

GUEST EDITORIAL

Creative Dilemmas and New Global Aesthetics: The Korean Wave on Digital Platforms

Sookeung Jung
Institute of Korean Studies, Freie Universität Berlin

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Corresponding author

Dr. Sookeung Jung
Postdoctoral Research Fellow of Korea-Europe Center, Institute of Korean Studies
Freie Universität Berlin
Email: sookeung.jung@fu-berlin.de

Over the past three decades, Korean popular culture—known as Hallyu—has emerged as a formidable contender against Western cultural hegemony in the global entertainment market. The 2020 Academy Award triumph of the film *Parasite* and the worldwide success of *Squid Game* in 2021 marked pivotal turning points, confirming that Korean cultural content is no longer confined to Asian regional audiences but has achieved genuinely global reach. More recently, achievements such as the musical *Maybe Happy Ending*'s sweep of six categories at the 2025 Tony Awards and the tremendous success of Sony Animation's *K-Pop Demon Hunters* demonstrate that K-content has firmly established its position as a global media phenomenon.

This special issue aims to illuminate this sustained phenomenon within the structural context of a new global cultural landscape driven by digital platforms (platform capitalism) and the ways in which cultural difference is consumed as aesthetic value (aesthetic capitalism). The proliferation of K-content is intimately linked to the twenty-first-century digital media environment. Whereas past influxes of East Asian culture into the West reached European audiences through aristocratic intermediaries or intellectual elites, today's K-content differs significantly in that it reaches mass audiences directly through digital platforms. This unmediated access, combined with the explosive speed of digital dissemination, is fundamentally transforming the character and terrain of contemporary global popular culture.

While scholarly research on Hallyu has surged in recent years, most studies have concentrated on consumption studies—that is, examining how diverse audiences receive, interpret, and appropriate Korean cultural products. This consumer-centric approach leaves a critical gap in fully understanding the distinctive appeal and the global competitiveness of K-content. Research on production dynamics—the creative intentions, organizational cultures, studio systems, and content philosophies that shape what gets made—remains insufficient. Foreign observers face particular difficulties in accessing the inner workings of the Korean production environment, and production-side research remains relatively scarce.

This special issue seeks to address these research limitations by exploring the production, translation, reception, and role of fandom in K-content within the structural frameworks of platform capitalism and aesthetic capitalism. We present three primary research questions and offer multifaceted insights into each: First, how are global media platforms reconfiguring the creative principles and business models of K-content, and what new dilemmas do creators and local industries face? Second, what roles do the aesthetic characteristics, translation, and localization of Korean content distributed through global media platforms play in reshaping global sensibilities? Third, how do transnational Hallyu fandoms that transcend racial and national boundaries manifest as emotional attachments within global youth culture, and what sociocultural meanings does their construction of “global Koreanness” hold for discourse and power relations in world popular culture?

The five contributions assembled here offer multifaceted insights into these questions. Konshik Yu analyzes transformations in K-drama production and business models under platform capitalism. Global OTT platforms like Netflix have injected massive capital and enabled flexible formats and pre-production systems that enhance quality. However, Yu identifies a troubling paradox: while production values rise, Korean production companies capture diminishing returns from globally successful content as platforms monopolize intellectual property rights—a dynamic Yu analyzes through the lens of “platform imperialism.” Sustainable growth,

Yu argues, requires strengthening IP ownership, enhancing domestic platform competitiveness, and providing strategic government support.

Sookeung Jung examines through interviews with veteran creators how the Korean studio system reconfigures creative environments. While expanding financial compensation and production opportunities, the system paradoxically shifts creative control from creators to platforms and capital. Global marketability concerns prioritize casting over storytelling, trapping writers in “endless revision cycles” and assigning directors to what they describe as “factory-line labour.” Yet Jung finds creators maintain commitment to conveying “stories of ordinary people” through universal emotions—an ethical core that sustains K-content’s competitive advantage.

Oul Han reframes translation as a “discursive mechanism” rather than unilateral linguistic transfer, applying the theory of Discursive Institutionalism to analyze how professional and fan translators form “meaning clusters” through coordinative and communicative discourse. Case studies from *Parasite*—translating *jjapaguri* as “ram-don” and Seoul National University as “Oxford”—reveal how subtitle translation prioritizes immediate comprehension through “cognitive shortcuts,” with “audience legitimacy” rather than “literal equivalence” serving as the criterion for successful translation in entertainment contexts.

Olga Fedorenko applies bell hooks’ “Eating the Other” framework to examine how K-culture functions as “spice” adding flavour to mainstream culture while being depoliticized and flattened. Fedorenko identifies “tradition” rather than “primitiveness” as the fantasy marking K-culture’s otherness—an imagined stable moral world behind hypermodern aesthetics satisfying nostalgic longings. Despite Korean actors’ active serving of culture for global recognition, Fedorenko argues this strategy repackages cultural influence into culture-lite commodities demanded by aesthetic capitalism, ultimately failing to transform fundamental dynamics of cultural peripheralization.

Irina Lyan explores “fan nationalism” among non-Korean Hallyu fans, categorizing it into “Minority Solidarity” (leveraging Korea’s underdog status for global activism around human rights and social justice) and “Role Model” (positioning Korea as aspirational through language learning and educational pursuits). Lyan demonstrates how “waving the Korean flag” helps fans manage the stigma associated with supposedly immature fandom while acquiring social capital and legitimacy, thus enabling transformation into imagined citizens of transnational communities.

These contributions converge on several insights. Hallyu unfolds within platform capitalism and aesthetic capitalism structures that simultaneously enable and constrain cultural production. Its success derives from creators’ commitment to universal empathy and “wholesomeness,” a sensibility forged through Korea’s difficult twentieth-century history, though global market logic threatens to reduce these values to depoliticized aesthetic surfaces. The unmediated digital access distinguishing Hallyu from historical precedents creates recursive feedback loops between production and reception, while simultaneously concentrating power in platform architectures that extract value from creators.

Methodologically, this issue extends bell hooks’ critical analysis to twenty-first-century aesthetic capitalism; applies Discursive Institutionalism to translation studies; and critiques “methodological nationalism” in fandom research. These approaches illuminate how peripheral cultures navigate global cultural hierarchies

in platform-dominated environments.

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