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UNDERSTANDING THE HALLYU BACKLASH IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

A Case Study of Consumers in Thailand, Malaysia and Philippines

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Abstract

Korean cultural products (known as Hallyu) are now the dominant incarnation of East Asian culture throughout Southeast Asia and have introduced consumers to Korean industry, cosmetics, and culture. Recent work has concentrated heavily upon this region and the new dynamics Southeast Asian countries can offer to the study of inter-Asian cultural links, particularly during the political amalgamation of the ASEAN economic community. Yet in the more developed Southeast Asian nations of Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, there is some evidence of a rejection of and animosity towards Hallyu products from consumers who are beginning to question and disapprove of the high number of Korean products in their countries. Through interviews with over 70 consumers dissatisfied with Hallyu across these three nations, this project identifies three main areas under which this potential for a Hallyu “backlash” occurs: perceptions of colonial-esque attitudes and cultural imperialism from Korea; the movement of Hallyu from an innovative new “high culture” to a static and out-of-date “low culture”; and the increasing availability of new and different international products that threaten to usurp Hallyu. Such evidence represents a potential change in East and Southeast Asian relations, as well as the long term difficulties inherent in using Hallyu as a vehicle to maintain Korean influence.

Keywords

innovation; anti-Hallyu; Soft Power; K-pop; K-Dramas

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The spread of “Hallyu”—Korean popular culture—internationally is now a well-documented phenomenon, with studies assessing the impact of this East Asian-based culture upon politics, international relations, and media forms in East Asia, Southeast Asia and further afield into the Middle East, Europe and America. Korean TV dramas, pop music, movies, food and cosmetics are all part of the well-known international “Korean Wave” phenomenon, with fan movements present in countries as varied as Israel, Kazakhstan and Argentina. Southeast Asia is one region in which Hallyu is particularly popular, and recent work has addressed the ways in which this region can further our understanding of both Hallyu itself and the wider relationship between the Southeast and East Asian nations.

Yet despite the continued economic success of Hallyu, there is also evidence of a potential rejection of these products in the Asia region. The promotion of Hallyu within Southeast Asia, an important area for Korean overseas investment due to its developing economies and supplies of raw materials, has also led to specific problems when Hallyu products potentially challenge hegemonic norms and are seen to usurp local culture, yet there is no specific project examining such difficulties. This qualitative research study therefore seeks to address the problems and pitfalls experienced in Hallyu reception through analyzing in-depth interviews with consumers in three major Southeast Asian countries where Korean pop culture has been particularly successful over the last decade: Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

The paper addresses the potential issues facing the long-term marketing of Hallyu products in these key nations through conducting qualitative interviews with a number of consumers who are aware of Hallyu’s long history and influence in the region and were heavily exposed to this phenomenon. These consumers were specifically chosen for this project as all now express dissatisfaction, apathy, and even open dislike of Korean cultural products. Examining such views can offer reasons behind potential rejection of Hallyu in this region, though the limitations of qualitative methodology prevent any discussion as to the widespread nature and size of this potential “backlash.”

Through an analysis of responses, the paper will demonstrate that these consumers’ rejection of and animosity towards Korean culture products is based upon the perception that Hallyu has now shifted to be perceived as a “low” cultural product that is no longer associated with notions of modernity and sophistication. Furthermore, it will demonstrate that the increasingly visible and explicit connection to Korean economic interests in the region is distasteful to consumers, who are beginning to see such naked “soft power” as a form of cultural imperialism. Finally, it will indicate that, according to such consumers, Hallyu is failing to keep up with the rapid economic and cultural changes in the region, which include

increased access to international products that now compete with Hallyu and offer new forms of cultural identity and engagement.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE REJECTION OF HALLYU: “BACKLASH” AND “CULTURAL PROXIMITY” IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The majority of Hallyu scholarship tends to focus upon the very visible mainstream presence and effects of Korean pop culture in proximate East and Southeast Asian nations, recognizing a common depiction of particular Asian values and sentiments (Shim 2008; Chon; Heo; Shim; Suh et al.; and Chung). Such nations have undergone a similar level of growth and economic urbanization over the last decade and have experienced increased dissemination of and access to digital technology and social media, all of which have aided the spread of Hallyu (Lee Jung yup). Yet this wider spread has also caused significant difficulties; Suh et al. understand that during the consumption of a foreign cultural product “the cultural values of the country of origin are mixed with the local values, going through a process of adjustments and conflicts.” Such “conflicts” are now evident in reports that note animosity towards Hallyu from both consumers and industry professionals in various nations (see “Culture Wars” and Hong). Yet overall there is very little scholarly attention towards the “conflicts” and “backlash” that may occur during this process and which are becoming more evident as the Korean Wave ages.

As a form of social resistance, “backlash” movements can be both official and unofficial as well as socially progressive and reactionary. Cultural backlash expresses itself through what Vertovec and Wessendorf call “backlash discourse,” comprising specific tropes and idioms that reinforce the status quo through “othering” a particular individual, groups of individuals, cultural products and/or signifiers as something foreign and threatening (Vertovec and Wessendorf 6). Such “othering” often rests upon notions of shared “core values” that are touted as a form of collective identity for the citizens of a particular nation or society (10). Perhaps the most notorious academic analysis of “backlash” in a cultural context comes from analysis of social challenges towards feminist discourses and movements in the mid-1990s UK. This “backlash” was characterized through the embracing of more traditional feminine roles by popular culture after the so-called Second Wave of feminism in the 1980s when the previously promised utopia of social liberation had ceased to become a reality. The term therefore became synonymous with a revoking of social gains and changes, one seen in similar analyses of White backlash against Black Civil Rights movements in America and likewise a general backlash against notions of multiculturalism across Europe in the 21st century.

This revoking and combating of potential social change is certainly evident in media reports that speak of a backlash against the presence of Korean cultural products in nations such as Japan, China, and Taiwan. Such articles do not give an indication as to the widespread nature of such movements, but do indicate that their presence is substantial enough to be noted in the mainstream and foreign media. In Japan, recent anti-Hallyu protests have been small but also particularly noisy and visible. Complaints seem largely based upon nationalism, xenophobia and the difficult political legacy of the relationship between Japan and South Korea. Online comments attribute this “backlash” to the idea that the Japanese market is being exploited and used by greedy K-pop bosses at a time when society is going through a demoralized and traumatic period. Such analysis conforms to backlash discourses by interpreting Hallyu as an “other” that is in some way responsible for current social problems (“Is There a Japanese Backlash” n.p.). InKyung Lee mentions a similar degree of Hallyu backlash in China, stating that this is an inevitable result of the high popularity and continued presence of Hallyu, which is beginning to frustrate consumers who are eager for something more. Likewise in Taiwan, politicians expressed criticism towards the excessive number of Korean dramas airing on television, fearing this unbalanced influx is preventing the development of Taiwanese dramas (Hong). One reporter notes that Hallyu is “earning a hostile response in proportion to its positive developments” and concludes that “if export of culture is unilateral, it cannot continue for a long time” (Hong).

Such analysis is relevant to exploring the reception of Hallyu in Southeast Asia and the potential “backlash” similar views could represent within this region. In recent years Southeast Asia has become simultaneously more economically and culturally prominent due to the amalgamation of countries under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regional organization, making the area much more significant to Korean overseas interests. Indeed, in the mid-2000s the economic significance of Southeast Asia was recognized in the 2005 Conference on Strengthening the Korea-ASEAN Relationship, and Korea has since signed free trade agreements with all ASEAN countries, increasing the export of Hallyu products in the region. Southeast Asia as a whole is now the country’s second largest trading partner and while the region was badly hit by the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s and early 2000s, ASEAN has developed some of the fastest-growing economies globally over the past decade, including a growing rural and urban middle-class with increased consumer spending power (something it shares with the other “emerging Asia” countries of China and India).

Yet the position of Hallyu within Southeast Asia requires much closer analysis given the significant differences between the East and Southeast Asian region and the tendency to overlook such differences in the quest to construct “cultural proximity.” “Cultural proximity” or “cultural affinity” is the most frequently used

concept to analyze the international movement of cultural products. Products that embody “general values” and have a “low cultural discount” can penetrate foreign markets easily (Suh et al. 4). While constructing this close proximate cultural relationship between Korea and Southeast Asian nations is undoubtedly appealing for consumers (particularly given its ability to offer an Asian-based identity to counter Western cultural domination in a region which was once a site of Western colonialism) Hallyu scholars have long critiqued such a simplistic concept and understanding (see, for example, Suh et al.; Kim & Ryoo; Jo et al.; and Oh). The Southeast Asian context is and always has been much more culturally plural with a significant variety of cultural products available within individual nations. Southeast Asia lies outside of the Confucian sphere of East Asia with populations that are ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse. Several of the world’s major religious traditions are represented, along with indigenous animist belief systems. In this region Hallyu was able to provide a new Asian-based model of cultural identity that certainly contained a high degree of “cultural affinity” and a lower “cultural discount.” However, constructing this affinity can unwittingly erase the complex cultural differences between these regions and in their quest for “Asianness” inadvertently position Southeast Asia as an ultimately inferior version of Asian culture that aspires to the sophistication and modernity represented by the more affluent and globally dominant East Asian nations.

Likewise, the continual importing and dissemination of cultural products from the Hollywood “West” and the Asian “East” has given rise to notions such as globalization and cultural imperialism (Tomlinson), all of which altered the way “foreign” cultural products are constructed and consumed by local audiences. Such contemporary global media flows have defined and determined the way in which cultural products are generally perceived and received in Southeast Asia (see mediascapes in Appadurai), all complicated the conception of a “backlash” in this context.

Analyzing participants’ concerns and attitudes towards Hallyu in Southeast Asia not only identifies the challenges facing Hallyu in this region therefore, but also begins to highlight the current economic, social and cultural differences between the East and Southeast Asian regions. This includes outlining the different ways in which consumers relate to foreign products as well as questioning any supposedly high “cultural affinity” automatically attributed to this relationship. While reports from East Asia associate cultural “backlash” with nationalism and complex historical and political relationships, such explanations are a problematic way to understand concerns around Hallyu in Southeast Asian nations, which are much more culturally and racially diverse, have always been recipients of international cultural products (and, indeed, encourage such overseas investment) and do not generally have problematic historical relations with Korea.

METHODOLOGY AND KEY FINDINGS

The study sought to provide a deeper examination of the potential “conflicts” Hallyu faces in three Southeast Asian nations, set within a context of the current wider economic and social changes in the region. The paper identifies and explores the reasons behind negative attitudes towards Hallyu from eighty Southeast Asian consumers in Thailand, Malaysia, and Philippines. These countries each contain large Korean populations and are significant destinations for Korean overseas investment. Within the region, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines have been undergoing significant economic growth and changes as part of the regional amalgamation under the ASEAN initiative that Korean authorities are eager to remain a part of. Despite some political uncertainties, all three nations have relative economic stability and are projected to improve productivity into 2018, so the ongoing presence and success of Hallyu within these countries is an important part of maintaining Korean overseas interests.

As a particularly astute form of “soft power,” Korean cultural products have become the dominant incarnation of East Asian popular culture in these nations over the last decade and have introduced consumers to Korean industry and culture, while keeping Korea visible and relevant to investment opportunities and political influence. The Korean Wave has been present in each for over a decade and has had substantial impact upon locally produced entertainment. In Thailand Hallyu is generally traced to the 2001 success of TV dramas *Autumn in My Heart* and *My Sassy Girl* as well as the later phenomenal success of *Dae Jang Geum* [*Jewel in the Palace*] in 2005 (see Ainslie for a full discussion of this). The same situation occurred in the Philippines, when Korean dramas known as “Koreanovelas” were shown on local television. This began with *Bright Star* in 2003, with the phenomenon gaining wider public attention after the airing of *Winter Sonata*. Likewise in Malaysia, *Winter Sonata* quickly paved the way for K-pop and Korean cosmetics. In all three countries such success quickly led to a craze for all things Korean, including language courses, goods, services, and foods.

The study contains analysis of data from focus groups and interviews with 80 consumers: 24 from Thailand, 24 from Malaysia, and 34 from Philippines. Participants were chosen due to their negative views of Hallyu and the qualitative method was used as a means to tease out such negative information from participants, who were far less likely to talk about the subject if not sat face-to-face with the interviewer. Likewise, qualitative research allowed for in-depth study of a phenomena that was both not yet well understood and highly complex, a necessary step before later quantitative research could begin. Participants were able to lead the interviews and so offered a very strong and detailed explanations for their own thoughts and feelings. In all three nations Hallyu products remain highly successful

and lucrative and as a qualitative project involving a relatively small number of participants, this study should not be seen as an attempt to quantify a widespread anti-Hallyu movement, viewpoint, or situation. Indeed it would be wrong to label such a sample as representative of a backlash ‘movement’ in Southeast Asia. Instead, interviews sought to identify the reasons behind the growth in negative views towards Hallyu within these Southeast Asian nations, views that are becoming increasingly evident but have yet to be explored or documented.

From questioning participants, three sources of Hallyu rejection and dislike were identified: the movement of Hallyu from “high” to “low culture,” the perception of Hallyu as a form of cultural imperialism and re-orientalism, and finally the changes of the wider ASEAN region that have displaced Hallyu. The data was then analyzed thematically and related back to these key themes. Each section is outlined below with key quotes and findings. The researchers remained open to new ideas and possibilities, allowing for the identification of means by which Hallyu could possibly overcome such difficulties and “conflicts,” issues that are outlined in the conclusion. As one of the few empirical studies into Hallyu in Southeast Asia, the project offers a crucial snapshot and insight into the current and potential difficulties Hallyu is facing in this region. This would enable the project to function as (1) a scoping project from which to begin constructing a wider quantitative project based upon the identified three areas of concern, and (2) a means from which to produce specific recommendations to maintain Korean pop culture as a dominant consumer product in the region and, hence, an important source of “soft power” for Korea.

Our sample of consumers was obtained largely through higher-education institutions, with “gatekeepers” such as student societies, professors and teachers used to identify participants, with further “snowballing” after each contact had been made. The samples are diverse in terms of age, background, and occupation. In Thailand, younger consumers of the 18-21 age group were interviewed in focus groups as was their preferred method, while older consumers were interviewed directly. Interviews were conducted in either Thai or English (as the participant preferred), and if in Thai were later translated to English. Malaysian respondents also consisted of working adults from a diverse industry (i.e., marketing, information technology) and homemakers. In the Philippines, the academic circle was tapped for interviewees, mainly consisting of university students and professors (see Appendix for a full list of participants from each country).

In keeping with the multiethnic nature of Southeast Asian nations, our participants were from ethnically diverse backgrounds and originated from places across their respective country. All were now based in the key urban centers of each nation, indicating how they had been subject to increased consumer opportunities and understood the position of Hallyu within this. All were aware of the growth

of the Korean Wave over the last decade, and its lasting impact in their nation. Researchers followed appropriate ethical procedures, providing full information to participants about the project and making it clear that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were also ensured, with all names and potential identifiers removed from transcripts. Consent forms (which contained the actual names) were kept separate from the data.

The Movement of Hallyu from “High” to “Low Culture”

Aesthetic choices and the construction of “taste” within a society are often the result of consumers actively distancing themselves from one social class to the other (Bourdieu). In keeping with such analysis, the rise in popularity of Hallyu in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Philippines was initially interpreted as an expression of dissatisfaction with the status-quo and a critique of hegemonic power structures. For many Southeast Asian consumers, this new form of popular culture became a means to express an alternative form of identity and relationship to an increasingly globalised urban context, yet one that is separate to the status quo (see, for examples, Lim and Siriyuvasak).

However, given the increase in accessibility in Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines (particularly via online platforms), evidence suggests that Hallyu is now no longer regarded as “niche” culture and is even considered to be “too mainstream” for many Southeast Asian fan groups. This section examines the evolution of Hallyu and the movement of this phenomenon beyond “fan groups/gatekeepers” to an association with a lower-class consumer, a significant source of dislike amongst participants. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu’s examination of the notion of “taste,” the section reveals a shared perception amongst respondents that there is a general dumbing down of quality with regard to Hallyu products, a conclusion that is influenced by both reference to textual content and the appeal to a different class of consumer. Hence, despite not necessarily achieving a completely “mainstream” status, this now widespread and inclusive form of pop culture has reached a point where it seems to be regarded as part of the “status quo” and so should therefore be “othered,” whether consciously or otherwise. While such a construction may seem to be a natural part of the lifecycle of certain imported cultural products, within Southeast Asia this process reflects the struggle to define the “self” in relation to the “other” that still exists in many developing nations. This sense of belonging and deep-rooted understanding of national identity remains unresolved, and such nations have a long history of positioning foreign cultural products as a “threat” that would “contaminate” the values and morals of an otherwise “pure” state.

Former Hallyu fans indicate how “taste” is a deliberate choice to distance themselves from the status quo, now associating Hallyu with “trashy people” who belong to “the working class, the people who work a lot and they want to just see a series and cry and that’s it” (ThaiM33).¹ This “working class” is also defined as “women who are single or are office workers. These people like to catch up with trends and fashion. They also want to be accepted by their friends and group who follow trends and fashion” (ThaiF38). Other participants also indicated:

If you are watching Korean movies you are the same as everyone else. If you watch something different you are considered higher class, different. I think maybe this has to do with special fashion... They are looking for something more different, something people don’t know. (ThaiM24)

At one point it was viral, but everyone is taking up the trend so now, it’s not as hyped (Mal21)

Age was also a significant factor in this construction of taste. Considering this shift of interest and popularity, respondents from all three countries seemed to suggest that former Hallyu fans had “matured” or aged, and as a result had “lost interest.” For some Thai participants, being “trashy” was associated with teenagers, considered to be the only consumers of Hallyu today, although “ten years ago, the audience were both teenagers and office workers” (ThaiM38). A Thai male student believed that “we have grown up and I think the series are not based on reality. It’s only fantasy” (ThaiM20). Respondents from the Philippines share the same view: “Hallyu targets younger fans. People in their 30s or older sometimes feel misplaced in the cutesy world of Hallyu” (PhilF40); “They are growing by attracting the younger crowd, but eventually it will taper off. Just like how we eventually got tired of Spanish telenovelas” (PhilF47). Likewise, a Malaysian IT consultant stated, “It’s just a phase in life for teenagers. I feel they will leave the phase and new people coming in, a new interest, this and that” (Mal19).

The decline in popularity was also evident from the responses of fans and consumers who professed to have been interested in Hallyu from its beginning. In describing their dissatisfaction with Hallyu, participants constructed an image of Korea (from Hallyu) as a culture that is static, fleeting, and lacking imagination because “people eventually get tired” (PhilF47) and there seems to be a “failure to innovate” (PhilM31). A respondent from Thailand opines:

I think Koreans often create temporary cultures. . . . They really created a fashion wave in all music, clothing and plastic surgery culture . . . and the others just follow and not long after they are making a new trend. Again, on and on, in a circle. For example, plastic surgery styles, at the end everyone looks the same. . . . If they are all repeating the

same style then it becomes boring instead of individually unique. It's like you're a factory product, a dozen of the same. . . . I don't like that everything is the same, repeating, there are no differences and there is no individual style. (ThaiF43)

There's repetition. . . . All the bands have this similar sound and they do have a similar look so after a while for me it gets tiring . . . because it's the same thing over and over again. (Mal5)

Furthermore, Hallyu is deemed formulaic with “recycled” concepts, executions, and ideas taken from texts used before, resulting in a form of oversaturation of the same products that are now accused of lacking “authenticity”:

It was a big thing, like I have to watch Korean TV at 7 p.m. . . . We would just sit there and watch. Now no one is watching Korean TV, and I was like, don't you watch Korean movies anymore? People reply, they are kind of boring, all the stories have become similar, they have a villain, a hero, and the woman is poor and meets someone from a rich family, they got together then there is some problem in the family, she was kicked out and then there was some delay, she is always a pretty girl in a dress . . . they are all the same. (ThaiM24)

The Philippines is oversaturated with all things Korean. Also after a while, one starts to notice the template or formulaic character of many Hallyu products and they start to get old. For example, K-pop groups follow a cycle. Ninety percent of Korean TV soaps I watched likewise follow a very predictable formula. (PhilM33)

My sister was obsessed . . . she drew her eyebrows so big that it looked like she put black tape on it. The way she put make-up and dressed. Everything was Korean style. But today she just stopped. . . . I think she get bored with it now. (ThaiF33)

This notion of over-saturation is also said to cause confusion among audiences:

There are so many K-pop groups out there, too many TV shows out there, too many sometimes. You don't know which one to follow, you don't know which one is good. Sometimes it's too diluted. Out of 10 maybe one is good. Because they wanna pump out content. (Mal12)

While Chua and Iwabuchi may have celebrated the notion of cultural proximity as an explanation behind the popularity of Asian cultural texts in Southeast Asian countries (2008), this notion is now challenged by Hallyu's scarcity of sustainable story plots. In fact, cultural proximity is now associated with the failure of Hallyu:

I don't see the sustainability of the Korean culture; people are already tired of it. . . . I don't think it will stay, in the next ten years I think [everyone] will be tired with Korean movies and TV series. . . . (ThaiM24)

New Hallyu products are becoming shadows already of former Hallyu products. It may be that former Hallyu fans don't get the excitement anymore in consuming new products as they may be "cliché" or on a lower quality compared to former Hallyu products. (PhilM24)

In Thailand, one participant also associated this "trashiness" with the consumption of foreign media products, considering this to be the opposite of an ideal Thai identity: "most Thai people have very strong identities, are conservative, and are very nationalistic. Only young people follow Korean things" (ThaiF35).

While there are issues with form and content, the negative implications of aligning oneself with mainstream-low-culture has also affected the way people now consume Hallyu products. Respondents from the Philippines and Malaysia attest to this notion: "When I openly express my passion towards Hallyu, people think I'm weird or deviant"; "I always get laughed at due to general opinion that Hallyu is something cheap and out of this world"; "I keep it a secret. Otherwise, my friends might ridicule me or think I'm cheap which I am anxious about" (PhilS34).

I wouldn't tell people that I am a K-Drama fan unless I know they are also fans themselves. Because people judge and they always say it's very unrealistic and all of the celebs undergone plastic surgery so they are fake. People think it's all very superficial. So I avoid telling people I am a fan. (Mal2)

A correspondent dumbing down of quality is also observed by participants, many of whom feel this has been a strategy adopted to garner more popularity, particularly for exportation. A Chinese language teacher from Thailand asserts that:

I think before it used to show the original culture like *Dae Jang Geum*. . . . The way they make it now is not real Korean culture. It's more like they are taking Western culture and putting them in their dramas. I'm not happy with it. (ThaiF55)

Hallyu as "Cultural Imperialism"

While, over the last decade, exporting Hallyu has been a significant means of increasing investment opportunities for Korea in the Southeast Asia region, such

consumers have also been presented with a range of new products from Korea, representing new forms of creative and social engagement. However, in recent years this connection between Hallyu and Korean overseas economic interests has become increasingly blatant and explicit. Products are often connected to a very naked show of soft power and Korean branding with an aggressive marketing tactic behind them. Indeed, as a major political and economic enterprise, Hallyu products can be interpreted as the public embodiment of “face inflation,” a practice which refers to the Korean tendency to construct an idealized image of perfection that eclipses all others (Tudor 113).

In creating an image of superiority that will showcase Korea internationally, Hallyu becomes part of an exercise which sets Korea apart and distinguishes this nation as superior to those which consume Hallyu products. This becomes a form of “re-Orientalism,” a practice in which “Orientals” themselves perpetuate these previously European discourses of exoticism and inequality (see Lau and Mendes for a full discussion of this phenomenon). While the continued presence of Hallyu and its various derivatives indicate ongoing success, the heavy promotion of this Korean version of superiority and perfection is disliked by our participants and interpreted as a form of cultural imperialism.

In contrast to the historically inspired anti-Hallyu backlash movements found in China and Japan therefore, responses from interviewed Hallyu consumers in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand suggest that negative sentiments towards Hallyu in the ASEAN region stems from the tendency of such products to echo colonialist and orientalist practices. For Southeast Asian consumers, Hallyu’s packaging, promotion and proliferation functions as an explicit manifestation of Korea’s national interests and has provoked negative sentiments as to how this pop culture is used to advance a very overt national agenda. Indeed, critiqued as modern day mercantilism, the role of Hallyu in promoting Korean overseas economic interests was increasingly explicit for participants. As Thai and Philippine consumers aptly observed:

I think, they want to do more business, and that is the best for business and their own people. [If Korea is promoted in other countries], then Koreans can go to these countries and do business more easily. . . . I don’t think Thais really know about Korean culture. Because Korean culture is not about K-pop, short skirts, high heels, or cosmetics. All these things are about making money. (ThaiF38)

The promotion of Hallyu, I’m presuming, is principally for business intentions. (PhilS16)

This sense of suspicion is reinforced and heightened when Korea's commercial interests are seen to either clash with or affect local interests, as opined by respondents from the Philippines:

It might jeopardize our own products, and might result in an economic downfall. (Phil17)

Hallyu has led more Korean products to enter the Philippine market, leading some local consumer goods to receive tight competition. (PhilStud21)

Such distaste then quickly turns into accusations of cultural imperialism from consumers in a region that has long been subject to various forms of colonialism. While Hallyu has previously been interpreted as a new form of Asian cultural identity which challenges previous Western cultural hegemony (Iwabuchi), for some Southeast Asian consumers Hallyu and its aggressive promotion reinforces a colonial mentality, and points to the usurping of local culture as well as the construction of Southeast Asia as a poorer Asian "Other" next to the superior Korea. Instead of challenging Western hegemony (as was a major source of attraction for Asian consumers in early years), the promotion of Hallyu then actually functions to reinforce a colonial mentality in which it is positioned as usurping local culture. Consumers become conscious about its effects on their own culture, creating a sense of threat and intimidation:

Koreans are bigger, more aggressive, and faster. Also their government is pushing their culture worldwide. . . . If their culture is coming to take over our own culture, then we need to be more concerned about it. (ThaiM43)

It strengthens Filipinos' passion for and consumption of foreign culture, thus, somehow pulling them away from their own culture. (PhilS24)

This is further exacerbated when notable social values and norms clash, making consumers significantly uncomfortable. Notably such concerns seem to focus upon sexual and gender norms:

I think Korean girl groups dress too sexy. . . . I don't like it. . . . Teenagers will follow what they do, and it's not good at all. . . . It's against my culture. We accept a lot, but not so extremely sexy like that. (ThaiF29)

They can hug and kiss all that stuff and everything you know. So when you compare that with Malaysia, it's not acceptable by the culture here. (Mal19)

Likewise, while Hallyu has encouraged the localization of cultural production in national industries throughout Southeast Asia, this impacted resultant “indigenized” culture is also criticized and seen as the diluted and polluted imitation of local culture. One professor in the Philippines observed:

From the popularity of K-pop, many local groups emerged to imitate K-pop bands/groups but Filipinos discriminate them, arguing that they are not authentic and are only copycats. (PhilM27)

Such inflated images of perfection are also difficult to sustain and can be unappealing to many consumers, especially when the dichotomy between what is “Hallyu-Korea” and “real Korea” becomes apparent. Due to this “gap” between the real and the fantasy, the increased level of actual contact between Korea and Southeast Asia (much of it sparked by Hallyu) through aspects such as increase in tourism, personal relations (such as inter-marriage) and the increase of the Korean diaspora in Southeast Asia has inadvertently resulted in negative perceptions of Korea. Ultimately, the clean-cut fantasy projected in Hallyu products cannot match the actual reality of Korean society, with consumers noting their disappointment and distaste for this inflated reality:

My friend was in Korea for three years and he said, oh my God, everything about Korea on the TV is entirely different from reality. Korean people are really rude, but on TV they are polite, respectful to the elders. . . . In reality they spit everywhere and this is acceptable to the culture. In TV series, everyone is beautiful but in reality, it's totally the opposite! It's not interesting, the places are very similar everywhere you go. Also the visiting figures are made up. . . . My friends says [that] Korea is a nice place but they are not going again! . . . What they perceive on TV is very beautiful or better . . .but I think this is an exaggeration. (ThaiM24)

Hallyu content is designed to provide consumers with a diversion or “escape” from the everyday and has functioned, in many cases, as an individual’s primary interface with Korea. Yet the significant gulf between the Korea introduced by Hallyu and that which is directly experienced by people through tourism, online viewing or contact with the large diasporic Korean communities in Southeast Asia, turns such initial attraction and admiration into doubt and suspicion. For instance, one Malaysia interviewee commented that:

A lot of things are very fake. But I can't say anything, it's the entertainment industry, of course everybody wears a mask and everything. . . . I don't like what goes on beneath the surface. (Mal13)

Such branding is therefore seen as empty of Korean authenticity and genuineness, disconnected from reality and so creates confusion, as articulated by two participants:

I went to Korea and saw that Korean culture is so different. People are different from how they are represented on television. (ThaiF38)

They're all goody-goody kind of people portrayed in the dramas. So sometimes it's not very real. Sometimes it's so unreal. (Mal17)

This disconnection and disappointment then quickly turns into a developing suspicion that Korea is openly using Hallyu to deceive its consumers and pursue its own agenda, so furthering notions of cultural imperialism.

Changes in the Southeast Asian Region

Such dissatisfaction with Hallyu in Southeast Asia is also a clear result of recent economic and cultural changes within the ASEAN region. The growing importance of the Southeast Asian region economically has meant that over the last decade there has been an increase in international investment as these countries amalgamate economically and (to a certain extent) culturally as part of the ASEAN initiative. This rapid economic development and corresponding increase in consumer spending power has opened the region up to more international pop culture products. Whereas Hallyu was previously the overwhelmingly dominant (and very often the only) visible pop culture influence in many countries in Southeast Asia, products from places as diverse and far away as South America, the Middle-East and Europe are now readily available on VCDs and even shown on local television channels.

Comments from Southeast Asian consumers indicate that while people recognize Korean products were an early and crucial means of cultivating interest in new and different cultural products during the mid-2000s, Hallyu is now far less relevant in the contemporary context. Southeast Asian consumers now have a much wider cultural outlook and many more products to choose from, all of which pose significant competition for the previously dominant Hallyu. One Malaysian consumer explains:

There was a hype before because it was new, but now it's more seasoned. . . . I think there are more materials out there, a lot more content. Like more TV shows, more music. (Mal12)

Another consumer from the Philippines continued: “There are more international products and culture made available to us” (PhilS17). Indeed, many participants indicated how their environment has changed dramatically in recent years, identifying “choice” as a major characteristic today. One Thai contributor said “We had no choice when we were young. Everything we watched was from America” (ThaiM32), another added “Now we have more TV channels. . . . In the past we only had two or three” (ThaiM24).

Such increased choice has impacted upon Hallyu consumption. Participants indicated that due to this increased access and availability they now do not have to watch only Hallyu. One participant states “I want to see more diversity on TV not just Korean every time, maybe a French channel” (ThaiM24), another explains “It does not have to be only Korean, like before” (ThaiF36). One Malaysian consumer then explained how this increase in choice has influenced her viewing habits of TV dramas, indicating that she is now much more discerning and that products, including Hallyu, must compete for her attention:

I’m more selective nowadays. . . . Now it depends who’s starring in it, and if their stories are attractive enough. . . . I don’t watch all the dramas like we used to. . . . Let’s say I watch the first two episodes, it either catches my attention or the storyline is not good I would just drop it. (Mal17)

This increase in diversity is directly related to the amalgamation of the region under the ASEAN initiative and the growth of consumers with both disposable income and access to social media. This has changed Southeast Asia significantly, most notably it has led to curiosity and interest in other ASEAN nations. One consumer explained:

If I step back and look at the big picture, I see a lot changing. Firstly, job opportunities. People from Myanmar can have better jobs in Thailand, Laos, or even Vietnam. And a person from Vietnam can be a teacher in Thailand. But before it never happened. . . . For me . . . there could be a big change maybe not this year or next year. Maybe in the future. I have to learn more Vietnamese, I never learned before. (ThaiF38)

Continuing this thread, another participant expressed interest in learning about Singapore:

Their country is very small, but they are very advanced. I want to learn how they manage their country. Or how they improved the education system. (ThaiFG2)

Another was interested in Myanmar:

I am interested in Myanmar because it is a historical enemy of Thailand. And that has been an inspiration for me to learn about it and learn about the culture and I can sing some Burmese songs. (ThaiFG2)

With this increasing regional awareness between Southeast Asian nations, pop culture from within the region is also beginning to cross borders and become available in countries where it was previously not a staple feature. In Vietnam, Thai dramas and pop music are now popular, while Philippine dramas are likewise now screened in Vietnam and Indonesia. One consumer indicated how this ASEAN culture has usurped Hallyu as a more appealing and interesting form of entertainment:

In ASEAN, we are promoting ASEAN identity. . . . I think people are more interested in ASEAN movies. . . . Every country has a different story. . . . ASEAN stuff would be diverse and interesting. (ThaiM24)

Another indicates how she believes this increase in availability and interest in diverse products has had a direct affect upon the reception and popularity of Hallyu in her country:

We have Chinese and Indonesian movies, which is more interesting than Korean movies. . . . I see from 10 years ago, when Korean culture first came to Thailand, Thai boybands copied the Korean style. But now due to the ASEAN movement, there will be an exchange in economy and tourism and I think that is a good thing. For example, there are now many products from Myanmar, also many Thais have been traveling to Myanmar lately. (ThaiF36)

In particular, as consumers experience a greater variety of cultural products and the character of the region changes dramatically, Hallyu now seems stylistically static and formulaic. Many consumers were highly critical of what they perceive as the lack of innovation and variety in Korean pop culture, interpreting Hallyu as unimaginative and repetitive. In a stark contrast to the “freshness” this Korean pop culture represented in the mid to late 2000s, terms such as “generic,” “repetitive” and “boring” were used frequently in statements such as these: “After a while, it got so generic. It’s all the same after a while” (Mal11) and “it’s not really interesting anymore. I think it’s boring. It’s generic” (Mal12). One consumer explained “sometimes Hallyu produces relatively similar things and it can get boring so people lose interest” (PhilS28), while another described this transition from a new and interesting product to one that is now the opposite:

At first everyone has liking for it, its new, its good. They like Korean culture, Korean TV, miniseries, they think it’s good for about four or five years. After that it’s like they do

the same thing. . . . When they see a Korean miniseries of about ten or twenty [episodes], they are boring, everything is the same. (ThaiM33)

Another participant described a visit to his home village where his family and friends have stopped consuming Hallyu products:

Now no one is watching Korean TV, and I was like, don't you watch Korean movies anymore? People reply, they are kind of boring, all the stories have become similar, they have a villain, a hero, and the woman is poor and meets someone from an rich family, they got together then there is some problem in the family, she was kicked out and then there was some delay, she is always a pretty girl in a dress, so its like. So they are all the same. (ThaiM24)

He continued:

And they are very long, the TV series, and they are doing the same things! When I was here I used to watch Korean TV series, but I got bored two or three years ago. They have about 60 series, who is going to watch that, I stopped at 30 because I didn't care what was going to happen! (ThaiM24).

This sentiment towards Korean TV dramas was echoed by a great many consumers across the three countries, with many often using the word “predictable” in their description:

10 years ago it was new for Thai people to watch it . . . [but] it is now repeating the same kind of plot and story. Now if you see five or six stories, you kind of know how the rest will be. (ThaiF38)

After a while, one starts to notice the template/formulaic character of many Hallyu products and they start to get old. For example, K-pop groups follow a cycle. Ninety percent of Korean TV soaps I watched likewise follow a very predictable formula. (PhilM33)

K-drama is very predictable. You know who's gonna end up with who. (Mal6)

There was similar sentiment expressed towards K-pop, with terms such as “repetition” used to refer to the many groups who now seemed somewhat stale and uninteresting:

For me there's repetition in like the K-pop industry. Like all the bands have this similar sound and they do have a similar look so after a while for me it gets tiring for me because it's the same thing over and over again. (Mal5)

To some degree, it's quite repetitive. The groups, the guys, the girls, not to be mean but they even look the same. It's quite repetitive. So when something is going on over and over again, the appeal decreases. So, I see no innovation from their side to retain their followers. (Mal7)

Korean groups seem so similar to the point that it can be boring. (PhilS32)

This inability to adapt and stay relevant in the contemporary context, described as a “failure to innovate” (PhilM31) by one participant, can be explained by the stylistic standardization of Hallyu products. Sociologist John Lie speaks of K-pop performers as embodying universal appeal through their “clean, well-crafted performers” with a “genteel demeanour” who embody “politeness” (355), while journalists claim that Hallyu fans love K-pop because the idols are “good-looking, relatable, hard-working and disciplined” (“Culture Wars”) and embody a staple model of urban stability and modern conservativeness. Yet after enjoying almost over ten years of global success, it appears that this conservative nature now points to stagnation and a lack of creativity in a context where new products are continually challenging consumers. Indeed one participant notes how the “cleanliness” and “politeness” which Lie refers to is now unappealing:

The artists are like factory produced. Everything is like so perfect. They try to perfect everything. It's not natural. I don't buy it and believe it [anymore]. (Mal11)

Another repeats this notion of a sanitized “factory” product which, for her, points to a lack of “uniqueness”:

I don't like that everything [in Hallyu] is the same, repeating, there are no differences and there is no individual style. . . . If they are all repeating the same style then it becomes boring instead of individually unique. It's like you're a factory product, a dozen of the same. (ThaiM43)

This is echoed by comments from journalists, one of whom complains that K-pop is now far too bland: “Where are the cool, badass young people who aren't always happy, make mistakes, and say what they want to in K-pop?” (“Culture Wars”). Compared to the difference and “quirkiness” associated with emblems such as “Brit-pop” or “Japanese Cool” which are “a lot more specific, personal and weird” (“Culture Wars”), the standardized global model which Hallyu reproduced so well has now resulted in a lack of clear and distinctive characteristics.

Other comments from consumers also indicate that this lack of distinctiveness has made Korea and Hallyu less interesting and attractive to consumers. One

individual states: “Hallyu does not provide anything new and interesting anymore” (PhilM25), and another: “There is nothing interesting about Korean entertainment. It is all the same” (Mal1). Others indicate how their interests have drifted from Korea to other Asian countries: “I used to want to go [to Korea] (*laughs*). But now I want to go to Japan” (ThaiF36) and “My friend used to love going to Korea. But now she has changed and now goes to Myanmar, Indonesia, and China” (ThaiF36). Likewise, some consumers have moved back to “the West”: “I was addicted to Korean dramas before but now I am addicted to American dramas” (ThaiF35) and “when it comes to Western music, you have other genres and they’re more open to differences” (Mal8).

This absence of “uniqueness” and “interestingness” can again be explained by the format of Hallyu. Rather than a distinctive representation of Korean culture, scholars have identified Hallyu as embodying a particularly successful incarnation of East Asian popular culture together with a high quality “look” that is in keeping with the globalization of the culture industries today (Oh and Park 55). The modern “conservativeness” that is attached to these products and the rigidity of the Hallyu format was designed to cultivate wide appeal and has been extremely successful. Yet as a result, Hallyu no longer embodies the unique appeal and image that enabled K-Dramas and K-pop to begin displacing previous dominant Euro-American (and to a lesser extent Japanese) entertainment products in Southeast Asia. As an adept global model, Oh and Park’s “high-quality” look (55) can also be easily replicated elsewhere in a way that may be more appropriate to or interesting within a particular context. This is evident in Thai T-pop and Philippine P-pop, which are both becoming highly successful across parts of Asia.

This standardization and lack of “uniqueness” is also problematic for Hallyu’s long term prospects in this region. In constructing Hallyu as formulaic and repetitive, comments indicate that many consumers view Korean pop culture and the “Korean Wave” as a temporary and impermanent phenomenon that will be easily replaced by the next influx of pop culture. Comments indicate that consumers are aware of the “waves” and circular movements of cultural popularity and see Hallyu as part of this, evident in the following quotes:

We used to admire American and European culture more than Thai culture. And now it has gone in a circle to Asian cultures. Maybe tomorrow we might go back to European and American cultures again. (ThaiM43)

I don’t think it will stay, in the next ten years I think it will be tired with Korean movies and TV series. . . . I don’t see the sustainability of the Korean culture; people are already tired of it. (ThaiM24)

For now, many China bands are coming up, so that might be the next trend coming up. (Mal14)

CONCLUSION

This small sample of Hallyu consumers in key Southeast Asian nations provides rare insight into the current difficulties facing Hallyu in this region. Such evidence indicates the various factors behind consumers' concerns, issues that could start to affect the popularity of Hallyu. These concerns are based around the oversaturation of Hallyu, its aggressive marketing tactics and the inability of this industry to adapt to the very significant changes in this region. It appears that next to the new movements of inter-ASEAN products, the overall increased diversity of products available in the ASEAN region, and the strengthening of local products (often, ironically, through adopting characteristics from Hallyu), the very standardized Hallyu aesthetic with its very naked ambitions of "soft power" for Korean overseas interest is struggling to remain relevant to these consumers within this fast-changing region.

Much of the dissatisfaction expressed towards Hallyu from these participants can be attributed to the general inability of Hallyu's static, stable, and conservative products to keep up with the changes in this region. The middle-class urban values that Hallyu represents are changing rapidly in each country and region and can be represented by other (more suitable) cultural models. As Southeast Asia changes and grows, the standardized format of Hallyu and the modernity previously represented by East Asian cities such as Seoul is no longer seen as aspirational in for consumers in countries which have growing cultural industries and a growing consumer-based middle class of their own. Quantitative research is needed to address whether such issues are significant enough to begin affecting the popularity and economic success of Hallyu, and such material should be based around the identified issues and three categories of this project.

As stated in the methodology, such issues are not necessarily indicative of wider social problems in Hallyu reception. While there can certainly be clashes between hegemonic values, such products are still popular and indeed, in their analysis of "backlash," Vertovec and Wessendorf warn against conflating the "sound and fury" of newspapers, talk shows and politicians with actual public opinion (15). There is, as yet, no large and significant downturn in Hallyu export or popularity, such exported products are still economically viable, and revenue is still increasing. Indeed, while identifying the problems and issues with reception, many consumers also reaffirmed their commitment to Hallyu and its continuing popularity:

I still watch K-drama though, and a lot of reality shows. I tried watching *Game of Thrones* and other English [language] series but I think I prefer Asian dramas.... In the end, tell me anyone who doesn't know who is *Big Bang*. (Mal3)

Participants also demonstrate faith that Korean entertainment will overcome current problems and adapt and innovate:

There seems to be a lull now. But that should be until the next interesting telenovela or K-pop group comes along. (PhilM58)

Nevertheless, our qualitative study fills an important gap in available literature in relation to the differing context of East and Southeast Asia and the growing autonomy of Southeast Asian consumers. In order to remain relevant and significant in this context, Hallyu must adapt and reinvent itself, fulfilling the requirements of its changing consumers.

Notes

1. If the interview was conducted in English, then translation has been made and grammar corrected accordingly. However, if the participant spoke in English, then their speech has not been altered and remains original. Occasionally notes in parenthesis are given to clarify a point.

Appendix

Participant Number	Age	Country	Occupation	Sex	Nationality	Ethnicity (if available)
ThaiM43	43	Thailand	Graphic Designer	Male	Thai	Central Thai
ThaiM24	24	Thailand	Student	Male	Burmese	Burmese
ThaiM33	33	Thailand	Freelance Movie Critic for Magazine	Male	Thai	Central Thai
ThaiM32	32	Thailand	Artist and Photographer	Male	Thai	Central Thai
ThaiF29	29	Thailand	English Teacher	Female	Thai	Central Thai
ThaiF38	38	Thailand	Thai Language Teacher	Female	Thai	Central Thai
ThaiF35	35	Thailand	Company Worker	Female	Thai	Central Thai
ThaiF55	55	Thailand	Chinese Language Teacher	Female	Thai	Central Thai
ThaiF36	36	Thailand	Teacher at an International School	Female	Thai	Central Thai
ThaiFG1 (Focus Group 5 participants)	19-20	Thailand	Student	Male	Thai	Mixed

ThaiFG2 (Focus Group – 10 participants)	19-20	Thailand	Student	Male and Female	Thai	Mixed
Mal1	20	Malaysia	Journalism Student	Male	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal2	18	Malaysia	High School Graduate	Female	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal3	23	Malaysia	IT Administrator	Male	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal4	23	Malaysia	Film Student	Female	Malaysian	Malay
Mal5	22	Malaysia	International Communication with English Student	Female	Malaysian	Indian
Mal6	21	Malaysia	IT student	Female	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal7	23	Malaysia	Masters Student, Engineering	Male	Malaysian	Punjabi
Mal8	23	Malaysia	Law Student	Female	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal9	23	Malaysia	Medical student	Female	Malaysian	Thai/Chinese
Mal10	22	Malaysia	Direct Salesperson	Female	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal11	22	Malaysia	International Business student studying in South Korea	Female	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal12	28	Malaysia	Marketing Executive	Male	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal13	27	Malaysia	Event Manager	Female	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal14	18	Malaysia	Fresh Graduate from High School	Female	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal15	55	Malaysia	General Manager	Female	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal16	51	Malaysia	Homemaker	Female	Malaysian	Indian

Mal17	54	Malaysia	Homemaker	Female	Malaysian	Chinese
Mal18	23	Malaysia	Student	Male	Malaysian	Malay
Mal19	50	Malaysia	IT Consultant	Male	Malaysian	Indian
PhilF26	26	Philippines	Teacher	Female	Filipino	Filipino
PhilM25	25	Philippines	Teacher	Male	Filipino	Filipino
PhilF37	37	Philippines	IT Company Employee	Female	Filipino	Filipino
PhilM33	33	Philippines	Teacher	Male	Filipino	Filipino
PhilM27	27	Philippines	Teacher	Male	Filipino	Filipino
PhilM58	58	Philippines	Teacher	Male	Filipino	Filipino
PhilF49	49	Philippines	Social Worker	Female	Filipino	Filipino
PhilM29	29	Philippines	Financial Consultant	Male	Filipino	Filipino
PhilF24	24	Philippines	Events Manager	Female	Filipino	Filipino
PhilF40	40	Philippines	Teacher	Female	Filipino	Filipino
PhilF28	28	Philippines	Teacher	Female	Filipino	Filipino
PhilF47	47	Philippines	Employee	Female	Filipino	Filipino
PhilM31	31	Philippines	Teacher	Male	Filipino	Filipino
PhilM28	28	Philippines	Teacher	Male	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS15	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS16	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS17	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS18	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS19	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS20	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS21	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS22	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino

PhilS23	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS24	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS25	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS26	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS27	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS28	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS29	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS30	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS31	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS32	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS33	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino
PhilS34	17-20	Philippines	Student	Not identified	Filipino	Filipino

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