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CULTURAL STUDIES AND *HALLYU* PHENOMENON: UMA ENTREVISTA COM INGYU OH

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Virgine: First of all, I would like to thank you for agreeing to do the interview. It is an honor to interview you.

Could you share a bit about your academic journey and what led you to choose the field of Cultural Studies, with a particular focus on *Hallyu*? How have your academic experiences outside of South Korea shaped your perspective on cultural industries and, specifically, the Korean Wave?

Ingyu Oh: My academic journey is deeply interdisciplinary, grounded in sociology, political economy, and organization theory, which naturally led to my engagement with cultural studies and *Hallyu*. Initially trained in comparative political economy at the University of Oregon, my early research on South Korean chaebol and Japanese keiretsu provided a foundation for understanding global corporate structures, cultural commodification, and the systemic forces shaping media industries. Over time, this evolved into a broader critique of the political and economic dimensions of cultural production, particularly within the global spread of Korean pop culture.

A pivotal moment that sparked my interest in *Hallyu* came during my tenure in Japan from 2001 to 2005. I witnessed firsthand the first wave of Korean pop culture among Japanese women following the mega success of *Winter Sonata* and *Changummu no Tsikai* (Jewel in the Palace). What intrigued me most was the paradox: these same Japanese women who had traditionally been critical of cultural imports from Korea, once Japan's colony, were now embracing Korean television dramas with fervor. This phenomenon raised profound questions about historical memory, cultural reconciliation, and the emotional allure of *Hallyu*, compelling me to investigate deeper.

My international academic experiences, spanning institutions in the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Turkey, Japan, and Korea, have profoundly shaped my perspective on cultural industries and the Korean Wave. Exposure to Western media theories, cultural hybridization models, and global consumption patterns allowed me to analyze *Hallyu* beyond a nation-centric

framework, positioning it within transnational fandom, migration studies, and political branding. My time at Korea University's RIKS Center for *Hallyu* Studies deepened this approach, incorporating gender dynamics, commercialization trends, and fandom participation into my critiques.

Moreover, my editorial leadership in journals such as *Asia Pacific Business Review* and *Culture and Empathy* has positioned me as a key voice in shaping academic discourse on pop culture industries. By mobilizing international scholars, especially from Japan, Korea, the United States, and New Zealand, I have fostered research that connects cultural production to global political economy, corporate strategy, and societal change.

Ultimately, my work in *Hallyu* studies is not just about pop culture—it is an extension of my broader intellectual pursuit: critiquing systemic structures, understanding cultural globalization, and exploring how media industries shape identity and political behavior. My multilingual proficiency and ability to engage across disciplines make me uniquely suited to advancing these discussions in both academia and public discourse.

Virgine: What differences do you observe in how *Hallyu* is studied within South Korea compared to academic approaches abroad? How do you assess *Hallyu*'s capacity to adapt to these transformations in the digital cultural landscape?

Ingyu Oh: Korean scholars tend to rely on Anglo-American or French theoretical frameworks to explain *Hallyu*, often emphasizing nationalism or adopting overly critical perspectives that fail to recognize fundamental aspects of its success. One key oversight is their limited engagement with the fact that women constitute the majority of *Hallyu* fans. This gendered dimension plays a crucial role in the Korean Wave's global reception, yet it is frequently underexplored in domestic scholarship. The focus on nationalism sometimes leads to an overestimation of state influence, neglecting the role of private

media companies and international distribution networks in shaping *Hallyu*'s trajectory.

Western scholars, on the other hand, apply their own academic frameworks without deep engagement with Korean-language sources or industry insiders. Due to language barriers, they primarily rely on English translations and external interpretations, which often result in oversimplifications. A common misconception is the assumption that the South Korean government was the driving force behind *Hallyu*'s success. This perspective overlooks the pivotal role played by Japanese and US distributors who facilitated the global reach of Korean pop culture. Many Western scholars visit Korea briefly, conducting limited fieldwork, yet they claim comprehensive knowledge of *Hallyu*. As a result, their research frequently lacks nuance and fails to grasp the complexity of its industry and audience dynamics.

The main differences between Korean and Western scholarship on *Hallyu* stem from their respective approaches to industry dynamics, language barriers, and audience engagement. Korean scholars have direct access to primary sources but often frame *Hallyu* within nationalistic narratives, whereas Western scholars impose external theories without fully understanding the internal structures of the Korean pop culture industry. Both perspectives have gaps that need to be addressed through interdisciplinary, multilingual research. Future studies must move beyond ideological biases and nation-centric frameworks to acknowledge the transnational nature of *Hallyu*. A more accurate approach would integrate insights from media ethnography, cultural hybridity, and the lived experiences of fans, industry professionals, and distributors. Only then can *Hallyu* research reach a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the forces that drive its global appeal.

Hallyu has demonstrated an exceptional capacity to adapt to the digital cultural landscape, evolving alongside technological advancements rather than being constrained by them. Unlike many traditional entertainment industries that struggled to transition from physical to digital distribution, *Hallyu*

embraced digital transformation early, particularly through platforms like YouTube, social media, and streaming services. This adaptability stems from the industry's fluid production models, tech-savvy marketing strategies, and deep engagement with virtual fandoms.

One of the key reasons *Hallyu* thrives in the digital era is its integration of data-driven strategies. Entertainment companies use algorithm-based content promotion, ensuring that K-pop videos reach global audiences efficiently. YouTube's recommendation system, coupled with fans' collective streaming efforts, amplifies visibility far beyond conventional advertising. Digital interaction, including live broadcasts, virtual concerts, and real-time engagement on platforms like Twitter and TikTok, allows idols to sustain strong global connections. This continuous accessibility maintains fan loyalty and ensures momentum, even in competitive entertainment environments.

Beyond distribution, *Hallyu* has successfully adapted to audience behavior shifts in digital spaces. Fans are no longer passive consumers but active participants, shaping trends through viral challenges, reaction videos, and digital activism. Korean entertainment companies recognize this shift, tailoring their strategies to empower fans as co-creators, fostering organic promotion through user-generated content.

Virtual fandom has also transformed the traditional fan experience, creating borderless communities where interactions are no longer limited to physical concerts or regional broadcasts. *Hallyu's* expansion into metaverse projects, NFT-based fan engagement, and interactive AI experiences signals its readiness to evolve further as digital spaces become increasingly immersive.

Ultimately, *Hallyu's* ability to leverage digital innovation as an extension of its cultural influence ensures its ongoing global presence. Rather than resisting change, the industry continuously refines its approach, making digital transformation an integral part of its identity. This adaptability positions *Hallyu* at the forefront of the entertainment industry's future, where technology-driven cultural production will continue shaping global fandoms.

Virgine: In your view, what are the main differences between how K-pop is consumed domestically in South Korea versus by international audiences? Furthermore, how do the management models employed by entertainment agencies affect both artistic creativity and the physical and mental well-being of performers?

Ingyu Oh: K-pop is consumed differently in South Korea compared to international markets due to variations in cultural familiarity, fan engagement, and media accessibility. In South Korea, K-pop is embedded within the broader domestic entertainment industry, and audiences often have a deeper understanding of its inner workings. Korean fans tend to evaluate idols critically based on their vocal and dance skills, public behavior, and adherence to local social expectations. They are familiar with the trainee system, the influence of entertainment companies, and the competitive nature of music show rankings. For domestic fans, K-pop is one option among many entertainment choices, and while it is popular, it can also face stigma or be viewed as youth-oriented or superficial by older generations.

Internationally, K-pop is often seen as a unique and exotic cultural product that represents Korean identity and global soft power. Many international fans discover K-pop through social media, YouTube, or streaming platforms, and their engagement is more digital and global in nature. These fans frequently participate in streaming campaigns, fan art, fan fiction, and trending hashtags to promote their favorite idols. While they may not fully understand the Korean language, international fans form strong emotional connections with idols, often valuing their efforts to communicate in other languages and their perceived authenticity. Language barriers are mediated through subtitles and fan translations, which sometimes create new interpretations or deepen para-social relationships.

A key demographic feature of K-pop fandom—both domestically and globally—is that it is overwhelmingly female. This gendered nature of fandom has broader implications for consumption patterns beyond music. K-pop often acts as a gateway to other elements of Korean lifestyle and beauty culture. In South Korea, young women who are fans may follow idols' fashion and makeup styles closely, often purchasing products endorsed by idols or featured in idol-related media. Some even pursue cosmetic procedures to emulate beauty standards popularized by celebrities, though these decisions are shaped by complex local social pressures and beauty norms.

Internationally, the influence of K-pop extends into the global spread of Korean beauty (K-beauty), fashion, and food. Female fans in particular are often at the forefront of this trend. Many adopt Korean skincare routines, buy cosmetics promoted by idols, or explore Korean fashion through online retailers. While cosmetic surgery is less common abroad, there is growing interest in procedures associated with the "Korean look," especially in regions with active beauty influencer communities. Korean food, too, benefits from this cultural spillover, as fans often become interested in trying dishes featured in K-pop content, such as *mukbang* videos or variety shows.

Female fans thus play a crucial role in the global diffusion of South Korean cultural products. Their engagement is not limited to music but expands into beauty consumption, lifestyle choices, and even tourism. While Korean fans are more embedded in the domestic cultural context and may approach these products with a blend of aspiration and critique, international fans often consume them with enthusiasm, curiosity, and a desire to feel closer to the world of K-pop idols. This gendered and affective dimension of fandom significantly shapes the global success of K-pop and the broader Korean Wave. The management models employed by entertainment agencies in K-pop have a profound impact on both artistic creativity and the physical and mental well-being of performers. K-pop's creative output is structured around strategic outsourcing, where songwriting is often delegated to Swedish, UK, and

American composers, while choreography remains under the control of Korean creators. This approach ensures that K-pop maintains a competitive edge in global markets by incorporating Western musical trends while preserving distinct Korean performance aesthetics. However, this system also limits the autonomy of idols in shaping their own artistic identity. Unlike Western artists who frequently co-write and produce their own work, K-pop idols are primarily performers rather than creators, which can lead to a sense of creative confinement and limited self-expression.

Beyond creativity, the industry's rigorous idol training system and competitive selection process subject performers to immense psychological and physical strain. This system, which often lasts for several years, demands relentless practice, strict diet control, and conformity to highly curated images dictated by entertainment agencies. Even after debut, idols face unsustainable schedules, often performing under extreme exhaustion to meet promotional demands. The emphasis on perfection leads to physical injuries from overwork, vocal strain, and long-term stress-related health issues.

Mentally, K-pop idols are expected to maintain flawless public personas, adhering to a level of fan service that includes constant engagement through social media, live streams, and personal interactions. This expectation leaves little room for personal freedom and exacerbates issues such as intrusive *sasaeng* fandom, where obsessive fans invade idols' privacy, sometimes even camping outside their homes to harass them. The pressure of unrealistic public expectations, industry exploitation, and lack of agency over their careers has contributed to severe mental health crises, including depression, anxiety, and, in tragic cases, suicide.

However, melancholia and emotional distress have also been recognized as sources of artistic creativity. Many idols channel their struggles into their performances, conveying deep emotional resonance in their artistry. This phenomenon is not unique to K-pop but a universal experience among global artists in demanding entertainment industries. Yet, while pain and artistic

expression often coexist, the K-pop system offers little institutional support for mental health, placing the burden of resilience on individuals rather than providing structural safeguards.

Ultimately, the highly controlled management models in K-pop maximize commercial success at the cost of personal well-being and artistic freedom. While idols achieve global fame, they do so under an industry framework that prioritizes marketability over sustainability. If the industry wishes to evolve, it must rethink the balance between discipline, creativity, and human dignity to ensure that idols are not only celebrated but also protected.

Virgine: To what extent do the narratives embedded in Korean dramas and popular music reflect or engage with internal social tensions, such as economic inequality, hyper-competitiveness in education, and labor precarity?

Ingyu Oh: Korean dramas and K-pop partially reflect internal social tensions such as economic inequality, hyper-competitiveness in education, and labor precarity, but they tend to do so through emotionally stylized and often gendered lenses that offer symbolic rather than structural engagement. While certain dramas—like *Sky Castle*, *Itaewon Class*, or *Squid Game*—do foreground systemic problems, including class stratification and the pressure cooker education system, these are the exception rather than the norm. The most commercially successful K-dramas typically center on personal growth, romantic destiny, and gendered emotional healing, especially from the perspective of female audiences. This reflects what I term “female universalism,” a cultural logic that recenters the narrative world around the desires, fantasies, and emotional well-being of women, often using the concept of gendered melancholia—alienated, vulnerable, or fantastical—as a narrative device.

Female empowerment in Korean popular culture is frequently expressed not through direct challenges to social structures, but through the promise of

emotional fulfillment and personal agency. K-dramas tend to emphasize female subjectivity by allowing female characters to navigate and ultimately transform emotionally unavailable men, often coded as non-human (goblins, aliens, time-travelers) or symbolically inaccessible (North Korean soldiers, chaebol heirs). These men are idealized as pure and devoted, offering unconditional love, which contrasts sharply with real-life expectations of men in Korean society. This narrative device functions as a form of escapism that allows female viewers to delay marriage and motherhood, symbolically justifying it by holding out for a romantic ideal—one that aligns with South Korea's ongoing fertility crisis and women's declining interest in traditional family roles.

K-pop similarly centers female empowerment, particularly in the global success of girl groups such as BLACKPINK, NewJeans, and TWICE. While male idol groups still dominate in some metrics, girl groups have become cultural icons precisely because they project a form of accessible yet aspirational femininity. They often emphasize themes like confidence, self-love, and resilience. Yet these messages are packaged within a framework of romance and emotional purity, not political agency. Songs frequently depict women as subjects of love—both giving and receiving—in ways that affirm traditional emotional roles even as they reframe them in modern, self-directed terms.

What's often missing in both K-dramas and K-pop is a direct confrontation with the structural roots of inequality or labor exploitation. Labor precarity, youth unemployment, and toxic work culture may be the background noise of some storylines, but they are rarely treated as the core problem. Instead, personal transformation, emotional redemption, and romantic success are positioned as the solutions to broader societal issues. Even when economic inequality is depicted, as in *The Heirs* or *Crash Landing on You*, it is often romanticized or resolved through personal relationships rather than systemic critique.

In this sense, Korean popular culture offers emotional recognition of social tensions but deflects direct political engagement. It provides emotional relief

and a gendered reordering of value—placing women's emotional experiences and desires at the center—but it does not directly challenge the systems that produce economic and existential insecurity. Rather, it offers romantic escapism and gendered melancholy as symbolic responses to structural crisis.

Virgine: Could you elaborate on the role of the South Korean government in promoting *Hallyu*? Which cultural policies do you consider particularly effective or, conversely, problematic? Moreover, to what extent does the government shape the public image of K-pop and Korean popular culture to serve geopolitical interests, particularly in relation to China, Japan, and the United States?

Ingyu Oh: The South Korean government's role in promoting *Hallyu* (the Korean Wave) is paradoxical and often misrepresented. While today it is common to hear that *Hallyu* is a product of national soft power strategy, the historical and structural reality is far more ambivalent. For much of the 20th century, the government was more suppressive than supportive of popular culture. Under authoritarian regimes, cultural expression—especially that which suggested individualism, Western influence, or criticism of social norms—was censored or heavily regulated. Japanese cultural imports were banned until the late 1990s due to colonial memory and nationalistic sentiment, and popular culture was often dismissed as morally corrupting or politically dangerous.

It was only under President Kim Dae-Jung in the late 1990s that a shift occurred. In a surprising move, Kim both allowed the importation of Japanese pop culture and encouraged Korea's cultural industries to expand globally. This period coincided with the financial crisis of 1997, which forced Korea to diversify its economy and embrace new sectors. While Japanese manga, anime, and games flooded the Korean market, Korean dramas and music started to enter Japan, catching both governments off guard. This unexpected cultural exchange revealed the transnational potential of Korean pop culture,

especially as it appealed to female consumers in Japan and other parts of Asia.

Despite the later narrative that positions the Korean government as the architect of *Hallyu*, in reality, its early involvement in K-pop and K-drama was minimal. The government provided little financial support for production or distribution. Instead, it focused its resources on promoting traditional culture, such as Taekwondo, Korean language education, and heritage arts—areas largely irrelevant to the global success of *Hallyu*. Even today, much of the global reach of K-pop and K-dramas is due to private investment, global platforms like YouTube, Netflix, and TikTok, and the transnational labor of fans, rather than state funding.

Where the government has been active is in attempting to shape the public image of *Hallyu* once it became globally recognized. In particular, the state seeks to frame K-pop and K-drama as part of Korea's soft power arsenal, using them to distinguish Korean identity from China and Japan. This is geopolitically strategic: by promoting Korean culture as modern, dynamic, and exportable—unlike China's state-controlled industry or Japan's declining global influence—the government aims to elevate Korea's global standing. Yet this effort is often undercut by the fact that Korean pop culture borrows heavily from both American and Japanese sources. K-dramas resemble Japanese shojo manga in structure, themes, and character design, while K-pop is built on a foundation of American hip-hop, R & B, EDM, and idol training systems adapted from J-pop. There is also a clear disconnect between the government's self-image and the actual audience of *Hallyu*. Korean policymakers often portray *Hallyu* as targeting elite Western audiences—particularly white male cultural gatekeepers in North America and Europe—while downplaying or even ignoring its core consumer base: women of relatively lower social status, whether young girls in the case of K-pop or mature women in the case of K-dramas. This denial reflects a gendered and classed misunderstanding of how cultural soft power operates. The affective labor and spending of female fans—

through streaming, merchandise, social media engagement, and fan events—are what sustain and expand *Hallyu*, yet they are rarely acknowledged in official discourse.

Furthermore, the state's lack of investment in actual pop culture production reveals a deeper contradiction. While the government is eager to brand Korea as a cultural powerhouse, it contributes little to the creative infrastructure that sustains this success. Profits are largely captured by tech platforms like YouTube, Spotify, and Netflix, while the burden of production falls on precarious cultural workers—idols, trainees, screenwriters, and independent producers—who often operate under harsh labor conditions.

In sum, the Korean government's role in *Hallyu* is more reactive than generative. It capitalizes on the global popularity of Korean pop culture to advance geopolitical narratives but has historically contributed little to its creative development. Its cultural policies are more effective in branding and diplomacy than in actual cultural support, and its efforts to reshape the public image of *Hallyu* are often misaligned with the gendered, transnational realities of its consumption and production. This contradiction between image and infrastructure remains one of the most problematic aspects of Korea's cultural policy.

Virgine: From your perspective, is there a structural tension between state control, commercial interests, and artistic freedom within the Korean entertainment industry? How does this tension manifest in cultural production practices?

Ingyu Oh: There is indeed a structural tension within the Korean entertainment industry, but it does not follow the traditional triangular model of state control, commercial interests, and artistic freedom. In the case of *Hallyu*, the Korean state neither initiates nor effectively regulates cultural production. Unlike in authoritarian or heavily centralized cultural systems, the Korean government

exercises minimal direct control over what gets produced in K-pop or K-dramas. It lacks both the policy mechanisms and financial leverage to shape the content of these industries, which are largely driven by private companies, foreign investors, and transnational market logic.

In K-pop, music production is often outsourced to Swedish, American, and UK producers, while idol groups are designed with global markets in mind. The result is a commercial product that is less a reflection of Korean artistic vision and more a curated, internationally palatable entertainment commodity. K-dramas, similarly, are increasingly produced or funded by global streaming platforms like Netflix, which seek content that appeals to broad, transnational audiences. Much of the creative inspiration for K-dramas comes from WebToons, a uniquely Korean digital form, but also from Japanese shojo and shonen manga. The state neither censors nor intervenes in these adaptations, and its cultural institutions have little say over narrative content or ideological messaging.

Where the tension does arise is between commercial interests and artistic autonomy. Because the Korean entertainment industry is structured around profit maximization and global reach, artistic decisions are often subordinated to branding strategies, product placement, and fan service. K-dramas frequently include obvious in-show advertising—from makeup and fashion brands to convenience store chains—while K-pop idols are often contractually bound to multiple sponsorship deals that influence their public personas and even the themes of their songs. This commercial logic can restrict the range of topics artists and creators are willing to explore, discouraging controversial or socially critical content in favor of what is emotionally safe, visually polished, and internationally marketable.

This has led to a curious situation where artistic freedom is not primarily constrained by state censorship, but by the demands of global capitalism and platform-driven aesthetics. Fans may desire more authentic or locally resonant content, while Korean creators may want to push boundaries, but both are

often sidelined by the imperatives of transnational commercial viability. Ironically, the creative input of Western songwriters or the influence of Japanese manga can offer more room for innovation than Korea's domestic commercial structures, which are often conservative, risk-averse, and hyper-focused on profitability.

Therefore, the core tension in *Hallyu's* cultural production lies not in a three-way struggle between state, market, and art, but in a two-way imbalance between commercial imperatives and artistic intent, with the state largely absent. The result is a cultural industry that is globally dynamic but internally conflicted, where creativity is enabled by transnational flows yet constrained by the structural dominance of commercialism.

Virgine: We have witnessed an increasing involvement of K-pop groups and their fan communities in political and social causes, from supporting movements like Black Lives Matter to engaging in domestic political criticism. In your analysis, does this represent a new form of political engagement within popular culture, or is it, at least partially, a calculated marketing strategy aimed at image management?

Ingyu Oh: The increasing visibility of K-pop fandom in political and social causes may appear, at first glance, to represent a new form of digital-era political engagement within popular culture. However, upon closer analysis, this phenomenon is more complex and less politically transformative than it may seem. While moments like the global participation of K-pop fans in the Black Lives Matter movement attracted international attention, these actions were largely reactive, often initiated by other activist groups or online social pressures, rather than being organically driven by fandoms themselves. The participation of K-pop fans in such causes does not reflect a deep-rooted politicization of fandom, but rather an ad hoc convergence of image management, identity performance, and community dynamics.

The primary orientation of most K-pop fandoms remains cultural rather than political. Fans are more invested in learning Korean, consuming Korean media, traveling to Korea, and building strong intra-fandom communities. For many, especially women and LGBTQ+ fans from regions where freedom of expression is constrained—such as conservative Muslim societies—Korea is not a political ideal but an emotional and symbolic homeland. Their engagement with *Hallyu* is often a personal or social quest for safety, intimacy, and belonging, rather than a conscious political stance. The effort to visit Korea, despite familial or cultural restrictions, is their most significant collective action—motivated not by ideology, but by desire, imagination, and cultural identification.

In this context, fan activism is better understood as a form of affective mobilization, not political awakening. Even when K-pop fandoms engage in actions that appear political—such as disrupting far-right hashtags or organizing donations—these are often moments of moral signaling, social trend-following, or attempts to defend the image of their idols and their fan communities. Image management plays a central role. Fandoms are quick to defend idols like BTS even in the face of serious controversies, such as accusations of anti-Japanese sentiment or the use of Nazi-inspired imagery, suggesting that their political engagement is highly selective and often subordinated to reputational concerns.

Moreover, K-pop idols and their management agencies are generally cautious and politically neutral in their public messaging, avoiding controversy to protect commercial interests. Any engagement with social causes is typically carefully curated and marketed to enhance their global brand, especially in Western liberal markets. This calculated positioning feeds back into fandom behavior, encouraging performative activism that aligns with the idols' sanitized image, rather than fostering critical or oppositional political thought. In the domestic Korean context, political actors have started to recognize the affective and mobilizing potential of *Hallyu* fandoms. Cases like Lee Jae-myung's campaign or the online mobilization against President Yoon reveal

that fan communities can be strategically targeted and instrumentalized. However, these are not organic movements arising from the fandoms themselves. Rather, political forces tap into the emotional intensity and digital coordination of fan groups to serve their own agendas. This dynamic resembles manipulation more than genuine political engagement.

In short, while K-pop fandoms have occasionally participated in political or activist causes, it is premature and misleading to frame this as a new form of popular political engagement. Their core activities remain rooted in consumption, cultural exploration, and emotional community-building. When political behavior emerges, it is often reactive, symbolic, and instrumentalized—driven more by affect, image management, or external influence than by ideological conviction or structural critique.

Virgine: What emerging trends in Korean popular culture do you consider most relevant for the coming years? Additionally, which underexplored topics, gaps, or methodological approaches within *Hallyu* studies do you believe hold the most promise for future scholarly research?

Ingyu Oh: Korean popular culture is evolving in ways that will redefine its global influence over the coming years. One of the most relevant trends is the deepening interactivity between idols and fans through digital platforms, expanding virtual fandom engagement beyond traditional consumption. The integration of AI-driven personalization, real-time engagement through live streaming, and emerging metaverse applications are reshaping how audiences connect with Korean pop culture, allowing for immersive fan experiences that blur the boundaries between performer and spectator. Additionally, K-pop and K-dramas are increasingly adapting narratives to global audiences, moving beyond Korea-centric storytelling to incorporate themes resonating across diverse cultures.

However, significant gaps in Hallyu scholarship remain. Fandom studies must move away from country-based approaches, which often misinterpret the motivations of K-pop fans by assuming they operate within national cultural paradigms. Instead, scholars should employ comparative methodologies, ensuring analyses are either qualitatively robust or statistically significant, rather than anecdotal or geographically isolated. Current research disproportionately focuses on Anglo-American and European fans, while Asian fandoms—especially in Korea, Japan, and the United States—are often overlooked despite being primary drivers of *Hallyu*'s global success. Chinese and Southeast Asian fans receive some attention, but their engagement is rarely studied in comparison with Japan and the United States, despite their substantial influence on industry trends.

Another underexplored question is why Hallyu overwhelmingly attracts female fans while Japanese pop culture appeals to both men and women. This gendered dimension needs deeper analysis, particularly in relation to cultural psychology, aspirational identities, and emotional investment in celebrity narratives. Research should examine how Japanese female fans set early trends in *Hallyu* fandom, influencing subsequent waves of engagement from American audiences, and how this trajectory differs from fandom growth in other regions.

Future *Hallyu* studies must embrace scientifically acceptable methodologies, ensuring rigor in cross-regional comparisons, media reception analysis, and socio-cultural impact assessments. By shifting toward data-driven and ethnographic approaches, scholars can uncover deeper insights into the global mechanisms of *Hallyu* fandom, moving beyond simplistic interpretations that fail to capture the complexity of its transnational appeal.

Virgine: While the K-pop industry appears heavily focused on Asian and North American markets, what barriers do you perceive that prevent countries like Brazil from being considered strategic markets? Furthermore, in your opinion,

what aspects of Brazilian culture could foster more meaningful and productive dialogues with Hallyu?

Ingyu Oh: The K-pop industry's heavy focus on Asian and North American markets is largely driven by economic considerations and symbolic capital. Japan remains the top *Hallyu* market due to its high consumer spending power and willingness to purchase albums, merchandise, and concert tickets at premium prices. North America, particularly the United States, is attractive because of its global media infrastructure, including Netflix, YouTube, iTunes, and other distribution platforms that enhance visibility. The United States also provides symbolic validation through institutions like Billboard, Grammy Awards, and Hollywood, reinforcing an artist's legitimacy in international entertainment. Brazil, despite having the world's ninth-largest music market, has not yet been considered a strategic *Hallyu* market because of several barriers. First, spending habits differ, with Brazilian consumers less likely to pay high prices for K-pop albums and merchandise compared to Japanese or North American fans. Additionally, music consumption in Brazil is dominated by local genres, making K-pop's penetration more difficult without significant industry adaptation. The lack of major *Hallyu*-focused distribution channels similar to Netflix or Billboard also limits exposure, making it harder for Korean entertainment companies to justify large-scale investment.

However, Brazil offers rich opportunities for collaboration that could foster more meaningful connections with *Hallyu*. The emotional depth of Brazilian music, particularly tango and ballads, shares a sentimentality with Korean pop ballads, presenting a chance for fusion projects that resonate with both cultures. Co-productions in dramas and films focusing on romance and scenic landscapes could expand *Hallyu*'s presence by integrating Brazilian storytelling elements into Korean narratives. Additionally, Korean and Japanese immigration experiences in Brazil provide compelling themes for cinematic and artistic exploration, bridging historical and cultural ties through shared heritage.

To establish Brazil as a stronger *Hallyu* market, Korean entertainment companies must develop targeted strategies that recognize the country's unique media landscape. This could include localized content collaborations, strategic partnerships with Brazilian entertainment platforms, and culturally relevant marketing that highlights the emotional connections between Brazilian and Korean artistic traditions. While Brazil may not yet match Japan or the United States in market influence, it holds untapped potential for deeper cultural exchange and industry expansion.

Virgine: Finally, what advice would you offer to young researchers interested in Cultural Studies, particularly those focusing on Asian popular cultures and the *Hallyu* phenomenon?

Ingyu Oh: For young researchers interested in Cultural Studies, especially those focusing on Asian popular cultures and the *Hallyu* phenomenon, the first and most essential step is to immerse themselves in the language and culture firsthand. Understanding Korean, Japanese, or Chinese in depth allows researchers to engage with primary sources, industry reports, and fan discourse without relying on translations, which often introduce biases or distort nuances. Cultural literacy goes beyond language proficiency—it requires firsthand exposure to media, everyday interactions, and local contexts that shape popular culture narratives.

Mastery of academic English is equally important. While fluency in Asian languages provides access to raw materials, English remains the dominant language in global academia. Researchers must develop the ability to articulate complex ideas, write scholarly papers, and engage critically with international discourse. Without strong English-language skills, their work may struggle to gain recognition beyond regional scholarship.

A solid foundation in theories and methodologies is crucial. Many early-career researchers adopt cultural studies frameworks without fully understanding the

strengths and limitations of different approaches. Critical thinking requires familiarity with media theory, sociology, political economy, and interdisciplinary methods. They must move beyond descriptive analysis and embrace comparative studies that apply rigorous qualitative or statistically significant methodologies. This ensures their research is both theoretically grounded and empirically valid.

Finally, scholars should never disconnect from raw data and everyday cultural materials. Popular culture evolves rapidly, especially in the digital age, and relying solely on academic publications can lead to outdated conclusions. Staying engaged with media platforms, fan communities, industry trends, and direct observations keeps their analysis relevant and informed. Fieldwork, digital ethnography, and continuous interaction with shifting fan dynamics ensure that research reflects the reality of cultural consumption rather than preconceived notions or theoretical assumptions.