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Lights, Camera, Hallyu:
The Intricacies of Diplomacy and Economics of South Korean Popular Culture

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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By

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Abstract

The meteoric rise of South Korea's entertainment industry into stardom has garnered widespread attention. This paper delves into South Korea's *Hallyu Wave* (Korean Wave), exploring how the country's entertainment exports, notably K-Pop and K-Dramas, have transcended regional boundaries to wield significant soft power on the international stage. By examining South Korea's global presence and economic growth from an international relations perspective and the intricate dynamics with its East Asian neighbors, this paper sheds light on the strategic expansion of country's soft power. It aims to uncover the multifaceted nature of the entertainment industry's role in South Korea's economy, politics, and in shaping perceptions and creating cultural bonds when expanding into new markets. South Korea must carefully navigate its relations with global actors and regional neighbors. The country must conscientiously balance their national security with economic interests. This is particularly evident in the challenges encountered by South Korea's entertainment industry in China during periods of strategic military engagements with the United States. South Korea has already begun to circumvent its dependance on the Chinese market by expanding its cultural reach to Southeast Asia and the Western markets. Furthermore, the country has tactically began producing halal versions of their products as an alternative option for Muslim consumers. While some of this reach is still niche in the West, Korean dramas like *Kingdom* and *Squid Game* are well-known, BTS holds sold-out stadium concerts, and the demand for Korean skincare and cosmetics has been growing.

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For my brother, the brightest star in my night sky. To my loving parents, my guiding stars.

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Introduction

South Korea's entertainment industry is among the most successful expressions of soft power in modern history. The rapid rise in interest in Korean pop culture seems unique to the mass Western populace since South Korea tends to be in the media for geopolitical issues rather than cultural interests. However, South Korea has been exporting its culture for decades regionally. This growing interest in Korean pop culture is a result of the meticulous efforts made by the South Korean entertainment industry and the government. This paper will analyze East Asia in the context of international relations theories, how the South Korean government has been expanding the reach of its soft power regionally, paying particular focus on the expansion of the entertainment industry in East Asia and Southeast Asia, its contentious relationship with the Chinese consumer market, and growth in the Southeast Asian consumer markets.

This paper uses a comprehensive methodology blending ethnography and historiography to delve into the multifaceted dynamics of public reception, cultural discourse, and the soft power implications of this phenomenon. By engaging with the direct interactions between diverse stakeholders, including the local population, entertainment industry insiders, and other entities, my research will capture the subtle nuances of cultural exchange, public sentiments, and the strategic redirection away from dependence on the Chinese market. The ethnographic research will extend beyond traditional interviews to incorporate innovative methods such as virtual ethnography, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of online communities and subcultures shaping the Hallyu narrative. This digital dimension will enrich the understanding of global audiences' perceptions and engagement with Korean entertainment. Historiography in the

study of the Hallyu Wave, or the Korean Wave, entails a comprehensive exploration of key moments, industry evolution, controversies, global expansion, audience responses, and the cultural diplomacy aspect. It involves tracing the historical trajectory of South Korea's entertainment industry, discerning shifts in public perception over time. This analysis encompasses major events like influential debuts and controversies, documenting the evolution of cultural products and assessing their global reach. Attention is given to audience reactions through media coverage and fan communities. Additionally, the historiographical approach delves into the industry's role in cultural diplomacy, soft power, and its contribution to shaping global perceptions of South Korea. By weaving together these historical threads, my research will provide a nuanced understanding of how the Hallyu Wave has unfolded, impacted global audiences, and influenced South Korea's cultural and diplomatic standing on the world stage. By weaving together these historical threads, this paper will provide a nuanced understanding of how the Hallyu Wave has unfolded, impacted global audiences, and influenced South Korea's cultural and diplomatic standing on the world stage. Through a careful analysis, I aim to unravel the complex interconnections between security decisions, diplomatic tensions, and the unfolding narrative of cultural exports.

South Korea’s Global Presence from an International Relations Perspective

The growth and popularity of the South Korean popular culture is explained by international relations theories. These theories help in understanding the global political economy and analyzing the intricacies of geopolitics and diplomacy. When applied, these theories are vital to establishing the relationship between South Korea’s entertainment industry and various consumer markets. Most of these concepts emerged during the Cold

War (1947–91), creating a Western Europe- and America-centered outlook on hegemonic structures and global politics, leaving behind large swathes of the globe and world history that do not conform to these ideas (Acharya and Buzan 2007).

International relations theories have three main problems. First, these theories and the scholarship employing them primarily use a Western lens. Even scholarship originating from non-Western nations embody a degree of Western bias to appeal to a "broader" audience. An East and South Asian lens is not applied in understanding relations between countries; therefore, the scope of interaction and understanding is already limited. A non-Western lens must be used to view the histories of non-Western nations. Second, one theory alone cannot adequately explain many historical events. According to Daniel Drezner, no matter how sound or straightforward a theory may be, it will only be applicable temporally within their theoretical model (Drezner 2021). The current models explain post-World War II global politics but not power relations further back in the past. In comparison to the West, East Asia's complex geopolitical history spans millennia of diplomatic ties. Understanding these historical international relations potentially yields new perspectives. Furthermore, such perspectives can elucidate the complex dynamics of nations that colonial attitudes have ignored and may even help resolve contemporary problems. Finally, most of these theories fail to explain historical experiences of various civilizations that suffered colonization. These nations had been in existence long before the Western powers began to drain resources from them. Therefore, any theory-based study of non-Western nations must acknowledge the gap in scholarship in Western theories while considering the potential perspectives created by these theories that may provide a better understanding of different circumstances.

Despite the varying stages of development throughout time, in recent history Europe has been considered to be the center of knowledge and development. European nations surpassing more ancient civilizations technologically in recent history certainly does not warrant the erasure of milestones and innovations of others (Maza 2017). Non-colonial powers have a nationalistic desire to separate themselves from their invaders causing the colonized to cling to what they deem to be traditional customs with fervor (Caprio 2009, 43–45). In precolonial Korea, for example, before its takeover by Japan, some factions within the royal court of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910) pursued a more conservative Confucianist policy as they sought to isolate the peninsula from the "barbarians" that threatened "pure" Confucian ideals (Park 2022, 217–28). This policy considerably delayed Korea's attempts to modernize—an outcome which the West, the root cause, saw as backwardness or a lack of progress. Western theories exclude non-Western nations when applied in recent history using a contemporary lens. However, by using some non-Western applications of these theories and studying earlier historical cases, some of these theories may also apply to non-Western countries. These theories do not explain historical events fully but can be used to study them and explain events of non-Western geopolitical institutions.

The study of hegemonies and their interactions with the world speaks to and for Western powers. It does not include previous power systems of East and South Asia, non-contenders, or states that do not belong to a "side." Arguments posited by scholars suggest that the rise of American hegemony also prompted the increased study of hegemonic theories (Acharya and Buzan 2007, 294–295, 297, 307–09). Since these theories do not look at non-Western hegemons and since their scope is limited to a

Western lens, they cannot account for previous historical hegemons. For example, if one were to study Tang and Late Silla periods of East Asia, one would be able to identify how China reigned as the hegemon during that time and how the Korean peninsula engaged in the geopolitical proceedings as a global actor. Such an analysis would show the complicated history of the two nations and how historical memory politics plays a vital role in making decisions today.

Hegemonies and their spheres of influence drive global political policies and maneuvers. Accordingly, the balance of power between the hegemon and potential rivals attracts much interest (Jervis 1978, 167–214, 172–75). According to Robert Gilpin's view on the formation of hegemonies and their spheres of influence, the dominant powers create a system that benefits them and their interests, as well as promoting their values. Using such a system, the dominant powers influence foreign and economic policies to maintain the status quo of the international system so that it can continue to serve them (Gilpin 1991, 50–63, 68–74, 207–09). China and Korea have been a part of hegemonic power systems for over two millennia before these theories were even created. Intermittently since the fifth century, various Chinese dynasties have maintained tributary relations with Korean states, though Korea maintained autonomy. For example, Silla (57 BCE, trad. –935 CE) successfully fought off efforts of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) to take over the entire peninsula (670–76). Furthermore, the kings of Korea would still maintain their power as many donned royal outfits of color and patterns reserved for the Chinese emperor without facing repercussions (Breuker 2003, 48–84). For its part, China viewed maintaining Korea's loyalty vital in maintaining hegemonic status. Accordingly, China's Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) aided Chosŏn Korea during the Great East Asian

War (1592–98), set off by a massive Japanese invasion (Lewis 2017). Ming's conqueror and successor, the Qing Dynasty (1616–1912; Later Jin until 1636), China's last dynasty, too, secured Chosŏn's loyalty after subjugating it upon two invasions (1627, 1637). These wars and invasions can be viewed as great power wars and highlight the already existing complex power dynamics of East Asia (Spence 2013, 127–89).

South Korea is one of the few nations in the world that is able to wield both soft power and hard power. The country is one of the most developed nations in the world. The country boasts a strong GDP, high GDP per capita, high military spending, and one of the top education and literacy rates among developed nations. From the country's military expertise, South Korea is able to draw upon the hard power necessary to absorb pressure from neighboring nations like China. Still, people do not perceive or have awareness that South Korea is as developed as other Western nations. Currently, South Korea's strength in the global arena arises from increasing its' soft power and improving trade relations as opposed to growing its military strength. Through their cultural exports the country has gained a foothold in markets due to consumer demands. By developing soft power concurrently with hard power, South Korea has been able to improve its ability to negotiate diplomatically without forceful coercion (Nye 1990, 166–71).

South Korea's Economic Growth: A Product of Hard and Soft Power

A state or organization in international relations is a global actor if its actions have an effect globally, diplomatically, and politically. Immanuel Wallerstein developed the "world system's theory" to categorize states as the core, semi-periphery, and periphery states to help better understand relationships among "global actors" and others. Core countries are developed, industrialized, and wealthy nations such as Japan, Canada,

and much of Western Europe. Hegemonic powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom are also a part of this group. Most of these nations are considered global actors, as their policies have repercussions worldwide. In contrast, periphery nations are less developed and lacking in infrastructure. North Korea, much of the Middle East, Africa, and parts of South America belong to this category. For sure, North Korea arguably is a global actor since its weapons of mass destruction have global implications, but overall, most countries of this group have very little input in world policies. Somewhere between the core and periphery lies the semi-peripheral countries: each with a large manufacturing base but still in need of development (Wallerstein 1999, 219–39). Historically, many occupied a borderland or middle ground (Maza 2017, 67). Among the semi-peripheral countries are China and India, both global actors as their actions have broader political implications. All the same, many in this category, such as Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, do not carry the same political weight.

Among these categories of nation, South Korea, recovering from the Japanese occupation, transitioned from periphery to semi-periphery category due to the relative steady growth and organization of the government. Before Japan's colonization, the nation already had a complex and developed bureaucratic government system. With these systems in place, the country could make modern improvements and continuous economic growth steadily. Then, again in 1992, South Korea moved from the semi-periphery category to the core. This shift was dramatic, considering that most countries achieving a transition entailed change from one category to another due to fluctuations between natural resources. This was not the case for South Korea, which had exceeded in developing its industries and manufacturing capabilities (Babones 2005, 50–52). In 1995,

South Korea's top two industries were machinery and textiles; in 2021, the top two industries were machinery and transportation, with textiles being the eighth most prominent industry for the nation. This change in the industry shows the growth in South Korea's manufacturing capability, highlighting the country's economic growth. The increased economic capabilities of the country also correlate with an emerging middle class, higher rates of education, and an expanding service industry entailing moves away from raw materials and towards more finished and higher-end goods and services ("South Korea (KOR) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners | OEC," 2022). Many perceived South Korea's growth from the periphery to the semi-periphery and then to the core in just two decades nothing short of an economic miracle (Harvie and Lee 2003, 256–86). Indeed, South Korea earn its place among the Asian economic "tigers" (Paldam 2003, 453–77).

South Korea has come to rely more on its cultural influence or soft power in furthering national interests through persuasion to continue its economic growth. In 2000, South Korea's transportation sector was the top service trade industry, with $13.2 billion in exports. That same year, the personal, cultural, and recreational services sector recorded $137 million in exports. In 2018, the transportation sector was still the top industry, with $27.7 billion in exports. In the same year, the personal, cultural, and recreational services sector grew to $1.11 billion in exports. In eighteen years, South Korea's personal, cultural, and recreational services sector saw an 810-percent increase. This increase indicates the expansion of South Korea's cultural influence in the world through the entertainment industry ("South Korea (KOR) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners | OEC," 2022). This has led to a booming tourism industry. In 2019, before the

COVID-19 pandemic hit, South Korea had over 17.5 million tourists visiting the country, making it the world's twentieth most popular tourist destination and the fifth most popular Asian country for travel ("World Bank Open Data," 2023). The increase in consumption of South Korean entertainment by an international audience has attracted a growing number of visitors seeking to learn more about Korean culture, including the language, and taking an interest in various South Korean products and fashion trends.

South Korean government entities and administrations have attempted to promote the Hallyu Wave in an effort to increase both their hard power and soft power. Through South Korea's government support in the late 1990s, Hallyu Wave began to grow. In 1995, the Motion Picture Promotion Law first protected the domestic film industry by creating screen quotas. Subsequent iniatives such as the 1999 Basic Law for Culture Industry, the 2001 establishment of Culture and Content Agency, and the 2002 Online Digital Contents Industry Development Act all looked to protect the domestic industry. These iniatives ensured the growth of the domestic creative and cultural markets. The Kim Dae-Jung administration in 1998 announced the Hallyu Industry Support Development Plan which expanded the budget from $14 million in 1998 to $84 million in 2001 (Kim 2022, 126). Much of the focus in the late 1990s was export driven but this changed under the Lee Myung-bak administration. The Lee administration aimed to change the economic export-oriented focus of the industry to a national branding, competitive strategy, and a part of cultural diplomacy (Kim 2022, 126–127). With Psy's success of *Gangnam Style* Park Guen-hye's administration spearheaded worldwide culture centers by increasing the budget of the Ministry Culture, Sports, and Tourism. This iniatives continued under Moon Jae-in's administration as the Ministry Culture,

Sports, and Tourism established the Hallyu Department in 2020 (Kim 2022, 127).

Hallyu Fan Culture, Consumerism, and Impact on Local Businesses

Fan culture surrounding Korean idol groups has significantly changed the entertainment industry. Hallyu has become such a big phenomenon that the Korean government uses it as a tool to promote Korean culture and tourism and bring investment into the nation. The government is heavily invested in the industry and has created legislation and laws to regulate it. Other times, the government will use the industry by revealing celebrity scandals to distract the public from potential scandals in the government or any news that may create public outrage. Fan culture has made significant domestic impacts.

For K-pop, everything begins first with the fan culture surrounding and idol group. An idol group is a “boy band” or “girl group” created by any talent agency or entertainment group. Often, some idols train for years before making their debut in a group. Unlike most Western groups, Korean groups normally are not formed by the members. Instead, they are formed by the talent agencies who “invest” in an idol hopeful, called a trainee, looking to make their debut. A group’s concepts, members in the group, name, fan club, hairstyles, fashion, and music, among others, are often all the agency's decisions. Idols ready to be sold and ready to be consumed. Idols are not viewed as artists but as manufactured products, a distinction made by netizens for musicians who write and compose their music and lyrics and are not assembled by a talent agency. To gain fans internationally, starting in the mid-2000s, some agencies had begun to debut trainees from countries such as China, Thailand, and Japan. By having group members from different countries, companies can easily establish a stable fanbase and source of revenue

in countries outside of Korea.

This process works. Fans spend a fortune to get merchandise associated with their favorite idol. The casual fan tends to stream music and knows a group's title songs. They appreciate the choreography and watch one or two practice videos or live performances. These fans do not spend much money, time, or energy on celebrities. For the more ardent fans, streaming is just the beginning. Talent agencies of the idol groups have official fan registrations and events that only registered fans can attend or enter a raffle to attend. There are registration fees associated with gaining membership. These memberships come with perks. Registered members can access exclusive video content, company-approved and designated online chatrooms and forums for the idols, exclusive merchandise available to registered members, and early-sale concert tickets. Official fan registration has become another source of revenue for companies to make more profits. Aside from online content, companies can also profit from physical merchandise sales. Most fans own every physical album without question, and for all future comebacks, they buy at least one album, if not several physical albums, to help the artist increase their rank on the music charts. K-pop albums tend to be more extravagant than Western albums. They have photo books of the group, photocards which sometimes are like trading cards for fans, among other little goodies. Companies have taken advantage of this unwavering support by strategically releasing multiple versions of the same album with different photo concepts and photocards to sell.

A prime example of effective marketing is the boy band Exo. The group had twelve members when the boyband Exo first debuted in 2012. During one of the promotions for one of their earlier albums, SM Entertainment, Exo’s agency released ten

versions of the same album, one for each member. When all the albums are lined up in a particular order, the album spines become a picture of Exo's logo. Furthermore, Exo has members from China and releases songs in Korean and Chinese. SM Entertainment released the same album in Chinese with ten different versions, once again, one for every member, for twenty albums. This release strategy motivates many fans to buy the other versions of the same album, boosting the group's album sales and increasing their ranking on the music charts.

Companies will also hold concerts or fan meet raffles with album sales. Purchasing an album counts as an entry into the raffle, causing many to bulk-buy albums. These companies create a culture where buying multiple copies of the same album is not only common but actively encouraged. Purchasing an album becomes a gateway to exclusive opportunities, creating a symbiotic relationship between album sales and fan engagement. This strategy boosts album sales and increases the overall revenue generated through associated events and activities. Often, companies will also sell repackaged albums for extra profit. Repackaged albums are a release of an older album with a couple of new songs and new concept art. Thriftier fans or those with less purchasing power will wait to purchase those albums. In addition to album sales, companies will release holiday specials, concert DVDs, and other merchandise to help increase profits. Many fans will purchase all these products.

Consumerism increases rivalries between fandoms as well. Fandom rivalries intensify the loyalty of fans to their chosen idol groups. This heightened loyalty often translates into increased consumption of merchandise, albums, and other products associated with the idol or group as fans seek to demonstrate their dedication. In some

instances, fans boast within their fandom of how they bulk buy albums to help increase their idol's place in the charts by showing the receipts of the purchases. Fandom rivalries can fuel a race to boost album sales and chart rankings. Some entertainment companies leverage fandom rivalries for marketing purposes. Fans may purchase albums in bulk to ensure their idol or group achieves higher chart positions. Companies may exploit this competition by releasing multiple album versions and repackaged albums, encouraging fans to buy more to support their favorites (“Invasion of ‘smart’ Albums” 2023). Fans express their dedication by purchasing official merchandise, albums, attending fan meetings, participating in fan events, and consuming other products. The rivalry between fandoms acts as a catalyst, encouraging fans to go above and beyond to showcase their unwavering support through increased consumption. Members of a fandom interact with each other and feel a sense of community that comes from actively supporting and promoting the idol or group. Rivalry amplifies this effect as fans strive to demonstrate the superiority of their chosen idol or group over others.

Consumer culture becomes a means of signaling this dedication to peers within the fandom. This can lead to increased revenue for the companies. Fandom conflicts often spill over into social media platforms, including X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and dedicated fan forums. Fans use these platforms to showcase their dedication, engage in discussions, and amplify the visibility of their chosen idol or group. This digital showcasing becomes a form of competition, with fans actively seeking to outshine rivals by generating more online content, such as fan art, videos, and memes. This online activity can increase the idols' visibility, generating more interest and potentially attracting new fans who may contribute to the consumer culture.

Rival fandoms engage in hashtag battles, trend creation, and coordinated online events to dominate social media spaces. Expressing loyalty in this way contributes to the virality of content related to the idol or group. Trends associated with a particular fandom or idol attract attention, drawing in new fans and encouraging existing ones to participate in digital conversation. Fans actively create and share content, including fan-made videos, edits, and compilations. The rivalry encourages fans to produce high-quality, creative content that showcases the talents and appeal of their chosen idol or group. This content-sharing culture becomes an additional driver of consumer engagement as fans celebrate their favorites through digital creativity. Sometimes, fan-shared videos can catapult a less popular group into stardom. This was the case for the girl group EXID, when a fancam—a video of a performance taken by a fan—of the member Hani became viral. Before the viral video, the group was not well known. There are also perks for fans who are engaged online. Dedicated fans often become influencers within their respective fandoms. They amass large followings and wield influence over trends and discussions. This influencer culture further drives consumer behavior, as these digital influencers' purchasing decisions and preferences influence fans. The more intense the rivalry, the more likely fans are to engage with and support these influential figures, further contributing to the consumer culture. Furthermore, social media breaks down geographical barriers, enabling fans worldwide to connect and engage in fandom rivalries. The global nature of these interactions expands the consumer culture beyond national borders. Fans from diverse backgrounds contribute to the online conversation, share their experiences, and participate in the consumption of K-pop merchandise, albums, and events.

The active involvement of fans in K-pop culture creates numerous opportunities for collaboration with local businesses. Whether through merchandise sales, event planning, photography services, or fundraising initiatives, fans contribute to the vibrancy of the local economy and stimulate consumerism in various sectors. This symbiotic relationship between fans and local businesses strengthens the overall cultural impact of K-pop in Korea. Fans actively purchasing K-pop merchandise from physical and online stores can contribute to the success of small and local businesses. These stores may specialize in official or unofficial merchandise, catering to the diverse preferences of fans. The demand for unique and exclusive items often leads fans to seek out local stores, providing these businesses with increased visibility and revenue. Furthermore, fans creating and selling unofficial merchandise often collaborate with local print shops, designers, and manufacturers. These collaborations support local businesses in producing fan-made items, contributing to the growth of the local creative industry. Additionally, selling these items boosts local economies as fans actively purchase and share their creations.

Local businesses can capitalize on the demand for fan events, concerts, and pop-up shops. These events attract fans looking to explore and purchase unique items related to their favorite idols. Entrepreneurs can set up pop-up shops at these events, offering a diverse range of products and services tailored to the specific interests of the fandom. Local businesses specializing in K-pop merchandise, such as independent online stores or local shops, can benefit from the passionate fan culture. Fans are often eager to purchase merchandise, including posters, clothing, accessories, and fan-made items. This demand creates opportunities for local businesses to cater to niche preferences and offer unique,

customized products unavailable through larger outlets.

Fans often coordinate events, such as birthday celebrations, group anniversaries, or milestones, which involve fundraising. Local businesses, including restaurants and cafes, collaborate with fans to provide catering services, host events, or offer discounts. Furthermore, fans coordinating events, such as concerts or fan meetings, may organize food trucks or provide catering services. These events boost the local food industry, as fans often source food locally to support the community. Businesses offering catering services may directly benefit from collaborations with these fan-driven events. In addition, fans may send food trucks to the filming site for the staff working with their favorite celebrity. The goal is to create goodwill between the staff and the celebrities and between the staff and fandom, helping boost small local businesses. Fans will also help create large charity events where they make donations in the name of their favorite celebrities, helping boost the celebrity's image and creating positive public opinion toward the celebrity and the fandom.

Anti-fans and Counterculture

Anti-fans within the K-pop and K-drama fan communities can cause casual fans to fall out of love with Korean entertainment. However, more pertinently, anti-fans may pose more danger to celebrities as they can be more obsessive than even the most obsessed fans. Anti-fans, for a variety of reasons, dislike certain celebrities. These reasons can include jealousy, celebrity behavior in any event that may have appeared unlikeable by the anti-fan, or inability to "prove their talent" to the anti-fan through performances. Sometimes, a celebrity gains an anti-fan because a fan of another celebrity feels like their favorite star is more talented but is not receiving enough recognition. After

all, the first celebrity is trendier or more famous. Like in any fan community, some anti-fans only spread gossip and are online keyboard warriors. For example, on online forums, they will dislike comments or posts praising the celebrity they hate and post negative comments about them instead. Some anti-fans may create posts about how a celebrity is unsatisfactory in their performance on stage or drama by comparing the celebrity with another one, attempting to show they lack talent. If they are obsessive enough, they continue to make more noise by digging into a celebrity's past and personal life to expose immoral behavior or manners.

In East Asian entertainment culture, certain etiquette must be maintained. For example, celebrities who are bullies will lose fans and popularity. If the allegations are severe enough, these celebrities will be canceled and must leave the industry. East Asian entertainment industry's fans are unforgiving, and there have been many instances where idols were forced out of their groups or actors were replaced in dramas. Furthermore, anti-fans often try to find pre-debut photos to discredit a celebrity and attack their image and appearance. A debut usually refers to the first performance or stage of an idol. Hence, pre-debut refers to the time before the celebrity becomes one. Anti-fans look for pre-debut images, particularly to accuse celebrities of getting plastic surgery. Plastic surgery is a widespread practice among celebrities and non-celebrities and procedures involving double eyelid surgery are the most common (Smith 2023). Other methods may be more extreme. However, many celebrities will claim that they are "100 percent natural" and "plastic surgery-free," causing anti-fans to search for pre-debut photos of celebrities where they may look different from claiming that the celebrity has gone under the knife. Although hate comments are malicious, most of these types of anti-fan interactions do not

cause serious issues. If anti-fans cause considerable damage, celebrities have started to fight back by taking legal action against the anti-fans who began rumors (Kim 2023). Legal action against anti-fans for defamation is a more recent phenomenon in the industry that has started to occur after several successive celebrity suicides (Kim 2020). However, legal action has not stopped malicious comments and allegations; even with legal action, sometimes celebrities cannot recover their popularity and careers.

Unfortunately, anti-fans do not always stop at being keyboard warriors with malicious comments. Some resort to extreme measures to bring harm to a celebrity. While some stars may receive hate mail from anti-fans on occasion, they may also receive death threats. While some can be just online trolls, some death threats are credible, creating security risks for celebrities, especially those who perform. In addition to celebrity, some threats can also be a security concern for the public. During one of BTS's early concert tours in the Americas, an international anti-fan tweeted a picture of a gun, saying that they would see member RM at the concert. While the concert was not canceled, other events that were to take place in addition to the concert, such as fan meets, were canceled for safety reasons, and security was increased for the safety of the fans. Officials attempted to contact the culprit. However, no further reports of what ensued afterward were made. In extreme circumstances, anti-fans have also tried to kill the celebrities they hate. DBSK member Jung Yunho consumed a drink he received during a fan meet. This was a laced drink with superglue by the anti-fan who had given it to him. Jung was rushed to the ER and fortunately did not have any serious lasting physical injuries but received mental trauma and did not touch or consume bottled drinks for quite some time (Koreaboo 2019). As a note, it is normal for celebrities to receive

food and beverages from fans as gifts. This incident could have been fatal for Jung. Authorities had apprehended the culprit, but Jung did not press charges after learning the age of the deranged anti-fan was the same age as his younger sibling (Allkpop 2019).

The negative actions of anti-fans, including defamation and attempts to damage artists' reputations, have impacted the popularity of Korean celebrities in the West. Furthermore, when fandoms exhibit extreme behaviors, their actions negatively affect their celebrity, with the celebrities having to take responsibility for the actions of their fans (Warner 2020). When such actions are widely publicized, toxic fans can discourage new people from supporting these artists, contributing to the formation of countercultures that prefer alternative entertainment options and furthering stereotypes of Koreans and East Asians in general. Toxic behaviors within the existing Korean and international fan communities create divisions that deter casual fans who may have initially been interested in Korean entertainment from consuming more content. Casual fans may distance themselves from these toxic elements or stop consumption of products altogether. The behavior of anti-fans and the overall toxic behavior of extremely obsessed fans have hurt the growth of the Korean entertainment industry by limiting its development and acceptance in the West.

As a reaction to these negative aspects, Western audiences seek to maintain the entertainment status quo by rejecting East Asian entertainment altogether with the idea that Western entertainment is more positive, progressive, and less controversial. Within the Anglophonic Western market, audiences have either outright rejected non-Western pop culture's entrance altogether or celebrated the “diversity and inclusion” of non-Western pop culture while simultaneously criticizing many aspects in dismissing it.

Incidents involving death threats or harm to celebrities may instill fear among Western audiences. This fear could lead to a reluctance to support or engage with Korean entertainment, as fans may associate it with potential security risks and extreme behaviors. Negative incidents involving anti-fans and obsessive behaviors have attracted media attention in the West. The coverage focuses on the dark side of the Korean entertainment industry and fandom (Campbell 2019). This coverage negatively shaped the public opinion of the Western audience and contributed to the rejection of the Korean entertainment industry's entrance into the Western Market.

The West tends to perceive South Korea in a neutral-negative due to the association of the country with North Korea. Much of the Western audience in the United States cannot differentiate between the democratic and developed South Korea and the autocratic and developing North Korea. This creates a barrier as the audience is less receptive to Korean entertainment since they mistakenly boycott it by associating it with North Korea instead. The toxic fan behavior compounds this already negative view. Western audiences tend to caricature Korean entertainment by mocking Korean celebrities. The mockery typically focuses on the physical features of Koreans, most stereotypically, the eyes. Male celebrities are criticized for being too feminine. Footballer Son Heungmin has not been spared from such hate from fans (Media 2023). Korean boy bands tend to have several members. These bands are subjected to comments such as "there are so many of them" and "they all look the same" (Kids React to K-Pop 2012). TMZ reported a sighting of the K-pop group ACE as BTS (Marie 2020). Female celebrities are usually fetishized or treated as less beautiful compared to Western celebrities. Celebrities who do not speak English are looked down on and those who are

mocked for their accents when they speak in English. Western audiences are surprised if Korean celebrities from English-speaking countries easily answer questions. These condescending critiques come from not just Western audiences but Latinx, Indian, Muslim, and Black audiences too (Kaufman 2022). Often, the ridicule is very stereotypical, surface-level insults with Koreans being categorized as Chinese or mocking the Korean language (Kim and Kim 2018). Despite being a conservative nation with little to no LGBTQ+ protections, ironically, the Korean entertainment industry faces barriers in other markets because of homophobia. It is a large driving force in the rejection of the consumption of Korean entertainment. Homophobia stems from toxic masculinity and religious hardliners in international audiences (Son 2024).

To not appear racist or homophobic, some audiences have targeted the capitalist nature of the Korean entertainment industry and the factory-like production of K-pop groups and dramas. One of the most prevalent critiques is that K-pop has a cookie-cutter method, and the field exists to only push out groups like a factory for maximum profits. These audiences tend to criticize the exploitative nature of the entertainment industry, the labor practices, rigid promotion schedules, using toxic fan culture as an excuse to boycott the entire industry. Furthermore, poisonous fan culture adds to a progressive anti-fan argument with the overconsumption of Korean entertainment merchandise. The progressive anti-fan will note how capitalistic the entire industry is, the wasteful habits of a fan, and even the environmental waste created by the industry and the fan culture (Mendoza 2023). This is a double standard.

Western fans also idolize their favorite celebrities and put them on pedestals while simultaneously being extremely critical and hostile toward the celebrities they dislike.

Excessive devotion to celebrities, intense emotional reactions, and obsessive behaviors are observed in both Korean and Western fan cultures. This includes stalking, invasion of privacy, and unhealthy fixation on celebrities' personal lives. Toxic fan culture is prevalent in both fan communities. Both Korean and Western fan communities display online harassment, including spreading rumors, engaging in cyberbullying, and creating a hostile online environment for individuals who may not align with their preferences. Toxic fan culture is not exclusive to the Korean entertainment industry. Some attempt to rationalize that the toxic fan culture only resides among young female teens but neglect to observe the extreme reactions of fans after a defeat during the playoffs during any sporting events. Furthermore, the critics of the K-pop factories also ignore how Korean entertainment agencies are similar to Disney and Nickelodeon and how they produce their child stars. The Western gaze on the Korean entertainment industry tends to ignore the problems within the Western entertainment industry, criticizing it and devaluing its popularity, reach, and talent. Toxic fan culture shares some common elements between Korea and the West; the specific expressions and consequences can vary due to cultural, societal, and industry-specific factors. Recognizing that fan cultures are diverse and that not all fans engage in toxic behaviors is essential. The negative aspects often gain attention because they are more sensationalized, but positive and supportive fan communities also exist in both contexts.

The South Korean Entertainment Industry's Influence in East Asia

Western theories assess a country's stature by its hard power and soft power alike. A nation's hard power reflects its ability to coerce others into securing its interests, usually through the threat of military force. Hard power as such has also come to include

a capacity to apply economic pressure (Gilpin 1991, 68–74, 207–09). Soft power, in contrast, is the ability to obtain the cooperation of other nations and entities without the use of force. Accordingly, a country's soft power can reflect its cultural influence and likability (White 2022, 31–35). For the East Asian nations of China, Japan, North Korea, and South Korea, each has its own methods of applying hard and soft power.

Japan outsources its hard power to the United States, relying on America's protection but attracts and influences others by exporting their culture. In the eyes of most Western countries, Japan is a developed nation with a strong cultural export through its entertainment industry, primarily anime, manga, and video games (White 2022, 31). Also, Japanese culture and society receive praise for their "kind" demeanor and community-oriented outlooks (Keh 2022). Japan's soft power as such has led to a boom in the country's tourism industry and product exports. Japan is especially famous for its transportation industry, including automobiles. Globally associated with quality products, Japan is able to maintain a more highly developed service industry than one focused on manufacturing and raw materials (Park 2022, xi).

Conversely, China has relatively low soft power, especially among Western nations. This lack of soft power is a consequence of the Cold War, and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) dogmatic communist principles which alienated the country from the West. With Deng Xiaoping's "cat theory" and the opening of China under his leadership, China began to make gains in soft power (Reuters 2007). Subsequently, the Beijing Olympics showcased China's rich culture to the world and helped the country progress in cultural diplomacy (Griffiths 2021). China also uses "panda diplomacy" to help soften its image (Hartig 2013). All the same, in the new millennium, Xi Jinping's

assertive projection of China's hard power has created a rift between China and the West (Graham-Harrison 2019). In particular, China's aggressive posturing vis-à-vis maritime territorial disputes increased tension in East and Southeast Asia ("Philippines Files Protest over China's Laser Use in Sea Dispute" 2023). Also, the brutal crackdown in Hong Kong and Xinjiang has fanned nationalism among Chinese citizens. Moreover, China weaponizes its celebrities to be the face of nationalistic rhetoric. Such an approach has produced tensions among nations disposed to Chinese cultural exports but hesitant about the celebrities of their favorite C-Drama or idol group parroting nationalistic rhetoric (Lu 2023). China relies on strict economic practices to compensate for the loss of cultural influence and focuses on bolstering its military capabilities (Garamone 2022). Overall, China officials believe that soft power will not be enough to further its interests and therefore focuses on increasing its hard power.

In stark contrast, rather than using hard power as its source of growth, South Korea relies on its ability to attract and persuade other nations through a positive image to further its interests through expanding the country's influence through soft power. South Korea has a strong economic base and manufacturing industry, but its companies in the past benefited more from being associated with Japan than with South Korea (Park 2022, xi). In fact, until recently, South Korea was unable to shed the image of a semi-developed country in the West. Regionally, South Korea has been gaining the adoration of Southeast Asian nations, as well as Japan and China, through entertainment industry. The official establishment of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism in 1990 helped begin exporting the Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, spearheaded by dramas in the late 1990s (Shao 2020). The explosion of the Korean Wave is often credited to the drama, *Winter*

Sonata, released in 2002 and immediately producing a cult fan following (Han and Lee 2008). Routinely the stars of the drama pop up in international news articles tailored toward Korean pop-culture fans, even though they are inactive in the entertainment industry (Lim 2015). More dramas began to capture the interests of overseas fans, and the entertainment industry began to expand with Korean variety shows and music.

Also in the 1990s, the beginnings of the South Korea's music industry seen today first emerged when Korean pop music became popular domestically (Shao 2020). The eventual machination of the industry came with the establishment of the "big three": SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and YG Entertainment. These titans of the Korean music industry developed Korean pop music in a way that was palatable to the mass domestic audience and revolutionized the industry to be highly profitable through international appeal. They also increased their profits by promoting in China and Japan. Multiple groups from these companies have re-recorded their songs in Japanese and Chinese. The proximity between South Korea and Japan allowed for celebrities to promote on variety shows in both countries on the same day, increasing a celebrity's visibility and an agency's profits. In addition, groups record entire albums in Japanese and hold concerts and special fan events in Japan, allowing for additional marketing opportunities and increased revenues (Michel 2011). SM Entertainment even began to tap into the Chinese market by debuting idols from China to boost popularity within mainland China. JYP debuted idols from Thailand to help expand the popularity of their boy bands even more to Southeastern countries. South Korean music groups were no longer limited to domestic audiences for a source of income as they could perform concerts and tour Japan, Thailand, and China. Scholars initially attributed the rising

popularity of Korean entertainment in Asia to the cultural proximity between these nations (Park, Lee, and Seo 2019, 139–57).

Chinese fans showcase their buying power by contributing to music sales and product and endorsed merchandise sales. The large Chinese consumer market allows South Korea to expand outside the limited domestic market. Before 2003, South Korea's largest export partner was the United States, followed by Japan, Hong Kong, and China, all approximately equal. Since 2003, however, China has been South Korea's largest overall trading partner, both export and import. While the bulk of the change in export and imports between South Korea and China comprises other industries, such as machinery and technologies, the personal, cultural, and recreational sectors have seen a significant growth ("South Korea (KOR) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners | OEC" 2022). The interdependence of the two economies also resulted in overall positive public sentiment between the two nations as both were developing better economic ties. China and South Korea both shared strong negative sentiments against Japan and zealously condemned the growing nationalism in Japan (Wingfield-Hayes 2013). Accordingly, China's government at the time did not restrict Korean entertainment, and the K-Pop industry was able to establish ardent fan bases for dramas and music groups in China.

Fan culture in China, too, boosted the consumption of South Korean products. Fierce competition among K-Pop groups drove buying albums as a way of helping a fan's favorite climb the charts. Fans, therefore, coordinated with one another in buying as many albums as possible to help their favorite artists climb charts. China was a big market for consumption and had money to spend. K-Pop groups held concerts and fan meetings to expand profits. K-Dramas featured meet-and-greets to promote themselves.

Social media growth in the early 2010s also helped develop K-Pop and K-Drama fan communities (King-O'Riain 2021). The phenomena certainly helped fans across the world to communicate, but with China's Great Firewall, often, Chinese fans insulated from the rest of the fans elsewhere. Despite this, Chinese fans developed methods to coordinate with one another and to help boost their favorite artists on charts (Yoon 2022). The consumption of Korean entertainment has even caused concern among members of the CCP (Oh 2009). Government officials have taken notice of the popularity of Korean entertainment and have begun to promote the growth of China's own entertainment industry (Wan 2014). In an attempt to catch up, Chinese broadcasters have copied Korean variety show formats, dramas, and music idol contests. The blatant copying has even led major broadcasting stations in South Korea to issue warnings against Chinese media companies. These incidents reflect the Chinese entertainment industry's lack of creativity and of the strong base Korean entertainment commands (Zhang 2019).

Through Korean dramas and K-Pop music videos, Korean fashion also influenced Chinese fanbase. Korean hyper-femininity and body image issues affect young adults as they attempt to recreate looks inspired by their favorite celebrities. Young females are more susceptible and impressionable to societal pressures to look a certain way and may get bullied if they do not conform to a specific look. Consequences include multiple eating disorders in women, insecurity, depression, and some extreme measures such as continuous plastic surgery.

The obsession to look a certain way has turned South Korea into a prime destination for medical tourism—featuring the country's high quality of the procedures and competitive prices (Park et al. 2021). Billboards surround Gangnam station

advertising the best clinics, popular procedures, and the low costs of the surgeries. Other elective procedures, such as Lasik eye surgeries, are also more affordable in South Korea compared to other countries. Patients can arrive in the country, have their procedures done cheaply, recuperate, and then do tourist activities in Seoul with their new nose. Every step of the way, from traveling into the country, medical procedures, and tourism, different industries in South Korea can increase their revenues. While not every fan might take it to an extreme with medical procedures, many have "invested" in skincare products from South Korea and follow trends set by entertainers on how to do their makeup. To buy good cosmetics products and re-sculpt their faces, women may face socioeconomic burdens to look a certain way, as making one's face look different and appealing takes time, energy, and money (Zuo 2022). When such an investment does not help a person get ahead in life, inevitably, they will develop depression. This person may then take more drastic measures to meet these standards such as more plastic surgery, extreme diets which result in eating disorders, or extreme exercise resulting in body dysmorphia. The entertainment industry's dark side has affected not only its fans but also the stars themselves, as many have taken their own lives. Adding to the tragedy are fans following their favorite celebrities and subsequently committing suicide too (Kim 2020).

Nevertheless, fans still follow the trends set by their favorite celebrities and the products they endorse. Often groups will have exclusive deals with certain brands and promote them. Customers who buy a specific dollar amount of product may receive special promotional items from the group, such as photocards or posters. The skincare industry in South Korea has gained popularity all over the world. As a result, there has been an increase in demand for Korean cosmetics and skin care products internationally

outside the region. Some people develop their skincare routines based on what their favorite idols may promote. While idols are paid to promote certain products over others, they may use other products personally. If fans can determine what product their favorite celebrities use, they will buy it. Depending on the idol's popularity, the product may sell out. When a product is sold out, a celebrity's star power is deemed top tier. Referred to as "sold-out king" or "sold-out queen," the celebrity can make these sales without promoting the item (Kandangwa 2023). These fan culture habits also translate into visiting cafes or restaurants that a celebrity has visited, vacation spots, and, sometimes, a mailbox where a celebrity poses next for a picture (Kwong 2016).

Not surprisingly, aspiring Chinese celebrities recognize the pull of the Korean entertainment market. They use Korean competition shows to gain a fanbase or even debut with Korean groups before "jumping ship" into the "bigger" Chinese market (Tai 2023). This tactic is effective for many stars as they can start in the Chinese market with an established fanbase leading and land better roles in drama and endorsement deals. Borrowing the tactic to her success was an American citizen and Olympian, Eileen Gu, who chose to compete for China—a decision which gained her widespread support from Chinese netizens (Gu and Zhang 2023). As public figures, celebrities often must promote state propaganda as a show of support. In some instances, if international companies make statements or pursue policies perceived negatively by Chinese consumers, Chinese celebrities quickly break contracts with the brands they work with (Li 2021). Chinese netizens revere, for example, Jackson Wang, who rose to fame in South Korea as a member of the K-Pop boy group Got7 member, for his patriotism (Hunter-Tilney 2023). The adoration, however, is fickle: if a celebrity is not patriotic enough or has a dissenting

opinion, their support could instantly vanish. Tennis player Peng Shuai vanished from the public for accusing former Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli of sexual assault (Clarey and Rothenberg 2022). This incident reignited the “Me Too” movement in China, and whether the CCP forced Peng out of public life is unclear. Regardless, Peng’s incident highlights the sensitivity of Chinese netizens and officials. China has been able to weaponize the entertainment industry to promote nationalistic rhetoric using Chinese K-Pop celebrities who have large international fanbases.

Obstacles in the Chinese Market

Korean entertainment has a vivacious fan base in China and has become a strong source of revenue for the industry, but this fan base is a double-edged sword. Depending on the political situation, the CCP, which has absolute control over many aspects of Chinese society, can control what is allowed into the country. Therefore, when tensions over geopolitical decisions rise, the CCP can signal its dissatisfaction to South Korea by blocking Korean culture exports to the Chinese Market. These pressures weigh heavily on the South Korean government when making decisions that serve strategic defense interests versus economic interests.

Rising nationalism in the Chinese market is also a new challenge for the South Korea’s entertainment industry. South Korean celebrities are wary of any comments and actions that Chinese consumers may deem insulting. At the beginning of 2016, Chou Tzuyu, a sixteen-year-old member of the girl group Twice, faced backlash from Chinese netizens. At the time, a video showcasing the international appeal of the nine-member girl group with five South Koreans, three Japanese, and Taiwanese-born Chou showed her waving South Korean and Taiwanese flags. Outraged Chinese netizens demanded that

Chou and the group Twice be banned from performing in China. The backlash raised further issues, as promotional activities, appearances in mainland Chinese TV shows, and concerts by Twice's labelmates in JYP entertainment faced cancellation. Chou was allegedly forced to apologize for the incident. The CEO of the JYP Entertainment, Park Jinyoung, too, apologized to the Chinese "for failing to educate [Chou] well enough in the absence of her parents" and suspended her activities (Fawcett 2016). In Taiwan, many people came to her defense, finding her apology video humiliating, but to South Korea's entertainment industry, the incomparably larger Chinese market was more valuable than the Taiwanese market. The "Tzuyu Incident" highlights the transnational scope, the complex economic relationships among national markets, and the power dynamics and geopolitics of East Asia. The incident, the power dynamics of an artist and the agency is visible; it serves as an allegory of the power dynamics of an artist and their agency, between an industry and a country, and among three nations (Ahn and Lin 2019, 158–75).

At the end of 2016, the South Korean government's decision to employ the U.S. military's Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea sparked backlash from China (Maizland 2017). Initially, China limited appearance of Korean acts on Chinese variety shows. Subsequently, China limited updates on streaming services of new Korean entertainment contents. Such restrictions immediately halted the growth of South Korea's cultural fanbase in China. Introducing the THAAD into the peninsula is a prime example of South Korea's security dilemma (Jervis 1978, 172-175). The South Korean and American governments insist that the installation of THAAD is for the defense of the Korean peninsula and is not able to be used against China (Shin

2022). From China's perspective, the THAAD installation is a threat to Chinese security and is an attempt by the U.S. to undermine Sino-South Korean relations (Kai 2022). China viewed what South Korea deemed necessary defensive measures against North Korea as a threat to China's national security and retaliated by limiting the cultural exports from Korea. For South Korea's entertainment industry, this incident highlighted how the nation's security could cost the industry revenue.

In 2020, the internationally famous boy band BTS accepted the Van Fleet Award from the US-based Korea Society. BTS band leader Kim Namjoon's comments on the sacrifices of the Korean and American soldiers during the war received heavy backlash from Chinese netizens. BTS fans in China had a variety of reactions to the incident. Some kept quiet and advised other fans online not to "make noise" over the comments choosing to understand the band. Other fans left the fandom "insisting that no idol is superior to the motherland." The *Global Times*, a Chinese state-owned tabloid, wrote that the US was an aggressor in the War to Resist American Aggression and Aid to [North] Korea, which is the official Chinese name for the Korean War, rebuking Chinese netizens who had pointed out that the speech was intended for US netizens. Chinese fans were outraged that the band "ignored the sacrifices of Chinese" soldiers (Yu 2022). South Korean and other international fans reproached Chinese netizens for overreacting to comments made for an award promoting the alliance between South Korea and the US. Political activists opposing China's authority also used this issue to criticize China. Joshua Wong, a Hong Kong democracy activist, pointed out that China was not mentioned at all and that "propagandists" in Beijing were using a non-issue for their nationalist propaganda campaigns. Some fans commented that while they may be able to understand Chinese fan

sentiments, BTS are South Korean artists and, therefore, should stand by their own country and that, as artists, they should not be used politically by any nation, including China, South Korea, and the US. Other fans poked fun at the issue, with one fan tweeting, "Still waiting for Kim Jong-un to get mad too because BTS didn't mourn North Korean sacrifices." This issue brought into question whether or not this incident would harm the band's success. Chinese netizens had commented that BTS's "career in China was over" and that their success would end (Chen and Kwon 2020). This was of great concern; many experts and netizens alike wondered what the reaction of the BTS's agency, which was due to go public at the time, would be and what would happen to the group.

Initially, businesses that collaborated with BTS for marketing promotions removed the products related to the brand from their online stores overnight. These brands and companies made little to no comments on the issue (Dong 2020). The Chinese propaganda attacks from the *Global Times* on the band disappeared as quickly as they began. Some fans' calls for a boycott did not harm the group's popularity (Park 2020). Some Chinese netizens who were not BTS fans weighed in by commenting that they had trouble seeing how the comments were offensive. China and South Korea fought on opposite sides; therefore, why would South Koreans commemorate the war by thanking the Chinese? Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, made a neutral comment stating, "We should learn from history and look toward the future by cherishing peace and advancing our friendship," indicating the government's position on not wanting to create a more significant response to this issue (May and Chien 2020). Kim Namjoon did not issue an apology, nor did he retract his statement. BTS's agency went public without issue and made significant gains in the stock market (Herman 2020).

This was because BTS had successfully attracted consumers in other markets including the larger Western market.

For the first time in decades, a South Korean entertainment act did not have to rely on the whims of the Chinese government and market for success and profits because profits were not dependent on the Chinese markets. Barely four years before this incident, a sixteen-year-old teenager bowed so deeply that she completely disappeared from the view of her apology video. The apology video is still up on JYP Entertainment's official YouTube channel. The South Korea's entertainment industry also faced restrictions when the South Korean military bolstered its defenses. These events indicate larger issues in Sino-South Korean relations and obstacles that the South Korean entertainment industry faced in trying to appeal to the Chinese markets. By being less reliant on China, South Korea can be a stronger US ally as it will not have to bear with the whims of the CCP. This is highlighted by the intensity of the reactions of the CCP in the four years between the "Tzuyu Incident" and the BTS's Van Fleet Award acceptance speech. In these instances, it is apparent that pop-culture is used as a proxy for diplomatic negotiation.

Halal & Hallyu

Southeast Asia has been a strong consumer market of East Asian entertainment. Japanese, Chinese, and Taiwanese entertainment has a strong following in the region. These nations are, therefore, major tourist destinations for many Southeast Asians. The popularity of K-pop and K-dramas in Southeast Asia also saw a boost in the consumption of Korean products. This boost began with television, movies, and music but expanded to the consumption of Korean cultural products. Fans in Southeast Asian nations began to demand Korean food, fashion, cosmetics, and skincare.

Increasingly, consumers in these nations view Korean products as high quality. This phenomenon led to an increase in exports of Korean products to these nations (Baek and Chea 2021). There were also more profound implications for Korean companies since they had to learn how to cater to the tastes of Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, which are both Muslim-majority nations. Korean products, therefore, would also have to be halal for the fan consumers in these nations. This also translated to the need for halal food in Korea to increase tourists from Indonesia and Malaysia. All over the country, halal restaurants have been popping up to cater to the influx of Muslim tourists. The government has also set up a guide for Muslim travelers. The fact that the government created this guide implies that tourists are not only visiting Seoul and Busan but also smaller cities like Gwangju, Cheonan, Jeju City, and Daegu. The Korean economy benefits from these tourists, and the government initiated special programs to help promote easy travel for Muslim tourists. “The Halal Restaurant Week Korea” is one initiative the Korean Tourism Organization holds yearly from September to October (Yoo 2021). This program aims to make Muslim travel easier in Korea by providing information, and discounts are also given to the attendees to encourage travelers to go to these stores.

Korean Muslims have also played a significant role in helping promote Korea as a tourist destination for Muslim tourists. Influencers like Song Bora, a Korean-Muslim convert, regularly promote Muslim-friendly restaurants and locations in Korea on her Instagram. As a part of a broader cultural exchange, she often travels to majority Muslim nations to develop better relations with her fans. Song has over 182,000 followers on her Instagram. Adhering to Islamic teachings and dress codes, Song intertwines her Korean

heritage with her religion in her fashion. Often, her clothing resembles the *hanbok* (traditional Korean clothing), or she puts a modest twist on current fashion trends. Song also serves in an ambassador-like role to Koreans who are non-Muslims and are more curious about the religion, helping bridge the understanding gap between Koreans and Muslims. Muslim fans in Southeast Asia who sometimes may feel alienated from certain aspects of the Korean entertainment industry and culture, such as drinking, can better connect with influencers like Song and other converts.

The Korean entertainment industry offers something to Southeast Asian consumers that the Western entertainment industry does not: modesty. Sex sells in the Western media but culturally clashes with Muslim and non-Muslim Southeast Asian nations. Korean dramas focus less on sex and appear more wholesome to Southeast Asian audiences. The music focuses less on sex, drugs, and alcohol and more on love or just having fun. These aspects make Korean entertainment more palatable for Southeast Asian consumers. In this instance, the cultural proximity of Korea to Southeast Asian nations benefits the Korean entertainment industry marketing (J. H. Park et al. 2019, 137–51). Through these different markets, Korea has been able to wean itself off the Chinese market.

The emphasis on modesty in Korean entertainment contributes significantly to its appeal to Muslim audiences by aligning with cultural sensitivities, emphasizing universal values, and providing a family-friendly and diverse viewing experience. Korean dramas and music generally avoid explicit content such as nudity, explicit scenes, or overly provocative themes. This aligns with many Muslim audiences' cultural and religious values, who may prefer more modest content in line with their ethical and moral

standards. While most Korean dramas may focus on Korean characters, there is an increasing effort to introduce diverse characters and storylines. This may include characters from different ethnic backgrounds. The dramas *Gaus Electronics* and *Squid Game* feature South Asian actors. The inclusion of these actors delighted fans of that region.

The storytelling in Korean entertainment often focuses on universal themes of love, friendship, and personal growth. These themes transcend cultural boundaries, making the content relatable to audiences worldwide. The portrayal of love stories and friendships in Korean dramas tends to be more subtle and wholesome. The absence of explicit scenes allows viewers, including those with conservative values, to enjoy the content without discomfort. This contrasts with some Western media, where explicit content may be more prevalent. Furthermore, Korean entertainment often strongly emphasizes traditional values, such as respect for elders, familial bonds, and communal harmony. These universal themes resonate with audiences in Muslim-majority nations where similar values are highly regarded.

The portrayal of familial harmony and the challenges characters face in maintaining these values contribute to a sense of cultural familiarity. Older audience members also appreciate historical dramas set in periods like Chosŏn, allowing Muslim viewers to explore and appreciate Korean history and culture. In Korean dramas, the depiction of the *hanbok* may draw parallels to the traditional attire worn in some Muslim cultures. The appreciation for cultural clothing, including modest and traditional styles, creates a visual connection that adds to the cultural proximity between Korean entertainment and Muslim audiences. Both Korean and many Muslim cultures emphasize

collectivism and community values. Korean dramas often portray characters who prioritize the well-being of the community or family over individual desires. This emphasis on communal harmony and interconnectedness resonates with the collectivist values present in many Muslim-majority nations. Therefore, younger Muslim audience members can connect well with dramas emphasizing the struggles of main characters who have trouble navigating personal dreams with familial expectations. With all these elements, Korean dramas are made available to and enjoyed by entire Muslim families with Arab, Malay, and English subtitles.

The biggest cultural barriers between the Korean entertainment industry and Muslim audiences, however, are food and drinks. The drinking culture depicted in Korean entertainment, which is often integral to socializing and character dynamics, can clash with the Islamic values of abstaining from alcohol. Alcohol-centric scenes, such as gatherings in soju tents or bars, may not align with the cultural preferences of Muslim audiences. Islam prohibits the consumption of alcohol, and the prevalence of drinking scenes in Korean dramas may make it challenging for some Muslim viewers to engage with the content fully. Korean cuisine features pork, a staple ingredient in many recipes. However, Islam prohibits the consumption of pork, making it a significant cultural difference that can pose challenges for Muslim viewers. Scenes depicting the preparation or consumption of pork-based dishes may be off-putting for some audiences. Some production teams consult with cultural experts or engage in cultural exchange programs to better understand the preferences and sensitivities of diverse audiences. This collaborative approach can contribute to more accurate and culturally respectful portrayals in Korean entertainment. Younger Muslim fans who are more avid consumers

of Korean entertainment are happy to see mentions of anything related to their day-to-day lives as Muslims. For example, if a drama or webtoon with a high-powered CEO character is talking about expanding the company's products overseas and mentions the word "halal," TikTok videos and Instagram reels of the scene will take over the explore pages the following day.

This excitement translates to real life, too, if fans can consume halal Korean products. Due to the reach of the Korean entertainment industry with Muslim audiences, Korean corporations have taken note of the potential growth for their products in these markets and the growing demand for halal Korean products, leading them to capitalize on these opportunities by creating and offering halal products suitable for Muslim consumption. Korean companies are obtaining halal certification for their products, indicating that these items comply with Islamic dietary laws. Certification ensures that the products are free from ingredients prohibited in Islam, most notably pork and alcohol. This certification makes the products acceptable to Muslim consumers and builds trust in the quality and authenticity of the items. Furthermore, some Korean corporations collaborate with halal certification bodies and Islamic organizations to ensure the authenticity and credibility of their halal products. Partnerships with local entities in Muslim-majority nations can facilitate market entry and help companies navigate regulatory requirements and cultural nuances. These companies may also collaborate with Korean Muslim reverts who have become influencers to help promote their products. Companies actively participate in halal expos and events, both domestically and internationally. These platforms provide opportunities to showcase their halal products, connect with distributors, and engage directly with consumers. Participation in such

events helps build brand visibility and establishes a company's commitment to catering to the Muslim market. Many companies have adapted their existing products to meet halal standards. This may involve reformulating recipes, altering ingredients, or establishing separate production lines to prevent cross-contamination with non-halal items. This adaptability allows companies to cater to a broader consumer base without completely overhauling their product offerings. Many companies want to expand beyond food products, including cosmetics, skincare, and other consumer goods. By offering a diverse range of halal products, Korean companies capture a larger share of the Muslim consumer market by meeting more needs and preferences.

Muslim tourists can face challenges when traveling to Korea. Certain cultural practices might be unfamiliar or even challenging for Muslim travelers. For example, the prevalent drinking culture in Korea might be uncomfortable for those who avoid alcohol, and some tourists might misunderstand the cultural norm of bowing. Most locals are not familiar with Islamic customs and practices. This lack of awareness can sometimes result in unintentional misunderstandings or awkward situations. Understanding the importance of cultural exchange, the Korean government also works to facilitate better relationships with Muslim audiences through initiatives to help make Muslim tourists more comfortable during their visit. The Korean Tourism Organization offers information and guides specifically tailored for Muslim tourists. This information can take many forms including brochures, websites, and mobile apps that provide details about halal restaurants, mosques, prayer facilities, and other relevant information to help Muslim tourists navigate the country.

In collaboration with tourism organizations, the Korean government occasionally

organizes special programs and events to promote South Korea as a Muslim-friendly destination. This includes events like “The Halal Restaurant Week Korea” and other initiatives highlighting the availability of halal products and services. The government, in collaboration with relevant authorities, encourages local businesses, including restaurants and food producers, to obtain halal certification and promotes the availability of halal-friendly accommodations, including hotels that offer facilities and services catering to the needs of Muslim guests. This may include prayer rooms, Qibla direction markers, and halal food options within hotel premises. Top hospitals in Seoul that treat international patients will also have Arabic interpreters. Through these iniatives, the South Korea uses soft power as a diplomatic tool to better engage with Muslim nations and tourists creating good will between these nations and itself.

Conclusion

Hallyu is more than just the love of entertainment in the form of music and dramas. It has geopolitical implications, increases economic growth, has a unique fan culture, and has increased South Korea’s presence positively in the global stage. The country’s government has worked extensively to increase both its hard power and soft power hand in hand. By developing both simultaneously, South Korea has increased multiple avenues for diplomatic negotiations and proceedings. South Korea’s entertainment industry is slowly maneuvering away from reliance on China to other nations. South Korea’s entertainment industry has become less reliant on China and more reliant on the US as Netflix shows and K-pop become more popular here creating better relations between the two allies. These incidents show public sentiment, impact trade relations, and can provide insight in which direction governments may move. In recent

years, Southeast Asian and Muslim nations have experienced growth in their consumer markets and Korea has been increasing their presence in there. The cultural proximity between these nations and South Korea is closer and therefore consuming Korean content is more palatable for them.

Non-Western countries have been exporting their culture to neighboring countries through the entertainment industry for quite some time now. Regionally strong countries can share their culture with their neighbors. India's Bollywood has staunch followings in South Asia and the Middle East. Nigeria's Nollywood is getting a stronger following as well. Turkish dramas have a cult following in some South Asian countries. However, regional cultural powers did not have the same star power as Hollywood. The reach has been very restricted, and the economic presence of the non-Western entertainment industries has been minor. The Korean entertainment industry is not at the same level as Hollywood. However, it has surpassed expectations and is now reaching a global audience. While some of this reach is still niche, Korean dramas like *Kingdom* and *Squid Game* are household names, the Korean movie *Parasite* is the first non-English movie to win the Academy Award for Best Picture, BTS holds sold-out stadium concerts, and the demand for Korean skincare and cosmetics has been growing. As a result, Korea has increased its soft power enough to improve its relations with other nations. The Korean government and the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and Tourism have successfully curated a strong entertainment industry and changed Korea's image to be more prestigious.

Much of the scholarship surrounding Hallyu uses an artistic or cultural lens to analyze the phenomenon. Some scholarship investigates the impact of South Korean popular culture in relation to gender studies or diversity studies. Comparisons between

South Korean entertainment and India's Bollywood or Nigeria's Nollywood would also make for interesting case studies. The Korean wave should be studied beyond these perspectives. However, there are deep geopolitical layers weaved in with economic relations in relation to Hallyu that should be delved into more. Particularly, future scholarship should study the economic relations and growth between South Korea and Muslim nations increased by the expansion of South Korea's popular culture. This would add more to current scholarship as there is very research that examines the halal market. Research regarding trade relations between South Korea and Muslim nations would also provide a new lens of how non-Western consumer markets interact with each other and show how non-colonial powers benefit each other economically.

Since the beginning of Hallyu, the entertainment industry has expanded its reach from domestic audiences to regional neighbors. While the Japanese market is available, it is smaller than the Chinese market. The contentious geopolitical situations made it clear that Korea must rely on more than just the Chinese consumer market. The growth of Southeast Asian nations has helped spread interest in Korea. These markets, however, still need to have the consumer power seen in the Chinese markets. In the last five years, Korea has been slowly entering the Western market because of the global popularity of BTS. The thrilling dramas and other K-pop acts also help reach a broader audience. In the near future, the Korean electronics companies that benefit from being associated with Japan will be able to enjoy benefits by being associated with Korea instead.

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