

Netflix and the Global Receptions of Korean Popular Culture: Transnational Perspectives

Introduction

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This editorial introduction examines the Netflix effect in the Korean wave tradition. It analyzes the ways the world's most influential over-the-top platform is changing the production, distribution, and consumption of South Korean popular culture in the global cultural markets from the perspective of transnational culture. It provides a deeper understanding of the transformations of regional and transnational cultural industry practices, creative labor, artistic challenges, and transnational reception juxtaposed with and in response to the Korean cultural industries' quantum leap in the (post-)age of the COVID-19 pandemic. We attempt to advance our current debates and place them in contexts relevant to future work in transnational cultural studies in the digital platform era.

Keywords: Korean Wave, Netflix, transnationalism, popular culture, K-pop, digital platforms

Between December 2022 and March 2023, *The Glory* (Ahn, 2022)—a drama about a woman who seeks revenge on several classmates who bullied her—became globally popular. As a Netflix original, *The*

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Glory became the most popular show globally just three days after the release of *The Glory* Part 2 on March 11, 2023. It ranked number one in 38 countries, including Japan, Malaysia, and Mexico, and number three in the United States and the United Kingdom, “making it the overall No. 1 show globally” (Cho, 2023, para. 2). The global popularity of *The Glory* is only one example that shows the recent popularity of Korean cultural content such as dramas, reality shows, films, and K-pop in the global cultural sphere.

Many Korean dramas and films have already made their global popularity. For example, on November 20, 2021, Netflix introduced the “original” series *Hellbound* (Yeon, 2021). This six-episode dark fantasy is helmed by Yeon Sang-ho who rose to international prominence with the zombie thriller *Train to Busan* (Yeon, 2016) in 2016. Within 24 hours of its launch, *Hellbound* (Yeon, 2021) became the most-watched Netflix television series in the world, topping streaming ratings in more than 80 countries. *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), another Netflix original series from Korea released in 2021, which was a brutal nine-part survival thriller, directed by the veteran Korean filmmaker Hwang Dong-hyuk, immediately rose to the top of the charts in over 80 countries. *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) went on to become the most popular Netflix original series of all time. The series had been seen by an estimated 142 million households in 94 countries by the time *Hellbound* (Yeon, 2021) was released. The success of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) and *Hellbound* (Yeon, 2021) was followed by the webtoon-based high school-set zombie thriller *All of Us Are Dead* (Lee & Kim, 2022) and the heart-warming legal drama *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (Yoo, 2022), centered on autistic genius lawyer Woo Young-woo, which topped the charts in over 30 countries in summer 2022. *King the Land* (Cho, Kim, & Han, 2023)—a romantic drama series—the latest addition to this trend, continues to be a popular K-drama on Netflix.

The crossover triumph of these dramas in global cultural markets in recent years has demonstrated how Korean cultural industries have evolved from a traditional theatrical release-based business model to one that encompasses theaters, OTT (over-the-top) services, webtoons, and television stations. As a creative director and a scriptwriter, for example, Hwang Dong-hyuk, whose 2014 comedy hit *Miss Granny* (Hwang, 2014) was remade in Japan, China, Indonesia, Thailand, India, and Turkey, is planning to work with Netflix to create a *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) universe, with the streaming giant hoping to develop not only a sequel (Weiss, 2022)—which is under production as of September 2023—but also spin-offs and anime.

Several global OTT platforms, such as Disney+, Amazon Prime, Apple TV, and iQiyi, as well as Korea’s local streaming services Wavve, Tving, and Coupang Play, have actively produced, coproduced, and licensed Korean films, dramas, and reality shows; however, Netflix has reigned supreme in the Korean cultural market as well as global cultural markets. In 2021, Netflix invested US\$463 million in Korean content thanks to a string of commercial successes for “made in Korea” original series and films. Due to the increasing role of Korean popular culture on Netflix in increasing global subscribers, in April 2023, Netflix also promised to invest \$2.5 billion in Korean cultural industries until 2027 (Bae & Toh, 2023).

More broadly, it is crucial to acknowledge that the global sensation of Korean pop groups BTS and BlackPink, as well as a flock of Korean dramas, has positioned Korean cultural products at the core of the global cultural industries. Korea’s cultural industries are now producing theatrical films and original series for streaming services, film studios, and television stations worldwide. Korea is practically the only country outside

the United States to have captivated the world's hearts and minds through K-pop, K-dramas, K-film, and K-webtoons. In 2014, Richard Greenfield (2014), in an article for *The Hollywood Reporter*, already predicted that

by 2024, the concept of a multi-month window between a movie's theatrical and home entertainment release will no longer exist. . . . By 2024, consumers will be able to pay for and access content whenever they want and wherever they want on a device of their choice. (para. 5)

That time came much earlier than expected. Significantly, Netflix is gaining great financial success through Korean cultural content, while Korean cultural industries have partially reaped the benefit. Netflix is undoubtedly the most influential OTT platform and content producer for Korean cultural products.

This Special Section, which contains 11 essays, including this introductory article, written by scholars in various countries, examines the Netflix effect: the ways the world's most influential OTT platform is changing the production, distribution, and consumption of Korean popular culture in global cultural markets from the perspective of transnational culture. This Special Section provides a deeper understanding of the transformations of regional and transnational cultural industry practices, creative labor, artistic challenges, and transnational reception juxtaposed with and in response to the Korean cultural industries' quantum leap in the (post-)age of the COVID-19 pandemic. With this Special Section, we hope to shed light on current debates and place them in contexts relevant to future work in transnational cultural studies in the digital platform era.

Netflix and the Transnational Flows of Korean Popular Culture

Contemporary transnational cultural flows have occurred in three distinct stages. In the first stage, between the 1970s and the 1980s, the majority of countries received popular culture mainly from the United States, which wielded dominant power in global cultural markets. During this period, popular culture flowed primarily in one direction—from the West, particularly the United States, to the rest of the world—and the concept of cultural imperialism was used to explain the global flow of American cultural content. In this stage, media globalization was understood to mean essentially the dissemination of U.S.-driven cultural hegemony across the globe, and the primary actors were American cultural companies, including the Hollywood majors (Schiller, 1976).

Starting in the early 1990s, a few non-Western countries developed their own popular culture that attracted significant overseas audiences. Several local powerhouses, such as Bollywood (film) and telenovelas (drama) made their global appearance; collectively, these phenomena were known as countercultural flows (Thussu, 2006). Many Japanese anime and characters also earned global fandoms (Allison, 2003; Iwabuchi, 2002; Yano, 2013). In particular, the recent phase of Hallyu clearly shows not only "alternative circuits of media flows that operate outside the West" (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2003, p. 14) but also countercultural flows of non-Western cultural products into the Western regions (Thussu, 2006). To understand this stage, a multitude of studies have moved beyond the rigid center-periphery binarism. Within this theoretical tendency, which can be called the "cultural globalization thesis,"

especially since the 1990s (Kraidy, 2005), the diversification of cultural flows has been explored in several ways by cultural studies researchers (Appadurai, 1990).

Meanwhile, the circumstances surrounding our contemporary cultural flows have again changed significantly with the advent of digital platforms. The growth of Netflix in global cultural markets, particularly in tandem with the Korean Wave, has fundamentally changed the trends of transnational cultural flows. The existing research on transnational culture does not sufficiently address the shifting media ecology surrounding the rise and integration of local cultural forces on a global scale, as exemplified in Hallyu and Netflix, which exemplify the third cultural flow. Netflix is “the world’s leading curated video entertainment service” (Lotz, 2020, p. 196), with over 167 million paid members in over 190 countries enjoying TV series (both originals and licensed series), documentaries, animated shorts and features, and feature films across a wide variety of genres and languages. When Netflix entered Korea in 2016, its strategy was to undertake a partnership with local OTT carriers to supply their programs. In other words, the convergence of local popular culture and global digital platforms has become a new norm in the global cultural sphere, although it does not imply the demise of American hegemony.

More important, digital platforms increasingly enable media audiences to participate in and initiate transnationalization, through a process that has been referred to as bottom-up transnationalism (Georgiou, 2006; Larkin, 2008; Lukács, 2010). In the global rise of non-Western content, much of which bypasses the official media market and export/import routes, “alternative (bottom-up) practices of media circulation” (Lukács, 2010, p. 179) play a significant role in enhancing the circulation of such content (Jin, Yoon, & Min, 2021). In the mediascape of Hallyu, technologies do not simply enhance virality but can also transform cultural norms and the conventional modes of cultural consumption (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013).

The global popularity of several Korean cultural content items like *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) and *The Glory* (Ahn, 2022) on Netflix has fundamentally changed the role that mediators play in contemporary media ecology. Digital platforms, especially OTT platforms, generate many ways of circulating media. Unlike previous stages, the transnationalization of local cultural content is now not only global but also simultaneous. During the first and second stages of global cultural flows, people had to either buy cultural content or go to theaters and concert halls to enjoy it. However, digital platforms, both OTT and social media platforms (e.g., YouTube), have turned global cultural markets into a single unified market that allows global audiences to enjoy local culture with no time difference. Again, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) was popular in over 90 countries almost simultaneously, and it was a genuinely global sensation. By engaging with the Korean Wave’s digital mediascape, global audiences who otherwise would not have been exposed or attracted to such non-Western media are integrated into transnational cultural flows.

Of course, we have to be careful in our interpretation of this new form of cultural flow, as it does not necessarily mean the cultural environment is balanced or nonhegemonic. Some global OTT platforms are located in the United States to maximize their profits, although local cultural creators use them as a new circulation tool. This situation calls for a critical and analytical approach to the dominant role of American OTT platforms.

Works Included in This Special Section

Dal Yong Jin discusses an industry approach to understanding the cultural industries in the digital platform era. It critically documents several major theoretical frameworks, including critical political economy, cultural industries, production studies, and critical media industry studies. Critical political economy and cultural industries approaches are rooted in political economy, while production studies and critical media industry studies are based on cultural studies; therefore, they show similarities and differences. It not only discusses their major characteristics but also utilizes them to advance a new theoretical framework in understanding contemporary cultural industries. By historicizing the growth of the Korean Wave, it introduced a new industry approach termed "critical cultural industries studies," which is a meso-approach.

Kyong Yoon discusses "Diasporic Korean Storytelling" on Netflix. During the global flows of South Korean media and popular culture known as the Korean Wave or Hallyu, representations of the Korean diaspora have gradually emerged in the global mediascape. This process is at least partly indebted to the role digital streaming platforms have played in accelerating transnational flows of media content produced in diverse locations. This article examines the transnational circulation of media content and practices relating to the Korean diaspora in platform-driven media environments of the Korean Wave. While the subject of global flows of Korean media has been attracting increasing interest among media scholars, the diasporic aspects of the Korean Wave have remained underresearched. This article argues that digital platforms have played a role in the emergence of diasporic voices in the Korean Wave. Drawing on theoretical discussions and textual analyses of two Netflix shows portraying diasporic Koreans, the article examines how the streaming platform facilitates and/or commodifies cultural diversity. In doing so, it initiates a discussion of how the diasporic aspects of the Korean Wave are integrated with the platformized media environment.

Benjamin M. Han's article examines how creativity is regarded as a significant corporate asset to Netflix's rise as a dominant global streaming platform. Using Netflix Korea as an empirical case study, the article problematizes the institutionalization of Netflix creativity to construct the streaming platform as a peculiar cultural space for creativity and lure ethnic content creators while capitalizing on the particularities of Korean television production norms and practices. Drawing on critical media industry studies and analysis of journalistic interviews with Hwang Dong-hyuk, the creator of the global hit series *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), this article examines the politics shaping Netflix's creativity in terms of authorial value, labor, and intellectual property. The article moves away from a Western-centric study of creativity rooted in romanticism, inspiration, and neoliberalism to explore how creativity as a resource to Netflix shapes the interactions between the Korean television industry and the subjectivities of Korean creative laborers.

Sojeong Park and Seok-Kyeong Hong analyze how Netflix, an emerging global Subscription Video On Demand (SVOD) service, affects the global reception of South Korean content. In-depth interviews were conducted with 32 viewers of various ages, genders, and nationalities (Japan, United States, Brazil, and France) who consume Korean content through Netflix. The findings suggest that Korean content is expanding beyond fandom culture and into global media culture. This is due to the technological affordances that increase the possibility of Korean content being more universally received by the global audience, as well as Korean Netflix Originals creating new values such as diversity and sincerity that cater to the new generation. Furthermore, this study provides a comparison between the audience who first encountered Korean content through Netflix and

the established Korean content consumers. By recontextualizing the findings within the changing discourses on the interplay between Hallyu and Netflix, this study provides a new perspective on the notion of Hallyu.

Hye Seung Chung seeks to provide an alternative interpretation of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) as a Levinasian text about ethical choices made by the protagonist and his relationships with two other finalists, including a North Korean defector. Challenging both popular and critical readings of *Squid Game* as a morally ambiguous or even harmful text that might have detrimental effects on impressionable young viewers, the author contends that *Squid Game* is covertly an *ethical* text that espouses Emmanuel Levinas's theory of "for-the-other" subjectivity and "infinite responsibility" for the other under the guise of an exploitative and misanthropic "death game" narrative.

Yin Yuan examines K-drama's potential as a postcolonial Third Space. She considers the impact of Netflix's profit-driven transculturalism on Hallyu by contrasting Netflix Korean Originals, particularly *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), with K-dramas such as *Liar Game* (Kim, 2014). Contextualizing *Liar Game* within an emergent K-drama mode that she calls the "melodramatic mundane," she examines alternative structures of feeling embedded in popular contemporary K-dramas and explores their potential as a postcolonial "Third Space." Analyzing K-dramas' Western reception alongside a comparative close reading of American, Japanese, and Korean TV shows, she examines alternative structures of feeling in K-dramas that challenge American narrative ideologies. She integrates reception patterns with a comparative cross-cultural analysis of different shows to examine K-drama's transcultural potential in the global arena.

Kristin April Kim, Ji Hoon Park, Sola Yoon, Yue Wang, Hayoung Bae, and Kieu Trang Luc examine whether Korean content carries distinct characteristics compared to those of other countries through a comprehensive quantitative analysis of all non-U.S. Netflix Originals from 2015 to 2021. The findings reveal a predominance of dark K-dramas and a duality to Korean Netflix Original programming, characterized by high viewership and a lack of genre diversity. Netflix's persistent focus on a limited set of genres can be both advantageous and restrictive, potentially fostering a unique K-drama brand or hindering the exploration of diverse genres. Therefore, this study recommends emphasizing platform studies and a political-economic framework in future research on the Korean Wave to better understand the evolving K-drama landscape, ensure continued growth and diversity of Korean content, and address challenges and opportunities posed by dominant platforms like Netflix.

Tae-Jin Yoon and Yaewon Jin examine the potential collaboration between Netflix and the Korean gaming industry and how it could impact the Korean Wave. Using the concept of *transversality*, it explores hypothetical directions of collaboration that could create a new facet of the Korean Wave called *Transversal Korean Waves*. This collaboration could blur the boundaries between virtual and physical reality, integrate content and form into a metaverse, and establish a new digital economy and ethics. This study also contends that this new wave challenges the notion of cultural product ownership and encourages collaboration across boundaries. The paper concludes that the transversal Korean Wave's sociocultural implications lie in rediscovering cultural marginalities that were left out in the fast adaptation to universality.

Joseph Jonghyun Jeon considers the position of Netflix Korea within Netflix's global business and South Korea's place within a transitioning world system in the early 21st century. The article will first discuss

prospects for growth at corporate and geopolitical levels with an emphasis on leadership principles. Netflix culture implies a useful strategy for stamping out weaker competition amid crisis conditions, but one that does not solve the crisis itself, a fact that becomes apparent when Netflix assumes its position as an industry leader rather than a scrappy upstart. Second, this article will track how *Kingdom* (Kim, 2019), Netflix Korea's first original scripted show, encompasses the contradictions of imperialist logics that ramp up precisely as the foundation for that power erodes. *Kingdom*, and Netflix more broadly, imagine a world that bypasses this fundamental requirement, and in so doing, they risk building castles in the sand susceptible to shifting tides as *hallyu* waves begin to recede.

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