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Where is my K?

Reframing the Korean Wave analysis through  
a plurilocal perspective

Gwendolyn Domning



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UNIVERSITÄT  
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## *Where is my K?*

# Reframing the Korean Wave analysis through a plurilocal perspective

Gwendolyn Domning

KDI School-FU Korea-Europe Programme

Institute of Korean Studies

Freie Universität Berlin

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Korea Focus – Briefing is a series of short articles relevant to Korea. The following essay explores ideas about the localization of the Korean Wave, which were further developed in a published article (*Localized Hallyu: The Tides of the Korean Wave in Berlin*). It is written by Gwendolyn Domning, research associate and lecturer in Korean Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin.

# Introduction

There is one question that unites area studies scholars despite the apparent heterogeneity of their craft: What constitutes the ‘where’ of my research object? And consequently, what am I looking at? Engaging with this question requires one to position oneself epistemologically and methodologically. It signifies delineating the research object, defining what data should be considered relevant, and what should and should not be claimed about the phenomenon.

The contentious debates in the field of Area Studies also apply to the place “Korea”. Especially since, for the first time in history, it is globally exposed to a degree that its imaginary nourishes the mainstream of what art and pop have to offer, the question of place seems to need reconsideration. How should a researcher of Korea deal with the impact of its contemporary global popularity?

Some leaders in the field could claim that “Korean Studies is not the study of K-pop”. And yes, K-pop is more than the study of place, the study of its progeny, the study of the people that produce and perform. This claim seems not to imply a rejection of the legitimacy of studying the phenomenon in the field, but rather to pinpoint the issue that, for now, place, circulation, and meaning are not sufficiently analytically related to the study of Korea as it exists. In other words, to study K-pop from the perspective of place requires proposing epistemological and methodological models that advance its study in the field of Area Studies.

This task is crucial for the discussion of the Korean wave in general, since without the expertise of Korean Studies, which provides a socio-cultural backdrop and awareness of the meanings conveyed through the forms created by the “K<sup>1</sup>”, its study quickly disintegrates into a placeless thing. Is the Korean Wave a phenomenon that requires negating place for the sake of the global? Or is it globally transferable because of its place of origin?

Questions that highlight tensions between the global and the local are not new, but they have consistently stayed unresolved, at times tilting towards opposing political positions without offering a methodological solution. Adding to that, technological advancements that make grasping for life in the hyperspace even more likely, the question of materiality joins the puzzle of place. The dichotomous tensions of global-local then transform into philosophically important questions of virtuality(global)-materiality(local). If considered seriously, Area

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<sup>1</sup> “K” is used here as shorthand for contemporary Korean popular culture content, but does not claim coherence or homogeneity of its content.

Studies research, and thus Korean Studies, reframe the central question of the Korean Wave research from *what* is the K to *where* is it?

## Where is the K? Korea as a first locality

The ‘where’ question is a confusing one. First of course, the K can be located in Korea. A national quality, a local brand of production, serves as the discriminatory factor, delimiting the phenomenon symbolically from its neighbors. The country, as a container of culture, history, and identity, is implementing differences in a globally distributed good or service. So far, so good, but it is already on this most distinguishable level that confusion arises. Because the ‘S’ is silent in K-food, K-pop, K-drama, K-film, K-beauty, and all other variants of K-production. In other words, the K is tied exclusively to the South and *not* the North of the peninsula. Or is it? Is the K inherently crowding out the possibility of a Northern variation, or is it intentionally open to invite a future geographic expansion? The K, as a symbol of unity, is contradictory and leaves open borders due to its lack of definition.

Despite this potential for openness, one cannot claim that K is located in both hemispheres of the peninsula. The current reality is that K-production and K-aesthetics are empirically tied to the Southern sphere, and the DMZ contains its borders. It is a window into primarily Southern lifestyle, national identity, and contemporary modus vivendi that is globally embedded. Or is it?

The distinction between K and Kayo (가요, popular song or pop music) shows that even within its borders, the K is at times placed outside. Kayo translates to 'song' in Korean, but usually refers to 'pop song' in conversation. Before the term K-pop emerged, Kayo meant popular song. Now, the terms are synonymous in Korean, and the use of Kayo is declining among the younger generation. The parallel meanings of Kayo and K-pop for 'pop song' create a potential for distinction between local and global, best understood as a field of shifting meaning, with Kayo addressing exclusively 'Korean' popular song, and K transforming into a signifier for difference and globality. If understood as discursive positioning, this evolution could reflect an ongoing negotiation over authenticity, locality, and culture within Korea. The use of Kayo may then be a sign of estrangement of the K from its own Koreanness, its place of belonging. The Kayo, which is then interpreted as the 'true origin' of Korean pop song, belongs to its local consumers, imagined to be made by and for Koreans. Distinguishable from trot, Kayo thus becomes a signifier of pop in a national setting,

while K marks its evolution into placelessness. The K grows out of the Kayo and addresses a global audience, even if it remains a part of Korea's pop family.

Besides linguistic distinctions that can offer peeks into the evolution of the perception of popular songs among Koreans, the myth of local production and its beautification can be considered another field of tension between the global-local dimension of the K. When distribution is global and staff partly composed of global talents, how can one claim local originality? At the level of cultural branding and industry narrative, it then becomes crucial to reclaim global production chains and transform K into a Korean product by highlighting its locality. A myth of homogeneity is needed<sup>2</sup>, not as an expression of social consensus but as a symbolic production strategy, which logically requires the management of heterogeneity, and the selective omission of global elements of production contained by the K.

To select, one needs to understand how the global should constitute the K in its myth. I suggest that the rule of consumption of the foreign (*Oeguk* (외국, foreign country; foreign), not *Külloböl* (글로벌, global)) is an interesting point to consider. The 'global' appeal of K shoulders on the local consumption of the foreign. In this logic, the production uses the foreign as a tool, remains its master, and is not defined by it. The *Oeguk* is thus incorporated through referencing rather than embodiment, functioning as an entry point to the *Külloböl* without destabilizing the symbolic anchoring of the K. The referencing of the foreign (which then becomes an entry point to the global) thus becomes the mechanism for strengthening the local quality of the K.

Indications that the K indeed operates on the need for a local myth can be found empirically: throughout the recent history of the Korean pop industry, black-Korean artists more commonly faced backlash and difficulties during their careers within the mainstream industry and reception contexts, whereas a Korean artist referencing 'black' music has not<sup>3</sup>. This asymmetry should not be understood as a reflection of individual prejudice, but rather as an indication of limits placed on the embodiment of *Oeguk* within the production of K. These limits undergo changes and have in the past led to a disruption of the imagined coherence of Korean popular culture form from an industry narrative perspective. These early examples

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<sup>2</sup> This does not imply uniform belief among audiences or producers, but rather the operation of a dominant discursive logic.

<sup>3</sup> Some prominent examples for Black-Korean artists that faced difficulties are Insoon (from the Hee Sisters) and Yoon Mi-rae. In contrast, Seo Tae-Ji Boys were acclaimed for integrating 'Black' Hip Hop culture and fashion into their music.

support the idea that K, at one point in its evolution, was meant to serve as a space for referencing the foreign, rather than outwardly creating a new culture rooted in globality.

This changed as content reached increasingly diverse audiences, creating a global sphere of consumption. With increased reach, opportunities for global cooperation grew. Nowadays, having an international member or a non-Korean ethnic K-pop band perform and promote does not surprise or elicit as much backlash as it once did. One remaining indicator that the prior limitation on interpreting K's as a globalisation of culture still applies to 2020s K-production is that purely non-Korean ethnic groups still perform worse in sales than larger Korean ethnic groups.<sup>4</sup> This suggests a persistence of market and reception dynamics rather than an ideological boundary. K may be increasingly diverse, but it has not completely transitioned to a purely cosmopolitan and global space. For it to be widely popular, the imaginary of Koreanness and Korean referencing of the foreign, through the catalyst of, for example, a Korean member or the Korean entertainment company CEO, remains the key to differentiating the K against competitors<sup>5</sup>.

The conclusion to this first aspect of locality, which considers K in Korea, is thus vague. First, K contains a silent S and primarily refers to South Korea while maintaining conceptual unity across both Koreas, thereby bestowing on it a potential for expansion. Second, the K is a recent development in Korean pop culture that, in the eyes of the Korean beholder, is estranged to a certain degree from its local culture. Third, the K, while sometimes strange and foreign to Korean consumers, is rooted in the principle of referencing. With increasing global popularity, the K is in the process of transitioning to a cosmopolitan and global joint-venture, but the principle of a distinct 'Korean' referencing of the foreign still lies at the heart of production.

This is where the story of K could end for a Korean Studies scholar. Limited to the area designated as 'Korea', one could focus on the diverse phenomena that develop within this container. But, as already claimed, the conclusions are unsatisfactory, and the reason is clear – K is, at the very least, a dual-local concept. It is produced and rooted in Korea (first locality), but through its popularity and consumption, it is transported into the world (second locality). And the world is not a place but a compilation of diverse areas, systems, and communities that need to be considered in analysis, which requires research to move past the dichotomous

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Blackswan, XG, Vcha, NiZiu, compared to BTS, Blackpink, Stray Kids, Ateez etc..

<sup>5</sup> Katseye (Hybe), Vcha, NiZiu (JYP), WayV (SM entertainment) are cases in point.

idea of local-global and introduce a plurilocal notion of the K. Korea, transported through the K, lands in unknown territories, and aside from claiming that it is popular, performing well in sales, and causing groups of interest (fan communities) to form, not much is known about its diverse and plurilocal impacts.

## K as plurilocal – Europe as a research venture

The dichotomy of Korea vs. the global only limits case studies of the K's local impact. Beyond the global, the K is local, a phenomenon that transforms in relation to its audiences, rooted in their own symbolic socio-cultural systems. Regrettably, for a science that seeks clear answers to complex questions, these systems are constantly changing in ways that must be observed empirically. Without a plurilocal idea of the K and a clear distinction between chains of production, chains of reception, and transformation, puzzle pieces will remain in disorder, leaving a multidisciplinary field without a shared common ground.

The results of the local inquiry are not exactly a substitute for the global dimension of the K. Instead, local research on the K is better understood as an analytically more pertinent approach to the phenomenon's global nature, one that permits clearer discernment of the scope of claims that can be made in a diversified, multi-level system of K's voyage through space. It is not an exercise of scale but an effort to communicate the scope of research results in a way that permits the advancement of local knowledge into a coherent theory of the K. The following lists the multiple ways analysis can tie back to the idea of localizing. They are best understood as modular, allowing for multiple combinations depending on the research question and empirical material.

Different applications of the local in K analysis:

- as private space (the bedroom, domestic space)
- as embodied practice (the body, dance, sensory experience)
- as temporally situated event (time-bound events such as concerts, livestreams)
- as language (its use, fan slang, translation practices, code-switching)
- as social interaction (peer groups, fan communities, interpersonal exchange)
- as spatial scale (cities, neighbourhoods, municipalities, territorially bounded sites)
- as national context (nation-states as culturally, legally, and linguistically specific frameworks)

- as media environment (platform-specific infrastructures, algorithmic logics, and nationally or culturally structured media systems)
- as normative framework (locally negotiated norms, values, hierarchies of taste, and boundaries of legitimacy, f. ex. in fandoms)
- as market (economic context, local markets, commercial infrastructures, access to goods)

For now, most knowledge of the Korean Wave global reception is based on continental mega-categories, above all, America's and Asia's reception of the K. To break down the hegemonic influence of ideas emerging from these specific contexts and tailor knowledge to other localities, one needs to clearly disentangle the reach of their impact.

Consider not the U.S. economic target market for K's global rentability, but Europe, for example. The Korea Foundation, in their global report, compiles information on the development of fan clubs and general reception trends across all countries on the continent. They showcase the generally accepted idea of reception development from Rain's Hollywood debut to Psy's Gangnam Style, BTS and Blackpink's global popularity, Squid Game and Parasite, and now, certainly, Demon Hunters. The general gist of what is popular is a common global factor that highlights that, to a certain degree, the popular is a shared and entangled taste.

Nevertheless, a deep dive into the data shows that much of the information compiled is not properly documented. This is especially true for the number of fan clubs: in some years the numbers are irregularly low. When fact-checking the establishment of the clubs, however, it becomes clear that the report simply forgot to count them in some years. Other times, the fan clubs counted are not real organizations but fan pages or businesses that do not focus solely on K-pop but also on J-pop and other J-Wave products. The Korea Foundation's reports on Europe's K-Wave consumption thus serve as a general guideline but lack consistency in data quality and measurement, raising questions about how Europe should be evaluated. While this critique does not question the legitimacy of institutional data collection itself, it highlights a lack of methodological sensitivity to specific localities.

Is Europe then a dataless zone? Of course, that is not the case, especially with new projects mapping the local impact of the Korean Wave in greater detail. The Korea Foundation funded project held at the Seoul National University for example, is a valuable tool for accessing data on the Korean Wave, particularly its economic impact. However, despite the usefulness of this new map, the core problem remains that the data is not fine-tuned to the local context of the

K. It is a compilation of existing data points, and its strength lies in aggregating measurements that are, to some degree, correlated with the K. For now, there exists no shared standard theory, method and data set to discern, compile, and compare the K, its local impact, and its spread across contexts, certainly because K scholars do not agree yet on the lens through which this feat should be completed.

Consequently, Europe is a data-rich but seemingly analytically under-theorized zone for K studies for now. The few works that employ grounded theory, all above Cicchelli and Octobre, to advance concepts are in a constant race to renew their research due to the fast-paced development of the K itself. In addition, Europe, despite its partial referential centrality in many aspects of K-content works, is not the primary economic market for the K, which puts research in competition with American perspectives. Claiming a difference in European K is to challenge the foundation of the global discussion, which is still rooted in continental mega categories. A critical question thus needs to be addressed: do we even need a European analysis of the K?

The answer is a resounding yes if one applies a plurilocal concept to the study of K. The plurilocal may even be a necessary condition for studying the K in the European context, as the myth of Europe is committed to ‘unity in diversity’. The notion of Europe as a cultural category in itself is rooted in a history of European self-perceived exceptionalism that started during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ambitions to transform localities into shared political systems based on common values and norms are a recent phenomenon and are influenced by proximity and security concerns. The history of diplomatic exchange, which gave rise to peace but at times also to war, and the region's tendency toward polyglotism factored into the ambitions to culturally unite Europe as a place. Against the backdrop of such a contentious and vague notion of European culture, talks about the European reception of the K remain as vague as explanations of the ‘Asian’ or ‘American’ reception. It is not only the K that requires a plurilocal approach, but especially Europe, which has not yet concluded its European integration. Beyond some statistics, which hardly translate into reception in a socio-cultural and historical sense, mega-categories cannot, if treated seriously, satisfy research into the cultural aspects of either side.

## Conclusions:

I suggested that shifting the question concerning the Korean Wave from *what* it is to *where* it unfolds is a crucial turning point for future epistemological and methodological

considerations. By highlighting *where* questions, discussion can be reoriented toward a local perspective, which, in the larger context of the Korean popular culture theorization, has the potential to open a plurilocal perspective on the phenomenon. In this regard, I proposed a modular approach to implementing a plurilocal perspective. Such an approach could constitute a first step toward developing a nuanced understanding of the continental mega category Europe.

A first step towards advancing a plurilocal conception of the K through the practice of localising its reception is showcased my article “Localized Hallyu: the Tides of the Korean Wave in Berlin”. In this first attempt, the scope of the local inquiry can be attributed primarily to the dimension of ‘spatial scale’ suggested above, from which the analysis then tentatively expands toward the ‘normative framework’ of taste and ‘national context’. While some of the data analysed in the article also hints toward potential insights into ‘private space’ and ‘language’, its main focus is anchored in the ‘spatial scale’. Consequently, the article’s ambition represents only one step within a larger project of localizing K analysis, a project that can be extended across multiple analytical levels that prioritize not the question of *what* the K is but rather *where* it can be found.

The cumulative value of such localized inquiries should not be underestimated. A pertinent accumulation of local analyses will eventually become fundamental for addressing questions concerning mega-categories, such as the presumed European reception of the K, thereby creating the conditions for renewed and more grounded ‘what’ questions to be posed. It is clear that the fruition of a plurilocal perspective on the Korean Wave does not hinge on a single attempt; rather, it depends on sustained, comparative, and collaborative international efforts to harmonize localized knowledge of the K into a coherent yet non-totalizing analytical framework.