

# The Korean Wave: The Seoul of Asia

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## Abstract

*Over the past decade, Korean popular culture has spread infectiously throughout the world. The term, “Korean wave,” has been used to describe this rising popularity of Korean popular culture. The Korean wave exploded in the media across the world generating a ripple effect. The Korean government took full advantage of this national phenomenon and began aiding Korean media industries in exporting Korean pop culture. This global expansion has contributed to enhancing South Korea’s national image and its economy and has been seen as a tool for public diplomacy. This paper analyzed the Korean wave and its implications for cultural influence on neighboring countries. Furthermore, this study explored how national identity impacts framing processes related to media coverage and public response.*

## I. Introduction:

The Korean wave—“hallyu” in Korean—refers to a surge in the international visibility of Korean culture, beginning in East Asia in the 1990s and continuing more recently in the United States, Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Europe (Ravina, 2008, p. 1). The Korean wave portrays an unprecedented frame of Korean popular culture by the Korean media alongside the line with commercial nationalism. As a result, the Korean wave is manifested as a regional cultural trend signifying a triumph of Korean culture (Hyejung, 2007, p. 3). It is easily seen in this excerpt from a Korean publication:

When President Roh Moo-hyun invited Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and his delegation for a luncheon meeting last September, something unexpected happened. After a moment of calm, the Vietnam officials stood up one by one and started to line up in front of a woman, asking her to sign their menus.

The woman was actress Kim Hyun-joo, heroine of the SBS TV drama “Yuri Gudu” (Glass Shoes), which had been shown on Vietnam television in May 2003. Actress Kim had become well-known in Vietnam after the drama became a big hit there. The commotion settled down only after a Korean general promised the actress’s autographs for everyone after lunch. The center of attention during the luncheon apparently was not President Roh or Prime Minister Khai, but actress Kim, showing that perhaps the Korea Wave is stronger than diplomacy (Shin, 2004).

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## II. Literature Review

The Korean wave refers to the significantly increased popularity of South Korean culture around the world; it is also referred to as hallyu, in the Korean language. The term was coined in China in mid-1999 by Beijing journalists surprised by the fast growing popularity of Korean entertainment and culture in China (Kim, 2007, p. 15). Broadly speaking, it can be said that the popularity of Korean pop music and television soap operas in China and Taiwan sparked the Korean wave abroad. The outbreak of hallyu can be traced back to 1997, when the Korean TV drama, *What Is Love All About*, broadcast on state-run Chinese television, CCTV, set the stage for hallyu in China, following an MBC-TV drama, *Jealous*, which was imported as the first popular cultural product from South Korea in 1993 (Kim, 2007, p. 15). Since then, the boom of Korean popular culture in the neighboring Asian countries has remarkably increased and significantly penetrated them over the past several years, and in the years 2000 through 2002, according to one source, “the Korean wave moved forward to diverse parts of Asia, including Southeast and Central Asia, and therefore this wave reached an active penetration stage” (Hyejung, 2007, p. 6).

Interestingly, though every country in Asia had a common reaction toward the Korean wave at first, each had a slightly different outlook. This is because “each country has a different ethos, and based on this, its audience decodes and responds to cultural products in different ways” (Kim, 2007, p. 24). For example, in Taiwan, *Daejangguem* had the best reception of any Korean drama, whereas in Japan, *Korea Herald* was most popular (Kim, 2007, p. 24). The trend soon spread out from the mainland to Taiwan, Hong Kong, affecting ethnic Chinese in other Asian countries and eventually Japan, leading all these Asian peoples to be fascinated by not only Korean music and drama, but also its films, food and fashion. Accordingly, Korean cultural products have become a catalyst for curiosity about Korean culture and Korea itself. Korean dramas in particular have served as an important bridge for the different countries to encounter Korean culture.

The appeal of Korean pop culture to Asians is especially meaningful for the Korean government “since the country’s national image has not always been positive in neighboring countries” (Doobo, 2006, p. 6). Many Asian countries have been distant from their closest neighbors in terms of cultural understanding and exchanges, and instead “have had a tendency to link more closely to the former colonial empires or advanced Western countries than with neighbors sharing borders” (Ryoo, 2007, p. 144).

The impact of the Korean wave has not only permeated popular culture but is also a measure of positive lifestyle for many Asian people (Ryoo, 2008, p. 144). Many Asians did not know much about South Korea or knew only a few simple, often stereotypical things about South Korea. Images associated with South Korea were negative and related to events such as the Korean War, cycles of poverty and political instability (Lee, 2007, p. 29). These negative images have diminished dramatically due to trendy entertainers, new technology, and the image of contemporary South Korean lives through dramas and movies.

Rhoo wrote, “Regional cultural affinities also help explain this phenomenon in the sense that the success of the Korean wave is closely related to the ability of South Korean culture and media to translate Western or American culture to fit Asian taste” (2007, p. 45). “Western popular cultural artifacts will not likely succeed because of a certain non-negotiable cultural heterogeneity,” Rhoo predicted (2007, p. 45). South Korean popular culture is much more readily relatable and accepted to Asian audiences. The cultural affinity between South Korea and neighboring countries in the region may thus function as an effective bridge or buffer between the West and Asia (Ryoo, 2007, p. 145). South Korean television shows and movies portray themes that Asian audiences can relate to more easily than those of Western entertainment because Korean “dramas typically deal with family issues, love and filial piety in an age of changing technology, and often reinforces traditional values of Confucianism” (Ryoo, 2007, p. 140).

Observers generally agree that the most likely explanations for the popularity of South Korean shows, singers, and movies throughout Asia include South Korea’s high income levels, the close cultural proximity and affinity they share with neighboring Asian countries (Ryoo, 2007, p. 140). As a result of these and other economic developments, “South Korea is now the twelfth largest economy in the world, and its entertainment companies are able to finance shows and movies with production values much higher than in most of Asia” (Ryoo, 2007, p. 140).

As seen above, the Korean wave has had a marked impact in various ways regarding transaction with other countries. Local sentiment towards Korea has not been respectable in the past, but the Korean wave has fundamentally changed the national image of Korea in a positive way. The Korean wave ultimately improved Korea’s image in foreign countries, which in turn created a ripple effect that has extended much

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farther than just the Korean economy or peninsula.

Such a fast change in the economic and cultural status of Korea raises important questions regarding the Korean wave and how it is covered in the media. This paper will examine this Korean experience as a primary case in which various political, cultural, economic, and historical factors are at play in shaping the perception of a nation.

### III. Method

For a critical analysis of how the Korean wave has been depicted in the media, the author reviewed scholarly studies on the topic and analyzed prominent newspapers from different countries. Sources included academic journals, news articles, edited books, websites, and newspapers. Research was also conducted for qualitative data by face-to-face and phone interviews.

The author's research focused on a comparative framing analysis on the Korean wave from U.S., Asian, and Korean newspapers. Only major newspapers were selected based on their national reputation in each country: *Korea Herald*, *Korea Herald* (Singapore), *Korea Herald* (Thailand) and *Korea Herald* (Tokyo). Articles were collected from online archives with the searching keywords of "Korean Wave." After the author narrowed her search, 84 newspaper articles were selected.

### IV. Findings

Scholars have determined that "Communication research today demonstrates that media can and do influence societies, cultures and identities" (Reason and Respect, 2007). National identity is not only embedded in everyday news coverage but also explicit when international news, to which a nation is related either directly or indirectly, is reported (Reason and Respect, 2007). The conditions that made the recent success of Korean pop culture possible are examined in the context of news frames. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text described, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p. 391). Generally speaking, "news framing is the process of filtering and transmitting news through an angle or 'frame' in order to support specific ideologies, stimulate widespread attention or persuade an audience" (Entman, 1993, p. 391). On another note, "cross-national comparison of framing begins with conceptualization of a nation as the highest level of interpretive community or discursive community. As a foundational interpretive community, a nation has dominant values or ideas that are unconsciously instilled in news discourse" (Gudykunst, 2001, p. 31). Ganz (1979) labels these values as "enduring values," and argues that in "shaping news meanings, enduring values are grounded in publics' values" (p. 21). As Fuller (1991) notes, "every newspaper from the national daily to the smallest rural weekly is provincial, being aware of a specific audience with whom it must share a sensibility and a set of interests, tastes, and values" (p. 69).

Newspaper articles were analyzed with the given information above in mind. The one dominant frame found was that the Korean wave is a commercially driven phenomenon, and this phenomenon is described as a victory of Korea's nation branding from the nationalistic perspective. Under this main frame, several subframes were presented to answer each research questions.

#### **Frame I: Love/Hate Relationships: China, Japan, and Korea**

"A young Japanese woman in the comic book "Hating the Korean Wave" exclaims, "It's not an exaggeration to say that Japan built the South Korea of today!" In another passage the book states that "there is nothing at all in Korean culture to be proud of" (Onishi, 2005).

*Korea Herald*: "Ugly Images of Asian Rivals Become Best Sellers in Japan"

Interestingly, China, Korea, and Japan have a very sensitive historical tie, and this historical relationship makes it possible to interpret differently on the Korean wave phenomenon. Chinese hegemony, Japanese colonialism, the Korean War, political division of the peninsula and the International Monetary Fund

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crisis are just some of the more pronounced events that have kept these nations strained (Lee, 2010). The three countries all write about the Korean wave in a nature that depicts their political and historical relationship with each other.

In Korean news coverage, the Korean wave was naturally described in a positive light exuding national pride, honor, and triumph. “The cultural phenomenon known as hallyu or the Korean wave left an indelible mark throughout Asia in 2004, fanning optimism about the country’s potential as a culture powerhouse” (Yang, 2004, para. 1). “It all started with pop music and soap operas, but the Korean Wave hasn’t stopped there. The exporting of Korean pop culture reached new heights last year, with the wild success of the television drama *Korea Herald* in Asia. By the end of the year, the word ‘hallyu’ (Korean Wave), referring to the popularity of Korean pop culture abroad, became a household word,” according to an article in a Korean paper (Kim, 2005, para. 4). Undoubtedly, the Korean news frame singles out the success of the Korean wave in a fully emotional way compared to other news coverage.

Though the Korean wave has spread to many Asian countries, there is no doubt that it has found greatest success in China. News coverage showed a unique relationship that developed from the Chinese in adoration of Koreans. “Chinese people felt closer to Korean culture thanks to access to pop culture, even if they have never been to the country,” an article in *Korea Herald* stated (Chen, 2006, para. 3). Furthermore, another article said, “The Republic of Korea (ROK) and China have maintained close co-operative ties in the political, economic, cultural and educational fields in recent years. According to official ROK statistics published at the end of last year, China ranked number one in Korea’s annual foreign trade. The ROK has also become China’s third largest trading partner, exclusive of economic blocs. Intimate political and economic cooperation has led to frequent exchanges of citizens between the two countries” (Yang, 2005, para. 5). The article also stated that the Korean wave in China suggested a brighter future for bilateral relations. Due to the overwhelming demand of Korean pop culture in China, Korea was able to successfully enter a big niche market. The one-way influx of Korean cultural commodities to China made them create an increasing imbalance of two nations’ cultural trades. Thus, maintaining this wave in China for a long time was necessary to its establishment (Ryoo, 2007, p. 146).

In comparison to China, Japanese news frames portrayed a different kind of attitude about the Korean wave. Japan’s sudden attraction to Korean culture and the Korean language is particularly striking given Japan’s colonial rule of Korea from 1910 to 1945. With this knowledge, the Korean media took a much more cooperative approach with Japan. It is apparent Korean newspaper articles had very different attitudes when writing about Japan and China. Many Korean journalists were much more boastful and confident about Korea’s cultural identity in regards towards China. On the other hand, Korean newspapers seemed to keep in mind Japan’s economic standing and long-standing power.

One American journalist noted the changed relationship between Japan and Korea resulting from the Korean wave. “Japan, once the teacher of analogue technology and cultural products to Korea, is now being embarrassed by its former pupil with Korea’s rapid advancement in digital technology and cultural industry. Now, various Japanese mass communication organizations study and prepare reports on the trend-setting Korean IT industry” (Kang, 2010, para. 8).

The U.S. media sensitively portrays the Korean wave focusing on the historical and emotional perspective. The Japanese colonial dominance in Asia still remains a traumatic and brutal memory, in particular for both China and Korea. This antagonistic feeling toward Japan has revealed a long-term official ban of Japanese cultural content in Asia (Hyejung, 2005, p. 18). The U.S. newspaper coverage studied for this research portrays the Korean wave in a dominant manner. It clearly depicts South Korea as the underdog compared to Japan: “The reality that South Korea had emerged as a rival hit many Japanese with full force in 2002, when the countries were co-hosts of soccer’s World Cup and South Korea advanced further than Japan. At the same time, the so-called Korean Wave—television dramas, movies and music from South Korea—swept Japan and the rest of Asia, often displacing Japanese pop cultural exports” (Onishi, 2005, para. 2).

A *Korea Herald* article, “Roll Over Godzilla, Korea Rules,” reveals how sensitive the United States is in portraying South Korea in comparison to China and Japan: “South Korea, historically more worried about fending off cultural domination by China and Japan than spreading its own culture abroad, is emerging as the pop culture leader of Asia. From well-packaged television dramas to slick movies, from pop music to online games, South Korean companies and stars are increasingly defining what the disparate people in East Asia watch, listen to and play” (Onishi, 2005, para. 1).

An *Korea Herald* describes how Korean dramas depict the sharing of Asian cultures: “Those are Con-

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Confucian values like the importance of family, obedience and respect for elder ones. Values that many Chinese feel they've lost" (Lim, 2006, para. 9). One scholar has also observed, "South Korean dramas typically deal with family issues, love and filial piety in an age of changing technology, and often reinforce traditional values of Confucianism" (Ryoo, 2009, p. 140). South Korean TV shows and movies deploy themes that Asian audiences can relate to more easily than those of Western entertainment.

After an analysis of U.S. media frames, it is clear that these articles touch more on the historical significance of the Korean wave rather than its economic effects. The American newspapers such as the *Korea Herald* and the *Korea Herald* depict South Korea in a favorable light over neighboring countries on this specific matter. And the *Korea Herald* observed, "After having been colonized or overshadowed by its neighbors, Japan and China, for centuries, the country finally has a chance to outdo them on the cultural stage" (Cho, 2009, para. 14).

The articles above are indirect indicators of cultural elements changing foreign attitudes toward Korea and Korean culture, especially from countries formerly hostile or indifferent to Korea such as Japan and China. The overwhelming popularity of Korean items in these nations reflects a good base on which to build in order to develop a future-oriented relationship between Korea, China, and Japan.

## **Frame II: Nation Branding through Culture**

"I used to think that Korea was a feudalistic, male-centered society" Ms. Hsieh said. "Now I don't have the same image as I had before. It seems like an open society, democratic" (Onishi, 2005).

*Korea Herald*: "Roll Over Godzilla, Korea Rules"

The most conspicuous effect the Korean wave has had on South Korea has unarguably been enhancing its overall national image. This can ultimately be seen as the country reinventing their national image through a process called nation branding, "a field of theory and practice which aims to measure, build and manage the reputation of countries" (Coltman, 1989, p. 17). Coltman (1989) states, "Nation branding applies approaches from commercial brand- management practice to countries in an effort to build, change or protect their international reputations. It is based on the observation that brand images of countries are just as important to their success in the global marketplace as those of products and services." Countries all over the world are constantly shaping and re-shaping their national identities as they compete with neighbors for power, influence and prestige.

As said before, "the appeal of Korean pop culture to Asians is especially meaningful for the Korean government since the country's national image has not always been positive in neighboring countries" (Doobo, 2007, p. 6). A *Korea Herald* article stated, "Overall, a nation's cultural power lies in attractiveness. And we remain at low levels in terms of appeal. Violent images and other social problems cannot be covered up. Therefore we need to change internally to upgrade our cultural power in the long-term" (Cho, 2004, para. 3). The Korean wave has undoubtedly had many positive implications for Korea, such as improving foreign relations, increasing tourism and an overall enhancement of Korea's image on the international stage.

Encouraged by the surge of popularity of Korean pop culture that spread all across Asia, the Korean government designated *Korea Herald*—"referring to the technology that helps turning the culture, including both cultural heritage and mass media- mediated culture, into commodities—as one of the six key technologies that should drive Korean economy" (Doobo, 2006, p. 13). As a result, the government created the Korean Culture and Content Agency (KOCCA) in 2001 under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The agency was supplied with an annual budget of \$90 million (Kim, 2007, p. 89).

Results of these actions helped Korea become a cultural powerhouse in Asia. An article from the *Korea Herald* triumphed, "The number of inbound tourists to Korea has topped over 7 million as of Nov. 23, setting a record high, according to the Korea Tourism Organization. The upbeat figure is all the more promising given that Korea's neighbors China and Japan saw a sharp decrease in the number of travelers. Moreover, this year is the first in nine years that Korea's tourism sector has recorded a surplus of \$320 million in the January-September period" (Yang, 2009, para. 7).

In regards to the Korean wave, culture is the most essential element in creating a national brand image. Improvement of national image through culture ultimately has a positive influence on other factors that make up national image as a whole, such as political, social and economic factors. The Korean wave

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fundamentally improved the nation's cultural image that had a halo effect that changed people's perception of Korea's political, economic and social images. The Asian news frame explicitly stressed the situated sense of nation branding of the Korean wave. This frame not only reformed the Korean national image but also allowed Seoul to become known as the capital of commodities across Asia.

### **Frame III: Cultural Imperialism and Backlash**

Many scholars and journalists have questioned reasons for the emergence of Korean popular culture as a force throughout Asia and speculated on its potential influence on the future of the region (Yang, 2009, para. 8). Clearly, it is proven that local audiences tend to be more attracted to cultural products that are similar to their own compared to unfamiliar ones. From this, it is not surprising that Korean TV dramas and films succeeded so well because Asian people feel closer to Korean culture than to Western one. Korean entertainers also appeal to Asian audiences as a result of this cultural familiarity, as well as having a similar appearance (Lee, 2007, p. 56).

As the Korean tidal wave developed and swept over the Asian region, a steady counter-argument began to emerge; these hostile attitudes are visibly depicted in news coverage. The Korean wave provoked a backlash among different Asian countries making them gradually less favorable to spread the Korean wave in their own nation and market. Main discontentment was shown in Japanese news articles presenting a hostile tone on Korea-related issues, while Chinese newspapers tended to criticize the proliferation of Korean dramas and Korean companies entering the Chinese market.

"Zhang Guoli, one of China's top television actors, branded the Korean Wave a 'cultural invasion' and urged his countrymen to buy Chinese products instead," Maliangkay discovered (Maliangkay, 2006, p. 1). In January 2006, China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television announced that "Korean dramas were to be cut by half, while the government of Taiwan, where Korean dramas are by far the most popular, was reportedly considering ban on foreign dramas" (Lee, 2007, p. 43). Similarly, in a response to the heated frenzy, a 2010 article from the *Korea Herald* newspaper of Singapore said, "South Korea's government does not see the Korean wave just as a way of spreading its culture, but also wants it to represent the entire Asian culture" (Wan, 2006, para. 2). Such a strong stance comes from the awareness of the Korean culture's strong impact on not only its nation, but the entire region as well.

The Asian media mainly argue that the Korean wave is not a bilateral relationship in terms of cultural exchange. The one-way influx of Korean pop culture through today's Korean wave reinforces an imbalance of cultural industry in the Asian region (Kim, 2007, p. 109). According to the *Korea Herald* "the Taiwanese government is considering a ban on the broadcast of foreign dramas prime time, a measure that seems to be directed against popular Korean dramas" (Kim, 2006, p. 2). The Chinese media began to urge the Korean government and industry to develop a reciprocal and trustful relationship with them and other Asian countries in order to sustain the Korean wave.

In a series of public announcements, press releases and media campaigns, Korea's main agenda for the 21st century was to secure a leading position in the global economy, primarily against Japan. Japan became very conscious of these intentions and made it publicly known to warn neighboring countries. As Kim (2006, para. 3) reported, "Japan, the international symposium delved into the wide spectrum of hallyu's implications, bearing the potential to develop into another form of cultural imperialism or pave the way for a multicultural community in Northeast, or East Asia." Kim further reported, "If the Korean wave distorts or encroaches on the vitality of other Asian cultures, it would be nothing short of an East Asian version of cultural imperialism. Then, the cultural phenomena would be a mechanism that would hinder peace and coexistence in the region" (2006, para. 5). Many experts said that to continue hallyu, a clear distinction in culture between Korea and other countries must be made.

The Asian media have made it clear that outcries against Korea, in the pursuit of cultural imperialism, have been made to protect each country's diversity and to guarantee the coexistence of cultures. In response to the anti-hallyu sentiments, Korea developed successive business strategies to help remedy the negative cries in the media. Choi Ki-young, an official at the Korea Foundation for Asian Culture Exchange stated, "Koreans know that our image exerts a lot of influence. There is a need to walk a fine line, particularly where Korean Wave or popularity of Korean pop culture, in other Asian countries concerned. We need to be aware that these are countries with pride in their own cultural heritage" (Kim, 2010, p. 1).

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It is obvious a cautious attitude toward the Korean wave is occurring in response to Japanese anti-Korean Wave fans and the Chinese and Taiwanese broadcasters. Another article from the *Korea Herald* in 2010 reported, “Companies in the Korean cultural industry have recently started looking seriously at international co-productions and seem eager to pursue co-productions which can enter into local markets easily and lessen antipathy towards foreign cultural products” (Kim, 2007, para. 5).

To conclude, concern for the issue of cultural imperialism must be addressed for a number of reasons. Ryoo explains, “The commercial drive of South Korean media industry indulge themselves in pursuing profit maximization by getting their products and services to the largest number of consumer, not only in South Korea but also overseas, and this kind of capitalist activity has been justified in the name of national interest” (2007, p. 148). Realizing and taking action towards feelings of discontentment is vital for continuance of the Korean wave.

## V. Conclusion

The Korean wave has fundamentally changed the perception and overall national image of South Korea. Initially, the Korean wave was merely a cultural phenomenon to a specific region; however, the growth and impact far exceeded expectations by influencing the whole of Asia. Stemming from a deep-rooted ancient heritage and a powerful cultural grip on its people, Korea blossomed by developing in prosperity, democracy and liberalism. Today, Korea is arguably one of the greatest national success stories of the 20th century.

This paper sought to analyze the Korean wave and its implications of cultural influence on neighboring countries. Furthermore, this study attempted to look at the Korean wave not just as a phenomenon in its own right, but also considered the impact of this phenomenon on perceptions of culture and identity by comparatively analyzing U.S., Asian, and Korean news coverage.

The first conclusion was made by comparing Korea and its two major East Asian counterparts, Japan and China. All news coverage framed the Korean wave as commercial driven phenomena and a victory from a nationalistic perspective. Because these three nations each have their own sensitive historical tie with one another, it was interesting to make the correlation that journalists portrayed the Korean wave in a distinct manner according to their political, historical and economical relationship with one another.

A second conclusion was made about how the Korean wave has contributed to enhancing South Korea’s national image. The Asian news frame explicitly stressed a sense of nation branding of the Korean wave. Since the start of the national phenomenon, the Korean government played an active role by aiding the Korean media in publicizing Korean popular culture around the world. This global expansion penetrated and permeated various mediums of communication around the world. Because of this, the success of the Korean wave can be attributed to it being highly publicized in the media throughout the world.

A final conclusion was made keeping in mind the framing process and the relationship between the journalistic news coverage and the public’s news interpretations. The Korean wave peaked in 2005 making Korea a national powerhouse in the Asian region. Neighboring Asian countries soon began to portray hostile attitudes and growing sentiment through news coverage. This backlash made clear the influence of cross-cultural differences on national audiences’ interpretation of the news. Korean news frames indicated that these growing attitudes of discontentment made Koreans wonder whether the sustainability of the Korean wave had caused them to develop successive business strategies to help remedy the backlash.

It is still too early to predict the future of the Korean wave based simply on the recent trends in the media. As Park puts it, the Korean wave has crossed many boundaries (e.g., territorial, political, cultural, theoretical) and is in the process of constructing new kinds of relations across borders (2006).

“People say that hallyu is gone. What they don’t realize is that hallyu has now spread to become part of people’s lives and economy. Hallyu has ultimately come to embody the Korean lifestyle”(Kim, 2010).

*Korea Herald*: “Next Wave of Hallyu to Show Korean Spirit”

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