

Korean Pop Culture: A Decade of Ups and Downs¹

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Abstract

Korean pop culture or hallyu (the Korean Wave) refers to the phenomenon of Korean entertainment and popular culture causing a great sensation in the world with pop music, TV dramas, and movies. Over the last decade, Korea emerged as a new center for the production of transnational pop culture. However, an anti-hallyu movement is often rising in some parts of the world. In this regard, this study suggests that we should look back on the decade by analyzing the backlashes and achievement of hallyu to develop concrete ideas on how to consistently develop it. In order to do so, it is essential for the government to contribute to the progress of cultural exchange with countries where Korean pop culture is making inroads.

Keywords: *Korean pop culture, the Korean wave, hallyu, anti-hallyu, entertainment business, K-pop, Korean drama*

1. Introduction

Numerous popular cultural contents have been introduced to international markets since ‘*Winter Sonata*’ which brought sensational popularity of Korean dramas in early 2000s. Having astronomical economic value, hallyu² or Korean pop culture has made the unprecedented diplomatic achievements in history and has lifted the national brand of Korea for the past decade. However, there are some problems behind the glory of hallyu or called the Korean wave. As seen in conflicts between JYJ and SM Entertainment, crooked profit-sharing structure between stars and entertainment companies and the issue of unequal contract so to speak slave contract often make legal disputes as more and more stars go overseas and the profit scale of related fields is growing enormously. Additionally, poor production environments in broadcasting and movie industry cause criticisms such as the mass production of fragment script dramas or poor remakes.

In music industry, similar looking new groups boasting of well-made group dancing with dance music have been being introduced nearly every day, as many idol groups get popular among youths. Of course, there can be some idol singers equipped with talents and gifts but most of young singers are being forgotten after a few years’ popularity in spite of such years of severe training.

In addition to somewhat backward production system and problems in related personnel nurturing system in Korea, external problems are not a few. There is a new trend of resistance such as hatred and disgust against Korea. When looking into hallyu from the positive perspectives, we can self-praise it as Asia Continent centered culture phenomenon. On the other hand, it is indispensable to examine if Korean pop culture is peppered throughout the

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² Literally, this word means the Korean wave.

world based on the respect of the local cultures. It has already been 10 years since the new terminology 'hallyu' emerged in early 2000. As it is said that 10 years changes everything, hallyu has been changed many times and is entering its maturity. Therefore, it is time to establish prospective cooperation with other cultures and to prepare grounds to leap into a more culturally advanced country. To carry out this research, this study has reviewed the achievements and the future tasks of hallyu and has tried to propose a method for the sustainable development.

2. Achievement of the Korean Wave

Hallyu can be divided into many stages such as development stage from late 1990s to early 2000s, growth stage from early 2000s to mid 2000s and maturity after mid 2000s to present. Since the late 1990s, Korean pop culture has spread in East and Southeast Asian countries including China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Japan. A Korean drama, titled *What is Love All About?* broadcasted through Chinese TV in 1997, became the first hit drama while *Autumn Tale* gained popularity on Taiwanese television. Gradually, in Vietnam, 60 Korean dramas were broadcasted between 1997 and 2000 alone.

In Japan, Korean actors Yong-Jun Bae and Yong-Ha Park, heroes on *Winter Sonata*, became the most popular celebrities in 2004. According to a report from a Japanese institute, this unbelievably popular drama has helped create more than \$2 billion effect in exports that includes tourism to Korea in the mid-2000s [1].

Hallyu has been growing up to be a motive power of trading thanks to cultural contents since mid 2000s. In 2000s, hallyu has moved its horizon to culture contents business which is welcomed as highly value-added futuristic industry including games, shows, dramas and movies. As cultural contents industry grows more than 6.3% in average between 2004 and 2008, the full scale growth stage has been announced. Additionally, culture contents overseas marketing has made its first step in mid 2000s by grafting hallyu with exporting business. In particular, it is significant that the grafting of hallyu and export marketing was very successful in China, one of the biggest exporting counterparts of Korea [2].

Not only in Asian countries but also in Europe, the Korean Wave reached France, which is a core of European culture. In 2011, Korean pop music industry held a large scale concert in Paris for the first time in Korean pop music history mainly by entertainers in SM Town. It was a big success with long queue of ticket-buyers and the emergence of black market. It was an event showing hallyu's success beyond Asia. The love on K-pop of hallyu fans naturally lead them to the favorable feelings on Korean products and travel sites.

According to the survey by the branch office of Korea Tourism Organization in Paris, France through its overseas PR site (www.visitkorea.or.kr), this trend becomes more conspicuous. In particular, more than 90% of hallyu fans in France answered that they would like to visit Korea, while 72.1% answered 'Came to know Korea for the first time' and 66.3% answered that 'Came to have interest in Korean culture' after listening to K-pop. Generally speaking, hallyu fans came to have integrated motivation to learn Korean culture after contacting Korean cultural contents such as K-pop or dramas. It seems very positive for the continuous culture exchange and expansion of the base [3].

As the Korean wave has clearly become a major trend in pan-Asian pop culture, it has inspired high domestic expectations for both commercial profits and promotion of national brand. The Korean government and corporations have been eager to promote its essence and develop necessary strategies to sustain it. The government introduced the Basic Law for Cultural Industry Promotion in 1999 and launched the Culture and Content Agency under the purview of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2001.

In 2002, Online Digital Contents Industry Development Act was enacted to contribute to enhancement of quality of life and sound development of national economics by fixing necessary items for the promotion of contents industry to compose the base of contents industry and enforce competitiveness. In 2010, basic plans regarding contents industry promotion were established to secure government driven contents industry development system, and Online Digital Contents Industry Development Act was amended in full scale and renamed as 'Contents Industry Promotion Act' to secure various administrative and financial supporting grounds necessary for the development of contents industry.

In 2012, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism officially established 'Hallyu Culture Promotion Organization' to promulgate Korean traditional culture grafting with its pop culture. Additionally, the Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange is the organization established to continue and develop hallyu, in which Korea Cultural Contents Promotion Corporation, Game Industry Development Corporation, Broadcasting Media Industry Promotion Corporation, Independent Production Association, and the Federation of Korean Industries are participating as board members.

In spite of the concerns of bureaucracy depending on the success of hallyu, it is evident that public policies and institutions acted favorably on Korean Contents' entering international markets. According to the international income and expenditure statistics by the Export-Import Bank of Korea, the revenue of hallyu related contents from overseas broke the record of 150 billion won in the first half of 2012, and foreign currency income related to K-Pop and media contents reached 150 billion won in the first half. It is 11% increase from the first half of last year. From this context, hallyu naturally contributed to export increase of Korean products by expanding Korean culture, and brought visible economic effects such as enhancement of the national brand image in a relatively short time [4].

What are the backgrounds of the success of hallyu to become a mainstream of Asian culture? The first cause can be found in the commonality that Asian people share. Popular culture is delivered to the accommodators who have similar culture and emotion in the region. In other words, nostalgia to the virtues that are forgotten in industrial communities such as respect to the old and filial love between parents and children and similar racial characteristics in the contents made hallyu delivered beyond the physical national boundaries in Asia [5].

From the perspective of external aspects such as laws, institutions, technologies and environments necessary for the expansion of contents, the change of mediascape and the development of digital media played important roles. It is the same context of the mega hit of Psy's 'Gangnam Style' without special PRs recording over 1.4 billion downloads in YouTube as of March, 2013. Large entertainment companies in Korea usually upload music video on YouTube when artists release new numbers to share it with fans. Additionally, they usually communicate with fans through their homepages or Facebook pages when they select a new song for media exposure and fix concert schedule, and make efforts to reflect requirements of fans whenever they can. While culture was transmitted through direct contacts in the past, the emergence of new media made it possible to expand a culture without direct contacts.

3. Anti-Hallyu

As hallyu became popular in pan-Asian area, there became a negative sentiment of 'anti-hallyu' which means resistance to Korean popular culture and Korea itself due to the economic and cultural values embedded in hallyu. Nevertheless, the analysis of anti-hallyu is not sufficient comparing to the studies on its achievements and supportive policy implementation, and the studies are prone to being limited to protective and temporary resolutions rather than providing fundamental solutions based on the mutual sympathy. If the

success of hallyu is focused on the commonality that can encompass pan-Asia, anti-hallyu may be resulted from the overlook on differences between Korean culture and local cultures shown at encounters. It does not end with the reduced export of Korean dramas but may cause multi-faceted conflicts in politics, social matters and economy with the counterpart countries.

Anti-hallyu is spewed whenever there are politically sensitive issues such as history or territory issues in major countries such as Japan and China. For example, '*Manga Anti-Hallyu*' published in 2006 in Japan sold more than 300,000 copies in a month in spite of hostile and distorted descriptions. There are attempts to make use of anti-hallyu to consolate communities in Japan after earthquake in 2011, and in 2010 an actress who was appointed as Ambassador to Dokdo³ had to quit her activities because of demonstrations of right-wing organizations. In July, 2011, Takaoka Soske, a Japanese actor starred in Japanese movie '*Bakchigi*' describing the sorrows of Korean-Japanese in Japan posted a text in his twitter that jobs for Japanese entertainers were reduced as Korean dramas and songs became the main subjects of Japanese mass media, which fueled the controversy of Anti-Hallyu. Recently, with the visit of Dokdo by President Lee Myung-bak, anti-Korea fever has been raised and some of hallyu stars were refused to enter Japan. As such hallyu in Japan is the scale showing the political dynamics of two countries. Anti-hallyu opinions are distributed through non-official paths such as internet sites like 2ch, personal blogs, and bulletin board of right-wing organizations rather than official and trust-worthy media such as newspapers and broadcast.

China was very favorable to Korean pop culture in early times, as it first used the pronoun of 'hallyu' in 1999. However, the dramas gained more popularity and triggered a drastic change of the tastes of youths with K-pop, criticism was raised on the occlusive characteristics of Korean cultural industry and history distortion proliferated through patriotic historical dramas using mass media. China has institutionalized to regulate hallyu concretely since mid-2000s. As a result, in golden hours of 7 to 10 pm, foreign contents cannot be broadcasted in 2012. The Chinese government also limited total on air time of foreign dramas and regulated hallyu.

China expressed uncomfortable feelings for the strong pride of Korean culture, and considered the excessively ethnic colors as cultural chauvinism. Most of Chinese mass media criticized the quality of cultural products and personal problems of stars such as same monotonous stories in dramas, too expensive guarantees, or insincere attitude of some stars. As in Japan, anti-hallyu in China is mostly from misunderstanding and hostility because of political situations between Korean and China rather than the criticism against the popular culture itself. Especially, after the establishment of Lee Myung-bak administration, the relationship has become distant and negative feelings against Korea in China has been increasing because of default or overdue wages of Korean companies in China. Accordingly, Korean producers are looking for alternatives to overcome anti-hallyu in China such as starring Korean stars in Chinese dramas or producing programs with Chinese productions [6].

In Thailand, the popularity of hallyu started with the fever of '*Dae Jang Geum*'⁴ in mid 2000s, and the interest in Korean culture including cosmetics, food and language became very high. However, the dramas on air in Thailand TV reduced to 26 from 43 in 2009, and the share of Korean online games became reduced because of Chinese games. There is pessimistic prospect that hallyu is in its period of decline. In 2012, there was anti-Korea spirit for a while because of an idol group named 'Block B' ignored and despised local people in an interview with a Thailand media during the promotion. Although they shaved their heads and uploaded an apology video and apology letters, the anti-Korea feelings persisted. In Thailand,

³ Dokdo is the easternmost end of Korea's territories and is located 87.4km to the southeast of Ulleungdo of Korea.

⁴ It is a 2003 epic Korean television series directed by Lee Byung Hoon and produced by MBC.

discourses to enforce their own competitiveness to tighten vigilance against hallyu are being composed rather than criticizing hallyu directly. They tend to worry about economic and social influences of hallyu. Consequently, they tried to cut down the influence of hallyu or to define it as temporary phenomenon.

Up to now, western countries did not have many opportunities to contact Korean pop culture so there have not been an atmosphere called anti-hallyu. However, when SM Entertainment held hallyu Concert successfully in Paris, France in 2011, major European newspapers and media including BBC and Le Monde commented infringement of human rights of minor trainees such as severe training and long-term unequal contract. Those media analyzed that the success of K-pop was the result of tyranny of large entertainment companies and interests of government emphasizing economic value only. Behind such negative articles, there may be curiosity about the unique star nurturing system including language and manners training and psychology of check and control against hallyu which became the core culture of Asia [7, 8].

4. Conclusion

Korean cultural contents were introduced to international stage through global phenomenon called Hallyu in a decade. Numerous contents appear and disappear from '*Winter Sonata*' to Psy's '*Gangnam Style*', and visited culture consumers alternating success and failure. At present when hallyu fandom and anti-hallyu coexist although there is some difference in extent, it is difficult to expand influence in the market only with hallyu the consumer of which is limited to youths only. To encompass core consumers enjoying Korean culture and values, it is necessary to develop diverse contents. In other words, while hallyu used to be a product refining western pop culture up to now, the next ten years should be the period to search for the originality of Korea. We have infinite subjects introducing beautiful traditional culture, original technology and story-telling.

As hallyu is considered as a product using Korean culture as a medium, it is the window through which other Asian countries look at Korea. In this context, hallyu should shift its paradigm from the darling of culture industry to an overall phenomenon encompassing politics, economics and social matters. However, Korean government tends to see hallyu as a strategic industry to improve exports. As there were the supports of USA, the ultra super power country behind the phenomenon that American culture became a universal culture in the world, the government's role is very important. However, considering fluctuation of culture, institutional supports should be provided to produce high quality cultural contents through continuous study and analysis of local consumers.

Culture planners in Korea should have prospective strategies not only to create economic profits but also to support long-term sustainable overseas expansion. To do this, we need to develop programs supplement the backward system, systemize related personnel training, compose committee with related institutions in order to respond to anti-hallyu proactively and to compose new image of 'Koreans who share their talents and wealth' escaping from the old image of 'Koreans who scrape money' through donation, know-how transfer and establishment of Youth Cultural Educational Institutions. The good quality of cultural contents is essential to influence the sentiment towards Korea in general. For example, the more hallyu contents the cultural consumers are exposed to, the more amicable to Korean culture they become [9].

Half century ago, M. McLuhan forecasted the current media environments that make influences on local communities to globe beyond the personal dimension through his famous phrase of 'The medium is the message.' New media such as SNS, Facebook, and YouTube

based on Internet technology has been developed to distribute contents all over the world beyond the physical boundaries of nations in near real time. As Psy's 'Gangnam Style' made a sensational success and became the best pop culture product in 2012, it is the time that the consumers find the contents that they want borrowing the power of new media. From this perspective, we need to provide Korean culture product consumers with opportunities to contact diverse cultures in the world using new media as well as explore good cultural contents and introduce them to the other parts of the world.

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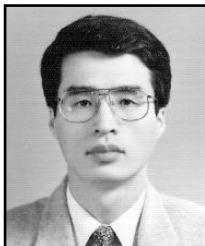
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