Waving a Korean Flag: Between Hallyu, Fandom, and Nationalism

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Abstract

This paper suggests a rethinking of the empirical focus of Hallyu fandom studies on a geographical logic of "Hallyu in place X." Rather than understanding non-Korean Hallyu fans as representatives of their respective nations, I ask: "How do fans themselves use nation and nationalism to rationalize their motivations and identification routes?" To answer this question, I look at the configuration between Hallyu, fandom, and nationalism, in what I call *fan nationalism*—that is, when fans choose to wave a Korean flag to act as ambassadors, patriots, or political activists for the sake of their local communities, global issues, or even Korea itself. Akin to other long-distance nationalisms, fans negotiate their social position vis-à-vis their fandom, being emotionally invested in building their social capital and constructing transnational imagined communities beyond their existing geographical and national belongings. Such attempts at theorizing fan nationalism strive to shed brighter light on fans' engagement and fascination with Korea's underdog status in the world.

Keywords: Hallyu fandom, fan nationalism, long-distance nationalism, social capital, transnational fandom

1. Introduction

When the regional success of Korean popular culture, known as the Korean Wave or Hallyu, began in Asia in the late 1990s, many predicted that it would end as suddenly as it began, considering it simply another fading fad. Yet the 2000s brought with them the success of K-pop, fueled during the so-called Hallyu 2.0 to reach any part of the world blessed with Internet connection (Jin 2012; Lee and Nornes 2015). Since the 2010s, the third Korean Wave has made its global entrance on all major cultural world stages. The continuously rising waves of Korean cultural triumph require further academic attention regarding the major reasons for their longevity and transformation: Hallyu fans.

The globalization of Hallyu has rendered the previous explanation of cultural proximity and the focus on the geographical logic of "Hallyu in place X" insufficient at best, as its lack of global perspective on what is considered a global phenomenon is rather striking. Instead, almost every study on Hallyu fans begins with the standard regional or national list of Hallyu successes in Asia, Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East, while citing the respective studies that focus on specific communities and their distinct characteristics. Constrained by methodological nationalism (Lie 2016), studies of Hallyu fandom tended to treat fans' national origins as a post-hoc explanation of fannish motivations based on their geographical and national belongings and their similarity to Korea or Asia.

To challenge the "Hallyu in place X" tendency, I join Chin and Morimoto's (2013) call "for a broad(er) model of transcultural fandom studies that, in shifting focus to the affective affinities that spark fan interest in transcultural fan objects, is intended as a corrective to nation-centered analyses of border-crossing fandoms" (p. 92). More specifically, I focus on one of the most evident examples of geographical logic—that is, cultural proximity among Asian (including diasporic) fans. Joseph Straubhaar's (1991) cultural proximity thesis ignores the global rise of Korean popular culture while homogenizing the highly diverse Asian region as being united by Confucianism and a shared history (see, for example, Yoo et al. 2014; and Han et al. 2022). Further, such a post-hoc explanation raises the question of what "Asia" is and whether "Asian culture" can break through regional borders and hierarchies to become fully global (Choi and Maliangkay 2014).

While the Asian example might seem persuasive, other examples of fans who suddenly realize how Korea is similar to their respective nations and local cultural values are numerous. For instance, Qatari fans state that "Decency is one shared cultural value between Korean and Arab cultures" (Malik 2019, 5741). A Pakistani fan argues that "Their culture [Korean] is similar to mine, the way they treat other people" (Cicchelli et al. 2023, 29). Israeli fans share a common joke that "they probably have been Korean in a previous life," or they feel "half-Korean" (Lyan 2024). Though we can argue about the global appeal of Korea as something that can provide any person with a déjà vu moment of "I have seen it at home," it most likely proves the post-hoc nature of such a sense of familiarity brought by fans as one more means of connecting with their fandom.

Previous studies have effectively demonstrated the futility of the cultural proximity thesis by exposing how Hallyu fans have found multiple and sometimes surprising routes of identification with their fandom—such as gender, social status, age, taste, and more—to make it their own, regardless of where they are from. Based

on his study of Hallyu in Latin America, Han (2017) suggests employing the notion of "affective affinity," which brought local fans to connect with Korean popular culture despite sizable cultural and geographical distance. To explain the global popularity of Korean popular culture, Jin (2023) further suggests replacing the cultural proximity thesis with the concept of transnational proximity, which unites especially young fans under the universal values of equality and justice.

Choi (2014) also argues that there are several explanations beyond the proximity thesis. A previous appreciation of Japanese pop might act as a common "bridge" to Hallyu fandom. Here, the proximity between fandoms, rather than between nations, has become a main source of attraction. Schulze (2013) goes so far as to dismiss national belonging of fans, studying an international online forum of K-drama fans with English as its lingua franca. Besides downplaying geographical logic, she found that fans are reluctant to actually characterize anything they see in drama as distinctly Korean, seeing it instead as part of a fictional K-dramaland. Fans define themselves using multiple alternative identities beyond the narrow focus on national ones, or as Wang (2022) eloquently puts it, "the object of fandom is more like a mirror, or extension of selves, and thus, fandom enables fans to find themselves, negotiate their self-identity and build up self-narrative."

Rather than understanding motivations of Hallyu fans in Asia and beyond based on their passport information, I suggest that we examine how fans themselves use nation and nationalism to rationalize their motivations and identification routes. More specifically, I focus on Hallyu fans who have chosen to relate to fandom through what I have called elsewhere *fan nationalism*—identification with and promotion of the national origins of one's fandom (Lyan 2019). This paper strives to broaden the initial definition by examining all possible configurations between Hallyu, fandom, and nationalism, I which fans make a choice to wave a Korean flag by acting as ambassadors, patriots, or political activists for the sake of their local communities, global issues, and even Korea itself.

I see fan nationalism as just one identification choice, whereas the connection between the two is far from obvious. Fannish affinities may or may not be extended toward a specific nation or political issue beyond the immediate fandom commodities, such as excessive consumption of online content, concerts, albums, merchandise, fan meetings, and more. Fans of manga and anime do not necessarily have a better understanding of Japanese society and culture (Iwabuchi 2010). Harry Potter fans do not have to become Anglophiles, and most Bollywood fans do not wish to obtain a college degree in Indian Studies (Lyan 2019). Focusing on the national identities of fans and the national origins of their fandom thus runs the risk of essentializing and fixing national cultures as homogeneous entities and of otherizing fans and their fandom choices (Hills 2002). Instead—and similar to other long-distance nationalisms—fans negotiate their own identity vis-à-vis their fandom, being emotionally invested in constructing symbolic affinities and intimacies regardless of their existing geographical and cultural realities.

Moreover, some fans consciously create a partition between their fandom and its national origins to avoid criticism at home. This is especially evident among fans from Asia, who are supposedly drawn to Korean popular culture due to cultural proximity. For example, Japanese fans have been heavily criticized for their fandom choice, which has been seen as a national betrayal (Ahn and Yoon 2020). Some Hallyu fans, including diasporic Koreans in Japan, have feared that the anti-Hallyu movement in Japan, that promoted the link between Korean popular culture and

the Korean nation, would worsen their already-troubled position within Japanese society (Iwabuchi 2008; Baudinette 2021). Chinese Hallyu fans are also under fire in their local communities, as they are seen as potential traitors to their own state and are even forced to declare their loyalty by dissociating themselves from Korea and Hallyu (Pease 2009; Gong 2022; Wang 2022).

Based on a literature review of Hallyu fandom and nationalism, case studies of fan nationalism around the world, and my own empirical research on Israeli Hallyu fans, I argue that waving a Korean flag allows fans to elevate their social status. More specifically, by engaging with nation and nationalism in order to make the world a better place on the wings of one's fandom, fans manage their common stigma of an infantile, time-consuming, and over-consumerist passion (Lyan and Otmazgin 2025). To put it differently, waving a Korean flag serves as a symbolic means for fans to gain legitimacy.

I found that fan nationalism can be centered on two foci, and the endless combinations and contradictions between them, such as a global focus on political activism and minority solidarity, and the national focus on Korea as a role model. Under the global focus, fans use Hallyu and its national origins to represent minority struggles around the world—including human and women's rights, democracy, anti-racism, environmental issues, and more—in order to better their own nations and local communities or the world at large. To achieve a better future, these fans use *minority solidarity* with Hallyu and Korea's underdog status (Cicchelli et al. 2023) to position themselves as politically engaged fan activists. These Hallyu fans are quite similar to other politically active fans everywhere in their list of worth-struggling-for global issues.

Under the national focus, fans use Hallyu and its national origins as a tool of self-empowerment to promote both themselves and the Korean nation, which they envision as a *role model*. While similar to minority solidarity, fan ambassadors raise a Korean flag to show pride in Korea as a fascinating role model to follow and to learn about, along with its popular culture. These fans will usually educate themselves and others about Korea by learning the language, enrolling in a Korean Studies degree program, traveling to Korea, and even going so far as to identify themselves as Korean-like and marrying a Korean (Lyan 2024). They are fans of both Korean popular culture and its national origins. While for both groups of fans the Korean nation has become a badge of honor, their global versus national foci and the degree of involvement in political issues set them apart.

In what follows, I will examine global and national foci and discuss them as different routes to "domesticate" fandom, to elevate fans' social status, and to make both Hallyu and Korea part of their own identity and everyday life.

2. Minority Solidarity: Korea and Fan Activism

The combination of consumerism and materialism with macro-political issues and the tensions between them is nothing new. Social business, for instance, which is oriented toward both commercial and social goals, might experience contradictory logics (Smith, Gonin, and Besharov 2013). South Korean advertising is sometimes called "the flower of capitalism," stressing its goal and duty to promote public good in addition to commercial success (Fedorenko 2022). Political consumerism is characterized by buying or boycotting specific products, businesses, or services because of their involvement in political, social, or ethical issues (Wang 2022).

Korean popular culture also strives to combine economic gain with advocacy of social issues—for example, when K-pop idols address and support youths dealing with mental health issues (Trzcińska 2022).

In recent years, we have experienced a surge in the politicization of fandom, combining consumption with social action in what has become known as fan activism. By engaging in politics, fans redefine themselves as fighters for social justice and new superheroes within and beyond their fictional worlds. Probably the most famous example of political activism among the united community of international fans is that of the Harry Potter Alliance (2005–2024), a nonprofit organization that later expanded into Fandom Forward (to include all members of fandoms in 30 countries) in order to encourage young fans around the globe to promote a broad range of human rights and social justice issues.[1] By moving from the fictional world to the real one, the association has focused on educating global youth to become civically engaged and politically active through collective action. Such a powerful network might allow for what Andrew Slack, the founder of the Harry Potter Alliance, calls "a cultural acupuncture" (Jenkins 2015).

Scholars of fan activism identify three core elements: shared media experiences, a sense of community, and the desire to help (Kligler-Vilenchik, McVeigh-Schultz, Weitbrecht, and Tokuhama 2012). Such empowerment of a fannish community might, in turn, create an alternative to the national one. Hallyu fan activists might become what Jenkins calls a "'pop cosmopolitan'—a fan whose embrace of and investment in global popular culture provides her with the beginnings of a global perspective and 'an escape route out of the parochialism of her local community'" (Jenkins 2004, 114).

Cosmopolitanism and nationalism might go hand in hand, as seen when fan activists utilize Hallyu and its humble national origins as an inspiration and reference point for other not-yet-there minority struggles. Such a demonstration of political activism, in combination with waving a Korean flag, further promotes the globalization of Hallyu as a symbolic tool for minority solidarity. With the third Korean Wave, which is characterized by politicization and globalization, we can witness a shift toward world problems, such as anti-racism campaigns, environmental issues, political strikes against the right, and more.

Despite its global orientation, fan activism can also be observed in domestic issues both inside and outside Korea. For example, donations of dreame (that is, "dream rice") to idols or social causes that are important to them are probably the most famous example of inward fan activism, wherein both domestic and international fans support their idols and contribute to Korean society. In this popular fannish practice, fans send multiple rice sacks instead of flowers as a type of charity in the names of idols. Similar to a mini-United Nations, different countries are represented by rice donations before concerts (Jung 2012; Oh 2018, 154). Chinese BTS fans, for example, were heavily criticized for forgetting their own nation during the celebration of a BTS member's birthday event in 2020, when they had cooperated with the government of Gyeonggi-do, a South Korean province, to cultivate rice there and then donate it to local charities (Wang 2022).

Korean and overseas fans' spontaneous mobilization toward social justice during the *JYJ* vs. *SM Entertainment* legal dispute (2009–2014) regarding so-called "contract slavery" provides another telling illustration of fan activism aimed at the ills of Korean society. Three members of the five-member band TVXQ filed a lawsuit against their former employer, SM Entertainment, for what they described as

1 Fandom Forward official website: https://fandomforward.org/

disadvantageous and unfair 13-year contracts. The members also established their own band, JYJ, in 2010, causing division in the TVXQ fandom base. Those original fans who left the fandom established *JYJ Republic*, which in turn enabled them, acting as politically engaged global citizens, to initiate a publicity campaign drawing attention to labor rights issues and to the collective power of fans to challenge Korea's most powerful K-pop agency. JYJ fans have utilized their fandom networks to make Korea and the world a better place for their idols and for themselves, while distancing themselves from fans who remained loyal to what was left of the TVXQ band. By creating pressure from both within and outside Korean borders, this fight counterbalanced the then-common nationalistic narrative in the Korean media of selfish and ungrateful idols who betrayed their agency (Lee 2015).

Probably the most widely known example of fan activism in Korea is fans' involvement in the biggest scandal in the K-pop industry, known as the Burning Sun Scandal (2018–2019). Fans were once again divided in their loyalty to K-pop idols and other celebrities, including Seungri (from the mega-popular band BigBang and one of the owners of the infamous nightclub Burning Sun), who were accused of rape, spy-cam crimes, sexual bribery, drugging, and more. This scandal divided fans over their fannish loyalty and feminist issues, which have become globalized through the MeToo Movement (Saeji 2019a).

Fans' criticism directed at celebrities or fans who continued to protect their idols has once again become a political choice to gain social capital. Both Korean and international fans feel pressure to declare their political stance toward their choice, diverting fandom away from simple consumption. The most recent employment of K-pop fandom practices, such as the use of light sticks during protests against former president Yoon Suk Yeol, further demonstrates the politicization of Hallyu fans (*The Conversation* 2024). Solidarity with Korean minorities, expressed through criticism toward an insufficiently global Korean society, which lags behind other developed nations in terms of human, labor, women's, and minorities' rights, has become another distinctive characteristic of today's Hallyu fandom.

Fan activism can also be aimed at bettering international fans' local communities by utilizing the underdog status of Korean popular culture and its national origins. This might explain the popularity of K-pop, particularly BTS ARMY's collective action as a mechanism of resistance and political activism in efforts such as raising $1 million in just 24 hours for the #BlackLivesMatter campaign in 2020 to match BTS's donation. Fan activists also crowded a police scanner app used for identifying protesters with fancams and K-pop videos and "spammed" the counterhashtags #WhiteLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter with fancams and photos of K-pop artists (*Time* 2020). The blocking of Donald Trump's election campaign event in Tulsa in 2020 by booking tickets with zero attendance went viral (*New York Times* 2020), further enhancing Hallyu fan activists' political power.

The fight against white supremacy, including anti-Asian racism and anti-Asian hate, especially during COVID-19 (Kanozia and Ganghariya 2021), and the reawakening of the yellow peril panic further foregrounded Hallyu and its Korean and/or Asian origins, making the Hallyu fandom base another Korean/Asian representative. Regardless of their own ethnicity, nationality, and geographical location, Hallyu fan activists decided to wave a Korean flag to participate in the global struggles of Asian minorities or minorities at large. For example, the environmental activist group Kpop4planet was established in 2021 to promote climate justice (Leksmono and Maharani 2022) while emphasizing the empowerment

of marginalized communities as one of its goals: "Kpop4planet stands in solidarity with communities frequently excluded from climate discussions, including youth, indigenous communities, women, the Global South, and LBGTQ communities."[2]

While less famous than their global or American counterparts, K-pop fan activists have fought against state oppression in Chile in 2019 (*Korea Herald* 2021) and the abuse of women and sexual minorities in Poland (Trzcińska 2020); promoted a liberal candidate in the 2022 Philippine elections (*Rappler* 2022); engaged in political consumerism in China despite the unofficial post-THAAD ban on Hallyu and its idols; and even taken sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the recent call to boycott Israeli Hallyu fans or Israeli supporters (Hervitz, Siman Tov, and Choukroun 2023; *Korea Times* 2024; *Korea JoongAng Daily* 2024).

BTS's most powerful fandom base, known as ARMY, has become prominent in environmental battles, including tree-planting activities in the Philippines in 2021 (*Manila Bulletin* 2021) and the launching of #ARMYHelpThePlanet in 2019 to save the Amazon rainforest from devastating wildfires (Dean 2019). ARMY, in general, is known for protecting BTS and aligning with its universal goals, such as battling racism and supporting BTS's UNICEF international campaign against violence toward children and teens (Jin 2021; McLaren and Jin 2020). This, in turn, provides a basis for transnational proximity (Jin 2023) based on shared values, especially, among global youth.

Finally, fan activists' minority solidarity with Hallyu and its national origins can be found to originate in their own belonging to ethnic, religious, and social minorities. For instance, the focus on Blackness and Asianness, especially within visual minorities among American K-pop fans, has become an integral part of minority solidarity and success despite humble or unfortunate beginnings (Kim 2021). Chilean Hallyu fans view Korean popular culture as an alternative and an "antidote" to the mainstream West (Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021, 92). Brazilian fans appreciate Hallyu and its nation as an exemplary case of modernity and development from which to learn (Regatieri 2017). For Turkish Germans, Hallyu fandom has become a symbol of the struggle of ethnic minorities against the dominant racial order (Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021, 116). For Hallyu fans in Paris, fandom has become a tool for confronting social exclusion; in Philadelphia, for fighting racism; and in Manchester, for dealing with xenophobia (Cicchelli et al. 2023).

To state it differently, rather than fans' belonging to a specific place, it seems that their social position vis-à-vis minority status defines their affection for Hallyu and the choice to raise a Korean flag. Hallyu fan activists, especially among minorities, have become fighters, effectively representing minority struggles around the globe. The politicization of fandom has become another unintended consequence of Hallyu's globalization. Akin to other youth subcultures, fan activists experience minority solidarity by engaging in both macro- and micro-politics, transforming themselves from fans of a marginalized fandom to protectors of the world's marginalized voices.

Though highly similar to that of fans of anything who choose to become politically active, Hallyu fan activism utilizes Korea's rags-to-riches Cinderella story and associates it with disadvantaged groups' struggles, while lending hope for a better future. Fans already belong to a marginalized group, one mostly comprised of young people with little, if any, political power. Though Korea's underdog narrative has served to empower Hallyu fan activists by attracting local and global media attention to their political causes, it also perpetuates fans' marginalization.

2 Kpop4planet official website: https://www.kpop4planet.com/about

3. Role Model: Korea and Fandom Nationalism

My initial interest in Hallyu-inspired fan nationalism was born after I co-organized several Korea-related events, including Korea Day, Korea Week, and Korea Month. I saw how Hallyu fans, usually led by the Korean diaspora and Korean government to celebrate traditional culture and to educate younger generations about the homeland, joined or even replaced ethnic Koreans in promoting Korea abroad. As a result, traditional culture has been complemented or replaced by popular culture, redefining what "Korea" means. Similarly, the organization of the Korea Festival in Frankfurt has become a negotiation process among fan students, the local diasporic community, and Korean government representatives. While the latter two groups preferred a Han-style traditional celebration with a focus on the serious national ethos, fans chose to focus on the joys of contemporary pop culture (Elfving-Hwang 2013).

Such a shift from diasporic Koreans to Hallyu fans, from inward to outward orientation, and from traditional culture to popular culture raises endless questions of authenticity, representation, and imagining of a nation. More specifically, it requires an understanding of fans' waving of a Korean flag when, along with the rise of Hallyu, we can witness unprecedented attraction, affection, and appreciation for Korea by non-Koreans. Fandom for Korea—or Koreaphilia—has become a social fact of the 21st century, another unintended consequence of Hallyu that was unimaginable a few decades ago.

This reminds one of what Liu (2019) calls *fandom nationalism* to describe how nationalists are mobilized to promote their nation in a way similar to fans who promote their fandom under the slogan "Love your nation the way you love an idol" (see also Jenkins and Zhou 2025; Wang and Huang 2026). When fans of Korean popular culture combine their passion with a fandom of the Korean nation, they make Korea their own as an alternative way to overcome cultural, geographical, and geopolitical distances between their passport belonging and an imagined one. Non-Korean fans mostly experience "Korea" through TV dramas and K-pop, to the extent that fandom itself becomes an imaginary journey that serves as a means to connect fans' own identity with "Hallyu Land" (Lyan and Levkowitz 2015a). Although direct experience with Korea and Koreans is limited by geographical distance, fans (re)create "Koreanness" at home as their own.

Hallyu fans and their emotional identification beyond popular culture with the Korean nation, its people, and Made-in-Korea products have become another integral force driving the Korean cultural renaissance. Hallyu fans might identify themselves with Korea by becoming Korean-like or even taking on the role of Korean ambassadors. Such fans prefer what they consider to be a Korean lifestyle and appearance, choose Korean Studies for a degree or non-degree education, seek a career path as close to Korea as possible, promote Korea in their local communities, and more.

For instance, some fans become cultural entrepreneurs who educate local audiences about Korea. This explains the phenomenon of the growing number of "Hallyu students" in Korean Studies programs around the world (Lyan 2019), as well as the rising popularity of Korean-language education, against the background of a general decline in language education around the world (*BBC* 2018). While some fans consume Korean Studies strictly for enjoyment, others feel an obligation

to become Korea experts, since through their engagement with Hallyu fandom, they are always questioned about Korea.

As an extension of their fan labor, such fans often educate local audiences both online and offline about Korea. They become Korea's unofficial ambassadors abroad by promoting national images while translating them for local tastes. The lack of Hallyu-related products, especially in non-Asian markets, has made fans more creative in connecting with their fandom through brokering and translation—such as creating fansubs, teaching Korean, cooking Korean food, selling Korean goods, opening K-pop schools, and organizing local Korean festivals or tourism packages. The general ignorance of things Korean, especially beyond the Asian region, enables fans to fill a niche and to provide extra hands to the Korean government (Lyan 2019; Otmazgin and Lyan 2014, 2018; Saeji 2020).

The link between Hallyu and Korea—even referring to Korean popular culture and Korea interchangeably—has been constructed via a gradual learning process. It ranges from total unfamiliarity with the Korean origins of Hallyu to curiosity and exploration. According to one of the Hallyu students, "For some it ends with a Google search and even self-learning of [the] Korean language, while for others it starts with Korean studies" (Lyan 2019, 3773).

I also found that fans use Korea festivals and other public events that promote Korea and make it more popular and recognizable as performance stages for fans to manage their marginalized status. Driven by the emotions of shame, love, passion, loneliness, and pride in their fandom, fans strive to achieve both external and internal recognition by struggling for positive representation of Korean popular culture, Korean Studies, and Korea at large, while managing their stigma. Waving a Korean flag here provides an opportunity for stigma management among fan students mobilized both by the macro mission to promote a positive image of Korea in their home societies and by the micro motivation to repair their own, often stigmatized, self-image as female fans of Korean popular culture and students of Korean Studies (Lyan 2019).

Such fans strategically unite Korean popular culture as a metonymic representation of the whole country and as a gateway to learning about and appreciating Korea. Their local cultivation of distant fandom, including cover dance performance and participation in cultural festivals, brings a redefinition of original content, self-celebration, and personal fulfillment (Choi 2014). For fans, participation in Korea Day has become a measure of their fandom, driven by an emotional attachment to both Korea and Hallyu and a sense of national, as well as fandom-wide, shame and pride. They, too, gain social capital by closely associating themselves with Korea and Koreans as a role model to follow and as a minority to support in their local societies.

Korean Hallyu fans as well might identify with their nation by becoming cultural brokers translating—both literally and culturally—Korean pop culture products, supporting the stars locally, and collaborating on fannish initiatives around the world. Besides collaboration, Korean Hallyu fans are also involved in competition with fans abroad. To gain legitimacy and improve their social capital, Korean fans have distanced themselves from international ones, presenting themselves as a more authentic, and therefore more loyal and reliable, fandom base (Berbiguier and Cho 2017; Berbiguier 2024).

By raising a Korean flag, fans forward their Korean identity and knowledge of the language and culture while connecting their fandom to the emotions of

pride in their own nation. For instance, in 2019, to show their patriotism, Korean K-pop fans initiated a media campaign to cancel a K-pop concert in Japan due to a trade dispute between the two countries (Kang 2023). Diasporic Koreans have also participated in Hallyu promotion by collaborating with or competing against non-Korean fans, while promoting their own social capital in the local societies as Korean experts (Yoon 2022).

The geographical and national belonging of fans can have an impact on post-hoc social construction of closeness between fans of Hallyu and Korea. Similar to other places where fans draw parallels between Korea and their own nations, Israeli Hallyu fans underline the similarities between the two countries that, despite unfavorable conditions (such as a lack of natural resources and continuing conflict), have become economic miracles. Yet Israeli fans also participate in constructing geopolitical hierarchies when they are fascinated by non-Western success, while positioning themselves in a superior position as the West vis-à-vis the East, at least, the imagined one (Lyan and Levkowitz 2015b). Fans from less-developed economies, on the other hand, will often reverse such a hierarchy, placing Korea in the position of a role model—as seen, for example, in the case of Brazilian fans, who nourish a "Korean dream" of economic and cultural development for their own nation (Regatieri 2017).

Raising a Korean flag by non-Koreans has its critics, who use the word Koreaboo, a term used to describe extreme Hallyu fans who "are singled out for their fetish of liking, buying, and promoting all things Korean" (Yoon 2019b). These fans, who often fantasize about being or becoming Korean by mimicking what they consider to be Korean looks and behaviors, are usually criticized for appropriating cultural Others and breaking monoracial taboos. Similar to and probably derived from "Weeaboo"—a term describing extreme White fandom of Japanese anime and manga—among the majority of Hallyu fans, the term Koreaboo is pushed to the margins of Hallyu fandom, aiming especially at criticizing White fans whose racial difference and distance from Koreans are highly visible (Lyan 2024). For instance, Yoon's study of White Canadian K-pop fans reveals that the highly visual racial differences between Western fans and their non-Western fandom fuel a stronger emotional reaction of ridicule from Hallyu fans and non-fans alike (Yoon 2019a).

The most representative such case is that of Oli London, a White British man in his thirties who underwent multiple plastic surgeries to become a look-alike of the Korean mega-popular band BTS's singer Jimin, and even released a song and a YouTube video titled "Koreaboo" (London 2021a). Despite its humorous message, the video mostly enraged both K-pop fans and the non-fan community. London's recent declaration of himself as "transracial" and his call for racial freedom of choice on Twitter further challenged the social construction of race as a biological, and therefore unchangeable, condition (London 2021b).

Yet the majority of Hallyu fans who see in Korea and Koreans an alternative self usually use jokes or fantasies to unite Hallyu and its national origins as a milder version of Koreaboo-ness (Lyan 2024). This allows them to gain more social capital as Korea experts while avoiding criticism for cultural appreciation. As the phenomenon of Koreaboo-ness demonstrates, Hallyu fans might have other goals in mind, whether in line with or in contrast to improving Korea's image abroad, as envisioned by Korean officials who deal with cultural diplomacy and see fans as free or cheap labor for promoting Korea abroad.

For instance, some fans see it as a tool of their own community creation, self-

empowerment, and stigma-management, while gaining social capital to become Korea experts who might have their own vision of what Korea is or should be (Lyan 2019). Others view it as a business opportunity to combine business and pleasure and become another adjacent Hallyu industry (Saeji 2020; Lyan and Otmazgin 2025). The majority are critical of the dark side of the Korean cultural industries, usually related to abuse of women and labor rights, a high suicide rate, excessive drinking and violence, and problematic gender representation, including the repetitive Cinderella-like plots of Korean TV dramas (Schulze 2013). While their criticism will not necessarily make them fan activists battling against the ills of Korean society, it definitely does not make them an ideal type of national ambassador, either.

Fannish participation in Korea's promotion abroad is thus often perceived as partial, problematic, and not sufficiently authentic, compared to the "real" Koreans or local diasporic communities. Such criticism is common in other long-distance nationalisms, including diasporic nationalism, in which diasporic individuals seem less authentic when waving the homeland's flags due to cultural, geographical, and other distances between it and their actual homes (Lie 2001).

The participation of overseas Hallyu fans and diasporic Koreans knowledgeable about the Korean language and culture in Korean TV variety shows provides another example of criticism of being same, same, but not quite (Saeji 2019b). Their accents, mistakes, and often visible physical differences weaken their right to wave a Korean flag, even if, in some cases, they are more knowledgeable about Korea or more passionate about promoting it abroad than Koreans themselves (Oh 2023). This, in turn, once again brings us back to the question: Why would non-Korean Hallyu fans wave Korea's flag in addition to, or instead of, their own?

4. Whither Hallyu and Waving a Korean Flag?

As this paper demonstrates, the relationship between Hallyu, fandom, and nationalism might follow multiple trajectories, sometimes bringing quite unexpected consequences or criticisms. First and foremost, they elevate the status of the fan from the stigmatized image of an overdedicated consumer to that of political activist, educator, or cultural ambassador. Waving a Korean flag becomes another symbolic resource for managing fans' own identity by diversifying the routes through which they connect with their fandom and, by extension, with themselves. By expanding Jenkins's (2004) definition of the cosmopolitan fan as someone who constantly translates fannish and local contexts, I understand fan nationalism as a flight toward imagined communities of fandom, its national homelands, as well as global issues, freeing fans from their local realities. Such theorizing attempts strive, in turn, to shed brighter light on fans waving a Korean flag to promote themselves along with their goals and beliefs, choosing who they want to be beyond their passport information.

Under the global focus, fans also promote globalization of Korean popular culture through the politicization of Hallyu fandom while emphasizing Korea's outstanding success despite its peripheral origins. Such an underdog narrative lends hope and inspiration to minorities around the globe to succeed in the future, following Korea's economic miracle and cultural rise. This, in turn, allows Hallyu fans to gain social capital and come together as an imagined cosmopolitan community for the sake of marginalized minorities elsewhere. Symbolically, they join a transnational

community of fans of anything who extend their fandom toward the political goal of making the world a better place.

Under the national focus, fans also are emotionally invested in constructing affinities and intimacies with their fandom, its nation, and their local communities. Fans who extend their fandom from popular culture to its national origins identify with Korea, Koreans, and Korean-made products to domesticate their fandom beyond their national belongings toward imagined ones. To elevate their social status and empower themselves, they also use Korea's underdog narrative as an aspirational story, consolatory tale, or educational lesson. Symbolically, they join a transnational community of fans of Korea who extend their pop culture fandom toward a fandom of the nation.

By examining fan nationalism, we can better understand fans' choice to relate to Korea as a mirror through which to reimagine themselves. Rather than divorcing Hallyu from its national origins, these fans use Korea as a symbolic resource to tell their own stories and to envision their own beliefs. This, in turn, transcends their national boundaries, transforming them into globally engaged world citizens, or a Korea-united community of Hallyu fans.

Unlike the cultural proximity thesis, with its overemphasis on fans' national origins and their implied similarity to Korean culture, Hallyu fans' bottom-up identification with Korea unveils transnational fandom in action. Though identification with the underdog might reproduce the marginality of Hallyu fans and fandom, it can also empower fans to promote self-love, self-worth, and self-aspiration to become better citizens of newly imagined communities. Paradoxically, or perhaps not, fans' identification with Korea makes Hallyu more global.

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