



## Conclusion: Diasporizing Hallyu

**Abstract** While Hallyu media itself may not be inherently counter-hegemonic, the diasporic audiences' critical engagement with the Korean Wave may enhance transnational Korean media's potential to challenge the dominant mediascape. The diasporic dimensions of Hallyu contribute to questioning the hegemonic forces that intensify the nationalistic and/or Westernizing processes of this transnational cultural trend. In response to the recent rise of Hallyu, diasporic young Korean Canadians engage with this cultural wave and negotiate different identity positions, associated with here *and* there.

**Keywords** Hallyu (The Korean Wave) · Diasporic Hallyu · Diasporic youth · Audience · Soft power · De-Westernization · De-Nationalization

In the midst of K-pop band BTS's dominance on the Billboard Hot 100 charts in the summer of 2021,<sup>1</sup> British music producer and DJ Mat Zo tweeted (Adams 2021), "I'm convinced k-pop is still niche in the west. Seriously, how many k-pop fans do you know personally? Is it possible corporations are pushing so hard cause it's not working?" After continuing his disapproving comments on K-pop, he even analogized the

<sup>1</sup> As of August 2021, BTS's English-language song "Butter" was the longest running #1 song of the year on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. The group stayed at #1 for 10 consecutive weeks (9 weeks with "Butter" and 1 week with "Permission to Dance").

growth of K-pop fandom to child grooming: “K-pop doesn’t hide the fact that it’s manufactured by grooming children into cultural icons.” This popular DJ appeared to deny the presence of K-pop in mainstream music markets even in the middle of the record-breaking popularity of a K-pop band and its global fandom. These derogatory tweets reveal that the Korean Wave (or Hallyu) may still be othered by some gatekeepers in the Western-centric mediascape.

This incident is indicative of the ways in which the cultural wave of Hallyu has sometimes been overlooked or stereotyped in the West. Some mainstream Western media and gatekeepers have reduced Hallyu to a commercially oriented fad in a niche market that is primarily popular among Asian or Korean diasporas without due recognition of the global audience bases of transnational Korean media. Indeed, in *The New Yorker* magazine’s online discussion of K-pop, American music producer Jeff Rabhan argued, “In the US market, there are about two million Korean Americans, or people of Korean descent. Without question, BTS or large K-pop groups are going to be able to sell tickets in New York City and certainly sell out in Madison Square Garden and can do well probably in the top 10 Korean American markets in the US. But beyond that, they can’t” (*The New Yorker* 2020). Rabhan’s attribution of the success of K-pop solely to the existence of Korean American consumers astonished two K-pop export panelists involved in the discussion (Crystal Anderson and Stephanie Choi) and elicited their ridicule. Not only was Rabhan’s argument challenged by the K-pop experts in the discussion, but global K-pop fans also harshly criticized his ignorant, Western-centric analysis of K-pop. In fact, scholarly and media observations have revealed the global composition of Hallyu audience bases far beyond diasporic Korean audiences (ARMY Census 2020; Bruner 2020; McLaren and Jin 2020).

While this book has focused on diasporic Korean youth in Canada, it does not suggest that diasporic Koreans constitute the majority of global Hallyu audiences. Indeed, the book works to acknowledge the ways in which Hallyu is driven by fan audiences of diverse backgrounds. As revealed in the book, Hallyu emerges as a global media practice that should not be reduced to media that is consumed predominantly in ethnic communities overseas. Even the Korean Canadian youth in the study engaged with Hallyu not necessarily as ethnic media flows; for them, Hallyu was also signified as a kaleidoscopic and youthful universe.

Against this background, this book has examined the diasporic dimensions of the Korean Wave. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 40

participants in three Canadian cities, it has explored how Korean Canadian youth negotiated their cultural identity through a new popular cultural trend that originated in their (ancestral) homeland but has been circulated globally. The analysis has shown the diasporic youth's identity work while growing up in between different cultural contexts and in between different media texts.

Many of the young people interviewed for this book had been immersed in (pre-Hallyu) Korean media through their upbringing in Korean immigrant families. While some interviewees continued to enjoy Korean media during their transition to adulthood, others lost their interest in Korean media during their adolescence and turned to mainstream Anglophone or other types of media. However, for most of the interviewees, the recent version of Korean media that emerged since the 2010s (often referred to as the period of Hallyu 2.0, or the New Korean Wave) seemed to trigger (or re-ignite) their excitement and interest in particular Korean media genres, such as K-pop, Korean dramas (known as K-drama), and Korean entertainment shows.

As illustrated in this book, recent Hallyu media gradually changed the young Korean Canadians' perception of Korean media from *ethnic* media that is consumed mainly in ethnic communities to maintain their connection with the left-behind homeland to *global* media that introduces a kaleidoscopic and youthful universe. In particular, for the diasporic youth, K-pop was often considered a genre (among other Hallyu media genres) that contributed the most to redefining Hallyu not as the overseas circulation of ethnic or heritage media, but rather as a new kind of global youth practice through which young people simultaneously negotiate here (Canada) and there (Korea).

On the one hand, the book has shown that Hallyu media can be considered to be *ethnic* media as it allows the diasporic youth to vividly imagine the (ancestral) homeland that otherwise would have remained distant. Through enhanced association with their Korean cultural heritage and through pop cultural artifacts and imaginations, Korean Canadian youth explore "ties with the 'homeland' to find a symbolic or literal 'home' where they can sense what it is like to be, for once, part of the racial majority" (N. Y. Kim 2018, p. 294). On the other hand, the book has revealed that Hallyu media represents a *global* media form, comprised of kaleidoscopic, youthful, alternative, and hybrid cultural texts for an increasing number of overseas fan audiences including diasporic Korean youth.

As examined in this book, young Korean Canadians equipped with bilingual and bicultural literacy navigate different media forms through digital platforms. They not only navigate between different media (e.g., Western Anglophone and Korean media) but also assume different audience positions as early adopters, mundane consumers, and/or dedicated fans. The diasporic media experiences show that Hallyu is an evolving cultural process through which different meanings of transnational media are generated and negotiated from the perspectives of the audience who navigate different frames of reference here *and* there. To move beyond a Western-centric or a nation-statist perspective, this book proposes further exploration of the diasporic dimensions of the Korean Wave.

### DE-WESTERNIZING AND DE-NATIONALIZING HALLYU

Diasporic cultural flows imply “how home is not a stable category” (Kalra et al. 2005, p. 18). Home may no longer remain a place of residence or nationality but may be redefined as places of imagination and affiliation. By imagining here through there, or there through here, in the time of Hallyu, young Korean Canadians may question where they are and who they are. While being *here*, diasporic youth are increasingly exposed to more relatable, non-White stars and texts and realize how the White-dominant cultural frame persists in “multicultural” Canada. In this frame, Hallyu is underestimated and racialized at best. Simultaneously, while being *there*, the diasporic youth also challenge the discourse that reduces Hallyu to the achievement of national “soft power.”

#### *De-Westernizing Hallyu While Here*

As a non-Western popular cultural trend, Hallyu may offer Korean and Asian diasporas the leverage to reveal the dominant cultural norm that hides the existing discrimination and injustice against people of color and thus to problematize the taken-for-granted mediascape of seemingly multicultural Canada. Hallyu media can be a litmus paper with which the limitations of the White, Western-centric mediascape are tested. The increasing appearance and discourses of K-pop idols on social media and even mainstream media in Canada remind us that the mainstream media available in Canada might be in fact merely a segment of possible imaginations and thus represents a hegemonic world view instead of many other possible views. In this regard, the emergence of Hallyu may serve

to do what Chakrabarty (1992) refers to as “provincializing the West,” which is a process of dismantling the colonial hierarchy between the Western center and the rest. In this way, the West as the default and universal norm can be challenged. In a similar vein, J. O. Kim (2021) has recently proposed using K-pop as a “method” to facilitate various modes of transcultural meaning making and to explore alternative possibilities to question and subvert Western-oriented norms and cultural flows (J. O. Kim 2021).

Indeed, some young people interviewed for this book appeared to engage with the Hallyu media while learning to question the White-dominant cultural frame. They become critically aware of taken-for-granted White-dominant representations (and lack of Asian representations) in the Canadian mediascape. By watching BTS’s performances on network TV or K-dramas available on Netflix, some interviewees now realized that there had been no Korean (or even Asian) TV characters in Canadian media. As the interview participants commonly noted, the default characters in media content were always White and thus they did not have room for even thinking about the absence or stereotyping of racialized people. By increasingly engaging with non-Western media forms in Western contexts, diasporic youth are reminded that Canada is a nation-state established through settler colonialism and diasporic routes of settlers of different kinds; and the White, Western lens may be an ignorant, violent, or partial (at best) way of representing worlds and identities. Hallyu has opened a new door for the diversified modes of the global mediascape in which the dominance of Anglophone Western cultural content and representations are questioned. Hallyu exposes the diasporic audiences to non-White stars and non-English languages, with which they can identify and thus eventually imagine “here” as not a White-dominant space, but deeply connected with “there” as a place that would have remained abstract and distant without the moments of engagement often occurring through mediation (i.e., the ancestral homeland, which would have remained purely nostalgic *without* the recent wave of Hallyu). Members of BTS and Bong Joon-ho, the director of *Parasite*, often speak in Korean in their interviews and speeches in Western media and thus require translations and translators. Hallyu may remind global audiences of the simple fact that English (or any other dominant language) is not a default language-setting in international cultural exchanges and consumption, but *translation is a default protocol* in transnational media flows and transcultural encounters. In an interview with an American

magazine about *Parasite*, the director Bong described the American Academy Awards, known as The Oscars, as a “very local” film festival (Jung 2019). This account reminds Western audiences (and global audiences) that The Oscars is not a global event at all despite global media attention to it. Director Bong’s account may reveal a potential way of provincializing (rather than conforming to) the West.

### *De-Nationalizing Hallyu While There*

By enhancing their ethnic identification in late adolescence or later (“coming out” as ethnic in college), diasporic youth tend to explore their ethnic identities. The recent Hallyu media play a role in this transitional journey, as it contributes to the diasporic youth’s feelings of connection with their ethnic heritage and senses of belonging. However, as some interviewees noted, the nation-statist definition of Hallyu as only a set of Korean media exports restricts the Wave’s diasporic meanings. The celebratory, top-down discourse of the Korean Wave as soft power and national brand is seen as problematic by young people of diaspora, who do not belong to Korea as a nation-state. Several interviewees in this book were critical about the ways in which Hallyu is shaped from above by institutional power—such as the Korean government, industries, and Western media. As evidenced by the flourishing discourse of Hallyu as soft power, this cultural trend has been utilized to instrumentalize the “national” cultural form for maximizing economic or political gains (H.-K. Lee 2018). It is undeniable that the Korean government has heavily promoted the Korean Wave as a way of boosting its economy and as an ideological means to affirm national pride and cultural nationalism. Consecutive governments, regardless of their political stances, have continued their emphasis on Korean Wave-related campaigns, investments, and policies through “K-branding” (Kim and Jin 2016).<sup>2</sup> These efforts clearly

<sup>2</sup> The Korean government and cultural industries have made an explicit effort to take advantage of the K component (Bang 2020). Not only K-pop and K-drama but also other “K”-products (such as K-cosmetics and K-tourism packages) have been promoted extensively. K-products and brands are often combined to maximize their synergetic effects. For example, K-pop idols appear to endorse K-cosmetic products; K-pop tours in Gangnam (where some K-pop companies and merchandise shops are located) are a popular K-tourism package. The government has extensively used the K prefix to proudly refer to economic or policy sectors that might be relatively advanced in a global scale. As a recent example, the government celebrated its somewhat effective disease control system in the

illustrate Korea's desire to catch up, compete, and stand out in global cultural markets. The government-led, top-down discourses of Hallyu for the past two decades reveal the country's desire to be a global dominant or "standard" through export-oriented economic strategies which have been pursued especially since the 1990s (T. Y. Kim 2021; Kim and Jin 2016). The top-down discourse of Hallyu has emphasized the potential economic or political power to be gained through the exportation of transnational Korean media and cultural products. The "soft power" or "cultural diplomacy" discourse around the Hallyu phenomenon reveals nationalistic desires for maximizing the country's influence in the world. If Hallyu is defined as outbound flows and global market expansion of Korean media and culture, this phenomenon may be none other than the mirroring of the existing Western cultural hegemony.

In response to this nation-statist discourse of Hallyu, diasporic youth's engagement with transnational Korean media—an engagement that sometimes questions the essentialized mode of Koreanness from their bicultural audience position of being here and there, or being (legally and physically) in Canada and (ethno-culturally) in Korea—reveals that Hallyu cannot be simply defined by the institutional, top-down discourse in which Korean culture is instrumentally used, measured, and commodified for economic and political gains. From below, Hallyu involves multi-faceted audience practices in which diverse audience members generate different meanings in relation to their everyday contexts while refusing to reduce the cultural flow to a national product.

For diasporic youth, Hallyu may provide the possibility for different identities and cultures to be appreciated and hybridized without necessarily being subject to, but rather in negotiation with, the dominant Western, White gaze and the nation-statist discourse of Hallyu that reinforces (long-distance) nationalism. This new cultural trend seems to offer the diasporic youth an antidote to both the essentialized notion of Koreanness and the White-dominant imagination of Canada. The diasporic

early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 by referring to it as "*K-banggyeok*" (K-quarantine) (Yoon 2021). The extensive K-branding reveals the ways in which nationalism or national pride is commodified or politically utilized. Critics and young people have increasingly been fatigued by the extensive and self-celebratory tone of K-branding. Thus, K-branding is also disapprovingly considered as an example of "*gukbbong*" ("intoxication with nationalism"; *guk* means country and *bbong* means a slang for methamphetamine) (T. Y. Kim 2021).

engagement with Hallyu can contribute to provincializing both the West and the nation-state.

### HALLYU AS DIASPORIC CULTURAL PRACTICE

The dynamic ebbs and flows of the wave show how media is diasporically circulated beyond nation-statist and/or Western-oriented mediascapes, and in so doing may allow diasporic youth to feel at home in different locations, moving beyond the binary opposition between here and there in their cultural practices. The transnational cultural flows of Hallyu can potentially generate new identities that are neither clearly affiliated with the nation-state form (Kalra et al. 2005) nor subject to the White gaze. Thus, young Korean Canadians' critical engagement with Hallyu media may offer opportunities for alternative cultural moments. The diasporic analysis of Hallyu allows for the possibility of provincializing the West, while rethinking the celebratory discourse about Hallyu as nation-statist soft power. The wave of transnational Korean media and popular culture may suggest that the global mediascape is increasingly diasporic in its meaning-making processes, which consequently allow it to move beyond the boundaries of nation-states.

Before concluding this book, it should be emphasized that Hallyu is not inherently counter-hegemonic against the Western-centric or nation-statist forces. In fact, mainstream Hallyu media has not been free of criticism due to its commercial interests. For example, K-pop industries have been criticized for their harsh training and control of idol groups to maximize profits (G. Kim 2018). Indeed, K-pop entertainment companies skillfully exploit fan participation to penetrate the market and generate profit, using "free labor" in the form of voluntary fan activities to generate profits without any substantial rewards (Y. Kim 2015; Proctor 2021). Moreover, it has been observed that the Hallyu industry has extensively developed somatechnics to fantasize about Whiteness especially through the obsessive emphasis on the white skins of celebrities (Park and Hong 2021). These examples contribute to the debates about the counter-hegemonic potential of Hallyu as a non-Western-centric cultural trend. No different from any other major media industries, the Hallyu industries seek to maximize profits through the instrumental use of culture as a commodity. Hallyu is certainly not free of the enormous structural forces of commodification.



However, the structural forces do not necessarily determine how Hallyu evolves as a transnational process that involves various stakeholders. In particular, as audience studies have explored, transnational media is constantly negotiated and relocalized through different modes of audience engagement (Athique 2017). Encountering the ebbs and flows of Hallyu media, audiences of different identity positions re-create the meanings of Hallyu media that would otherwise have remained an essentialized, foreign commodity form. In this transnational process of audience engagement, diasporic Korean youth play a unique role. As discussed in this book, young Korean Canadians engage with Hallyu media in relation to their own identity work that occurs in between cultures. Without necessarily relying on the Western-centric and/or nation-statist frames of reference, the diasporic youth may explore their audience positions transnationally and transculturally—between here and there. In so doing, they may also challenge the structural forces that attempt to define Hallyu as an essentialized commodity form.

As revealed by the examples provided throughout the book, young Korean Canadians may not assume a homogenous audience position. Some diasporic youth exhibited a stronger emotional attachment with the K, especially as an imagined refuge from the White-dominant cultural frame that has oppressively racialized them. In comparison, other diasporic youth reflected their second generation advantages or bicultural literacy as a means of negotiating the commodifying forces implicated in Hallyu. Moreover, there are groups of 1.5 and second generation Korean youth who are indifferent to, or even in denial of, Hallyu—especially those who are called “bananas” or the “Whitewashed.” Different diasporic experiences and positions imply that the diasporic dimensions of Hallyu are multifaceted and open to further research. For example, various intersectional experiences of diasporic youth, which have not been fully explored in this book, require additional in-depth studies.

Among various audience groups, diasporic youth who take up relatively ambivalent reception positions between two (or more) national and cultural contexts reflect the ways in which Hallyu is appropriated in different contexts and generate both ethnic or national cultural flows and global cultural flows. By examining the Korean Wave as diasporic cultural practices rather than the diffusion of national cultural products and capital, this book has revealed the diversified ways in which cultural flows are negotiated, re-signified, and reappropriated by audiences who are in between here and there. Questioning the dominant

global mediscapes, diasporic Hallyu offers a new lens for understanding diaspora, media, and identity.

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