

Book Review

Jin, D. Y., Yoon, K. Y., & Min, W. (2021).
Transnational Hallyu: The Globalization of Korean Digital and Popular Culture. Rowman & Littlefield

Benjamin M. Han¹

¹ Department of
Communication, Tulane
University, USA

Corresponding author

Benjamin M. Han
Department of
Communication, Tulane
University, 219 Newcomb
Hall, 1229 Broadway,
New Orleans, LA 70118,
USA
Email: bhan5@tulane.edu

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Transnational Hallyu is a welcoming addition to Hallyu studies as it offers a holistic approach to the study of K-pop across the globe. It is one of the few books that provides a comprehensive understanding of how fans across North America, South America, and Europe consume K-pop despite their lack of geographical, linguistic, and cultural affinities. More importantly, the book engages with critical theories in the study of globalization and media, such as cultural imperialism, hybridity, and contra-flow to offer a new framework to the study of *Hallyu* as a significant vector of the global media and cultural landscape. For example, the authors write that Hallyu illuminates “diversified directions of cultural globalization” (Jin et al., 2020, p. 9). Hence, the study of K-pop not only subverts the center-periphery binary that has long informed and shaped the study of media and cultural globalization but also the contra-flow of media and culture from a non-Western nation. The consumption of K-pop in North and South America and Europe further helps us understand that contra-flows are not only counter-hegemonic but also reifies the continuing dominance of Western power in the globalization of culture industries, as seen with cases of dominant social media and streaming platforms, including Netflix and YouTube.

While convergence and digitalization are the main concepts informing the arguments of the book, the authors are cautious not to over-value technological advancements in the form of social media platforms in understanding the transnational appeal and popularity of K-pop across different regional contexts. While convergence allows us to think of media being integrated across many different forms and structures, including industries, texts, and audiences, the book claims that convergence cannot be solely explained in terms of technology; rather, the book argues that convergence needs to be understood as transnational culture. Additionally, the book’s adoption of the concept

of “cultural omnivore” to explain how fans have come to encounter and interact with K-pop attests to the inherent hierarchization of global media contents, rendering it more challenging to dismantle it.

Methodologically, the book combines political economy and cultural studies, which have been historically debated as irreconcilable ways of studying media and popular culture. On the one hand, political economists have criticized cultural studies scholars for ignoring the study of institutions and economics, thus rendering them incapable of understanding the real operations of power structures. On the other hand, cultural studies scholars have pointed out the tendency of political economists to place too much emphasis on economics while ignoring questions of texts, discourses, audiences, and consumption (Gandy Jr. & Garnham, 1995; Garnham, 1995; Grossberg, 1995). As result, there has been an ongoing discussion on the relationship between political economy and cultural studies. Hence, scholars such as Havens et al. (2009) have proposed critical media industry studies as a better framework to the integration of industrial processes into the study of cultural processes, which gives attention to the role of human agents, popular entertainment, everyday meaning-making practices, and power through the lens of discourse. *Transnational Hallyu* employs both political economy and cultural studies in its analysis of the transnational flow and reception of K-pop in different geopolitical regions. For instance, while analyzing the larger industrial shifts shaping the transnational flow of K-pop, the book, through qualitative interviews with K-pop fans from diverse nations, examines how K-pop integrates into their everyday lives via the meaning-making process. In doing so, the authors argue that meanings attached to K-pop are not fixed and stable but susceptible to polysemic interpretations under diverse cultural influences and factors that perhaps make the theorization of global K-pop fandom more

challenging for scholars.

Another significant contribution of the book to the study of the Korean Wave is the historicization of the term Hallyu that entered the popular lexicon in the 1990s through mainstream media outlets. The authors point out the unchallenged tendency to view the concept of Hallyu emerging sporadically in the global mediascape scene without necessarily understating its precursors in the form of industrial changes, cultural policies, and different actors that shaped its emergence as a new form of transnational East Asian media popular culture. As the authors note, Hallyu is the outcome of Korean cultural industries’ continuous integration into the global mediascape for more than twenty years, not just an abrupt explosion and growth in popularity. In this section of the book, one might question the historicity of the term “K-pop,” which has been used uncontestedly without reference to its specific historical conditions. Is K-pop a highly commodified term that emerges from the culmination of factors involving industrial and globalization strategies as opposed to “*gayo*,” an antecedent form used in a local context before K-pop emerged as a Hallyu concept? Hence, are there inherent differences between these two terms that make the former more global than the latter? And how do these two terms in different cultural imaginations illustrate the tension between the global and the local?

Moreover, the authors provide an infrastructural perspective to the study of Hallyu through the examination of Korea’s development of information technology that facilitated the distribution of Korean media and popular culture. The inclusion of infrastructure within the examination of Hallyu points to an under-investigated area of research where we can view Hallyu as an infrastructural itself where the global consumption of K-pop via downloading, streaming, and sharing files through illegitimate media circuits involves affect or structures

of feeling that facilitate and strengthen the mediation and intimacy of fans with K-pop. The larger concept of mediation that undergirds the book, as it pertains to digital culture, prompts us to think of how it engenders new meanings around intimacy, immediacy, (dis)connection, and relevancy, which are undertheorized in the study of the Korean Wave as a distinctive form of global media culture. The discussion of Hallyu as digital culture also induces readers to think of the different types of labor, such as affective, aspirational, and relational, involved in K-pop fandom.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 provides the theoretical framework informing the arguments of the book in which the authors not only examine the significance of Hallyu studies but revisit some of the key theories informing it. It also describes key research questions and methodological frameworks in their definition of Hallyu as a digital and transnational cultural wave. Chapter 2 focuses on the different changes that the Korean cultural industries experienced from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s. In particular, the chapter focuses on the cultural policies and technological advancements shaping Hallyu, particularly exploring Korean cultural industries' continuous integration into the global mediascape for more than twenty years. Here, the authors are cautious to make a reductive claim and offer a celebratory view of how technological affordances facilitate the spreadability of K-pop. Chapter 3 discusses digital dimensions of Hallyu, particularly exploring how convergence through social media platforms and webtoons have contributed to the globalization and popularity of Korean media content in the sphere of global youth culture.

The rest of the chapters are case studies focusing on North America, South America, and Europe. Chapter 4 examines how Hallyu has been integrated into the everyday lives of North America fans. As the authors write, "... the global circulation of Hallyu can be examined

in relation to the way in which fans' grassroots transnationalism interplays with top-down, corporate transnationalism" (Jin et al., 2020, p. 72). Chapter 5 focuses on Chile as a case study of South America. In this chapter, the authors explain how Latin American youth participate in the social mediascape of Hallyu through secondhand translation. According to the authors, Chilean fans rely on secondhand translation from U.S.-based and English translations of K-pop content, which continues to reify how it is mediated through the West as the dominant center of cultural translation. More importantly, the authors argue that "Hallyu is a cultural resource, which may appeal to some Latin youth who cope with multiple societal contradictions partly due to complex temporalities—such as conflicting coexistence of indigenous culture and rapid neoliberalization" (Jin et al., 2020, p. 99). This chapter specifically focused on Chile expands the discussion of fandom to include the issue of racial politics, manifested in the labeling and stereotyping of fans as *chinos* or *chinitos*, which are embedded in the larger discourse of Orientalism. Furthermore, this racialized label attests to the politics of sameness and invisibility informing the representation of Asians. The chapter further prompts us to think of how K-pop as a foreign cultural form not only contributes to the racialization of Asians but also renders domestic Asian bodies less visible in the Chilean media and cultural spheres. The chapter also illustrates that K-pop is not only a subculture or post-subculture but also a foreign and globalized cultural product integrated into a localized political context, such in the case of the 2019 political protests in Chile, where K-pop was the culprit for inciting the movement against the government's neoliberal reform.

The book's focus on Chile as a specific case study subverts the essentializing tendency to view and understand Latin America as a homogeneous regional entity, as the discussion is centered on

Chile's unique historical, cultural, and social contexts informing the reception of K-pop among its fans. Chapter 6 focuses on Germany as a case study of Europe and examines how Hallyu fans consider themselves highly individualized as they perceive K-pop as "a total work of art" (Jin et al., 2020, p. 107) that distinguishes from mainstream American or German culture. Chapter 7 examines Hallyu in Spain, offering a comparative perspective to how fans in Spain consume K-pop differently than Chile and Germany. The concluding chapter discusses how the study of Hallyu contributes to the theorization of transnational media and cultural flows.

Even though the chapters that focus on different regions as case studies offer novel insight into how fans in those countries consume K-pop, there are two concepts that deserve more in-depth discussion: 1) soft masculinity, and 2) neoliberalism. I wonder how the interviewees in the book responded to the concept of soft masculinity associated with K-pop idols against the backdrop of nationalistic models that emphasize hard masculinity. Also, even though the concept of neoliberalism has been exhaustively discussed in the examination of K-pop as a byproduct of industrial standardization that exploits not only cheap labor but also places significant value on self-enterprising, how do fans view K-pop as a resistance against the capitalist culture industry that reproduces the logic of neoliberalism while simultaneously aiming to subvert it? And lastly, how does the mobilization of K-pop fans contribute to the culture rather than political war as evidenced by their participation in the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States?

In sum, the authors' detailed analysis of K-pop consumption across different geopolitical regions illustrates how Hallyu as a complex global media flow is a cultural force to be reckoned with and further susceptible to rich, insightful analysis that induces us to revisit, rethink, and redefine critical theories of globalization and transnationalism.

The book also underscores many challenges that scholars face in developing new innovative theoretical perspectives to the study of Hallyu. Overall, I appreciate the book's deviation from the questions of soft power, nationalism, and the state's role as a cultural agent driving the transnationalization of Korean media and popular culture. In contrast to existing studies, the authors direct our attention to the significance of fans as producers and consumers who contribute to the circulation of K-pop as it travels across different geographical and cultural spaces. More importantly, the book helps us think of what an in-depth ethnographic study of global K-pop fandom would entail and further envision new theorization of Hallyu involving fan activism and transnational proximity. Lastly, the book will be a valuable resource for those teaching courses on transcultural fandom, globalization and culture, and the Korean Wave.

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