Reversed Ethnography in the Reception of the Korean Wave

Hyeri Jung
Eastern University

Abstract

This paper unravels dynamic interactions between Korean popular culture and its fans in the United States, focusing on how cultural hybridity of the Korean Wave un/consciously facilitates soft power, and what sociocultural implications it might yield in global/international contexts. Employing various theoretical frameworks of globalization, critical/cultural media studies, hybridity, soft power, and fan studies, I take a qualitative methodological approach of what I call a reversed media ethnography: Examining the contraflow of Korean media culture on U.S. fans. I employ various qualitative and interpretive techniques including grounded theory to analyze the rich corpus of data I collected over a period of two years to examine the nature of transcultural media and fans of the Korean Wave in the United States. Overall, the findings of this paper suggest that the complex layers of hybridity embedded in Korean popular culture creates complicated webs of transculturality. The Korean Wave exemplifies strategically well-balanced cultural hybridity that arouses a certain feeling of affinity: Emotional proximity. Korean popular culture evokes continuous negotiations of identities and generates nonthreatening wholesome content that comfortably appeals to American fans with various ethnic, racial, social, and cultural backgrounds. The notion of *uri-ness* (we-ness in English), collective unity and solidarity, embedded in Korean popular culture and its fandom culture works as one of the multifaceted soft power in the eyes of American fans that leads to an alternative post-Western soft power. This study contends that it is not the so-called hybridized Korean popular culture per se that makes it transcultural, and global to some extent, but the often under-recognized vital agents in the global sphere: Legions of fans.

Keywords: Korean Wave, K-pop, reversed ethnography, emotional proximity, reception studies, *uri-ness*, fandom, soft power

Introduction

"Are you the one about soft power?" she said, seemed to have read my online profile about being a researcher interested in soft power and excited to have me as a new member of her group. A group of people was gathered in a dimly lit room to watch a South Korean TV drama (hereafter, K-drama) together. Some of them were wearing a T-shirt with K-pop (South Korean pop music) written on it, and one of them had an *EXO* keychain.[1] It was early 2015 when I first met a group of people who enjoy consuming, learning, and interacting with South Korean popular culture in the United States. That was the moment my journey of a reversed ethnographic approach to U.S. fans' reception of Korean popular culture started.

With the rapid globalization process in the 1990s, there has been a surge of transnational cultural flow of South Korean media content in the domain of global media culture. South Korea (hereafter Korea)'s media market expansion facilitated the export of its popular culture, which has received worldwide attention and popularity. Productions and content of Korean popular culture, mainly television drama (K-drama) and pop music (K-pop), have become a giant cultural industry and have garnered one of the biggest fandoms worldwide.[2] This successful reception of Korean popular culture overseas is known as *Hallyu* [Korean Wave]. Yet few investigations have explored the reception of the Korean Wave with first-hand accounts in Western contexts. The increasing prominence of the Korean Wave, especially K-pop among the young digital generation in the United States, compels scholars to reexamine the phenomenon much further.

One critical view of ethnography was that the ethnographic practice was seen as a product of colonial and thus Western-philic discourses, a charge that focused mainly on how ethnographies inscribed ethnocentric perspectives.[3] Traditional ethnographic research was conducted by Western researchers into the so-called non-Western cultures and people as exotic "Other," and thus the point of departure inevitably reflected the Western perspectives.[4] My study employs what I call a *reversed* media ethnographic approach to examine multiple aspects of the Korean Wave as transcultural media and its fans in the United States. This reverses the usual dynamic in which scholars from central countries study the periphery, hence *reversed* media ethnography. I have closely participated in and interacted with American fans of the Korean Wave for more than two years to explore beyond what has already been studied and below the surface of American fans' expressed interpretations.

In this article, I revisit some of the relevant theoretical concepts and frameworks of global media culture in light of the Korean Wave in order to address the following inquiries: How do Americans consume, interpret, and reproduce Korean popular culture? What aspects of soft power can be found in the realm of American fans' reception of Korean popular culture? And what sociocultural implications does the American fans' reception of Korean popular culture yield in global contexts? I consider pertinent subjects—globalization, popular culture, ethnography, fandom studies — as pieces of a broader theoretical argument and recognize their aggregate power in hopes that we can better understand the complex webs of transnational media culture and transcultural fandom, albeit provisional. One of the ways to do so is start taking transcultural fans' reception of transnational popular culture more seriously and closely interact with them by adopting a trans-local ethnographic approach at the heart of globalization.

Theoretical Background

Media Culture from Transnational to Transcultural

Few analyses have focused on texts produced outside but consumed inside the United States, except for some that focus on U.S. fans of Japanese anime.[5] Even fewer have considered the significance of fan culture on an increasingly global scene, fostered particularly by the advent of the Internet as a tool for intercultural, and potentially global fan activity.[6] Border-crossing—transcultural—fan studies have often been relegated to the periphery of fandom studies because scholars have tended to prioritize the nation when understanding fan appropriation and engagement and/or effectively exoticising transcultural fandoms. In this way, the unique insights they offer about the ways that transcultural fans interpret and interact with both media and one another in an ever-intensifying global media market are limited.[7] Questions of both how and why different transcultural media capture the imaginations of fans, as well as how fans incorporate transcultural media into their own popular cultural contexts and what meanings they attribute to them, have the potential to contribute nuance to a discipline that has remained firmly White American in orientation.

Thus, I advocate a broad framework for the exploration and interrogation of transcultural and transnational fandoms in which the nation is only one facet of contexts that influence their rise and spread. I

argue that while national identity and transnational historical and sociopolitical contexts may inform fans' pursuits, this is neither necessarily the case nor the only possible mode of transcultural fan engagement. Based on Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto's 2013 study, I use the term 'transnational' to prioritize a national orientation over other subject positions that are arguably more salient.[8] On the other hand, I use the term 'transcultural' to imply more flexibilities, allowing for a national orientation and yet having room for the possibility of other orientations such as gender, sexual, popular, and fan cultural contexts within the ecology of media fandom. Thus, the term 'transcultural' provides a more fluid conduit to comprehend how and why fandoms arise almost regardless of national borders both geographical and cultural.[9]

Cultural Industry in Korea

It was not long ago that Korea started to emerge as one of the major centers for the production of transnational popular culture. Since the 1990s, the Korean cultural industries have developed many products and expanded the export of these products mainly to East and Southeast Asia. A few media outlets and scholars argued that the Korean Wave would be a passing fad due to both protective cultural policies in some Asian countries and the emergence of China and India as new powerhouses in the realm of popular culture.[10] Despite these concerns, the Korean Wave has further developed from a regional to a global phenomenon. Many policy makers, cultural practitioners, media scholars, and most of all, fans around the world are amazed by this unexpected global popularity of Korean popular culture originating from the small—once semi-peripheral—country.

The premise of globalization is that the power of nation-states has diminished in the realm of economy and culture, and the national boundary does not function to shape people's cultural identities and cultural sovereignty. However, in the case of the Korean Wave, the power of the nation-state is reformed and redeveloped through the government's engagement in international relations. While neo-liberal norms call for small involvement of government in the cultural sector, the Korean government has taken a major role because the cultural industries acknowledge that active governmental intervention is needed to grow as commodities. Under neo-liberal reform, the primary role of the Korean government has been somewhat decreased, however, the nation-state remains and intensifies its role in popular culture.[11]

It is important to address that the advance of social media and digital technologies has changed the trend of the Korean Wave, making it much more global and transcultural both in scope and scale. The new media such as social media are a vital element creating an unfathomable spread of information in both speed and scope, known as spreadable media.[12] Fans around the world heavily access social media to enjoy K-pop, K-drama, television programs, films, and Korea-based-video-and-smartphone games rather than via traditional one-way communication technologies and mainstream media.[13] The scope and scale of fans (rather than general audiences) and their participatory activities across the globe have exponentially increased for the Korean Wave. One noticeable example is K-pop. As Psy's "Gangnam Style," featuring a buffoonish horse dance, has been the most watched video on YouTube in the world since 2013 as of 2017, social media have been a powerful conduit for the Korean Wave, facilitating their popularity beyond the Asian region. Along with social media, it is important to address that the transcultural phenomenon of the Korean Wave is boosted in conjunction with political economic strategy, such as the Korean government's purposefully relaxing copyright issues in order to make the content of Korean popular culture more accessible and spreadable.

Methods

Various qualitative methods are employed throughout this study to observe American fans' reception of Korean popular culture, mostly but not limited to K-pop, K-drama, films, Korean language, and food. With an overarching approach of what I call "reversed media ethnography," my study employs participant observation and qualitative interviews to examine the nature of the transcultural media and fans of the Korean Wave in the U.S.

Reversed Media Ethnography

Whereas traditional ethnography conducted by anthropologists is extremely local, media ethnographic approach to global media studies attempts to move radically from local to global—interlocked with reception studies—in the much more complex and dynamic realm of globalization.[14] Ethnographic practice has been criticized as an outcome of colonial and thus Western-centric discourses, inscribing ethnocentric perspectives.[15] Traditional ethnographic research was mainly conducted by Western researchers into the so-called non-Western cultures and people

as exotic "Other," and thus the Western perspectives were the point of departure.[16] In this vein, I consider my study to be a reversed media ethnographic approach because a) instead of studying and asking people about their culture, I am studying their understanding of my native culture, which is somewhat like studies that have been done in places like Israel about their reactions to U.S. culture on television.[17] but again, reversing the focus to examine impacts in the U.S.; and b) I am observing Westerners through a non-Westerner's gaze.

This study employs a reversed media ethnography over a period of two years, which includes participant observation recorded in field notes and various structures and types of interview methods, such as ethnographic,[18] respondent,[19] and discursive interviews. I regularly engaged in participatory observation of the meetings, events, and activities related to Korean popular culture between early 2015 and early 2017. I used a semi-structured interview to allow for more flexible and organic expressions, opinions, and experiences of interviewees outside of structured questions. The following are the basic set of interview questions I asked for all informants:

> "Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?"

> "What culture do you identify with the most? What ethnicity?"

> "How did you get to know about Korean popular culture?"

> "What motivates you to interact with Korean popular culture?"

> "What aspects of Korean popular culture are attractive and appealing to you?"

> "How do you consume Korean popular culture? What media platforms/outlets do you use for Korean popular culture?"

> "Where do you get news about Korean popular culture? How do you get updated?"

"What are the similarities and differences between Korean popular culture and American popular culture?"

"What aspects of Korean popular culture do you find difficult to understand?"

"What are some of the positives and negatives of Korean popular culture?"

"Have you ever participated either online or offline fan activities regarding Korean popular culture?"

"How do you perceive Korean fandom vs. international fandom of K-pop?"

"Why do you like Korean popular culture in particular? Why not other East Asian popular culture, like J-pop or Chinese drama?"

"Does your interest in Korean popular culture expand further to other aspects of Korea, such as history or contemporary politics?"

"How does Korean popular culture relate to your life now?"

Participants and Informants

There is an online social media site of local groups where people sharing similar interests gather together to improve themselves and their local communities. Within this site, there is a *Korean Interest Group* (a pseudonym, hereafter KIG), which is a non-profit and non-governmental organization founded in the 2010s. Most members in this group live in Texas and share a similar interest: Korean popular culture. There are about 400 members registered in KIG as of early 2017. Among them, about 30 members regularly gather once or twice a week and participate in various activities related to Korean popular culture; learning Korean language, watching K-dramas, discussing and sharing information about Korean

popular culture and celebrities, eating Korean cuisine, attending K-pop concerts, practicing K-pop choreography, etc.

KIG is composed of people with the U.S. nationality except a couple of native Koreans (including myself), and the group consists of multiple races and ethnicities: Caucasian American, African American, Hispanic American, Asian American and a few others. None of them previously knew each other before joining the group. Among the regular 30 members of the group, females outnumber males approximately by three to one. The ages range from teens to 50s with most participants clustered in the 20s and 30s. Some of them are self-claimed dedicated K-pop and/or K-drama *fans*, while others are perceived to be general *audiences* who have genuine interests in Korean popular cultures—such as Korean language, cuisine, films, etc.

There are about 14 key informants with whom I have closely interacted on a regular basis and conducted in-depth interviews periodically between 2015 and 2017. I consider my 14 key informants as a large enough number because that is when I started to see recurring patterns during the interview process. Qualitative interview scholars, such as James Spradley, consistently note that one has enough interviews when one begins to see consistent and recurring patterns.[20] They are all from varying backgrounds although they were born and raised in the United States for a significant amount of time, lived in Texas for the most part of their lives, speak English as their first language, and primarily identify themselves as American. My informants voluntarily took part in my research as I had been establishing close rapport with them by regularly attending their events and hanging out with them. All of my ethnographic interaction before and after the actual interviews also provides data for this study. Although my informants are from different cultural and social backgrounds, they share a common identity: fans of the Korean popular culture having a stronger desire than general audiences to build their cultural capital of Korea.

Table 1: Principal Informants

Number	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race
1	Angie	Early 30s	Female	Caucasian
2	Anya	Late 40s	Female	Caucasian
3	Binzy	Late 30s	Female	South Asian
4	Greyson	Late 20s	Male	Caucasian
5	Iliana	Late teens	Female	South Asian
6	J.C.	Mid-20s	Female	Black
7	Joseph	Early 30s	Male	Hispanic
8	Leoy	Late 20s	Female	Caucasian
9	Miranda	Late 10s	Female	Hispanic
10	Rosalie	Late 20s	Female	Half-Black, Half-Asian
11	Sean	Late 20s	Male	Caucasian
12	Tiffany	Late 20s	Female	Half-Caucasian, Half-Asian
13	TinTin	Mid 20s	Female	Black
14	Theia	Mid 30s	Female	Black

Developed by the author. All informants are U.S. nationals whose native language is English.

Findings

Emotional Proximity in Transnational Korean Popular Culture

Producers of commercial industrial products have to have certain ideas of what the audience will find pleasurable, so that they can attract consumers and make profits. The strategy that producers of modern popular culture employ is directed at the elaboration of what they already know about popular pleasure. In the U.S. context, what Korean popular culture seems to be particularly good at is skillfully formulating and constructing this capitalist-driven strategy of hybridity to arouse a feeling of nostalgia, which I call emotional proximity.

Matthew Hills, borrowing Paul Willis's theory of cultural homology as a means of discussing the symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of a group, [21] argued that the idea of this symbolic fit to analyze the transcultural affinities of self-identified Western and Japanese *otaku* (obsessive fan) who share a common devaluation as fans within their own popular cultural contexts that both operates through and exceeds nation-states. Chin and Morimoto also argued that transnational fan orientation

may at times supersede national, regional, and/or geographical boundaries.[22] This concept frees fandoms from the constraints of national belonging, reinforcing the contention that fans become fans of transcultural texts or objects not necessarily because of where they are from, but because they may recognize a subjective moment of emotional proximity regardless of their origin. This is not to say that the notion of nation-state is unimportant; national identity is still an important layer of identity for most people. But it is *one of* a constellation of possible points of emotional proximity upon which transcultural fandom may be predicated.

The notion of emotional proximity was also found in my study. Rosalie, a dearly devoted fan of all things Korean, once told me, "I'm shy to say I like K-pop because I'm afraid that other people might judge me." Members of KIG have expressed how they have to explain their love of and interest in Korean popular culture to earn justification from other people in the U.S. It is in this process that U.S. fans of the Korean Wave constantly negotiate with their identity and form multiple identities that are inherently fluid in the realm of transcultural fandom. This process is not an abandonment of their nation but an encouragement to revisit their nation in a new direction.

The way the Korean Wave exerts soft power in international contexts differs from that in which historically imperialist countries do;[23] Korean popular culture is seen as less threatening in the eye of the beholder because Korea historically has not invaded or colonized other countries as aggressively as other historically imperialist countries have.[24] Korea has been considered an in-between 'semi-periphery'[25] on the global sphere, and the Korean Wave can find a niche and position itself as a cultural mediator in the midst of global cultural transformation that leads it to a 'sub-Empire'[26] status. Hyun-key Kim Hogarth views the Korean Wave as a reaction and a challenge to Western-dominated global popular culture.[27] K-pop and K-drama have distinct Asian physical features no matter how hybridized they are. K-dramas reflect traditional Asian values and ethos, which makes Asian audiences feel culturally proximate and some Western audiences feel emotionally proximate. The Korean Wave fills a large demand[28] and void[29] for audiences of both the East and the West that were desperately waiting for clean-cut, more wholesome, and less sexualized content. Binzy, a second-generation South Asian American, expressed how she perceives herself as neither 100 percent South Asian nor American. She struggled as she sometimes found neither American nor

Indian culture relatable to her. Then she found K-pop and other facets of Korean popular culture that are Asian but not too Asian, which made her feel more comfortable:

> Binzy: For me, it's like the combination of being raised as South Asian and also American mentality. That's why I say I'm more American because I'm very more toward open-minded, accepting, so for me, Korean culture is like a nice combination of both.

The Korean Wave works as a mediator not only in Asia, but also in the West. The Korean Wave brings American people with different racial/ethnic/social/cultural backgrounds together by creating shared emotional proximity. American fans find foreign Korean popular culture attractive and pleasurable based on their preexisting experience.[30] The carefully structured way of touching and arousing a certain feeling of affinity with highly modernized and hybridized looks can be understood as emotional proximity, an additional lay the Joseph Straubhaar's theory of cultural proximity.[31] As addressed above, Korean popular culture reflects the traditional Asian values and ethos, which makes Asian audiences feel culturally proximate.[32] What is interesting is that its skillfully structured layers of hybridity comfortably appeal to Western audiences, associated with a notion of appreciation, not exoticization. It works as a mediator not only within the East, but also among the Western audiences who were looking for clean-cut, less aggressive, less sexualized, and more wholesome content.

The skillfully hybridized Korean media texts provoke a certain emotional proximity among American fans, which also ironically encourages them to rediscover their own identity and culture. What one perceives and feels as more culturally proximate does not necessarily relate to their linguistic or geographical proximity and nationality. Rosalie, a K-pop fan in her late 20s, shares her thoughts on this issue:

> Rosalie: [I prefer K-pop than American pop music because] I think it has different *feel* to it, and I can relate to their music more. The feeling is different. Korean culture is different [as opposed to American culture]... K-pop artists are great performers making audience *feel* what you're trying to portray. Off stage, they are cute and

polite, even the rappers. But here in the States, they're just the same person on and off stage. They [Korean popular culture and K-pop artists] seem more authentic to me.

The transcultural fans of the Korean Wave in the U.S. that I have interacted with for over two years have identified their interest, passion, support, and love for Korean popular culture not as *exoticization*—looking upon the East with a postcolonial gaze and constructing it as curious and bizarre—but as *appreciation* and as something their culture can learn from. Leoy, another K-pop fan and a K-pop choreography enthusiast, expresses her thoughts on this issue:

Leoy: If you are going to appreciate anything from any culture that's not yours, please be at least slightly conscious of the culture from which it is coming from. You gain an appreciation for the culture not just the material. The lack of conscious—I don't even know how to say it. People need to try a little bit harder to understand where the things they are consuming come from.

Whereas the Japanese industry consciously made their cultural products as "culturally odorless"—making products not distinctively Japanese—in an effort to universalize them, [33] the Korean Wave emphasizes a hybridity of formats with localized content and appeal,[34] maintaining the cultural specificity or Korean-ness of the content. Unlike Japanese animations and comic books, K-pop and K-drama possess an explicit cultural odor in terms of the agents who are associated with the country's bodily, racial, and ethnic characteristics. In other words, the people in Korean media represent physical features of the people of the country of origin, and these agents with physical features of Korean ethnicity appeal to international audiences, which have come to appreciate them. The transcultural fans' reception of Korean popular culture, more as an appreciation rather than exoticization, may help break certain stereotypes constructed in the U.S. toward East Asians, especially men.

Rosalie: [East] Asian men in K-pop and K-drama are portrayed as real people as opposed to how they are portrayed in American media. They are not type-casted into these roles that perpetrate false stereotypes. I hate

how American media portray people with color in certain stereotypical ways. It's hard for me to watch American TV sometimes because I know it's not true.

Angie, a fan of K-drama, shares her thoughts in a similar vein. She thinks that watching K-drama has helped her break the stereotypes she had toward East Asian men, which were perpetuated by the mainstream media in the U.S. In the mainstream U.S. media, the portrayals of non-Whites are structured in ways that support the dominant ideological power of heterosexual, White, and middle-class men.[35]

> Angie: Before I watched Korean dramas, I did not tend to find Asian men super attractive. [Me: why?] I know exactly why that is: Media exposure. We don't have attractive Asian men in our media, and the ones we do have are typically nerdy and thin like a smart, tech guy. I think that in American culture, it's structured in such a way that it benefits White men. White men can make Asian men not as attractive by being like 'Oh they are so feminine,' and that bears out in our media.

Leoy adds how mainstream American media lack exposure to more diverse portrayals and reinforce certain stereotypes of East Asian men:

> Leoy: Asian males are just not presented anything other than nerd, sidekick, or parody in America. We have no Asian male leads in films or TVs at all. That increases the lack of exposure people get because in our American, Western pop culture, there is so very little Asian portrayal as attractive. There is so very little Asian portrayal at all. Institutionalized soft racism; it's not aggressive. It's just there and nobody breaks the status quo.

The popularity of Korean popular culture among Americans is bound to have social, cultural, and political ramifications. I contend that American fans—both non-White and White—find this very complex layer of hybridity in conjunction with the polished and modernized look in Korean popular culture *comfortably appealing,* associating it with a notion of *appreciation*, not *exoticization*[36], to an extent that they may consider the

people in Korean popular culture as a *third race*. This debunks the dichotomous logic of race and gender structured in the West and the prevalent stereotypes of Asians portrayed in American mainstream media. In this vein, the popularity of Korean Wave among White deeply "*messes with*" long-held racial and colonial superiority and imperialism, driven by Western modernization in the global sphere.[37]

All modern cultures are hybrid to some extent; thus, hybridity cannot be the sole attribution of Korean Wave's popularity in the United States. Interestingly, the well-received hybridity of Korean Wave may reflect Kraidy's theory of intercontextual hybridity, examining the dynamics of transnational culture by articulating hybridity and hegemony at the nexus of global and local.[38] The favorable reception of Korean Wave shows what Americans have been missing in their own media. Two of my close informants, Anya who is a mother of two children and TinTin express their thoughts:

> Anya: What has become reality in America, especially with the aggressiveness and violence, is just too exhausting. It wasn't like that when I was growing up, but that is everywhere now. It just gets worse and worse. And I find it much more appealing that in Korean culture, it doesn't seem to be accepted. I appreciate that they make the effort to put this out as something to be emulated, encouraged, and followed. They are glorifying good behavior.

> TinTin: It's very similar to Black/African American culture too. 'Hey brother what's up. Hey sister what's up' [to someone] we may not know. It's very polite. I think it's polite to me that this older woman you may not know but you call her *ahjumma*.[39] I like that a lot. It shows a very close culture, and I love that. That's like what really highlights Korean culture for me—how close it is to African American culture.

The complex level of hybridity in Korean popular culture reflects the argument that hybridity ironically encourages local people to revisit and rediscover what they have neglected or forgotten.[40] The high level of hybridity in Korean popular culture arouses emotional proximity among

not only Asian audiences but also American audiences to help them realize what they have been missing in their relentless drive toward modernization and capitalization during the past several decades: the *uri-ness* [we-ness in English]. This simultaneously complex yet fluid hybridity and emotional proximity embedded in Korean popular culture transforms into one of the multifaceted soft power, which appeals to American fans.[41]

Uri-ness as Alternative-Post-Western Soft Power

Soft power is often overshadowed by hard power, such as military and economic power, in international relations and world politics. However, what really distinguishes soft power from hard power is that the public—not necessarily state-related agents—can be a source of soft power by allowing the public to form its own resources, distinct from or even against official policy in pursuit of the public good.[42] There is a particular notion that can be associated with the Korean Wave phenomenon: the *uri-ness*, which signifies the unity of a collective mindset. This unique notion of *uri-ness* in Korean culture, which is deeply embedded in Korean popular culture, can be traced back to the historical formation and building of the nation and the people of Korea.

The notion of imagined communities of nation-state[43] may apply to both Korea and the United States. However, Korea followed a different path from the way a nation state arose in the U.S. Korea's long history going back thousands of years from the Goryeo kingdom (918-1392), geographical location surrounded by powerful nations, the Korean War, military dictatorship, and relatively homogeneous ethnicity have been the fundamental means of survival throughout various historical phases—industrialization, modernization, democratization, and globalization.[44] These means of survival have created the *mythical norm* that we, the Korean people, can survive only by being together as *one*.[45] Therefore, Korea's *uri-ness,* in contrast to the U.S. individualism, was a way of surviving; it brought Korea to its status as a semi-global power and sub-Empire[46] in the 21st century. Woongjae Ryoo argues that what provided security for Korea was the idea of unified ethnicity.[47] As a racially homogenous population in a relatively small peninsula surrounded by more powerful countries, Koreans have managed to sustain their cultural and national identity. First, in the face of China then the brutal Japanese colonial period followed by the powerful influences of Americanization, Koreans have remained whole by preserving a distinctive Korean identity.

Whereas the form of the Korean Wave is highly hybridized and transnational, the driving force behind it, ironically, is homogeneous and unified. Miranda, who is in her late teens, once told me that people are so divided in the U.S. by race whereas in Korea, it is, seemingly, just one. Greyson, Joseph, and Rosalie share their thoughts on this issue:

> Greyson: On a grand scale, Korea as a whole, it is a tight knit country because [of Korea's unique together *uri-ness*] whereas in the U.S., everything is extremely individualized.

> Joseph: In Korean popular culture, they have strong roots and they have pride in their culture. They are proud of who they are. We [Americans] are proud of ourselves but not so much at national level. We've got some [historical] roots but it's relatively short compared to Korea.

The notion of *uri-ness* and Koreans' strong cohesiveness as a nation can be strengthened by the linguistic factor. Koreans have used one spoken language throughout their known history unlike the U.S. where various languages are spoken. Rosalie touches on how the Korean language and the word *uri* reflect collective society and unity:

> Rosalie: This [*uri-ness*] is the driving force behind all the success and today's global phenomenon of Korean pop culture. Korean culture is very much about community and collective society as 'we are one'…But here in America, it's *my* house, not *uri* [our] house as in Korean. And that mindset is one of the main reasons why Korea went from being one of the poorest countries in the world [during and after the Korean War, 1950-1953] to what it is today in such a short time.

American fans drawn to the Korean Wave are fascinated by Korea's unique cultural aspect of *uri-ness* as a path to globalization. Fans of the Korean Wave in the U.S. find a strong sense of community and belonging—the *uri-ness*—in Korean popular culture of which they do not see a lot in their own popular culture. They are not abandoning their

American nationhood and national identity, but rather acknowledging and embracing the lost sense of community through their interaction with Korean popular culture. For example, Anya says:

> Anya: [What Americans are used to is] just the most horrible, sexually assaulting things. It makes me feel like I'm losing my country, and I'm looking for other cultures that are doing this better. They [K-pop artists] are championing the good behavior [that is] modest, kind, and considerate. People could say that K-pop and the K-culture is just sort of an escape from reality. But I think it's also its own reality chosen to be promoted that's more positive and modest. There is a different level of integrity that I don't find in my American culture... I appreciate that they [Korean popular culture] make the effort to put this out as something to be emulated, encouraged, and followed.

Glorifying good behavior of modest, humble kindness in conjunction with *uri-ness* of communal mindset portrayed in Korean popular culture works as one of the multilayered facets of soft power in the Korean Wave. Rosalie expresses her fascination with *uri-ness*:

> Rosalie: The togetherness [*uri-ness*] of Korea and its [popular] culture is not ethnocentric because they are not saying this is better than yours. They are like 'We're all together in building up a better future for all of us, not just some of us. [Korea's *uri-ness*, its nationalism] is not ethnocentric because they are not saying 'We're better than you' but 'We work together to make something better.'

The Korean Wave is not reinforcing another facet of ethnocentric imperialism, but is suggesting a *different kind* of nationalism and modernity in the name of *uri-ness* as three actors collaborate together: state, market, and people. Even the K-pop artists and Korean Wave stars often claim themselves to be an "entertainment-diplomatic complex"[48] and are considered the most treasured national assets. Korea's unified desire and thirst to be recognized as a powerful nation in the global world has been

one of the driving forces behind the current status of Korea as a global powerhouse of popular culture. Korea's relentless drive toward capitalization and globalization during the past decades may have created a distinctive style of the Korean Wave in the name of national unification and making Korea as a global powerhouse. This national and cultural feeling of *uri-ness* is infused throughout Korean popular culture. Leoy and Theia share their thoughts on this issue:

> Leoy: So much of what makes K-pop great is its *Korean-ness*. Even if you took the same beat and tried to make the same songs in America, they wouldn't be the same. There is something about the way that—this music is produced and the members of the groups how they interact with their fans and everything—carries distinctively Korean feel.

> Theia: I honestly have to believe that the popularity of the Korean Wave in the world has a lot to do with their pride in their nation as a whole. There is a unity there. It definitely helps to promote the culture and the country.

I argue that this *uri-ness* can be seen as one of the multifaceted layers of soft power in the eyes of non-Koreans, especially in Western societies where national unification and sacrifice have been relatively silenced for the sake of individual freedom. It is important to remark that although soft power can only be made possible with substantial hard economic power,[49] it is not always guaranteed for a country with strong economic power to exert soft power onto other countries. This is where Korea's *uri-ness* and Korea's historical position as in-between 'semi-periphery' come in, working as an alternative post-Western soft power in global/international settings.

Uri-ness in Transcultural Fandoms

The *uri-ness* embedded in Korean popular culture spills over to the fans in the U.S. who also get to experience the feeling of *uri-ness* through Korean popular culture, and most of all, through its unique fandom culture. The rise of idol culture in the Korean cultural industry is closely bound with the construction of idol fandom, creating the needs for fans—the loyal customers—instead of targeting the larger audience. Hence, the idol

fandom is involved as a part of the idol group production system.[50] The everyday involvement, participation, and communication between fans and idols are much more interactive and closer than the relationship between American celebrity and fans.[51]

There is more collaboration and negotiation than struggle and tension between the industry and fans, and the management companies make efforts to stay on good terms with K-pop fans, treating them as adjunct producers.[52] Fans' collective participatory activities via online sites and social media have had important influences on the formation of the K-pop idol industry and the closer relationship between K-pop idols and their fans in Korean society.[53] For example, fans have significant power in choosing which K-pop idol trainees get to debut as a K-pop idol group via online voting, and they sometimes will remove a member from his/her group for being involved in a scandal. K-pop idol fans often construct their idols' public image through donations and other philanthropic activities.[54] The interpersonal relationship between idol and fan is more interdependent and symbiotic than in the U.S. musical fandom scene.

> Leoy: Honestly, I think that everybody would be happier if they lived their fan life the way Koreans, and fans of Korean music in particular, live theirs. I think it does have to do with the sort of "we culture" in Korea versus "me culture" in America. I think that not everybody in America needs other people to be a part of their enjoyment of something they enjoy. Especially with K-pop, I get so much more out of it when I get to enjoy it with other people, and I don't feel like Americans have the same idea… Because I feel the K-pop artists make an effort to make us [fans] feel closer to them… because they are more thankful. The concept of being connected, I think there is mutually beneficial nature to K-pop artists and fandoms.

This *uri-ness* bears out in K-pop fandoms in the U.S. as well. K-pop fans in the U.S. are from different backgrounds, but they all come together. They exercise and experience the very notion of *uri-ness* of Korean culture on their own terms throughout their reception of K-pop. When talking about K-pop, the members of KIG often expressed how they felt much more connected to their idols, other fans, and the overall K-pop world.

When my informants first got into K-pop, they were fascinated by how multicultural K-pop fans were in the U.S. For example, Iliana and Tiffany say:

> Iliana: K-pop has opened so many different cultures, like you meet so many different people and cultures through K-pop... When I went to my first K-pop concert, after the concert I had this whole conversation with this girl from Germany. And we talked more after that. I met so many people. Korea is very based on being *with* people. Americans are very independent, but Koreans seem to be a lot more like we [*uri*].

> Tiffany: It feels so unified when I am at K-pop concerts vs. American concerts. That's why I was saying before how age and ethnicity doesn't matter. When you are at the show, you are all together, you're all there to talking about your *biases*,[55] you're all there to literally enjoy what you're about to see... K-pop fans in Korea are really united. They come up with their fan group name, fan chants, fan group donation, and fan group color… It's just in K-pop. Fan chants are there in a specific spot in a particular song. In the U.S., it's more like girls screaming, and there's no on-point chant. There's more unison in K-pop fandom.

Each K-pop fandom has its own fandom name and fandom color to show a unified support for the idols. Figure 1 depicts the different fandom colors for major K-pop groups: red for *TVXQ*, blue for *Super Junior*, pink for *SNSD*, white for *Exo*, purple for f(x), and pearl aqua green for *SHINee*,

Figure 1: K-pop Fandoms' Practice of *Uri-ness*

Source: Twitter user NheSica

The Korean Wave and its fandom culture, which has the largest fandom size worldwide according to the Guinness Book of World Records,[56] provides a good example when trying to explain why and how popular culture matters in larger social contexts.[57] What makes Korean popular culture transcultural are the often-neglected intellectual and collective crafts people: transcultural fans.[58] The media convergence and the development of communication technologies have enabled audiences to shape their media engagement and participatory culture in a greater variety of contexts on their own. This has been particularly evident in the study of fans.[59] Fans of the Korean Wave have been among the first to create opportunities to do participatory and creative work that is centered around the notion of *uri-ness*, creating what Arjun Appadurai called the "shared collective experiences in mediascape" on a global level.[60]

K-pop fandoms' participatory *uri* culture is transcultural, and to some extent, global. Instead of being a passive audience, they increasingly participate in creating, distributing, and sharing forms of K-pop as spreadable media via social media.[61] While the mainstream media are unable to provide fans in the U.S. with the prompt cultural and linguistic translation of Korean content, fans translate and circulate Korean media texts, especially via social media.[62] Some of them further participate in sociocultural events such as fund-raising, donating to charity, volunteering

in emergency situations, and even building schools for those in need under the name of their favorite K-pop idols.

Members of KIG partake in this shared participatory *uri* culture. TinTin and Iliana have been doing amazing fanart by drawings and paintings of K-pop artists and have shared their work with other fans on social media, such as on Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr. Anya, who is an excellent planner, has created and organized various events related to Korean culture, such as playing *yut nori* (traditional board game in Korea) and a Korean food themed potluck party, just to name a few. My favorite regular KIG gathering has been K-pop dance class. J.C. and Leoy, K-pop choreography enthusiasts, have led the K-pop dance class every other week for the members of KIG. We reserve a room at a public community building for about two hours. There are usually about 10 members who regularly attend the K-pop dance class, including myself. Some of them would show up to the class and other KIG gatherings, such as going to K-pop concerts together, wearing K-pop costumes they bought online or made themselves. Binzy is particularly crafted in this activity. She makes multiple K-pop or Korean popular culture themed T-shirts, wears them, and sells them to raise fund for KIG.

Figure 2: Example of Fanart

Photo Credit: Iliana

Conclusion

More than two decades have passed since Arjun Appadurai theorized the global interactive system as complex, non-deterministic, and heterogeneous. Image, the imagined, and the imagination are central to all forms of agency, are themselves social facts, and are the key components of the new global order. [63] Mediascapes provide large and complex products of images and narratives to viewers throughout the world in which the world of commodities is profoundly mixed. Global culture is shaped by the communication process of local reception. [64] As some postcolonial scholars, including Appadurai, Homi Bhabha and Partha Chatterjee have emphasized, there really is no such entity as a single national culture, and to a larger extent, all contemporary cultures are hybrid. [65] However, as I emphasized throughout this paper, hybridity should not be used as an easy tool to explain any national, regional, international, or global media culture because its complicated in-between space is never power-neutral but demands constant struggles and negotiations over cultural meanings and symbols. I argue these intricate layers of hybridity are well manifested in Korean popular culture and its fandom. The carefully structured way of hybridity in Korean popular culture is not just a mere influence on the U.S. fans of the Korean Wave, but a part of creating the ecology of transcultural media and fandom

One of the purposes for studying the reception of the Korean Wave among fans in the United States is not to impose the idea of the great soft power of Korean-ness as a neo-colonial global cultural power, but to reconstitute globalization theories that recognize the dynamic formations of identity and hybridity at the local level while not dismissing the power hierarchy in international settings. As David Oh contends, we should direct our attention not so much to how to preserve the Korean Wave, but to how the movement of Korean Wave across global circuits can contribute to the hybridity that helps to level global power.[66]

The ecology of transcultural media and fandom is about mutual understanding, responsibility, respect, sensitivity, and learning. As much as the members of KIG, especially my major informants learned from me, it was me who identifies herself as an acafan, a native person of the culture they love and respect—who learned more from them. Throughout our close interaction over the years, they have influenced me to know more about the intricacies of social, cultural, political, and historical differences and similarities as well as to continuously reflect on my native culture and identity. One of the most significant things they have shown me, someone

from one of the most racially and culturally homogeneous countries in the world, is the importance of diversity. My informants come from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual, and political backgrounds, and I did not have an opportunity to interact with people from such diverse backgrounds when I was in Korea. Sometimes, my reception of Korean popular culture, such as K-pop's appropriation of Hip Hop[67] and aesthetic standards, as a native Korean is not the same as the ways in which Leoy, Rosalie, and Nicole perceive them. Yet, through building a close rapport with them, I learned how to value and respect the differences.

My study unraveled dynamic interactions between Korean popular culture and its fans in the U.S., how cultural hybridity of Korean Wave un/consciously facilitates soft power, and what sociocultural implications it might yield in global/international contexts. The Korean Wave exemplifies strategically well-balanced cultural hybridity, evokes continuous negotiations of identities, and generates nonthreatening emotional proximity that appeals to U.S. fans with varying ethnic, racial, sexual, and cultural backgrounds in the name of *uri-ness*. Spread of and exposure to foreign popular culture does not guarantee its popularity overseas. The transnational and transcultural reception of media texts is neither fully controllable nor predictable by media producers and policymakers because media texts are never self-sufficient structures of meanings themselves. The hybridized Korean popular culture as transcultural media defies identification as a fixed, single entity. In the midst of the Korean Wave phenomenon, there are the often-neglected participatory transcultural fans as legions of craftspeople that enthusiastically and willingly consume, interpret, share, and reproduce the culture of the "Other," actualizing the Korean Wave.

Notes:

[1] EXO is one of the most popular K-pop groups.
[2] Korean Culture and Information Service, *From K-pop to K-culture*, December 2012, Available online at http://www.korea.net/Resources/Publications/About-Korea/view?articleId=3223# and Doo-bo Shim, "Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia," *Media, Culture & Society, 28*(1) (2006), pp. 25-44.
[3] Patrick D. Murphy and Marwan M..Kraidy, *Global Media Studies: Ethnographic Perspectives*, (New York: Routledge, 2003).
[4] Robert Weiss, *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*, (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1994).

[5] Henry Jenkins, "Interactive audiences? The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans," in Henry Jenkins (Ed.), *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 134-151 and Susan J. Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*, (New York, NY: St. Martin Griffin, 2016).

[6] Fabienne Darling-Wolf, "Virtually multicultural: Trans-Asian Identity and Gender in an International Fan Community," *New Media & Society*, 6(4) (2004), pp. 507-528.

[7] Bertha Chin and Lori Hitchcock Morimoto, "Towards a Theory of Transcultural Fandom," *Journal of Audiences & Reception Studies,* 10(1) (2013), pp. 92-108.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Dal-youg Jin, *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

[11] Dal-youg Jin, "The Power of the Nation-State amid Neo-Liberal Reform: Shifting Cultural Politics in the New Korean Wave, *Pacific Affairs*, 87(1) (2014), pp. 71-92.

[12] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, (New York: New York University Press, 2013) and Dal-yong Jin and Kyong Yoon, The Social Mediascape of Transnational Korean Pop Culture: Hallyu 2.0 as Spreadable Media Practice," *New Media & Society*, (2014), pp. 1-16.

[13] Dal-yong Jin, New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media.

[14] Murphy and Kraidy, *Global Media Studies: Ethnographic Perspectives*, (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[15] Ibid.

[16] Weiss.

[17] Tamar Katriel, *Communal Webs: Communication and Culture in Contemporary Israel*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012).

[18] Michael Q. Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, (2nd ed.), (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990).

[19] Thomas R. Lindlof and Bryan C. Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* (3rd ed.), (London: Sage, 2011).

[20] James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1979).

[21] Paul E. Willis, *Profane Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1978).

[22] Chin and Morimoto, "Towards a Theory of Transcultural Fandom."

[23] There is a growing literature on the soft power of emerging cultural, economic, and media powers—known as BRICS—which consists of five countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. However, my dissertation mainly focuses on the case of Korean popular culture. According to Dal-yong Jin, Korea has become one of the top non-Western countries that meaningfully exports almost all forms of its culture, such as television programs, film, popular music, animation, digital technologies including online gaming and smartphones—not only as technology but also as culture—to both Western and non-Western countries. There have been several countries that have penetrated the global markets with their cultural products, but they primarily export limited cultural forms. Joe Straubhaar, "BRICS as Emerging Cultural and Media Powers," in Kaarle Nordenstreng and Daya Kisha Thussu (Eds.), *Mapping BRICS Media*, (New York:

Routledge, 2015), pp. 87-104 and Dal-young Jin, *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media.*

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[26] Kuan-Hsing Chen, "The Imperialist Eye," *Positions,* Volume 8, Number 1 (March 2000), pp. 9-76.

[27] Hyun-key Kim Hogarth, "The Korean Wave: An Asian reaction to Western-Dominated Globalization," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology,* 12(1-2)(2013), pp. 135-151.

[28] Dal-young Jin, *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media*.

[29] C. Anderson and Doo-bo Shim, "Filling the Void: Researching the Korean Wave (Hallyu) Fandom," *Journal of Fandom Studies,* 3(1)(2015), pp. 3-6.

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[31] Joe Straubhaar, "Beyond Media Imperialism: Assymetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity, *Critical Studies in Media Communication,* Volume 8, Number 1 (1991), pp. 39-59.

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[37] Jung-bung Choi and Roald Maliangkay, "Introduction: Why Fandom Matters to the International Rise of K-pop," in Jung-bung Choi and Roald Maliangkay (eds.), *K-pop: The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1-18.

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[39] An intimate (sometimes, not always, depending on the context) Korean word to refer to a married or marriage-aged woman who is not actually related to a family.

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41 Youna Kim, *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, (London, UK: Routledge, 2013)

42 Ibid.

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44 Woongjae Ryoo, "Reconsidering Globalism: A Korean Perspective," *Kaleidoscope*, Volume 3 (2004), pp. 1-20.

45 Ibid.

46 Kuan-Hsing Chen, "The Imperialist Eye."

47 Woongjae Ryoo, "Reconsidering Globalism: A Korean Perspective."

48 Ibid.

49 Joseph Nye and Youna Kim, "Soft power and the Korean Wave," in Youna Kim (ed.), *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global ,* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 31-42.

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62 Jin and Yoon.

[63] Arjun Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology," in M. Fox (Ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991), pp. 191-210.

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[67] Chuyun Oh, "K-Popscape: *Gender Fluidity and Racial Hybridity in Transnational Korean pop dance* (Doctoral dissertation,. Retrieved from University of Texas Electronic Theses and Dissertations.