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ARTICLE

Commentary: Can the Korean Wave Save the World?

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Abstract

This commentary for the *Signs and Society* special issue, "Localizing hallyu: The semiotics of the Korean wave in media and discourse," considers how the contributions reveal the tensions underlying the way signs of the Korean wave are recontextualized through the material and embodied engagement of participants along pathways of its global circulation. It suggests that a transnational analysis of the Korean wave can serve as a useful laboratory for understanding the socially transformative power of semiotic practice.

Keywords: Korean wave; popular culture; social transformation; South Korea; transnationalism

The success of the 2025 animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters*, which quickly became the most-watched original title in Netflix's history with more than 300 million views worldwide, may be seen not only as evidence of the global dominance of the Korean wave but also as a declaration of its aspirations—the Korean wave not only seeks to entertain, but to save the world. The film's premise is in fact unabashed in this regard. The titular trio of K-pop idols, the Huntrix, protect the world from soul-eating demons not simply through their skills at martial arts and exorcism, but through their song and voice; in other words, the fact that the protagonists are K-pop idols is not simply a contrivance but central to their identity as demon slayers. In an early scene, it is revealed that they are only the latest descendants of generations of demon hunters who each represent different musical genres characteristic of their times, from *gut*, the traditional rituals of Korean shamans (or *mudang*), to 1940s' swing and jazz and 1990s' pop. But the Huntrix are also suggested to be the most powerful of them all; they are on the verge of ending the evil Gwima's encroachment upon our world once and for all, something their predecessors have not been able to achieve—a quite lofty claim for the power of 21st century K-pop.

Such aspirational visions of K-pop and the Korean wave, of course, do not align well with the realities on the ground. While *K-Pop Demon Hunters* was basking in

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success, the group NewJeans, often identified as the most innovative new K-pop act in recent years, was losing its legal battle against their management company Ador, a subsidiary of the entertainment behemoth Hybe. NewJeans had sought to cut their ties with the company on grounds of workplace harassment and unfair treatment, and to perform independently by rebranding themselves as NJZ, but these attempts were crushed in court which ruled that they must carry out their remaining contract with Ador. However, Ador also singled out one of the group's five members, Danielle, for bearing "significant responsibility for causing this dispute and for NewJeans' departure and delayed return" (Abraham 2025), terminating her contract and filing a 30 million US Dollars lawsuit against her. Such tactics are highly reminiscent of the punitive legal processes Korean corporations often brandish to divide and squash labor unions, which serves as a reminder that K-pop idols, despite their glamor and influence, have more in common with exploited laborers than with magical protectors of the world. A New York Times article reviewing the unfolding of events noted the ironic contrast with *K-Pop Demon Hunters*' grand vision of K-pop through an article titled "In 2025, K-pop battled its demons" (Caramanica 2025), pondering the true nature of the demons haunting the world of the Korean wave.

To its credit, though, *K-Pop Demon Hunters* ultimately attributes the power to save the world not to the Huntrix, but to their fans. The film's key plot element is a spiritual shield that covers the world from demons, the *honmoon* (presumably "soul gate"), which is depicted as being generated not by the voices of the demon hunters, but the resonances they create in the hearts of ordinary people. Represented as a light glowing from inside of one's chest, those resonances are invoked by the idols' voices, but derive their true energy from the souls of listeners—or fans. In this sense, a scene that better parallels the world-saving heroics of the Huntrix may be found in contemporary sites of political protests in Korea, where K-pop serves as a key mediator for new forms of self-expression and solidarity, than in the political economic production pipeline of the K-pop industry.

One such scene may be the mass protests calling for the impeachment of South Korean president Yoon Suk Yeol, who had declared martial law in an act of insurrection on 3 December, 2024. In the protests, which continued over the cold winter months until Yoon's eventual removal from office on 4 April 2025, K-pop had a penetrating presence, serving as a uniting force for participants from diverse walks of life, from labor unions and farmers to young women, disabled people, and sexual minorities, all of whom were marginalized during Yoon's presidency due to his oppressive right-wing politics. Protestors danced and sang along with K-pop tunes blasting out through loud speakers, from Girls' Generation's *Into the New World*, which was already well established as an anthem for protest for some years, to Day6's *Time of Our Life*, which accompanied the protestors' celebration at the news of Yoon's impeachment. Young Korean fans also brought their cherished K-pop light sticks, LED flashlights distinctively designed for each idol group that are used by fans at concerns to cheer on their idols (also referenced in Go and Garinto, this issue). The light sticks became a salient feature of the protests, leading even older participants previously uninterested in K-pop to acquire them (Lee 2024). Evolving from the hand-held candles that lighted the mass protests in Korea during the first two decades of 21st century, these light sticks came to index not simply fandom but a new mode of political engagement where diverse

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identities and experiences are brought together in a common vision towards solidarity and equality (Choi 2025; Yoo et al. 2025). One notable example was the confrontation at Namtaeryeong, where the tractor march of farmers who were attempting to enter Seoul to demonstrate against Yoon and his agricultural policies was blocked by police barricades on 21 December. Informed of the unfolding events through social media, light stick-wielding youths joined the farmers in masses, forming an unlikely mixture of voices jointly calling for the removal of barricades and arrest of Yoon, which eventually led to the peaceful arrival of the march in Seoul (La Via Campesina 2024).

The vision of *K-Pop Demon Hunters*, then, may not be altogether fantastical after all. The question of whether the Korean wave can save the world—instead of being the demon from which the world should be saved—is indeed relevant, not because its signs inherently carry any privileged potential for social transformation, but because its salience in contemporary popular culture becomes a natural site of struggle over how we imagine the world. Even though the global success of the Korean wave cannot be understood apart from the political economic conditions that uphold it, an important part of the story remains how it is picked up and engaged with (Samosir and Wee 2024); in particular, how do fans and others use the signs of the Korean wave for making sense of their worlds, including both forces that seek to appropriate them for profit and power and those who strive to knit a net of relationships that do not oppress and condemn.

And this point is wonderfully illustrated by all four contributions to this special issue. They show that beyond the glamorous success of the Korean wave lies a struggle over how to capture the powerful meanings being generated by the bodies and affects of people around the globe as they interact with the cultural products of the Korean wave. The extent to which those struggles point toward hopeful new imaginations of sociality varies from case to case. But the studies all emphasize the complexity of this process through their adoption of a transnational lens, in which central focus is given to how signs of the Korean wave are recontextualized through the material and embodied engagement of participants. They show that, despite distinct ethnographic conditions rooted in particular national contexts, such processes of recontextualization always reference a transnational flow of culture and lived experiences, in which the power of borders is simultaneously reified and negotiated (Park and Bolander, Forthcoming).

In Christian Go and Leif Andrew Garinto's article on Filipino K-pop fans' online campaign to support presidential candidate Leni Robredo, we see an instance of such work of recontextualization under tension. KpopStans for Leni do more than adopt indexes of K-pop to attract the attention of others to their political cause. Many of the examples discussed in the paper show how they align K-pop practices with the political goals that Robredo represents: for instance, "comeback" is reframed as "a metaphor for personal and collective renewal," and "fan wars" is invoked to signal the candidate's potential for overcoming political polarization. Go and Garinto, however, are careful to differentiate such active revoicings of the signs of K-pop culture from other instances of fan activism, preferring to call them "civic stanning," which they define as "range of activities where fans engage with social and political life through their fandom without necessarily framing it as opposition to power structures." The authors suggest that civic stanning derives from the specific political context of the Philippines, where more direct and confrontational forms of dissent are given increasingly little public space. In other words, civic stanning is best understood as an outcome of semiotic practices by

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participants who actively seek to negotiate between the global flow of K-pop fan culture and national political conditions.

An interesting question that Go and Garinto raise in this regard is whether K-pop "has constraints in what political projects it can ostensibly support," given the tendency for its fandom to highlight playfulness, participation, collectivity, and cosmopolitanism. The implication here is that appropriation of K-pop by ultra-conservative and exclusionary movements, on the one hand, and by more radically progressive modes of direct action, on the other hand, may be less likely. While this is an empirical question that can be explored with further research across multiple contexts, one thing to keep in mind is that such meaning of K-pop cultural activities is in itself under constant reframing and reinterpretation, constrained by global and local political and economic conditions, but also subject to the practices of fans and others who interact with them. In other words, this is not only a theoretical question for researchers, but a political question for anyone who engages with K-pop: what do they want K-pop to mean for their world, and how do they bring those meanings alive?

Another perfect illustration of the tensions underlying engagement with the Korean wave is Ayumi Inouchi's paper, which uses a postfeminist lens to analyze *kankokuppo* "Koreaish," a fashion and lifestyle aesthetic popular among young Japanese women. Inouchi's ethnographic work reveals how the perceptual category of *kankokuppo* emerges as a response to gendered norms and hierarchical divisions that characterize modern Japanese society, instead projecting an alternative, progressive society without boundaries indexed by a "soft unity." In this sense, it reflects a desire for a transformed world which transcends the received gender order and opens up new identities defined by a sense of openness, sophistication, and cosmopolitanism. But the roots of *kankokuppo* in consumptive practices also limit its transformative potential, as it ultimately serves as a way of reproducing a class-based femininity aligned with traditional feminine norms, albeit one that is reframed as liberal consumer choice. This, again, underlines how the local meaning of the Korean wave always needs to be read in terms of the embodied and situated experiences of participants—in this case, in which young women are no longer expected to follow a different career path from their male cohorts, but are forced to realize that potential within a space of neoliberal self-management.

The phenomenon of *kankokuppo* may seem puzzling to a Korean observer, for its qualia centering on soft colors, muted contrasts, and gentle curves may seem more typical of Japanese culture (for instance, as associated with global Japanese brands such as Muji or Uniqlo). But as Inouchi points out, whether *kankokuppo* is an authentic representation of Korean culture is not really the issue. More significant is the discursive work through which young Japanese women bring together particular qualia to give rise to an emergent qualisign of softness that characterizes a Korean atmosphere. The transnational chain of semiotic circulation along the pathway of the Korean wave offers many junctures where an appropriative resemiotization of Koreanness can take place, and as Inouchi convincingly argues, "this will never be a one-way flow or static soft power controlled by pinpointable agents such as media, marketers, or governments."

Elaine Chun's paper offers a critical reading of what is often interpreted as the ultimate evidence of the victory of the Korean wave (even more so than *K-Pop Demon Hunters*): inclusion of Korean words into the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the

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bastion of authority for standard English, the most valued linguistic capital in the world (supposedly). Through careful dissection of OED's citational structure, Chun reveals how the increasing number of words originating from Korean in the OED (currently at 56 entries) are still represented through discourses of race and colonialism. Central to this process is the Modern English Speaker of Korean (MESK), a white, masculine listening subject who listens to and comments on the Korean language and upon whom the OED establishes its authority as the mediator and adjudicator of the English language. In this sense, Korean words in the OED are the exact mirror image of English words in Korean that are denigrated as *Konglish*—Korean usages of English that global speakers of English will not be able to understand (supposedly)—for they are also mediated by the figure of the puzzled, amused, or frustrated white listening subject of Konglish, upon whom the critic of Konglish establishes their authority on what counts as "real" English (Park 2025).

Significant here is Chun's observation that the central figure for the MESK has shifted over time, from that of the Koreanist—a cultural emissary whose authority derives from their colonial-institutional positioning as cross-cultural experts, such as merchants, missionaries, or military personnel—to that of a Korea fan—whose knowledge of the Korean language is seen as rooted in their playfully affective embrace of Korean culture. This insight is valuable because it serves as another demonstration of how the Korean wave as a cultural and political phenomena is an ongoing site of tension. On the one hand, it shows the potential of fans to contest and reimagine existing orders of institutional authority (as represented by the power of the OED to define what counts as English); on the other hand, it points out how hegemonic orders of race and gender continue to intersect such reimaginations (for instance, through the feminized figure of the Koreaboo, who is mocked for their excessive desire for Korean language and culture).

Joyhanna Yoo's article on the proliferation of the K- prefix as it is mobilized in the commercial appropriation of the Korean wave in South Korea offers yet another crucial vantage point for a transnational understanding of the Korean wave. The K- prefix, now being attached to almost anything to form lexicalizations ranging from *K-fashion* and *K-milk tea* and to *K-influencer* and *K-culture*, essentially functions as a branding strategy, representing heightened metapragmatic awareness of the cultural and commodified value that association with Korean culture carries globally, while also leaning on the cosmopolitan indexicality that derives from the English letter K. The presumed transparency of the connection between K- and "Korean" is also hegemonic in the sense that it does not consider possible that it might be understood as referring to, say, Kazakhstan or Kenya. Yoo's description of the K- morpheme as a "domestic index of outward-facing possibility," therefore, is entirely appropriate. It captures how the K- morpheme represents the circulation of meaning across the long chain of semiotic engagement that spans the entire globe, starting from cultural products of Korean society, their acceptance by fans and consumers around the world, and the sense of national pride and entrepreneurial opportunism ("spreading one's wings," as Dr Alok Roy is cited as saying in the paper) that this generates back in Korea.

This chain of circulation may be even further extended when we consider some instances of cynical reuses of the morpheme that Yoo alludes to earlier in the article.

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Examples of these may include *K-jangnyeo* "K-eldest daughter"—referring to "eldest daughter syndrome," the excessive emotional and relational burden that first-born daughters are expected to carry, but specifically situated within Korea's enduring patriarchal system (Lee 2020)—or *K-jikjangin* "K-office worker"—who is pressured to take for granted overtime work, rigid organizational culture, workplace harassment, and affective labor characteristic of Korean white collar work (Hong 2023). In these examples, the K- morpheme is doubly critical—of Korea's oppressive gender and labor relations, and of the blatant attempts to capitalize on the Korean wave fueled by nationalist pride. It calls out how the shallow, profit-driven and ethnocentric enthusiasm over the Korean wave's global success only belies the backwardness of Korean society. The K- prefix, then, has come a long way, from its origins in the US media as a term for labeling a foreign cultural product, to its use as an anchor for critical commentary on Korean culture and society, itself a powerful demonstration of the politically charged nature of the global flow of the Korean wave.

All papers in the special issue thus exemplify the strong potential of a transnational analysis of the Korean wave as a laboratory for understanding the socially transformative power of semiotic practice. Together, they cover the entire circuit of cultural production associated with the Korean wave, starting from the colonial gaze on Korean culture, to revoicings of Korean culture by global fans, to reappropriations of those revoicings by capitalism and nationalism, and to subversions of those reappropriations by critics of the overzealous embrace of the Korean wave. They remind us that the Korean wave can indeed be a site for transforming and saving the world—from relations of coloniality, divisive gender relations, oppressive political regimes, and much more—but that this requires a historical perspective, acts of global solidarity, and astute sensibility to persisting forces of colonial capitalism.

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