they] may be integrated into Korean Canadians’ identity work in their transition to adulthood, especially in relation to their responses to the White-dominant cultural frame that has taken the White Anglo culture for granted as the default cultural mode constituting Canadian culture” (p. 30). Yoon is well aware of the dominant English-speaking situation that most Korean Canadian experience, in a country that is officially bilingual, and allegedly embraces its multilingual and multicultural indigenous past. In other words, living in a White Anglo dominated culture internalizes the hierarchical cultural hegemony. Thus, “young Korean Canadians receive transnational Korean media [which is often in English and Korean] not only [do they receive it] as inherited cultural texts rooted in their ancestral homeland but also as highly hybrid cultural texts” (p. 31). Yoon’s observations avoid the obvious (the English linguistic fluency of diasporic members), and highlight the hybrid nature of transnational Korean media. He acknowledges that those very cultural products are often shaped by diasporic and hybrid individuals, which explains the “rise of Hallyu in diasporic young people’s everyday contexts and negotiation of

diasporic identities” (p. 31). Diaspora does not feel merely familiar to the content: the creation of Korean media is also shaped and it features diaspora itself. Korean media is no longer a mirror, but a window as well. The cosmopolitan South Korean music industry is looking abroad for content and self-reference, to its own diaspora and/or to itself, transplanted in a different space.

Although exact figures are not accounted, the interviewees confirm “how young Korean Canadians engage with Hallyu in their transition to adulthood in response to the White-dominant cultural frame that is still experienced by many youth of color in the seemingly multicultural society of Canada” (p. 31). Though “whiteness [was determined to be] the ‘norm’” (p. 36), several interviewees seemed to find countercultural, relevant, and original ways to belong through Korean media. Canada found a renewed reputation as more multicultural and tolerant than other cosmopolitan nations: “some interviewees emphasized Canada as a ‘culturally tolerant,’ ‘easy going’ country, especially compared to the US or Korea. They identified multiculturalism as what distinguished Canada from other countries, such as the US” (p. 41). George Floyd’s murder, violent attacks on Asian elderly, and the mass murder of Asian women in Atlanta, heightened the Canadian immigrant experience as the better alternative for “first world countries” that have sizable diasporic communities.

A valuable information that supplements views of “imagined” Korean longing, are “trips to the ancestral homeland [which] seemed to play an overall positive role for the Korean Canadian youth in this book” (p. 45). The “imagined” space that the Korean Wave provides in mediascape was no longer idealism, fiction, or fantasy for the interviewees. Moreover, increasingly diverse and realistic portrayals of mundane life and experience in TV shows, films, vlogs, etc., confirm that “many interviewees appreciated the increasing availability of K-pop music videos and K-dramas on streaming platforms” (p. 46). The

exposure from parents was later reformulated by interviewees' own experience in Korea, allowing many interviewees to participate in Korean culture in a passive way, but updated on trends, slang, and other cultural references in the ancestral homeland. Depictions in Korean media are sufficient to be partially immersed in part of Korean society, albeit virtual and distanced: "parents (first generation immigrants) were often depicted as someone who extensively consumed Korean media but rarely accessed non-Korean, English media" (p. 47). In other words, Korean immersion and connection to "ancestral homeland" was generationally mediated. Needless to say, "the exposure to Korean media at home did not necessarily keep Korean Canadian youth interested in Korean media and popular culture" (p. 47). But as second-generation Koreans transitioned to adulthood, some "basically re-learned Korean" (p. 48). What might have been intriguing follow up questions would cover the methods of "re-learning" which might include formal courses in college and/or intentional and disciplined ways of consuming media, beyond K-pop and/or K-dramas. How did they engage in this re-education? Was this a self-imposed journey to native-level bilingualism (or trilingualism for those who are francophone)? What resources does Canada and/or specific regions and/or institutions exist for Korean Canadian youth to advance in their enjoyment but also, immersion of Koreanness?

Perhaps, the most intriguing moment in the second chapter is how some of the respondents explored Pan-Asian Ethnic Identity (p. 48). How does the rise of the Korean Wave affect their relation and/or solidarity with other East Asian groups and individuals in Canada and the rest of the Americas? Yoon's project is a response of and a call for research in other diasporic communities, other spaces, and during different waves of immigration. Although 60% of the 2020 survey respondents were BTS fans (p. 48), additional surveys and studies could trace the evolution

and/or admiration for groups and cultural products that are increasingly adopting English-heavy repertoires. "Young audiences of Asian backgrounds identified with Hallyu media as a way of affirming their ethno-racial identities in response to White-dominant cultural contexts and media environments" (p. 48). In other words, the Pan-Asian solidarity might not be caused by the increasing use of English, but rather, the alternative phenotype that defied the normative popularity of mainstream White or "Western" entertainers. This is a point that the book successfully emphasizes, as he draws from several other studies. For instance, Yoon cites that "Austrian youth [assert that] Hallyu media functions as a substitute for dominant Western media among the diasporic youth, while engagement with the Hallyu media becomes a significant marker of their self-identity" (p. 48). The demographic composition might not be easy to decipher, but some "diasporic Asian fans consume K-pop as an ethno-cultural asset with self-celebratory fascination" (p. 48). K-pop was not a force that necessarily distinguished Korean culture products or nationality as a particularly nationalistic exceptionalism, but a cause to celebrate otherness and counter-culture entertainment. One of the respondents even confessed that "Psy's 'Gangnam Style' made her 'come out' as Korean in public places" (p. 52). Others "refused to be identified with Hallyu media by others (especially White people) as they did not want to be pigeonholed only as an ethnic audience member naturally tied to Hallyu as a cultural trend that inevitably signifies its Korean origin" (p. 53). Further research should address these differing attitudes and documenting statistical data would also complement more information regarding Hallyu reception among diaspora.

K-pop fandom and explicit distancing by Korean diasporic members redefined ways to navigate identity in light of a noticeably public and global presence of K-pop. "Orientalist gaze on the 'K' in K-pop may be challenged by alternative

voices with which this non-Western media genre is considered as 'subcultural capital' for imagining post-national and cosmopolitan worlds" (p. 54). The diverse attitude toward K-pop is a needed process for diaspora to engage or disengage with cultural products that though popular, might be viewed as "self-celebratory fascination" or on the contrary, "hesitant in overtly exhibiting their cultural tastes for K-pop among their peers" (p. 56).

Chapter 3, *Diasporic Viewing of Korean TV*, is pivotal to understand the Korean Canadian reception and representation on "Koreanness" and Korean identity, as it "focuses on Korean Canadians' viewing of and engagement with narrative Korean media genres" (p. 22). K-pop might be a very visual genre, in spite of the genre originally rooted in music. As we might expect, "diasporic youth were often aware of the Western and White gaze and felt marginalized" (p. 64), balancing the extremes of depictions of Asians as yellow peril or model minority (pp. 65–66) in television and cinema, media that was more intergenerational and democratic than user-enhanced streaming platforms. Moreover, Korean media from Korea provided a different array of narratives and symbols that recreated some of the youth's visual literacy, consumption habits, and aesthetic preferences that featured cultural products favored by the "ancestral homeland." Korean TV viewing by Korean diasporic youth became an activity that their parents experienced quite differently. For instance, "illegal downloading was a method for prompt access to an extensive range of Hallyu media among the earlier 2015 interviewees" (p. 69). Viki and DramaFever became popular in the diaspora and methods on how to navigate and inform each other about new episodes quickly spread (p. 71). The new generation accessed different media and genres. Streaming and sharing platforms allowed Korean with different degrees of fluency, to find subtitles that would allow them to experience the content originally in Korean but with resources to understand through user-generated subtitles.

Several respondents acknowledged that "Korean TV is not only dynamic, but also relatable ... and more personal" (p. 75), compared to Canadian TV that seldom included Asian diaspora.

The chapter and book, I suggest, culminate in his study of *Kim's Convenience* (2016-2022), and a seminal moment in Canadian TV in regards to Korean diaspora and reformulations of what Hallyu has evolved into. Paul Sun-Hyung Lee's 2017 speech opens with resounding gravitas: "Representation matters" (p. 86). The riveting speech that Lee shared on live TV with assertive and passionate language, effectively breaks the stereotype of the recent immigrant with "broken English", while reformulating the archetype of the patriarch as the anti-hero. The actor turns out to be the son of the patriarch in real life. Lee's words interrogate notions of Canadian identity that dared to celebrate and advocate for its self-proclaimed tolerant and multicultural ideal. Yoon has done close readings on the contributions and contradictions that are depicted in the show, and compels us to rethink Hallyu in the age of *Kim's Convenience*. The omnipresent diasporic Koreanness in Canadian TV (massively distributed by Netflix) counteracted with several Korean smash hits on streaming services. The show diversified the face, voice, and bodies of the Korean Wave, which often featured the formulaic industry standards of beauty and archetypal molds. There is an ample research opportunity to explore Korean diaspora on TV with other shows that have miniscule academic literature. This book will be part of the foundational sources to further study TV shows like *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), *Dr. Ken* (2015-2017), *Selfie* (2014), *All-American Girl* (1994-1995), etc.

The fourth chapter, "K-pop Diaspora," was the most ambitious but also, persuasive. Yoon "examines the particular meanings that are generated as these youth engage with K-pop in the process of growing up ... how K-pop is interpreted not only as an ethnic cultural text but also as a global cultural text" (p. 22). The

demographics heavily gravitate towards youth, as the music genre itself tends to cater and represent the youth rather than a multigenerational content or target audience. Key data contextualizes K-pop consumption habits in Korea and popular music in all languages in Canada. For instance, “most frequently listened to music among Koreans was Korean/domestic popular music (83.6%), which was followed by Western-English (12.4%) and Japanese (2.2%) popular music ... Canadian media is required by the national regulator to program Canadian content for at least 35% of a popular music broadcast” (p. 103). Korean/domestic popular music was by far the most listened genre, with a relatively miniscule consumption of music in English, while Canada required a minimum to allow more French and national entertainers. Internally, Korean popular music was dominant and increasingly popular in the global stage, while “Canadian music” might have been eclipsed by the pan-English hegemony mostly attributed to US and UK, in spite of massive global stars from Canada (Celine Dion, Drake, Shania Twain, Justin Bieber, The Weeknd, Shawn Mendes). Moreover, “among diasporic youth, K-pop may be signified as a *national/ethnic* (Korean) cultural genre on the one hand and re-signified as a *post-national/postmodern* cultural form on the other hand” (p. 104); Korean music became an “emotional refuge” (p. 108). Some important questions could have some intriguing follow up. For instance, does K-pop have a particular resonance with diasporic members which differ from those in South Korea? Is there a diasporic sound of K-pop that might resemble the cultural appropriation of artists who exploit cultural production from marginalized groups? How do diasporic Koreans receive native speakers “speaking” like second-generation Koreans (pronouncing Korean words with English accents) or code switching, regardless of the singers’ fluency in English. Ironically, “adoption of the English language refrains and rap parts in K-pop songs was considered by

several interviewees as a detrimental component in enjoying the music” (p. 123). Conserving or maintaining Korean dominance in Korean songs has been the preference for most fans, conscious that some of the authenticity might be lost with the omission of Korean as the main content. With increasing producers and creators who identify as diasporic Koreans, the genre renegotiates “hybridization and westernization” with “increasing incorporation of English and Western elements ... as a potentially undesirable or problematic type of hybridization as the tendency was interpreted as simple ‘Westernization’ of K-pop (or K-pop’s imitation of Western pop music)” (p. 123).

The book concludes with its most intrepid thesis, “Diasporizing Hallyu.” Yoon recognizes that “there are groups of 1.5 and second-generation Korean youth who are indifferent to, or even in denial of, Hallyu—especially those who are called ‘bananas’ or the ‘Whitewashed’” (p. 141), but additional study should be conducted to see if these groups are evolving and/or gravitating towards other aspects of the Wave which are not necessarily K-pop or K-drama, but other genres, cinema, K-beauty, and/or technology. This group is intentionally omitted in this project, but I look forward to listen to the voices of those who are “indifferent” or “in denial” of the current Hallyu. Perhaps there are generational differences or critical attitudes that K-pop might have been consumed by White Anglo hegemony, culturally appropriating Black music, and have become part of the exploitative realities of the global music industry.

The metaphor contained in Hallyu explicitly involves “diasporic cultural flows” (p. 5). The oceanic metaphor of Korean “soft power” can be limiting and considering other metaphors might reformulate our ways of understanding the phenomenon: “Hallyu is diasporic in interwoven way” (p. 5). The textile metaphor no longer views Hallyu as a mere trend, a momentary contact between Korean liquids and transnational shores.

Perhaps there is inevitable nostalgia for those of us who belong to a generation that did not experience Korean media in ways that they are featured in mainstream media today. Blackpink is fittingly mentioned as a prime example of diasporizing nature of Hallyu, as they reflect some demographics that make up a new K-pop industry that is produced by diasporic members, but also, features artists who are no longer “Korean” but hybrid and multilingual. The most followed K-pop artist on social media is Thai (Lisa from Blackpink), while Rosé and Jennie grew up in New Zealand. Now more than ever, Hallyu has become a diasporizing force. Hallyu becoming increasing diasporized is not only an apt description today, but a prediction of the state of Korean media in the global stage. Hallyu, in essence, is and will be diasporic.

Yoon recognizes pending issues towards the latter part of the book, pointing out the need to further study intersectional identities that will certainly liven the discussion. What do LGBTQ members of Korean Canadian society think of the shifting notions of masculinities and other gender expressions in Korean media? I would add how do the feminist and current anti-feminist movements in Korea affect Korean media and through their consumption abroad, the Korean diaspora’s engagement with content that might support or reject Korean feminism? How does the heightened religious Korean diaspora relate to the less religious nature of Korean popular media? Might I also suggest follow up studies on diasporic anti-Hallyu, the “conscious dissonance” of those who were not interviewed for the book project, the ones who deny the cultural phenomenon and hold on to a fatalist soft power nationalism. Neoliberal triumph of formulaic music emulates White Anglo hegemony over any attempt to salvage the “folkloric” romantic possibility that the wave represents and genuinely depicts the hybridizing reality of the Korea and its diaspora. The wave is not merely propaganda orchestrated by the government who is partnering

with chaebols, but also, evidence of the massive number of heterogenous multigenerational fans and consumers.

The book project concludes powerfully as it invites other case studies to replicate, expand, and reformulate his methodology and diasporic demographic. In other words, although an all-encompassing study of the reception of Hallyu is not possible, these case studies allow for a dialectic that no longer needs to reconsider Hallyu as a Made-in-Korea triumphalist soft power or a mere repetition of White Anglo-hegemony. Yoon’s project proves that this is an exciting moment for Hallyu studies, as we can expect “various intersectional experiences of diasporic youth, which have not been fully explored in this book, [and] require additional in-depth studies” (p. 141).

REFERENCES

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