

# Korea Focus

## Sailing or Drifting? The Korean Wave, Self and Fandoms

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# Sailing or Drifting? The Korean Wave, Self and Fandoms

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The Korean Wave (Hallyu) consistently piques the interest of media outlets. Especially in the German context, it is still perceived as a new trend. Sceptic voices remain most visible and question the reasons for its success. The most popular view is the soft-power perspective, painting the Korean cultural industry and its artists as embedded in foreign policy processes. Other views characterise Hallyu as a passing trend, a short-lived anomaly. Lastly, success is sometimes attributed to consumerism, stating that K-pop and other Korean cultural content are designed to appeal to the masses, especially the inexperienced youth. In short, Korean cultural content and its consumers are eyed with wonder and distrust.

Beyond popular media discourse, academic discussion on understanding the Korean Wave and its impact on a changing media landscape has emerged. However, until now, the German case has largely been sidelined in discussions. Focusing on K-pop, the special lecture series “Sailing or drifting? The Korean Wave, Self, and Fandoms” addresses this gap by providing an opportunity to discuss the impact of the Korean Wave on youths. Are individuals swept up by the wave or consciously riding it? Moving beyond arguments about the maturity of consumers and manipulation by media, the series highlights the artistic dimension of internationally popular Korean music and dances.

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# The Art of Ttechang: K-Pop Soundscapes created through Sonic Rivalry between Fandom and the Industry

As the first speaker, musicologist Dr Jungwon Kim shared her analysis of cheer practices by K-pop fans. From her point of view, the cheering culture, also referred to as Ttaechang in Korean, is one materialisation of the relationship between fans and idols. These ritualised soundscapes form spontaneously and are loosely rooted in the cultural tradition of Ttaechang. Ttaechang is a rhythmic and coordinated effort of vocalising support and admiration for another individual. Applied to contemporary cheering culture, it can be observed that K-pop fandoms articulate sounds that complement the performance of their artists. The high degree of coordination and professionalism of mass cheering distinguishes the K-pop fandom from other cheering cultures observed during popular music concerts. The K-pop fans effectively become part of the musical performance of their artist, coproducing the soundscapes that define Korean pop music.

These soundscapes, however, are contested: the once spontaneously coordinated efforts to vocalise support and participate in the musical performance undertaken by fans are now increasingly instrumentalised and ritualised by the industry. Ownership of creative participation is therefore contested. Dr Kim refers to this phenomenon as sonic rivalry, which points towards the complication of the relationship between fans and artists. Fan culture usually emerges from a dynamic communicative process between fans and artists. However, with the increased involvement of a third actor, namely, the Industry, the authentic responses of fans to music and the spontaneous emergence of fan community culture are inhibited.

Dr Kim's presentation draws attention to the creativity of K-pop fandoms and their tense relation to the commercialisation of their attachment. In essence, her talk raises questions regarding the role and influence of the Korean cultural industry on fan culture. How does the impersonal and market-oriented third actor affect the authenticity and the development of the personal and emotion-oriented relationship between fans and artists? As an acafan, a term introduced by Henry Jenkins to describe a scholar who is also a fan, Dr Kim evaluates the increasing commercialisation of cheer culture as a development that estranges fan communities from their original culture. One example is the introduction of company-designed lightsticks sold to fans. As K-pop fan cheers emerged, colour-coded balloons were used to distinguish cheer intention among fans. Now, the design and production of cheer instruments are sophisticated and owned by the industry. Aesthetic, as well as sonic choices, are increasingly decoupled from fan communities to improve the margin for profit.

## **How to understand Hallyu: issues, questions and problematics**

In her talk, Prof. Dr Hong Seok-kyeung critically reviewed the soft-power argument about Hallyu. In recent years, an increasing amount of scholarly work has framed the Korean Wave as an instrument of public diplomacy by the South Korean state. Public diplomacy refers to a policy that aims to improve communication with non-state actors of other countries to understand each other and share values better. While the success and influence of the Korean Wave undeniably have consequences for the outside perception of the Republic of Korea, the strategic involvement of national authorities in the success story of Korean film, music and art, in general, is less intentional than often argued. First, interest and recognition of influence potential by authorities came late. Only after the IMF crisis 1997 did the Korean Wave become relevant as an alternative source of economic development; even then, policies were inconsistent. The government's interest in Hallyu's influence potential in terms of public diplomacy, as can be observed nowadays, is a recent phenomenon. Furthermore, since the government has not been a significant player in the development of the cultural industry from the beginning, it struggles to appropriate its influence. The role of the Korean state in cultural production is thus anything but straightforward.

Prof. Hong further argued that the emphasis on the state as an actor in Korean culture might be the product of the continuity of ideas related to the economic development of the peninsula, collectivism and stereotypisation of technophile Asian countries. The idea of a strong state permeates all outside perceptions of phenomena emerging from the country, including its artistic expression. However, since such direct involvement cannot be evidenced, the lens of soft power should be used carefully.

## **Who is behind the K-pop prodigy dancers?**

Prof. Dr. Chuyun Oh, who studied K-pop social media dance, held the last talk in the series. Social media has played an essential role in the quick rise in popularity of Korean Music. With the rise of platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, the popularity of dance challenges in cyberspace has risen, introducing a new performance stage to the world, which is smaller and more accessible to various actors. Since K-pop music releases are usually accompanied by choreographies the artists perform, the genre naturally inspires prosumers and influencers on such platforms. Furthermore, K-pop dance movements are heavy in hand movements and facial expressions. Because the social media stage is restricted in terms of space (small screens) and

time (short videos), the choreographies of Korean pop music that often emphasise the upper body and facial expressions fit these new conditions well.

In addition to shedding light on the natural synergies between Korean pop performance and social media dance, Prof. Oh discussed her newest research on young performers in the K-pop industry. Future artists train in their early teenage years to become the industry's next generation of exceptional dance talents. The high professionalism in the sector is due on one side to talents coached and supported by family members in hopes of achieving stardom and on the other side by passionate teenagers who use new resources available on the internet to learn dancing. Even before starting their career, these aspiring teenagers join the social media stage to gain their first performance experiences. In contrast to earlier generations of K-pop performers, these young talents will thus not only have earned professional expertise on a global stage before debuting but possess fandom before joining a management company.

## Sailing or drifting?

As discussed in the introduction, this lecture series outlines how the Korean Wave and its popularity may be understood from a cultural perspective. After the review of the three presentations, it is possible to come to the following observations.

First, the Korean Wave artists and their fans are dynamic actors who relate to one another despite being encased in diverse management systems. Regardless of whether the industry entrenches upon original cheering culture or social media offers only limited ways of interaction in cyberspaces, fans and artists relate to one another in multiple ways.

Secondly, the relationship between fans and artists is emotionally driven. Cheering, caring, expressing support and aiming to inspire are motives that were apparent in the talks and seem to characterise the relationship mediated by content industries.

Thirdly, the authenticity of artistic intent by actors is disseminated by different institutional actors. The industry, the state, the internet: all amalgamations of rules aiming to enhance efficiency, profit or increase influence struggle to enter the realm of fandoms. Fans are aware of disingenuous attempts of manipulation. K-pop artists depend on their fandoms and are therefore bound to this authenticity value towards their supporters.

In sum, the relationship between fans and artists is essential when considering the Korean Wave's success. While management of popular culture in a global market is omnipresent and entrenches spontaneous expressions of enthusiasm to a certain degree, the fans are self-reflected and critical individuals who assert their own space and relationship with their artists. This also rings true for highly professional idols who still train for stardom out of their aspirations, receiving support from their families and institutional opportunities in the context of the Korean wave.



