

Guest Editors' Introduction

Wonjung MIN and Dal Yong JIN

In the 2020s, several elements from Korean culture, including the music of BTS, Bong Joon-ho's movie *Parasite*, and the TV drama *Squid Game*, penetrated both Western and non-Western cultural spheres. When the Korean Wave, referring to the rapid growth of Korean cultural industries and Korean cultural content's permeation of global cultural markets, started in the mid-1990s, the major target region was East Asia. Since the early 2010s, however, Korea has rapidly advanced into global cultural markets, including North America, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. Korea has also expanded its cultural forms to be exported, from dramas, films, and K-pop to digital technologies and cultures, including digital games and webtoons (Longenecker and Lee 2018; Kim 2021; Yoon 2022).

There have been several significant factors behind the recent growth of the Korean Wave in global cultural markets, including the increasing role of social media, the involvement of global capital in local cultural production, and shifts in people's cultural consumption habits in the OTT (over-the-top) platform era. While these elements playing essential roles in the Korean Wave are various, the concept of transnationalism allows for their understanding within a single theoretical framework. In other words, the Korean Wave in the global context since the 2010s is an example of the transnational circulation of popular culture

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and digital media forms and practices, generating and deploying alternative media consumption and moving beyond conventional routes and infrastructures (Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021). Transnationality implies flows of people, culture, and information beyond national boundaries, and the Korean Wave has actualized flows of popular culture and digital technologies beyond national and regional boundaries. The Korean Wave is negotiated by different audiences and re-situated by different uses of cultural literacy for its translation and decoding.

This special issue on *Hallyu Storytelling in the Americas* examines how the concepts of transnationalism, transnational proximity, and the universality of the Korean Wave have created a story encompassing an imaginary new continent that spans North and South America. The four articles included in this special issue were presented at the fourteenth Kyujanggak International Symposium on Korean Studies held via Zoom in Seoul, Korea on November 4–6, 2021. The panel examined how the Korean Wave is imagined and negotiated by different audiences and proposed new orientations for the Korean Wave in a post-pandemic world. This special issue discusses COVID-19's sociocultural impact on Korean Wave fandom and how that fandom has been strengthened in a pandemic environment. Specializing in the diverse sociocultural effects of the Korean Wave, the authors also address how different modes of storytelling and imagination have emerged and been negotiated by local audiences in North and South America.

In the first article, “Transnational Proximity and Universality in Korean Culture: Analysis of *Squid Game* and BTS,” Dal Yong Jin suggests a new approach to understanding the global popularity of the Korean Wave. Rather than traditional cultural proximity, he argues, transnational proximity based on similar sociocultural experiences in late capitalism—including social inequality, youth culture, beautiful storytelling, and fascinating choreography—can explain the Korean Wave's continuing prevalence. In his discussion, Jin investigates fan communities and several distinctive cultural programs in K-pop and Korean film and television, particularly BTS and *Squid Game* (2021). He concludes by assessing the prospects for the role of transnational proximity in the growth of local popular cultures in the global cultural sphere.

In the second article, “Pandemic to “Fandemic:” The Revival of Fandom Publics in the Digital Space of Latin American K-pop Fandom,” Hyunsuk Jang examines the ways in which individual fans coalesce into fandom publics, focusing on their affective intimacy. COVID-19 has dramatically changed our daily life. Fears about the virus inhibit face-to-face communication, leading people to spend more time in the digital world. Jang also examines how the

pandemic has impacted K-pop fandom in Latin America, which is characterized by cultural hybridity and bottom-up globalization.

In the third article, “Reckoning with the World: Infrastructural Imaginaries of Cuba in Contemporary Korean Television,” Benjamin Han examines how popular television entertainment programs such as *Encounter* (tvN, 2018–2019) and *Traveler* (JTBC, 2019–2020) formulate a distinctive way of (re)imagining Cuba manifested in infrastructural imaginaries that highlight the interactions between modernity, affective experiences, and infrastructures. Since the 2000s, there has been an increase in representations of Latin America and the Caribbean in South Korean television. In particular, Cuba has been more visible as a location in different television genres. The interaction between infrastructural imaginaries and touristic narratives in television represents Korea’s reckoning with the world beyond the West through the personal experiences and interactions between travelers and the fragile modernity of Cuba stemming from the collapse of infrastructures. Hence, the examination of infrastructural imaginaries of Cuba in contemporary Korean television speaks to the logic of modernity as (dis)connection while instilling a fantasy about more intimate modes of affinity that may be forged between Cuba and Korea.

Finally, in “Reworking the Cultural Imaginary: K-Pepsi Chile, Neo K-Pop, and Exoticized Otherness,” Wonjung Min analyzes the stylistic components and expressions of Korean popular culture found in advertisements featuring the pop group K-Pepsi Chile, exploring the possible presence of stereotypes about K-pop and Korean culture. K-Pepsi Chile also offers an example of the imaginary of the other. In 2020, Pepsi Chile recruited five male K-pop fans talented at dancing and singing to form a Chilean K-pop group—K-Pepsi Chile. Their first commercial video featured music and dance that mimicked the style of K-pop boy bands, and their second commercial video contained a new K-pop-style song and choreography, including an AI female member named All I. Min argues that Chilean K-pop fans’ negative perception of K-Pepsi Chile resulted from their identification of inauthentic K-pop elements in K-Pepsi Chile; the fans’ reluctance to embrace K-Pepsi Chile reflected their own perceptions of K-pop. Min thus deepens the examination of Chilean K-pop fandom by looking at the evolution of Chilean pop and the birth of K-Pepsi Chile.

Through these four articles, this special issue facilitates further discussion about the Korean Wave through storytelling and fan practices that reveal opportunities to critically re-examine the dominant mode of the cultural globalization of Hallyu. We hope this special issue will serve as a foundation for further interest in and production of Korean Wave-related research.

References

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