

# FROM LOCALIZATION TO GLOCALIZATION

## Contriving Korean Pop Culture to Meet Glocal Demands\*

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### Abstract

Hallyu (the Korean Wave) has been around the world since the late 1990s. Over the period of twenty years, Hallyu has evolved from a regional entertainment pop to a global cultural content. The evolution of Hallyu, like any other evolutions, has involved a long process of localization and globalization. Both K-pop and K-dramas, the two major pillars of the Hallyu revolution, are foreign imports. K-pop has mostly been influenced by European and American dance music since the early 1990s, whereas K-dramas have been heavily influenced by Japanese trendy TV dramas in the past, particularly during the 1980s. However, the localization of K-pop and K-dramas by Korean artists, writers, and producers demonstrated their adept rearrangement skills that ushered in a new era of a domestic pop culture boom that had been on the verge of destruction due to Hollywood films, Japanese pop culture contents, and the financial crisis that swept through the nation since 1997. K-pop and K-dramas have successfully gained domestic fame to propagate its commercial influence in Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America. The collection of papers gathered in this Forum Kritika on Hallyu Studies presents their analyses on the process of localizing and globalizing Hallyu, or what I call glocalization. Briefly, glocalization denotes a successful localization of foreign products so much so that original inventors of the products want to import the local variations instead of their originals. Americans buying a massive number of Japanese cars, for example, is a good case of glocalization. Hallyu's glocalization success indicates that the domestic Korean demand for high quality pop culture has induced new types of competition that required importing global pop content, simultaneously requiring them to contrive to produce better quality pop content than the originals for re-exporting to foreign markets, given the enormous investments that cannot be recouped from a small Korean market.

### **Keywords**

Female fandom, K-drama, K-pop, melancholia, resentment, tacit knowledge

### **About the Author**

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## INTRODUCTION

The World Association for Hallyu Studies (WAHS; [www.iwahs.org](http://www.iwahs.org)) was established in 2013 to organize some of the global interests in Hallyu Studies as an independent discipline especially apart from Asian Studies or Korean Studies. The rationale for such an organization was not readily acceptable for many scholars in Asian Studies who would easily accept a general, thus not necessarily informed, view that Hallyu will disappear in less than three to five years. To them Hallyu's sudden popularity was only accidental, and therefore, would quickly rescind back to the normal state of the domination of Chinese, Japanese, and Western pop culture in East Asia. Indeed, Korean pop culture has never been popular in the form of massive followings by non-Koreans in the past, adding the validity to their prediction of a quick Hallyu doom. WAHS is now hosting its fifth congress at the University of Seoul in October 2017, once again prevailing to say out loud that Hallyu has become not only global but is surviving as well. That Hallyu Studies should be independent from Korean or East Asian Studies is the very fact of its global phenomenon. The traditional and regional purviews of Korean or East Asian Studies, which emphasize Koreanness or a regional focus on either China or Japan (but increasingly on Korea and other countries), cannot figure out why Hallyu is global to begin with and why it is predominantly a female entertainment (see *inter alia*, I. Oh 2009, 2011, 2013; Kim 2011; Lie 2014; Otmazgin and Lyan 2014).

In our fourth congress held at Oxford University in September 2016, several good papers were presented with a theme of "What is the 'K' in K-pop?" The basis of this theme title was an eponymous paper by our brilliant colleague at WAHS, John Lie of UC Berkeley, who published his seminal work on K-pop in a special issue that I edited for *Korea Observer* back in 2012. There, Lie argued that the "K" in K-pop denotes anything but "Korea" as its success is derived from its non-Korean or non-Asian (especially Japanese or Chinese) musical elements by baldly incorporating more European and American dance music styles with fast beats and gyrating movements not easily found in Asian music scenes ("What is the K in K-pop?"). This paper of his, which was later published into a book, ignited many debates among the congressional participants in Oxford. Based on the papers presented in the congress, the WAHS delegates from the Philippines, Ma. Luisa Torres-Reyes and Sara Domingo Lipura, agreed with me to organize a special section, if not a whole issue, for *Kritika Kultura*. The result of our Oxford meeting is the collection anthologized here.

As I noted above, Hallyu's two main features are (a) its global spectrum and (b) its feminine fandom. Let me explain these two main features of Hallyu first before sparing space for the issue of the gender divide in Hallyu and female universalism in

the 21<sup>st</sup> century pop culture movement, as most of our readers and even specialists in Hallyu do not seem to understand it very well.

### **NOT GLOBALIZATION, BUT GLOCALIZATION**

Most scholars working in the field of globalization have widespread confusions regarding globalization, localization, and glocalization. Most scholars seem to agree with the textbook definition of globalization as integration on a global scale, although they display enormous difficulties with localization and glocalization (Jang and Lee). In pop culture studies, we should define globalization as a worldwide domination of one hegemonic culture such as the U.K. and U.S. culture. It is also referred to as Western male universalism as clearly depicted in such globally popular cultural products as *Sherlock Holmes* and *Superman*. Localization refers to modifying global cultural contents to the demands of local consumers. For example, *Sherlock Holmes* becomes *Aibō* in Japan, whereas *Superman* turns into *My Lover from a Star* in South Korea. However, here is a big difference between Japanese and South Korean localization. Whereas *Aibō* is more popular than *Sherlock Holmes* among the general Japanese public, the former is not popular among Westerners or other Asians, except for a small number of Japanese drama buffs. Whereas *My Lover from a Star* is not as popular as *Superman* among the general Korean public, it is very popular among female fans of Hallyu all over the world (roughly, 40 million as of 2016). Japanese localization is so perfect that no foreign competitor can easily please the Japanese general taste, whereas Korean localization is meant to be re-exported to other parts of the world with a Koreanized image of a superman, regardless of whether it is better than the original superman. This is what I call “glocalization”—viz., high quality localization that is meant to be re-exported to other countries due to a small domestic market. All other low-quality localizations would remain local not being able to compete with K-pop or K-drama in their own home, nor being able to be exported to other markets.

Japanese localization can in the end be re-exported back to the originating country, even as Japanese cars and cameras dominate the U.S. and other global auto market. This is exactly the case of the Japanese animation, which originated from Disney for mass consumption, but currently competing neck and neck with Disney in the global market. However, at the moment, Japan is pleased with the huge size of its domestic market, especially when it is difficult to export or license Japanese TV drama series to other countries. What is striking, however, is the story of Hallyu: how could their localization be so successful as to be readily re-exported to many different countries in the world. In 2014 a total of US\$256 million worth of TV dramas and formats have been exported to all over the world including Asia,

Europe, the Middle East, and South America (KOCCA 13). The success of Japanese and Korean localization involves a mix of their tacit knowledge that only Koreans and Japanese know and can master (for tacit knowledge, see Nonaka and Takeuchi). According to Nonaka and Takeuchi, the working definition of tacit knowledge is the kind of knowledge that is difficult to transfer to another person by means of writing it down or verbalizing it. Making good sushi products is one example, while producing good animation movies is another. Take sushi for instance. Few non-Japanese sushi chefs can produce the sushi that the most discriminating Japanese taste experts want to pay big money for and become pleased. Few non-Korean can master K-drama's subtle emotional actions found among Korean women or highly synchronized K-pop's gyrating moves in their group dance performances. This is what we call "tacit" knowledge that is hardly obtained or explained clearly in the localization (or hybridization) process. This is the same reason hybridity cannot explain the success of Japanese anime or K-pop. We need to know what the Japanese and Korean tacit knowledge is in addition to hybridity. Although all these K-drama and K-pop genres were not Korean in their origin, through tacit knowledge in Korea, these two genres are exported to Europe, North America, South America, and Japan (i.e., glocalization). In this paper, I define glocalization as export of local products that originated from globalization. For example, if Koreans export Caffè Bene, a Korean coffee chain, to the U.S., where Starbucks started its globalization for the first time, Caffè Bene is a good example of glocalization.

## **FEMALE UNIVERSALISM AND THE GENDER DIVIDE**

The "K" in K-dramas and K-pop therefore is obvious: The Koreanness represents female universalism that is vividly conveyed in all major works of Hallyu that are exported to all over the world. The "K" deliberately targets female fandom that appreciates female universalism, a ubiquitous value shared by most women in the world. This is the area Korean tacit knowledge knows the best and performs the most effectively. The subtle emotional actions that Korean actresses show on TV dramas is the best example. Often, these actresses do not have any prompts and sometimes add adlibs on their own while showing a wide range of emotions including impromptu tears without help of artificial tear drops. Female K-pop singers *qua* dancers mix difficult aerobic movements with facial expressions of K-drama actresses—full of subtle emotional lexis even including tears. What is ubiquitous of Korean actresses and girl band singers is their pure physical beauty that has become a female universality—viz. all women in the world feel Korean beauty as their ultimate desire to mimic (Epstein and Joo).

The gender divide that allowed the rise of Hallyu in all corners of the world started from three factors: gendered melancholia, racial melancholia, and post-colonial melancholia (I. Oh, "Torn Between Two Lovers"). To be a Hallyu fan, one must have at least one of the three types of melancholia. Melancholia is defined as the emotional outcome that emanates from the suppression of the mournful sorrow caused by the lack of something or someone that one cherishes (Butler). Gendered melancholia is the beginning of all melancholia as women cannot "weep" openly due to the fact that they were born female instead of male. Their duty as women who have to denounce their mothers, sisters, and other girl friends as their lifetime companions to accept male partners for their adulthood or sometimes even adolescent life, all women fall victims of gendered melancholia (Butler 2011). Racial melancholia occurs to men and women who are not born as desired racial components of society. The fact that one cannot openly lament about the fact that he or she was born non-white in European society or non-Japanese in Japan, for example, constitutes the tormenting melancholic experiences (Eng and Han). Postcolonial melancholia refers to the suppressed sorrow when the Chinese, white people, and the Japanese lose their colonies to indigenous people (Gilroy). China still suffers from the Taiwan problem, while Hong Kong also wants to be independent from China. But the U.K.'s and Japan's loss of their colonies represents a larger spectrum of the issue. One of the backlashes of postcolonialism is not only that racism has been reinforced in the U.K. and the U.S., but more white and Japanese women decide to marry postcolonial subjects, including African and Korean men, respectively.

Hallyu's glocal ascendance as an important female entertainment genre in the world is based on its appeal to women in the world through Hallyu's female universalism. Particularly important is K-drama's femininity that espouses heroines who represent wisdom, rationality, tenderness and care, and scientific reasoning with active social participation, all of which were once considered characteristics of Western male universalism. In Hallyu dramas, it is these heroines who assume the role of attorneys, prosecutors, politicians, medical doctors, artists, and struggling unemployed ordinary college graduates who want to realize their Cinderella dreams. Female universalism is therefore a universal value shared by all women in the world who want to sever their chains tied to the traditional and male dominant communities of Confucianism, Catholicism, and Islam to explore the possibilities of building and eventually realize female dominant communities where they can relieve their gendered, racial, and postcolonial melancholia without fears of social or state violence against women. Like K-pop, K-drama's success lies in demonstrating how Korean women can break the yoke of their Confucian and other local values and embrace Western and thus free and inclusive global humanity.

In the K-pop scene, girl bands for the first time in Korean history elevated their corporeal beauty expressed in a mild pornographic manner to the level of acceptable defiance to the Confucian repression of Korean women. Their dancing and singing also appealed to many traditional Catholic, Islam, and Confucian female fans from Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Unlike the usual phenomenon of women fans loving boy bands, in the K-pop scene female fans provide enormous support to girl bands, as Girls' Generation have the most YouTube views among all K-pop singers, including Psy, and Red Velvet has garnered the number one place on K-pop charts for the most number of weeks in 2017.

Put together, both K-pop and K-drama captures the attention of global female fans, as it is the only postcolonial cultural industry (vis-à-vis the so-called conviviality cultural industries in the U.K., the U.S., and Japan), which deals with gendered and racial/ethnic melancholia on a global scale. It is now proven that Korean entertainers have tacit knowledge in mixing Western cultural content with Korean-style female *ressentiment* (or *han*) to a degree that can cajole most female fans in the world who are tired of Japanese pop culture or its Hollywood versions (I. Oh, "Torn Between Two Lovers"). It is much more apparent among Chinese, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American female fans who share gendered and racial/ethnic melancholia deeply with Korean women.

### **GENDER FLUIDITY AND ANDROGYNOUS MEN – A GLOCAL PHENOMENON WITHIN THE K-COMMUNITY**

In both K-pop and K-drama, male actors and singers tend to present a very fluid nature of their gender, a shocking revelation in the South Korean cultural field, where traditional male and female gender roles have been strictly upheld. In order to compete with local and global celebrities and to cater to female fans all over the world, both K-pop male singers and K-drama actors have undergone a rapid evolution from macho characters to very feminine figures that promote images of androgynous males who are very feminine in their facial looks and body shapes with shaved six packs, a traditional symbol of manliness in the Western mass media (C. Oh).

"Beautiful boys" [*misonyeon* or *bishōnen*] has been a universally popular term in the West and the East Asia for literary and opera characters. In Renaissance Italy, beautiful boys were often models of modern beauty, whereas in Japanese *kabuki* plays, beautiful boys as *yakusha* wheedled enormous fan support mostly from older women (Rocke; Fujitani). Beautiful boys, along with beautiful girls [*bishōjō*], also occupy lots of significant positions in Japanese modern *manga* or comic book

stories. It is in Korean TV dramas and K-pop scenes that the concept of beautiful boys has also been proliferated through careful use of Korean tacit knowledge. Korean drama and K-pop producers use enormous means of beauty techniques either through cosmetic products and makeup skills or through outright cosmetic surgeries (Epstein and Joo). Korean boy bands and actors maintain a Renaissance style (i.e., golden ratios) facial and body compositions rarely found anywhere. Korean and other Asian (usually, Chinese and Thai) beautiful boys, therefore, have garnered enormous fan loyalty from both Chinese and Japanese women, subsequently leading to an outbreak of global female fan support from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, North America, and Europe. In this sense, the K-community, where global fans of K-dramas and K-pop interact with each other either offline or online, is filled with glocalized beautiful boys along with proactive and masculine women who also purport to be beautiful in a very K-drama or K-pop style. If the 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe and North America had represented white male universalism, East Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century epitomizes female universalism in the form of gendered melancholia and *ressentiment*.

In my social scientific analysis of Hallyu using gloclaization, female universalism, and gender fluidity, three important new findings about Hallyu from the producers' points of view (i.e., Koreans) are possible. First, Hallyu is not really about Koreanness or Asianness but is about global cultural values of female universalism (e.g., gendered melancholia, racial melancholia, postcolonial melancholia). Second, the gender divide is not an accidental outcome of Hallyu, but is a product of a long period of planning and experimenting by Korean drama writers, who are mostly women, and producers. Even in K-pop, writers and producers had initially focused on promoting boy bands to attract female fandom, followed by a later decision to promote girl bands for female audiences (i.e., *Cinderella* or *Ann of Green Gables* read and worshiped by girls). Third, Hallyu therefore is confused about its own concept of gender identity confuses itself about its gender identity, which is an accidental outcome of the Hallyu marketing and promotion by the Korean producers. Androgyny is a common phenomenon now in K-pop and K-drama, as the concept of Korean "beautiful boys" and "beautiful girls" flourish in the global Hallyu community. It is hard to deny the connection of androgyny with the highly developed Korean cosmetic industries with its tacit knowledge in producing and manufacturing Renaissance style beauties of the golden ratio.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE SPECIAL SECTION

This special section presents eight papers altogether with four subtopics surrounding a broad theme of glocalization. First, two papers deal with the topic



of glocalization. Jang and Song's paper on webtoons or web-based cartoons deals with a birth of a new Hallyu genre in South Korea using the concept of glocalization. Fendler also analyzes the glocalization process of Korean hip hop as a new hot K-pop genre. Second, two papers deal with the issue of gender in K-pop (Laforgia and Howard) and in Indonesia and Palestine among female Hallyu fans (Oh). Third, two papers deal with the business strategy of localization of Hallyu in the Middle East (Kim) and China (Ye and Kang). Finally, two papers deal with the question of the Koreanness in Hallyu, as Sim, Kim, and Lee discuss the origin of K-pop academy and training system from the traditional Gwangdae (clown) culture. On the other hand, Kim and Bae argue that Confucian and other Chinese cultural values are deeply permeated in Hallyu and resonate well with the conservative values of the receiving countries, a point with which I do not particularly agree.

The current issue therefore fulfills some of the old wish to bridge the gap between the Koreans' view of Hallyu and that of global fans. The recipient side has produced many works on Hallyu, including the recent special issue on Hallyu in Southeast in *Kritika Kultura* 28. The views presented by the recipient end desperately needs the views and analyses by Koreans on how they created Hallyu to begin with. When these two sides of the tale are complete; students and professionals in the field will not make mistakes similar to those committed by Korean Studies or East Asian Studies specialists. We need to employ multidisciplinary approaches to the issue and escape from a parochial regional reasoning on global cultural phenomenon.

I hope that this special section will serve the needs of various groups of scholars, students, and practitioners working in the field of Cultural Studies and Hallyu Studies. Again, this by no means intends to exclude our colleagues in Asian Studies and Korean Studies. Future endeavors in a multidisciplinary approach to the study of postcolonial and glocal cultural industries is warranted, and this is a ripe opportunity that *Kritika Kultura* has timely provided WAHS with such a concerted display of scholarly commitment to the understanding of Hallyu from various perspectives.

## Notes

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