

Hallyu Beyond the Age of American Cultural Imperialism: Counter Cultural Flows and Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

The Korean Wave (Hallyu) or cultural industries of South Korea continue to make ripples in the media, crossing regional boundaries and heading West. The nature and reception, as well as its history, have been documented meticulously by scholars and fans alike, making the phenomenon a much-researched subject in the fields of communication, social sciences, and area studies. Critics had often foretold the short-lived nature of the wave, and the industries had undergone ups and downs since its inception and popularity from the late 1990's. However, the current scenario provides an upward trend in the reception of these cultural products, with an ever-increasing audience from different parts of the world. This leads to two drastically opposing views- positive and negative. The optimistic outlook paints this popularity as the propagator in the creation of an Asian identity, the Asianisation of cultural production, distribution and consumption leading to greater interaction among neighbouring countries. The other outlook comes from several countries who are the main recipients of the cultural products from South Korea, depicting it as a form of cultural imperialism and media domination. This paper addresses the latter, determining the nature of the Korean Wave and see if it is a form of cultural imperialism.

The main aim of this paper is to determine if there is truth to the accusations against the Korean wave, i.e. whether it is imperialistic in nature. However, since the term cultural imperialism is of western origin, stemming from a critical assessment of American domination of worldwide communications, especially at the end of the second world war, a follow-up question has been formulated, taking this background into consideration. This line of questioning will try to determine what is the role of the Korean cultural Industry in the current international arena that continues to be dominated by American media.

Keywords: Hallyu, cultural imperialism, cultural industry, cultural diplomacy, counter-cultural flows

1. Introduction

There has been a plethora of literature written on the subject of Hallyu, ranging from transnationalism, cultural diplomacy, soft power strategy, etc. However, little of the literature has problematized the imperialistic nature of it, or even the milder negative connotations, such as cultural invasion and media domination. These accusations have instead been sporadically reported in the news media, both in Korea and neighbouring countries, prompting changes in strategies from the South Korean government in its cultural industries strategies.

A few papers have mentioned the Korean cultural industry as cultural imperialism. However, the common theme in these pieces of literature is that the accusations of cultural imperialism have been noted but not

thoroughly examined for their reasons or truthfulness. Apart from 'A Study of K-pop Reception in Vietnam' by Duong, there has been no attempt to investigate whether Hallyu is actually cultural imperialism or not. There has also been no discussion on the implications of cultural imperialism, and, at the time of writing this paper, no literature has focused on comparing American and Korean cultural industries directly. Therefore, this paper aims to provide a deeper look into these negative perceptions and fill some of the research gaps in this particular area.

1.1 Theoretical Underpinnings

The first course of action to answer the questions posited above is to look into what is meant by 'Cultural Imperialism.' Cultural imperialism was first brought into debate on the subject of communications during the 1970s, to explain the nature of the media. The situation at the time involved a top-down transmission system, from a dominant country to the periphery. However, the term is also used in debates of unequal relations in international relations, history, and sports. The term first requires an understanding of the conjoined words, what is 'Culture' or 'Cultural' and what is 'Imperialism'.

Culture can be defined in three ways:

- A general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development, e.g., great philosophers, great artists, great poets.
- A particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, or a group, i.e., the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society, e.g., literacy, holidays, sport, religious festivals.
- The works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity, i.e., the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively, e.g., poetry, novels, art (Williams, 1983).

Imperialism can be defined as:

- The policy of expansion of control or authority exercised in foreign entities as a means of obtaining and/or maintaining an empire.
- State policy, practice, or advocacy of extending power and dominion, especially by direct territorial acquisition or by gaining political and economic control of other areas (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Therefore, cultural imperialism can be understood as the domination of one culture by another. Cultural imperialism was first brought into the communications debate by Herbert Schiller in his book 'Communication and Cultural Domination':

"The concept of cultural imperialism today [1975] best describes the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system. The public media are the foremost example of operating enterprises that are used in the penetrative process. For penetration on a significant scale, the media themselves must be captured by the dominating/penetrating power. This occurs largely through the commercialization of broadcasting." (Schiller, 1976)

From the explanation above, it can be inferred that domination is the keyword. This theory entered public debate during the 1970s but developed from a long chain of historical events, like the European colonisation of other countries, which allowed the dominating countries to enforce their beliefs, ideals, and values onto the dominated countries. This can be seen in the dissemination of language, religion, lifestyle, and clothing choices in the colonised countries. However, after the Second World War, the need to promote authority and ideology arose with the separation of the world along the ideologies of two powers, that of the Cold War. This led to the use of media for the dissemination of such ideologies and

cultures, leading to the birth of media imperialism and cultural domination due to unequal media flows and the successful transmission of dominant cultural artefacts to peripheral countries.

There has been much debate over this theory, beginning with the validity of the term and the problems with the methodology to determine the mechanisms. Many of these criticisms have valid points, especially in the context of liberal markets which allowed cultural products to flow seamlessly all over the world. Due to the changing landscape of the world itself, Schiller (1991) revisited his theory in his article "Not Yet the Post-Imperialist Era," whereby he took the changing world order into account but maintained that American media domination still exists.

The criticisms remained, however, due to conceptual issues. Tomlinson tried to critically examine this theory and made attempts to separate what is culture from politics and economics. Culture is a difficult word to define, and the shaping of culture has a lot to do with ideology, the political climate of the nation, as well as economics. Therefore, it is an impossible task to completely separate culture from all these other aspects that help shape and determine it.

However, Tomlinson (1991) suggested four ways in which cultural imperialism can be examined. These are:

- Cultural imperialism as media imperialism
- Cultural imperialism as a discourse of nationality
- Cultural imperialism as a critique of global capitalism
- Cultural imperialism as a critique of modernity

These four perspectives will be used throughout this paper to determine the answer to our first question.

1.2 American Cultural Imperialism

As mentioned earlier, cultural imperialism theory emerged from the study of American cultural domination in the world. By establishing itself as the most powerful of the so-called First World, America successfully used various forms of media and other industries to disseminate its ideology and culture globally (Tomlinson, 1991; Schiller, 1976, 1991). Therefore, any study on cultural imperialism will be incomplete without mentioning American Imperialism.

America effectively used various forms of mass communication during the Cold War to fight an ideological war, propagating American culture and values to the rest of the world, especially communist countries. Instances of this can be found in the content of Voice of America, an American radio station during the Second World War. At the same time, comic books with heroes such as Captain America and Superman were used to propagate American ideals. The Disney corporation, hip-hop diplomacy, and Hollywood movies all served to announce the American Dream, where freedom and liberty prevail.

The American cultural industries run with the ideas of capitalism and free market liberal ideology. For the most part, this has been a successful endeavour. American popular culture artefacts are consumed throughout the free world. With the fall of the USSR, America established itself as a global hegemon. This domination included the cultural field, now that American companies had stakes all across the globe, bringing the debate of cultural imperialism to the forefront. As America is the forerunner among the 'First World', its presence has been felt throughout what has been described as the 'Third World'. According to cultural imperialism scholars, with America positioning itself as the centre, the flow of information went to the periphery, i.e., the Third World, in a top-down fashion. As the receiving cultures had no industries or means to block such information, they consumed what was available, shaping their ideologies and culture according to what was considered ideal in the American model.

This theory, developed in a Western-centric outlook by Western authors and scholars at the centre looking at the periphery, seems to have no place in the Asian context, where civilizations had undergone colonialism for decades. They are the periphery, the consumers of information coming from the centre. Therefore, it is remarkable that the concept of cultural imperialism, which arose from the debate on American hegemony, has been used to criticise the Korean cultural industry. Korea, which has long suffered under colonial rule, cannot be called a superpower by any nature or meaning, and until recently, had been one of the poorest countries in the world. However, the accusation remains. Therefore, forsaking the Western-centric definition of cultural imperialism, and using the implied nature of cultural imperialism, the Korean cultural industries will be examined in the following pages.

2. Proponents of Hallyu as Cultural Imperialism

The Korean Wave started off in China, Japan, and Taiwan around the same time during the 1990s. These countries are closest to South Korea in terms of geography. There have been historical linkages too regarding the flow of information, and religion like Confucianism and Buddhism. Therefore, it makes sense that cultural commodities from one would make inroads in the other neighbouring countries. These countries were, and remain, the biggest markets for Korean cultural commodities, and accusations of cultural imperialism started from these countries as well.

The backlash in Japan started mainly from right-wing nationals calling out their own national broadcasting channels for showing too much Korean content. They called the popularity cultural imperialism, and regaled the role played by the Korean government in the cultural industries, while downplaying the popularity of Korean pop culture by accusing the Korean media of inflating the numbers. This backlash mainly stemmed from the nationalistic fervour of right-wing conservative men who felt that Japanese women were being seduced by Korean stars.

The backlash from China seems to come from the government, which led to the imposition of bans on cultural products in the early 2000s, which did not pan out. The controversy and ban over THAAD does not play a role in the current discussion of ‘cultural imperialism’ and therefore will not be delved into.

Vietnamese society seems to be worried about its youth consuming too much Korean popular culture as well. However, even though Duong viewed Korean media as imperialistic, he concluded that the fervour associated with Korean popular culture has seen some decline. The Taiwanese government also imposed restrictions on the airing of Korean products, since it was felt that it restricted the development of its own cultural industry and products.

From the above examples, it can be seen that accusations of cultural imperialism came from different parts of Asia, some from the government and some from the societal level. Leaving the numerous reasons behind these accusations aside, the question of the nature of the Korean cultural industry will be analysed based on the four perspectives given by Tomlinson.

2.1 Cultural Imperialism as Media Imperialism

According to the theory of cultural imperialism, media plays the biggest role because it is through media that information and cultural values are disseminated to other societies (Schiller, 1976). The Korean Wave can be said to be entirely reliant on this media. It is a product of the information age, owing its popularity to the development of cultural industries like the film industry, technological advancements, the internet, and the seamless flow of information across national lines. It would not be erroneous to say that the Korean Wave functions wholly through this medium of mass communication.

However, for any cultural product to be termed imperialistic, it has to be dominating. It should be noted that the Korean cultural industry took off after the Asian financial crisis and after international organisations pushed South Korea to embrace liberal and open-door policies. These policies demanded South Korea to participate in free market economics, lifting restrictions on imports, which led to the strengthening of domestic markets to prepare for outside competition and allowed South Korea to start exporting as well. Therefore, South Korea can be seen as competing in a global market where there is a free flow of information. South Korea is a latecomer in this respect. While America had already established itself as a first-world country, using its popular culture channels successfully and dominating much of the free world in consumer products, South Korea's power to dominate any other country's media invites scepticism.

Considering the countries that have accused South Korea of media domination, it is clear that these countries are not consuming only Korean products. Their own cultural industries may be in their infancy, as suggested by various critics of South Korean cultural industries. However, American cultural products still maintain the largest consumer base. Looking at the biggest players in the media, South Korean industries do not figure in the top positions. Even Bollywood, India's own cultural industry, has more consumers in sheer numbers than Korean culture. Taking the case of Vietnam and Taiwan in particular, there have been complaints that Korean shows receive too much airtime. However, TV viewing is not restricted to one channel. Consumers can change the channel, choosing from a variety of available choices. South Korea does not have a monopoly over channels in other countries. The consumers have the choice to consume American or Western programs, Korean programs, other Asian programs, as well as their own cultural programs.

One could still argue that the significant presence and audience preference for Korean cultural products can be seen as media domination. However, it should be noted that much of Korean cultural content is a hybridization of several elements, many of which are of Western or American origin (Shim, 2006). The pop star system in Korea can be seen as a hybrid of American pop music elements, combined with the idol production system of Japan, and sung in the Korean language. Therefore, by analysing the content carefully, it is difficult to differentiate what is Korean and what is not in the cultural values contained in Korean popular culture. If the product itself is a hybrid, inclusive of American pop culture, can it be said that it is still Korean cultural imperialism, or just another new face of American imperialism delivered through a different language?

2.2 Cultural Imperialism as a Discourse of Nationality

Culture does not follow national or state lines (Appadurai, 1990). Therefore, if a dominant culture is said to be imperialistic over a weaker indigenous culture, there has to be a definitive form of what exactly constitutes an indigenous culture. Nations or states are not made up of single homogeneous cultures (Huntington, 1997). Cultural identities can be nurtured and formed through nationalistic and religious measures. In this sense, what is considered a national culture can be one culture or a few cultures taken from the citizens over other cultures available in the same space. Therefore, the national culture or indigenous culture has dominated other cultures in the same nation. Nationality is a constructed ideology, and at the same time, nationality or national identity cannot be shut off by simply accepting cultural artefacts from a foreign country. Vietnamese youths being avid fans of Korean pop music does not lead to a desire to exchange their identities with another. Japanese fans visiting South Korea to see the filming locations of their favourite dramas do not undermine their nationality.

2.3 Cultural Imperialism as a Critique of Global Capitalism

This perspective of cultural imperialism posits that cultural products lure consumers into the capitalistic system, manipulating society into functioning under the multinational capitalist enterprise (Schiller, 1976). The economic system, which had been attempted to be separated from the culture, comes into force again, bringing the problem of the complete separation of the culture. However, disregarding the other aspects of the capitalist economic system and looking into the culture, one aspect that can be seen in the cultural realm is consumer culture, which is said to be the driving force of capitalism - the emphasis on lifestyle and material goods to attain happiness and satisfaction. Reiteration comes into force, as capitalism is of Western origin. Therefore, if South Korea is propagating consumer culture, it is still under the ambit of American consumer culture told through different mouths. The only thing that changes is which products one chooses to consume out of the many available options. A society's choice to consume one culture over another does not make the chosen culture imperialistic either.

2.4 Cultural Imperialism as a Critique of Modernity

The entire world is functioning under the overarching process of modernity. Advancement of humanity in all areas for better living is the aim. The emulation of Western growth, productivity, forward-thinking, and technological advancements are what the West believes every country should try to follow (Tomlinson, 1991). South Korea is simply showing another form of modernity, an Asian modernity. However, as said earlier, modernity is still a Western concept and as such cannot be blamed wholly on South Korea.

3. Critiques of Cultural Imperialism

Many critics have argued that cultural imperialism is time-sensitive, that it may have had relevance in the post-war world with America winning the ideological war and establishing itself as the centre of civilization. A lot has changed over the years. There are now multicultural flows of people, knowledge, and information. Using the four perspectives as above, one can also assume the decline of American dominance and the theory of cultural imperialism.

There is constant negotiation and renegotiation by the audiences of media products. Popular culture goods are never consumed in their entirety or completely processed internally. Indigenous or local audiences do not simply accept foreign cultural goods but instead revise or reappropriate them according to their own needs (Kuotsu, 2013; Ko, 2010).

Cultural identity is difficult to erase. Cultural and national identities are formed through historical experiences, interaction with society, and national endeavours by the state, creating an affinity to one's own society that cannot be replaced simply by consuming products of another culture (Harrison & Huntington, 2000).

Cultural imperialism as a tool of capitalism depicts societies and people as easily manipulated beings with no autonomous decision-making skills, which is not the case. The main critique of capitalism is its advertisement of shallow consumerist culture which threatens the richness of global culture by homogenising cultural practices. However, there is no sufficient proof to believe multinational capitalist agencies are capable of such homogenization (Berger & Huntington, 2002).

Cultural imperialism includes the spread of modernity. There is widespread global development in technological and economic progress and growing integration of societies. This is not a product of just one culture but is an overall process of cultural loss and not of expansion. All societies are undergoing this change whether they are developed or developing countries (Tomlinson, 1991).

3.1 Significance of Distinction

The above arguments suggest not only the improbability of Hallyu as cultural imperialism but also debate the validity of the term cultural imperialism as well. Whatever one's convictions may be, in a broad overview, it can be agreed that there is American domination in the cultural realm, even if it is not as totalistic as the theory of cultural imperialism would suggest. Nonetheless, as the above arguments suggest, there is constant negotiation and indigenization by different cultures when consuming cultures from other societies. As of today, even though America still owns the top major media and cultural industries in the world, it is no longer the only major player in the formation of cultural products.

This is the point where Hallyu comes into the discussion. Hallyu being called cultural imperialism, or cultural invasion, or even media imperialism or economic imperialism suggests a few things. The first obvious implication is that there is a widespread aversion towards the Korean government's role in the formulation of cultural policies and products. Another is that Korean cultural products are making their mark in the world, especially in its neighbouring countries. These imply that South Korea offers alternative popular cultural artefacts from the existing American popular culture. This means that Hallyu offers counter-culture to the existing dominant one in the international context.

3.2 Importance of Counter-Cultural Flows

The existence of counter-cultural flows is necessary to start imagining a multipolar world, where information does not flow top-down but horizontally. When audiences actively choose to consume Hallyu products (or any other cultural product) instead of American ones, this facilitates the multiple flows of information (Shim et al., 2010). Such effective counter-culture flows prove beneficial for other countries. The success story of Hallyu has inspired other countries to pursue a similar path, under the impression that "if Korea can do it, so can we." China has started its cultural industries program, beginning with five-year plans. Thailand is also pursuing a cultural industries strategy, with the production of quality movies and series. There have also been instances of other countries in Asia adopting similar program formats or emulating media practices with varying degrees of success. It has also been observed that exposure to Hallyu products educates consumers on the vibrancy of cultures available to them. Audiences of Korean dramas are likely to broaden their horizons, looking to Chinese dramas and Filipino dramas, which offer similar formatting with increasingly advanced qualities but subtle cultural differences. This also implies that other countries, especially in Asia, are taking note of the Korean government's model and establishing their own cultural industries, providing quality products for the international audience seeking diverse cultural goods. This could be what has been called the transformation of a modern Asian identity, leading to greater integration of neighbouring countries through cultural goods.

3.3 Importance to Cultural Diplomacy

This counter-cultural flow is also important in the diplomatic context, as cultural diplomacy in the form of popular cultural artefacts increases the exposure of countries in the international arena, which has been dominated for so long by powerful Western nations. This domination can be seen in the so-called 'international agencies' like the United Nations, the IMF, and the World Bank, which have not been inclusive of the various countries considered to be on the periphery. Cultural diplomacy is deemed helpful in attracting not only economic benefits in the form of tourism but also favourable opinions from other countries that can increase its standing in international relations.

4. Concluding Remarks

As can be seen, the theory of cultural imperialism has its weaknesses and is easy to misinterpret. American culture has held much of the world in its sway, which prompted critics of American hegemony to assume, upon seeing cultural artefacts of the nation transposed to another place, that there is clear imperialism at work. However, such assumptions need a lot more scrutiny—to see if the “new” or “foreign” culture (or popular culture commodities in this case) has transformed, shaped, dominated, or disposed of the “indigenous” culture in any way.

Problematizing this issue is important, especially in the case of Hallyu. Although there is at this point no comprehensive foreign policy tactic on South Korea’s cultural diplomacy, the actions of the state suggest that the country is and has been using, as well as intends to keep on using, its popular culture industries to promote cultural diplomacy, thereby improving its political standing in the realm of international politics. Cultural diplomacy is increasingly considered by states to improve international relations and national security. There has been a marked rising trend in states’ investment in cultural industries, e.g., the United Kingdom’s ‘Cool Britannia,’ which focuses on youth culture, and Japan’s ‘Cool Japan,’ which tries to amplify its creative industries. There have been assumptions that because of the Korean government’s involvement in the cultural industries, it is a clear case of imperialism. However, the answer is not as simple as that. Cultural industries thrive and develop under favourable government policies, and many nations can attest to that point.

The tag of cultural imperialism pinned to Hallyu could be detrimental to the workings and success of this diplomatic venture of South Korea. The government has indeed taken note of the various criticisms and has stepped up various ways for inclusivity of different ethnicities as well as facilitating cross-cultural flows between neighbouring countries. Korean pop celebrities are no longer all from Korean ethnicity, with talents from other countries being taken into the fold. Cultural exchanges have been facilitated through government cultural centres around the world. Travelogues are increasingly popular, and emphasis has been made on Korea becoming a multinational society. The implications of all this are that there are no explicit efforts made by Korean cultural agencies to dominate other cultures, and South Korea’s desire to become a middle power drives home this point.

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