

Special Issue: Circuits of K-content: Co-productions, Collaborations, and Connections

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was reported by the author.

After the first uses of “*hallyu*” in Chinese-language newspapers nearly thirty years ago, the metaphor of a Korean *wave* has largely been understood as fluid movements that radiate out from South Korea. Often framed as soft power, there are echoes of a miniature form of cultural imperialism, whether it is couched as celebratory or concerned. The purpose of this special issue, “Circuits of K-content: Co-productions, Collaborations, and Connections,” is to re-imagine this transnational relationship by setting aside the metaphor of a wave for the metaphor of a circuit. The intention is not to argue against the wave but to expand the metaphors that can be used to discuss transnational media engagement.

Transnational Engagement as a Wave

The existing research that engages with the wave metaphor understand it as flows and impact (this is different from the essays that do not theorize hallyu but use it as simply a synonym for Korean popular culture). This literature discusses hallyu in terms of its “soft power” effects, the structural conditions that allow its movement, or the affective connection and fan labor that amplifies its movements. Transnational research has tended to use the wave as an operational metaphor, whether celebratory or critical. Celebratory accounts have tended to consider the import and interest in “K-contents” as a sign of soft power and neoliberal economic advantage.

In some cases, the research has been motivated by a desire to strengthen and extend the Korean Wave’s distance, desirability, and duration for the nation’s political economic advantage. These utilitarian approaches imaged K-contents as tools to extend the nation’s influence or market position. In other cases, humanistic textual work raised ontological questions about K-contents that would allow for its cross-

borders popularity. Borrowing from Shim's (2006) foundational application of Bhabha's (1996) postcolonial concept, hybridity has been a fairly common explanation for K-content's stylistic choices, language, and ideological meanings. In other cases, different waves are constructed into typologies to explain the sociotechnological interactions that shape the contexts, or the waters, in which K-content is experienced. For instance, in Jin's (2018) argument for a "New Korean Wave" or his more popular articulation, "Korean Wave 2.0," he argues that social media had become a major driver for *hallyu* as "spreadable media" (p. 407). Likewise, in J. O. Kim's (2021) argument for a "Third Korean Wave," she argues that although asymmetrical flows still favor the West, South Korean media flows into the U.S. are no longer subcultural but have entered mainstream popularity.

Less frequently, a few critical scholars have looked askance at the wave to interrogate the machinations of geopolitical power. Writing about Japan and Korea, Iwabuchi's (2010) theory of "brand nationalism" warns that the overdetermination of the "K," or the "J," hides serious problems such as global media ownership and international intellectual property regimes (p. 91). These are ideological and geopolitical projects, which is a concern also raised by Korean Wave scholars who apply "subempire (e.g., Fedorenko, 2022)," Chen's (2000) theory about the complicity and participation by some East Asian countries with the neocolonial, neoliberal Western order. What these approaches—celebratory and critical—have in common is the assumption of an outward cultural, political, and economic impact.

These articles examine the extent of Korean popular culture media's popularity, the institutional and textual mechanisms for its spreading popularity, its sub-empirical formations, or its fan-facilitated popularity. This has been an important line of inquiry that addresses Korean popular culture flows through all of the circuits

of cultural meaning – production, text, and reception. However, the metaphor of the *wave* has constrained the space around which *hallyu* scholarship has arisen to focus on flows, whether it is the counterflows of *hallyu* in the West, the dominating flows into less developed media markets and nations, or, perhaps, the multipolarity of flows. This implicitly produces a domination-resistance model of flows as movements of popular culture are understood as an articulation of power. Regardless of the direction of the flow that is imagined, it is largely a unilinear formulation – waves that radiate from the national popular culture's center. Whether the wave just pleasantly dampens or threateningly submerges, the metaphor's unidirectionality is an assumption in much of the extant literature.

Transnational Engagement as a Circuit

Describing the emergence of the term, *hallyu*, Shim (2026) points out that the *-ryu* (류/流) suffix was not first affixed to a *Korean* wave but that it had been used to describe other transnational media flows, including a Hong Kong wave (항류), a Japanese wave (일류), a Chinese wave (화류), an a Taiwanese wave (대류). It is, then, perhaps less instructive to argue that the Korean wave is conceptually unique other than the site of origin for its production (Oh & Han, 2024). It is the purpose of this special issue to look otherwise and to consider not the question of flows and effects but of interactions. Instead of ripples outward, the movement of K-content can be understood as currents within a complex circuit in which the contents of other nations can travel back through existing pathways and in which interactions change the nature of the current. After two decades of Korean Wave research, it is appropriate to understand receiving nations as not only accepting or rejecting Korean media but actively interacting with it. Indeed, it also points to how Korean content itself is co-constituted by its relationship with the rest of the world. This

would be consistent with conceptualizations of communication itself that explain it as co-constituted through a complex negotiation of cultural meanings and symbols.

Perhaps, the metaphor of the circuit is itself too limited to explain the complexities of culture, but it is a call to consider interactions and meaning-making not only as direction but also as substance. In the interaction between Korean popular culture and another nation, the circuit metaphor does not look at the other nation, its culture, and its people as being acted upon but, rather, as having agency to interact with and to change Korean media content, too. For instance, a Korean television producer may have to become more aware of the politics and society of Malaysia to represent the nation in ways that will gain the favor of Malaysian audiences and perhaps to gain the production permissions and incentives that would make filming on location more lucrative. The Korean audience might also then learn more about Malaysia through the popular pedagogy of television. Thus, transnational media are not just outward moving flows but are also substances that change through interaction.

For this reason, the special issue is interested in understanding the mediated connections and meanings that are produced in metatextual narrative, in remakes and adaptations, in fandoms, and other forms of transnational connection. The special issue particularly values new ways of thinking about co-constituted circuits with K-content rather than the metaphor of the Korean Wave, and, relevant to the journal, it is especially interested in these connections in the Asia-Pacific region and its connections around the world.

Article Summaries

Myoung-Sun Song's article, "Mapping Inter-Asian Connections through Mother-Daughter Relationships in South Korean films," analyzes multiple lines of connection in *A Letter from Kyoto* (2023) and *Moonlit Winter* (2019),

including the connection between mother and daughter as well as Korea and Japan. Reflecting feminist commitments in film, the movies portray daughters' intervention in their mothers' lives to journey toward emotional healing in the wake of closed historical relations between Korea and Japan, following the end of Japan's imperial ambitions. In the films' postcolonial, feminist imagination, they explore different traumas, not the harms of the colonial regime but the forced foreclosure of the mothers' past Japanese lives. Through the centrality of the mother-daughter journey to Japan and the reconciliation with their mothers' past lives, the films position feminist connections in a postcolonial present, restoring circuits that had been shut off.

Megu Itoh's article, "The Villainess as Transnational Icon: Circulation, (Re)Production, and Legibility across Japan and Korea," focuses on the (re)circulation of the villainess as an archetypal figure in Japanese manga and Korean webtoons. Using the concept of the "transnational icon," she argues that the villainess is not culturally fixed but that its meaning and reception are dialogically constituted in circuits that tie Korea and Japan together. The meanings of the literary villain moves between cultural circuits such that what is most operative is this mutual co-construction and audience interpretation rather than how one nation's popular culture has affected another. Itoh's conclusions are more consistent with the view in cultural studies that culture is dynamic and has no fixed essence but, rather, is produced through the negotiation of cultural meanings within and between a country's borders.

Olivier Jiyoun Jung and Sungbin Youk's article, "South Korean V-Tuber Visual Conventions within Korea-Japan Cultural Circuits" also examines the connections and movement between South Korea and Japan. Drawing upon the concept of hybridity, they examine the multiple forms hybridity can take, including retention of the originating culture, differentiation from the originating culture, and rearticulation of

it. Using a mixed methods approach, the article compares Japanese and Korean V-Tubers, virtual YouTube influencers, which are crafted to appear visually similar to anime characters. By analyzing the similarities and differences in the articulation of Korean V-Tubers, they demonstrate the visual hybridity which occurs within semiotic circuits that reproduce and reconfigure anime conventions. Using both textual interpretation of selected V-Tubers as well as a computer-assisted analysis of many V-Tubers, they find “selective reconfiguration” in the hybrid visual language of V-Tubers, connecting to while differentiating from Japanese anime visual conventions.

Xingyue Li, Jihoon Park, and Kristin April Kim’s article, “When Paid Intimacy Fails: Layered Accountability in Chinese K-Pop Video Call Events,” continues a regional analysis of the circuits of Chinese fandom and K-pop idols. Developing the concept of “layered accountability,” their article asks how and why Chinese fans direct blame for “failed” live calls, brief one-on-one video calls with idols. Although this node in international fan circuits presents possibilities for deepened affective engagement, the idols’ inability to meet fan expectations of sincerity and attention can produce dissatisfaction and blame that is directed toward the idol, the platform, or the idol’s management company. As the authors demonstrate, these short circuits in global fandom can generate fan disinterest but, in other cases, the currents of fandom are not disrupted but, rather, rerouted elsewhere to different idols who may be perceived as more worthy of the fan’s affection.

Sam James and So Yoon Lee’s article, “Embodied boundary work: Materializing identity across transnational K-pop concert spaces” attends to the idea of circuits through their cross-national participant observations of concerts in the U.S. and South Korea. Circuits of meaning in this case do not only connect national spaces but fans with one another in shared, embodied space. Advancing the theory of embodied boundary

work, the essay concludes that fans articulate and embody multiple identities as fans and as people whose bodies carry meanings about their social identities. This embodiment produces opportunities for fannish community through “semiotic alignment” but also difference with the ways in which they experience and are experienced in shared physical space. Across Korea and the U.S., shared symbols do not just exist as signs but become materially and corporeally manifest, connecting and moving fans across transnational and within intra-fandom circuits.

Finally, Sarah Keith’s article, “K-style Content: Assembling ‘Korea’ in the Platform Era,” examines media about Korea that is made outside of Korea, including *Kpop Demon Hunters* (2025) and *XO, Kitty* (2023). These new shows are positioned as Korean-media adjacent, connecting the mediated world of Korea in popular music and television to a North American imagination, a meta-simulacrum of what Keith calls “K-style.” Drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of assemblage, she points to the ways both shows borrow from K-pop and Korean drama conventions, tropes, and clichés in order to present Seoul, a metonym for Korea, as an exciting, appealing fantasy world. As the article demonstrates, the global popularity of Korean popular culture has produced new affordances to produce circuits that borrow from the symbolic universe and capital of Korean media in the 21st century within the production environment of the U.S.

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