

Special Issue: Past, Present, and Future of the Korean Wave (Hallyu)

Notes on Transcultural Fandom, Imaginary Homelands, and Sartorial Fan Practices

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For most of my career, I have seen myself as an “Americanist,” reluctant to write about other cultures because I did not feel I would ever know them as intimately as I knew my own. This position started to shift in the summer of 2023 when I spent seven weeks in Shanghai, teaching a fandom studies class at Shanghai University and immersing myself in local fan cultures.

This trip dramatized something I already understood intellectually: Hollywood’s dominance over global media was in decline and the next decades would be shaped by four Asian media-producing countries (Korea, Japan, China, and India) competing for dominance. I was surprised how deeply my Chinese students were immersed in Korean and Japanese media with massive malls dedicated to the exchange of cultural materials at the corporate, entrepreneurial, and grassroots level. The life of a fan in Shanghai was characterized both by pop cosmopolitan impulses to engage with cultures from elsewhere and fan nationalist impulses encouraging a protective stance towards one’s own culture, resulting in one of the most vibrant, creative, public, and economically viable fan cultures I have encountered anywhere in the world.

What the field of fandom studies needed in order to follow these developments were more comparative perspectives on fandom in East Asia that go beyond a single person’s expertise. The best way to achieve such insights was building a large-scale network of researchers collaborating across national boundaries. Led by Sangita Shreshtova and myself, the network—as of summer 2024—already has close to a hundred participants—mostly graduate students and junior faculty—working together in more than a dozen teams to research various aspects of transcultural fandom and popular culture in East Asia. In May 2024, I brought six students from the University of Southern California to Hong Kong and Shanghai where they met with their

Chinese counterparts at conferences hosted by Hong Kong Baptist University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University and for a week-long bus tour of fan locations in and around Shanghai. This trip allowed my American-based students to get a more grounded sense of developments in China and build stronger bonds amongst participants.

To understand the model that shapes our research, I will first define two key terms for us – transcultural fandom and fan locations. Then I will give some preliminary reports on two research projects we have undertaken—my own comparing fan locations in Shanghai and Seoul and a student-led initiative focusing on Hanfu, Hanbok, and fan nationalism. In my conclusion, I will suggest the impact of this kind of comparative and collaborative research.

Key Concepts

Writers, such as Bertha Chin, Lori Morimoto, and others, have made the case for understanding fandom as transcultural, a term which can refer to different cultures within a region as much or more than it does to differences between nation-states (Morimoto 2017; Morimoto 2018). Morimoto and Chin (2017) stress what happens when access and affinity combine: fans feel connections with popular culture that does not ‘belong’ to them, was not made with them in mind, may not even know of their existence, but nevertheless speaks to them in powerful ways. National differences certainly matter in such encounters, whether understood in terms of geographic boundaries, regulatory structures, or linguistic barriers, but the fan also recognizes something here which may transcend those national distinctions. Morimoto and Chin (2017) argue:

Understood as something that may be nation-centered, but may not be as well, a transcultural orientation enables us to conceive of extranational subject positions that assert themselves to varying and always shifting degrees at the levels of both the individual fan

and fandom generally. By recognizing fans as more than the sum total of a singular affective interest or national belonging, and fan communities as inherently transcultural sites characterized as much by conflict as concord, we open up a space for the possibility of understanding fan studies as a fundamentally transcultural enterprise. (p. 99)

The study of fan locations is relatively new and thus takes a bit more explanation. Marc Steinberg and Edmond Ernest Dit Alban (2018) write, “Otaku culture, we argue, must be understood neither merely through particular foundational texts nor merely through specific ways of seeing ... but rather through a conjunction of these visual and narrative elements with specific patterns of urban encounters. City spaces and transportable media commodities can become key methodological tools for mapping otaku movement” (p. 289). They map a Tokyo neighborhood called Ikebukuro, which they characterize as “a Mecca for female fandom” because of its numerous second-hand shops. Here one can buy recycled media, print culture, and clothing that has acquired value through subcultural production. They merge tools from cultural studies, urban history, and cultural geography to discuss the mobility of both media and pedestrians and how these movements charge the space with affect and meaning.

Expanding those arguments across a series of essays on “Otaku Sanctuaries,” including work on Otome Road and Tokyo Disneyland, dit Alban has tapped a “pedestrian” perspective on how fan networks operate and what an understanding of material practices and locations might contribute. How, for example, might a recognition of fan recycling, recirculation, and reselling practices contribute to our comprehension of Japan’s “media mix” (dit Alban, 2020)? This is a refreshing shift in focus – the study of online fan practices, while also important, may now deflect attention from material culture and physical geography.

In order to research how transcultural fandom

operates, we need a fuller understanding of what's happening on the ground, at specific locations, where cultural goods are exchanged, where participants gather, where cultures intersect, since such locations are where access and affinity are most likely to mix. The best way to understand this process is to encourage conversation, comparison and collaboration amongst researchers differently situated in relation to those fan locations.

CASE 1: FAN LOCATIONS IN SHANGHAI

In the heart of Shanghai is a full size (25-meter-high) and garishly colored statue of Evangelion Unit-01, modeled after the globally successful anime series, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Early on a summer Sunday, the statue attracted a mix of young women in Japanese school girl costumes, geeky guys, and a family centered around a five-year-old “princess” in heart shaped sunglasses and fluffy pink dress. The statue was created for the China Joy gaming expo and then transplanted to this park for more permanent display in 2017. Near the base of the hulking figure are smaller statues paying tribute to other icons of Japanese popular culture, including Ultraman, Godzilla, and characters from popular anime and video games. I discovered the location from a student in my class on western fandom studies at Shanghai University, who had referred to the location as his “imaginary homeland.” He and his friends would assemble there before going to watch anime at a local cinema or shop for manga.

As he explained, “Perhaps for ordinary residents it is just a large decoration but for fans it has an extraordinary value and significance of breaking through time and space limitations” (personal correspondence, name withheld). Seeing this memorial to Japanese popular culture with my own eyes helped me to understand in what sense this might constitute a “homeland” to a Chinese student who had never left the mainland—a

space where he went to find others who shared his passions and to escape the parochial realities of everyday life into the realm of “cool Japan.”

While in Shanghai, I saw multiple imaginary homelands, such as the Evangelion statue, functioning as portals to an imagined elsewhere. These are places young fans go when they want to feel closer to Japan, Korea, or the United States. Rather than going to some faraway place to intensify their relationships with popular fantasies (“fan pilgrimage”), these fans go to ‘shrines’ in their own neighborhood.

Contemporary Chinese malls offer diversifying opportunities to live out your fantasies—chain stores like Pop Mart or specialized malls dedicated to pop culture from other East Asian countries or amusement parks like Disneyland Shanghai or character cafes designed to engulf you in the world of Final Fantasy or temporary autonomous zones such as those that emerge when fans rent a theater space to host their own events.

This focus on the fan consumer gives these places the sense of being imaginary homelands. They exist locally but they encourage us to think globally or at least transculturally. Chinese fans can visit them in their own neighborhood. Many Chinese high school students return home from school, change into costumes and head out to the local mall to socialize. Every day is cosplay day here, and local malls tolerate and sometimes embrace these fans as vital customers at a time when many other Chinese people have shifted from brick-and-mortar stores towards online retailers. Some malls provide mini-staging areas where people can take their cloth dolls (associated with K-Pop fandom) and stage photographs in fantasy (*My Neighbor Totoro*, *Slam Dunk*) or exotic (a 19th century midwestern fairgrounds) locations. I saw women in their 30s and 40s grooming their dolls, carefully situating them, and snapping photographs.

When I visit the Eva Unit-1 park, I am simultaneously in the heart of Shanghai and entering a shrine to Japanese popular culture. I

can pretend the giant robot is real even as I know that it is a simulacra of something that exists only in an animated world. Performance scholar Bobby Schweitzer (2021) has documented how Disney fans responded to the claustrophobia of the Covid lockdown by producing homemade videos restaging their favorite Disneyland attractions. Schweitzer's analysis draws on Kendall Walton's (1990) *Make Believe and Mimesis* which defines Make Believe as the "use of (external props) in imaginative activities." As Schweitzer writes, "the act of make-believe is a form of social imagining in which *prompters* (such as verbal suggestions and props) are used to figure the *imagined object*..... [in the fan videos] Household objects are reconfigured in relation to their theme park referents. Desk chairs become ride vehicles, toys and dolls are recruited as animatronics, and souvenirs establish authenticity." (p. 204).

We might think of an imaginary homeland as its own form of fan "make believe", transforming the local into the global, much as Schweitzer observes fans turning their homes into amusement park attractions. Rather than conceiving these evocative spaces as enabling the willing (but passive) suspension of disbelief, Walton's theories describe the *active production* of belief—people *make* themselves and others *believe*—using resources we have at hand. This interpretation accounts for the importance of character goods as props for woolgathering much as the homemade Disney ride films tapped toys to cue viewer's memories of the parks.

Back to Shanghai. A mixed gender group of fans rented a cinema for a screening of *The First Slam Dunk*, a feature film remaking a classic Japanese anime and manga series. These fans dressed in sports uniforms that look like those worn by the high school basketball teams depicted in the film, they brought bright red thunder sticks which they clapped together in unison to cheer the fictive protagonists, acting as if they were watching a game in real time. So, they had a sense of possession, literally, over the rented space of the

cinema and more figuratively, over the imagined world of the high school gymnasium.

Such pop-up fan events occur every weekend scattered across Shanghai as rented spaces host a moveable feast of shared activities constituting a broadly accessible, publicly visible aspect of fan culture. I recall the dynamic quality of the random play K-pop dance party my students and I experienced in a Shanghai mall. A plastic sticker of a giant circle had been attached to the floor in the center of the mall. A sound system blared thirty second or so clips from various contemporary K-pop songs. Several hundred participants, mostly women, gather around the circle and as they cycle through the song segments, those who know the choreography for that song step into the circle to dance. Sometimes, only one or two know the moves and so they get moments of virtuoso performance, whereas other times many if not most of the participants know the moves and so this becomes a space of collective celebration and female solidarity. Elsewhere, around the world, these random playlist dances occur without authorization from civic or retail establishments, with fans gathering in public parks or parking garages or empty streets in the wee hours of the morning, claiming a space – however risky – for their fan performances.

Shanghai Disneyland is perhaps the most expensive and expansive of these imaginary homelands. Disney deploys its Imagineering skills to create a series of larger-than-life environments, some familiar from parks in the United States, others reimaged, redesigned, and rebuilt to Chinese tastes. But regular Chinese visitors regard the park as a promenade where they can show off their best clothes and see what their neighbors may be wearing this weekend.

Now consider a different fan location, in Yeouido, Hongdae and other Seoul neighborhoods, the material practices of K-pop also get commodified and performed through retail practices. These practices again and again foreground the intimate connections between fans and their idols, almost

but not entirely to the exclusion of the forms of imaginary homelands I observed in Shanghai. The release of a significant new album may result in specialized pop-up stores dedicated to performers and their fans. When I visited, there was a shop dedicated to the first solo “mini-album” from Yuqi, a member of [G]ID-le. Here, you can buy both simple or deluxe editions, either of which contain an eclectic mix of stickers, photocards, and other related paraphernalia. Some K-pop shops offer mini-production facilities where fans can record themselves unboxing the album at the point of purchase for later posting on social media.

Almost as an extension of these physical media, the shop is engulfed in multimodal practices. You can step into a photobooth and have your picture taken interacting with images of your favorite Idol. Typically, fans go with their friends and order multiple sets of the images so they can be shared and exchanged—in effect, their own personalized photo cards. You can buy light sticks dedicated to your idols. Light sticks are a vital part of participatory fandom as experienced at the concert, with the house computer taking control over and coordinating the light sticks, all flashing at once to signal fan solidarity in support of the performers.

And beyond the material goods for sale, the stores offer a multimedia showcase for the performers, with their music videos projected onto wall sized monitors or even layered onto display cases of their goods. The fan is engulfed on all sides by their likeness, and again, especially their dance moves. As one fan explained, everything here is designed to facilitate maximum circulation via social media as fans assume more active and formal roles as publicists for their idols.

If the spatial practices of Chinese fandom enable building and occupying alternative worlds, the spatial practices of Korean fandom perform the possession of/ being possessed by pop Idols. The shops are a playground where people can embrace and capture images that continually enact the fans’ relationship to their idols.

Next, I want to share a report on work in progress from one of the dozen or more research teams working within our network. In this case, they are exploring the relationship of historic dress to the crossing and defending of national borders. Here, we see the tension between transcultural desires and fan nationalism, given the intense pride these fans take in their own traditions, their desire for crosscultural visibility, and their defensiveness about other culture’s laying claim to their fashions.

CASE 2: HANFU, HANBOK, “CULTURAL CONFIDENCE” AND FAN NATIONALISM

Connecting with national identity and history, hanfu (汉服) and hanbok (한복) have gained attention as typical historical costumes in China and Korea. Many citizens wear traditional costumes as daily outfits, post photos on social media, and gather as communities to promote their culture and voice out for their countries. In past studies, fashion tastes have been significant in the self-presentation of identity, knowledge, and values (Affuso & Scott, 2023). The costume, with unique style and slogan, contain individual’s position on social problems, their rebellion towards mainstream ideology, and their interpretation of appropriated cultural materials (Hebdige, 1979). Hence, this old-fashioned dressing style allows us to explore the politics of dressing in historical costumes and fans’ roles in policing and promoting such historic cosplay. Our research focuses on the complex online discourse around the practice of historical cosplay as a source of insights on fan nationalism, sartorial fandom, and subculture.

The growing significance of hanfu and hanbok is reinforced by grassroots, commercial, and state-led enterprises. In Korea, tourists are encouraged to dress in hanbok to visit historic sites such as Gyeongbokgung, where makeup

and photo services are provided, showing the powerful economic effect that is tied to consumer nationalism (Li, 2008). By boycotting costumes from other countries and endorsing media content that highlights their culture, people express their appreciation for their countries. When some Chinese citizens wear hanbok in public and post pictures on social media, they risk accusations of being traitors. To counter this, some include phrases like “I’m Chinese, I love my country, I dress hanbok just for fun” to reassert their identities, showing strong national sentiment tied to traditional costumes.

In August 2023, there was a movement in China to ask The British Museum to return Chinese cultural relics. The movement gained traction through historic cosplay, with influencers cosplaying ancient Chinese to raise awareness, accumulating 2.7 billion views on Douyin. The practice is an act of fan nationalism as citizens idolize their country and patriotically defend it online (Liu, 2019). While the movement garnered support, some people viewed it as performative, which sparked a debate about nationalism and the political meaning of fandom in China.

State promotion is crucial in making historical costumes visible in citizens’ everyday lives. Cultural days like Huaifu (华服) Day¹ and Hanbok Day invite people worldwide to wear historical costumes and celebrate. However, differences in cultural attitudes lead to tensions between Chinese and Korean citizens on social media platforms. As Anderson (1991) argues, media plays an important role in forming an imagined community, under the states’ intervention, citizens build an online community that could fight for their culture and their imagined community. The mobilization of hanfu

and hanbok within fan spaces demonstrates the significance of fashion and dress as a tool for communicating belonging.

Disneybounding² in Korea presents a unique example of the intersections of nation, ethnicity, and fandom through personal style. Disneybounding in Korea involves merging aspects of Korean traditional national clothing with the color palette and style of Disney characters (Williams, 2023). Fan-produced works, such as DIY Disney-inspired hanbok and Koreanified Disney princess fan art, illustrate the role of fashion in making cultural meaning. Through Disneybounding, fans navigate between their national, ethnic and pop cosmopolitan identities, which inspires new forms of global consciousness (Jenkins, 2004). Here, Disney is used as a resource to convey the beauty of Korea and as a venue for celebrating national culture with a global audience.

On a popular Vlog documenting Disneybounding in Paris Disneyland, a Korean girl wears a Disney mermaid-inspired hanbok. The video attracted numerous Korean comments, praising the hanbok’s beauty and expressing pride in its recognition abroad (SAIDA, 2022). This exchange shows the cultural confidence that emerges when hanbok is appreciated in a global setting and highlights how Disneybounding, even if unintentionally, enables celebrating and affirming national identity.

Similar functions are evident in the reimagining of iconic characters. For instance, @00obsidian00 imagines Snow White as a Korean princess, utilizing the Disney color palette while incorporating the hanbok as her dress form (Wooh, 2024). Positive reactions demonstrate that a diverse audience appreciated the merging of traditional Korean elements with globally recognized icons.

Using a hanbok to Disneybound reflects a dual

¹ “Huaifu” is a term used to refer to the traditional clothing of the 56 ethnic groups in China. Instead of using “hanfu” to exclusively represent the major ethnic group, the government opted for “huaifu” to promote participation from the entire nation on cultural day.

² Disneybounding refers to the process of everyday cosplay where fans utilize makeup, style, and accessories to embody the color palette or style of a specific Disney character, film, or attraction (Brock, 2017; Williams, 2023).

process of politicization and depoliticization. On one hand, such cross-cultural play politicizes national garments by placing them on characters from mainstream media and inviting the global audience to celebrate Korean culture. On the other hand, such fan practices can also depoliticize hanbok, stripping away national meanings. Hanbok is reduced to a costume, enjoyed purely for its beauty. And through this process, wearing or enjoying traditional attire has become a global aesthetic experience. This duality in fan practices reflects a complex interplay between maintaining cultural uniqueness and fostering a shared, inclusive cultural dialogue. Fans engage in this interplay by restyling traditional cultural elements through cosplay and fan art. In doing so, they not only satisfy their desire for cultural representation but also lobby for greater visibility in mainstream media.

Disneybounding is not the only occasion where hanbok becomes a symbol of clashing national, cultural, and ethnic identifications. Foreign tourists' enraptured response to hanbok is clearly communicated through social media posts where tourists describe the experience of wearing hanbok, with the recurring declaration, "I felt like a princess," expressing their own pleasure and inspiring others to seek such experiences. However, some tourists do not simply describe their experience as princess-like; they explicitly term the experience as becoming a "Disney Princess." Fan comparisons between Disney and Korean Dramas (K-Dramas) can be found throughout social media sites such as Instagram and TikTok under hashtags like DISNEYXKDRAMA. So, what is it that resonates with these DISNEYXKDRAMA fans? Disney princess tales are an example of princess stories a genre of fairy tales that teach women and girls lessons in femininity. Disney stories also focus on romance and the power of true love making them an important site for escapist fantasies of female empowerment. Like Disney princess tales, K-Drama has the capacity to create a fantasy of

female empowerment derived from an erotic faith, the power of true love, and an idealized femininity. However, unlike Disney Princess tales, K-Dramas are situated in a single, identifiable cultural and ethnic context — Koreanness.

Hanbok as a material and visual representation of Korean cultural traditions provides ways for foreigners to immerse themselves in the cultural narrative of Korea. Moreover, for foreign fans of K-Drama (and Disney), wearing hanbok in Seoul becomes an act of sartorial fandom that opens a space where the fantasy of princesshood becomes an embodied reality. Hanbok's capacity to create a liminal space is amplified by its temporal and cultural distance. As a symbol of distinctly Korean traditional culture, the hanbok signifies a romanticized Other, a tradition different from the fan's and, therefore, exotic and more amenable to the imaginations of romance, reparation, and transformation. Furthermore, as a symbol of tradition associated with the colorful dress of courtesans and emperors in ancient Joseon, hanbok mobilizes an idealized national past where Korean palaces mirror Disney castles.

The examples we have briefly discussed here demonstrate the value of thinking critically about the relationship between transnational fandom, historical dress, and identity. In them, we consider fandom a lifestyle that can be expressed through style and dress. Whether through the fan-nationalist impetus to wear hanfu and hanbok as a political statement, the act of Disneybounding in hanbok as an affirmation of national and cultural identity, or wearing hanbok to participate in fan tourism, each case demonstrates how fashion becomes a strategy or ritual for accessing the transformative and affirming power of fandom.

Implications

The two cases here illustrate the value of comparative work on transcultural fandom in East Asia. Ultimately, such insights are only going to emerge through collaborations across

national boundaries and languages. Working together, we can test embedded assumptions, learning to look at our own and other cultures from new perspectives. Together, we can discover hidden affinities between cultural practices, trace controversies that play out via social media across and within different national contexts and follow various responses to the same texts – for example, the Disney Princesses or in another case we are exploring, Barbie.

We live in the era of the global shuffle: we have greater access to each other's cultures than ever before. The results are unpredictable and varied. We need approaches which are open-minded enough to capture the ambivalences and complexities of what is happening now and what will happen next. What may seem racist in one context will seem normal in another – as we are finding in a case on Genshin Impact – and what seems queer in one context seems straight in another as in cross cultural work on [G]Id-le. As our network grows – and we are always open to new participants – we will produce a wealth of publications exploring how the flow of media content and fan practices across borders may be impacting our sense of ourselves, our cultures, our governments, and so much more.

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