

K-dramas across Thailand: Constructions of Koreanness and Thainess by contemporary Thai consumers

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Summary

Studies of the popularity of *Hallyu* concentrate almost exclusively upon Northeast Asian nations, disregarding their popularity within Southeast Asia, an area still defined as 'Asian' yet often ignored in favor of the more economically prominent East Asian nations. This article attempts to expand discussions of *Hallyu* through an analysis of the reception of South Korean television dramas among different consumers in Thailand. It draws upon evidence gathered from qualitative interviews with Thai fans to illustrate how diverse consumers use these foreign products as a means to assess and critique their own position within contemporary Thailand and actively engage with changing constructions of Koreanness, Thainess and Asianness as a means to do so.

Introduction

The study of *Hallyu* throughout Asia provides what Kim Sujeong (2009) terms a "counter-case" to West-centric globalization that had previously dominated the Asia region culturally. Many scholars have explored the successful export and enormous popularity of Korean products in nearby East Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan, China and Hong Kong. Research addressing the reception of such phenomena tends to focus upon theories of both "cultural proximity" and the attraction of difference in the reception of Korean pop music, concerts, TV Dramas and, to a lesser extent, films. Viewing pleasure stems from identifying sameness in characters and situations that may otherwise seem distanced

from a consumer's own reality and also in the appeal of consuming foreignness as an alternative to local products.

Despite the copious research addressing the popularity of *Hallyu* in proximate East Asian nations, however, much less attention has been paid to *Hallyu* in Southeast Asia, a region that possesses its own very diverse history of development and interaction with transnational cultural products. Chua Beng Huat argues that "regionalization" has been much more important than "globalization" for *Hallyu*, noting that the vast majority of exported Korean pop culture travels no further than Northeast Asia (2015). In light of the very large Korean populations in countries such as Thailand and Philippines as well as the importance of this area as a market for Korean products, the "region" under consideration should be extended to include Southeast Asia, though such a wide-reaching geographical umbrella is difficult and problematic. In particular, the social divisions and diversity of the Southeast Asian nations and the very different economic conditions and historical legacy of each present new challenges to understanding the popularity of *Hallyu*. Recognising and engaging with the effects of such diversity is necessary when studying the reception of cultural products in this region, which differs according to the different consumer groups.

Currently, the few studies available that address the reception of *Hallyu* in Southeast Asia concentrate on young urban consumers, who are implied to be the main audience that consumes *Hallyu*. However, there is little

attention to consumers outside of this group or to how the stark divisions based upon wealth distribution, ethnicity and culture affect the engagement with and localization of such products. In order to move beyond this consumer group, this paper examines the ways in which various consumers across two very different Thai contexts understand and interpret Korean television dramas. It seeks to illustrate how the specific position of these two sets of consumers in Thai society affects their own conceptions of and relationship to discourses of Thainess (*kwam ben Thai*) and Koreanness (*kwam ben gaoli*) and how these discourses are indicative of the current changes in Thai society today.

Following Koichi Iwabuchi's example in his analysis of Japanese dramas, this is therefore a "translocal" rather than "transnational" project because it reflects upon the experiences of living within very different contexts of contemporary Thailand (2004) rather than concerning itself with a homogenous imagined national experience. Studying the responses and attitudes of such consumers can highlight what Younghan Cho (2011) calls the "temporal consciousness" of consumers, something that becomes particularly significant when such citizens are (re)negotiating their own position within a changing regional, national and international spatial hierarchy. Indeed, one previous study investigating *Hallyu* in Thailand suggests that Korean culture-in this case music-functions as an alternative model of identity for marginalised social and ethnic groups at a time of increased social polarisation and political instability (Siriyuvasak and Shin, 2007). Another demonstrates how such consumers frequently engage with Korean products through social media in ways that are interpreted as very inventive forms of resistance towards centralized state control (Lim, 2015).

The article is based upon interviews with a number of self-identified fans of Korean dramas

from across Thailand. These fans identified themselves to me, citing their familiarity with the latest Korean TV dramas, films, dress styles, music videos and stars as well as their collections of DVDs, magazines, clothing and other elements of Korean popular culture. Korean TV Dramas are the most widely accessible element of *Hallyu* and are consumed by a very diverse audience. Some things held true for all the fans, however. These dramas are particularly accessible due to their "universality" created by the focus on the familiar themes of love stories, family conflict and detective dramas; in addition, as Chua Beng Huat states, "television dramas engender sustained viewership and are, therefore, the most conducive site for audience reception research" (Chua Beng Huat, 2015). In addition, the fans found the dramas physically easy to acquire. They spoke of their ease in accessing the latest Korean dramas through cheap copied DVDs brought from Burmese border towns by local entrepreneurs. There was also no discernible difference between the dramas consumed by urban and rural viewers and all fans seemed equally happy to consume the latest Korean drama, with *Dae Jang Geum* having acted as a gateway into *Hallyu* fandom for a great many people in both groups.



A typical Bangkok stall selling Korean TV Dramas on DVD



Korean DVDs on display with Thai subtitles

My interviewees fell into two groups: urban consumers in central Bangkok and people in the culturally and economically very different rural North-eastern Chaiyaphum province. While this rice-farming province is dominated by an agrarian economy and its inhabitants are ethnically and culturally Laotian (and speak a Laotian dialect rather than central Thai), it is also a relatively affluent province in the wider context of the Northeast with a low level of poverty and a substantial and growing rural middle class since the economic recovery in the mid-to-early 2000s. Chaiyaphum is therefore undergoing a shift in its relationship to the capital Bangkok. While Bangkok's central Thai hegemony was previously promoted as an aspirational "norm" by Thai elites, Chaiyaphum's opposition to this is particularly evident in its significant show of support for the red shirt movement, a protest movement which organises large demonstrations against the military rule that Thailand has endured at various intervals since the 2006 coup.¹

The wider Thai context: *Hallyu*, 'Class War' and the Rise of the Thai Middle Class

The major impact of Korean popular culture – known as *Krasae-Gaoli* – in Thailand can be traced to 2001, with the successes of TV

dramas *Autumn In My Heart*, *My Sassy Girl* and the introduction of the internet game *Ragnarok*, all of which caught the attention of Thai teenagers (Damrong Thamdee, 2007; Parit Wongthanasen, 2007). Numerous dramas, films and popstars followed, continuing the craze. In 2005, a further surge in popularity of *Krasae-Gaoli* is attributed to the Korean soap opera *Dae Jang Geum* (Jewel in the Palace), which had already fuelled a fever for all things Korean in a number of Asian nations. *Dae Jang Geum* revitalised the fortunes of Thai Channel 3, which went from a dismal performance in 2005 to a 184% profit increase after broadcast (Bamrung Amnatcharoenrit, 2006). Broadcast in Thailand in 2005 and 2006, the drama was a smash hit and is still very much a part of popular consciousness in Thailand today. These events changed Thai attitudes towards Korea and sparked interest in many kinds of Korean goods, services and foods (Boonsong Kositchotethana, 2006). After a marked increase in Korean language study by Thai students, the oldest and most prestigious university in Thailand – Chulalongkorn University – even opened a Korean language department in 2008. Other universities also reported a dramatic increase in enquiries regarding Korean language courses during the broadcast of *Dae Jung Guem* (Damrong Thandee). Since then, the popularity of *Hallyu* has not waned, and indigenous Thai films have incorporated aesthetics and discourses that directly reference Korea. These include *Hello Stranger*, *Sorry, Sarangheyo* as well as the highly successful Thai remake of the Korean drama *Full House*, known as *Woon Nak Rak Tem Baan* in Thai.



The Thai version of Korean TV Drama, Dae Jang Geum



A shopkeeper advertises her product through its connection to Korea

How then do we explain the appeal of *Hallyu* in Thailand in the context of the social, economic and political changes occurring there at the same time? "The Thai consumer" is actually composed of inhabitants within a national hierarchy based upon class, ethnicity, geography and cultural positioning that constructs particular consumers pejoratively in relation to central Thailand and the Thai state. Consumer constructions of Korean products and Koreanness are most interesting because they show how people are trying to break down these divisions today.

Like other ASEAN countries, Thailand is an extremely diverse nation geographically and culturally. Central, Northern, Northeastern and

Southern Thailand all possess their own traditions, histories, food, entertainment, and variations upon the Thai language. These stark differences began when the area was divided into various early pre-modern kingdoms based on the early movement of peoples across the Southeast Asian peninsula. They were later amalgamated into a single nation, a process that involved violent suppression of internal dissent at times as well as the promotion of a centralized notion of Thainess and Thai identity. These differences derived not just from ethnic and linguistic divides, but were also intimately connected to very stark class and employment distinctions. Observing Thai society in 1962, David Wilson speaks of economic separation into two main groups: "a gross two-class structure, in which the classes are physically as well as economically separated... The rural agrarian segment is separated geographically from the urban ruling segment. The agrarian segment is, in the main land-owning and survives by a quasi-subsistence economy. The ruling segment is salaried (when its members own property, this is usually urban or sub-urban) and lives on a cash economy" (Wilson, 1962, quoted in UNESCO, 1982:38).

The mass movement of rural workers to the cities during Thailand's four decades of unprecedented post-war economic growth then began to break down and destabilise such hierarchical divisions. This changed the relationship between rural and urban citizens forever (see Ruth, 2011 for a deeper analysis of this). Alongside this transformation, the creation of the modern Thai middle class was a direct result of the 1980s and 90s economic development and was almost exclusively urban-based and strongly associated with Bangkok. That group tended to cling to older hierarchical power structures and ally itself closely with traditional aristocratic elites, creating what Funatsu and Kagoya call "a solid image of a middle class with a common political orientation" (Funatsu and Kagoya, 2003:244).

In keeping with these social divisions, the perception and conception of physical space and positioning within the nation supported such inequality. The "spatial hierarchy" in Thailand classified those furthest from the city as uncivilised and backwards. While those in urban Bangkok were positioned close to the centre of "civilisation" – or *siwilai* in Thai – and modernity, those in rural areas were far from this centre of enlightenment and were stereotyped as undesirable uneducated 'others' situated in the backwards realm of spirits and wild animals (Thongchai Winichakul, 2000).

Thai political movements have been constructed along the class distinctions associated with this division between rural and urban areas, particularly after the 2006 military coup which removed the democratically elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin enjoyed widespread popularity among rural and lower-class voters and was arguably the first political figure to tap into their dissatisfaction when they suffered from Thailand's economic crisis after 1997. His removal (due to fear of his significant power and influence by traditional Thai elites) resulted in widespread demonstrations between the "Red Shirt Movement," a rural lower and working-class movement, and the urban "Yellow Shirts" who are associated with Bangkokian middle-class Thais and supported Thaksin's removal. Since 2006, these two groups have clashed multiple times, resulting in deaths on both sides.

Any close analysis of Thai cultural products indicates the ways in which they are pulled between these different political, social and economic groups. This results in what film scholar Katarzyna Ancuta calls a "practical manifestation" of these social divisions, focusing on Thai TV and movies (Ancuta, 2014) and also begins to cement what Chaiworaporn understands as the "two-tiered" division of Thai cultural products into lower-class and upper-class production designed for two separate

audiences (Chaiworaporn, 2001). Many see this division in perjorative terms: substandard, crude and visceral texts such as generic soap operas (described by the derogatory Thai term 'nam nao' – meaning dirty or stagnant water) which cater for a supposedly unsophisticated provincial lower-class viewer in contrast to sophisticated and expensive foreign and artistic products consumed in air-conditioned cinemas. Due to their high quality and status as foreign products, Korean dramas seem to be automatically attached to this urban sphere, yet, as my analysis shows, in fact *Hallyu* caters to a wide range of consumers.

Korean Cultural Products among Bangkokian fans

As foreign texts with high production values that depict both historical Korea and urban modernity, *Hallyu* is inevitably associated with urban middle-class consumers in Thailand. Talking of American and Japanese cultural products in the 1980s and 1990s, Ubonrat Siriyuvasak describes how many urban middle-class Thai youth embraced them as a means of articulating their own frustrations at a society that remained "repressive" and "patronizing" (Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 2004:178). Yet, in keeping with the 'elite' nature of this group, accounts from interviews and focus groups in Bangkok indicate how the consumption of *Hallyu* can also function as a means for these consumers to intensify and reaffirm class divisions.

For instance, fans interviewed in Bangkok contrasted Korean TV Dramas with Thai TV Dramas based on what they called "realism," classing Thai "nam nao" dramas as dull, unrealistic and predictable compared to the creativity and flexibility of Korean dramas. They also referred to the supposed audience of these productions in ways that indicate how, for these urban consumers, *Hallyu* acts as a signifier of class and social status. Miss F, a student in Bangkok said "People who can watch

Korean series are those that 'need' the Internet. This group is also more educated, earns more money and tends to be in the middle class. People who watch Thai soap operas are country people. They live outside of the city; they don't have the Internet and/or they can't afford it." Such a statement indicates that consuming *Hallyu* functions as a means for Miss F to distinguish herself from a supposed backwards rural "other." This reinforces a social hierarchy that, research indicates, is actually breaking down in contemporary Thailand.

Indeed, the divisions Miss F refers to no longer exist in the way she imagines. Rural fans in Chaiyaphum province have access to the internet in cafes, schools and libraries, buy DVDs through shops and markets, and consume a variety of Korean dramas on TV at home. Rural provincial fans consume *Hallyu* products and use them to engage with the changing context of contemporary Thailand, rather than being outside of this as Miss F supposes.

For consumers like Miss F, *Hallyu* was also very much attached to notions of modernity and sophistication. In particular it appeared to embody individuals with a competitive and resourceful nature who are able to adapt and change in the contemporary world. This suggests that not only is *Hallyu* functioning to uphold particular divisions, but is also a means through which these fans can express their perceived frustrations with and critique what they see as the backward nature of contemporary Thailand and its inhabitants., who supposedly lack such entrepreneurial notions. Miss A stated that "Thais are very conservative. I think it [Koreanness] can help Thais be more creative, think out of the box because Koreans absorb everything around them; they express creativity and are interesting... Thais use the same pattern every day." Through such statements Miss A indicates her frustration with a context that she associates with discipline, rules and old

fashioned discourses. This view was also repeated by other participants in Bangkok, such as one who again brought up the supposedly flexible and democratic nature of Koreanness, stating in frustration that "Thailand has too many boundaries sometimes." Similar to Miss. A, Mr. D (age 20, also from Bangkok) connected Koreanness to a notion of change and adaptation. Interestingly he contrasted this to another "model" of Asianness, that of Japaneseness, which for him appeared much more static: "I think Japan is a very strong culture too, [but] they will not change, they are the same as many years ago. Korean culture is changing a lot. I find it fascinating."

The fans also included professionalism and a strong work ethic within this construction. Miss E, also a student in Bangkok, gave an example of these characteristics (which she described as "the Korean way") from a Korean drama she liked, indicating the direct link between *Hallyu* and this mediated construction of Koreanness: "An example is, *I DO, I DO* is a movie about fashion. The story is about a woman who loves shoes and wants to be a shoe designer. One day there is a shoe fashion show, she has to fit and repair a pair of shoes for a model in a very short period of time. Her work still comes out great." Students who studied Korean also connected this professionalism to an increased level of competition in education, with one stating: "My Korean teacher told me that Korean society is really competitive. Students wake up and get ready for their classes, which run from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. They then go to a library until midnight after that they take tutoring classes until 2 a.m. They go to bed at 2 or 3 a.m. The reason is everyone must try to get accepted into the Seoul National University."

However, while these participants identified differences between Thainess and Koreanness as a means to critique their own circumstances, they were also quick to indicate the cultural

proximity of these two nations based upon these cultural products, particularly when compared to the West. For instance Miss. D, a student in Bangkok, said: "I think because of the similarity of cultures, it [Korean popular culture] makes everything easier to access, compared to western cultures." She also noted that "Korean is easier to adjust to Thai culture compared to Japanese and Chinese," suggesting that *Hallyu* products have been involved in constructing notions of perceived cultural closeness between Thailand and Korea in ways quite separate to constructions of other Northeast Asian nations. Likewise, Miss A felt no need to 'adjust' when watching *Hallyu* products: "I am Thai and in my mind, I think western cultures are too difficult to adjust to compared to our Asian cultures." Interestingly, Miss. G (also in Bangkok) located this similarity in the actual linguistic processes of Thai and Korean, stating "Korean and Thai have [politeness] levels of using our language. But in western languages it's only "You" and "I" like that."

Participants struggled to articulate their understanding of this "Asianness," and relied much more upon its opposition to what they understood as "western cultures," rather than laying out explicit criteria. Moreover, as indicated by earlier comments, they are not attempting to construct an inclusive model of national or ethnic identity but rather one that excludes the lower-classes of Thailand. More in-depth research is needed to assess the various meanings behind these new and changing constructions of "Asianness" as well as the implications for Thai nationalism.

Further comments suggest that *Hallyu* may be playing an active role in building international relationships. One student from Bangkok remarked "The Korean wave is going everywhere today. It can help us in many ways, for example, if we do not know anything about a person's culture, we can still make friends by talking about Korean culture." Her friend then

followed with "That's true. Just like when I went abroad last time I was talking to a Cambodian in Korean because they could not speak English." While it is still far too early to be able to assess the potential of Korean to become a pan-Asian language, such comments indicate that there is a practical element to *Hallyu's* presence and its impact is not simply confined to academic realms of cultural theory. Indeed following this conversation, one student also worried about her own exclusion from this potential, stating "I chose to learn Japanese. This was before I knew about Korean culture."





Hallyu Fans in Bangkok

Korean Cultural Products among Chaiyaphum fans

Despite the assumptions of the Bangkok fans, Chaiyaphum province in the northeastern Isaan region also has plenty of *Hallyu* fans, all of whom were eager to share their expertise and opinions. As with Bangkokian fans, for those in Chaiyaphum, *Hallyu* also appeared to function as a means through which to mediate, critique and assess their own experiences of contemporary Thailand. However, in contrast to the modernity, adaptation, creativity, and entrepreneurship noted by the Bangkok-based fans, fans in Chaiyaphum seemed to focus more upon constructions of national identity, cultural uniqueness and loyalty in their interpretation of

Hallyu and Koreanness.

For these fans, their appreciation for and enjoyment of Korean dramas was connected to a definitive and very strongly perceived "Koreanness" (*kwam ben gaoli*) that they read in the texts. The dramas contained very strong and dominant identifiers of Koreanness suggesting to them that Korea was a unique country and Koreanness was something that was recognisable and distinctive. For example Mrs B, a 44 year old woman living in Chaiyaphum, remarked "I like the culture. I like it because it is a unique country." She further stated that "Korean media mostly keeps Korean cultural identity. For example in their series characters are always dressed traditionally. Um... even if we never knew it's a Korean series or movie people will always recognize them as Korean." It quickly became apparent that this perceived strong identity of "Koreanness" was a major source of popularity. Much of this identity tended to be connected to specific *mise-en-scene* such as costumes and props, indicating that there was a physical and performative characteristic to this recognisability. Fans talked a lot about clothes and food and it was clearly a source of pride that they could identify these specific icons of Koreanness.

This construction, however, also stretched to include particular behavioural characteristics. Many participants mentioned the good morals of the dramas and seemed to associate an element of personal strength and resilience with Koreanness. Miss. C, 34 years old, described herself as a major fan of *Dae Jang Geum* (owning all the DVDs) She singled out loyalty, leadership and resilience as important characteristics of Koreanness, stating "Koreans are loyal to their country. And the most importantly they are hardy. They are so Korean, I mean unique. Korean people are not followers they are always leaders. That makes me like them."

When discussing such observations further, it very quickly became apparent that the perceived cultural uniqueness of the dramas (despite such uniqueness being far from clear) was a key means through which fans could actively assess and respond to the current cultural and political discourses of their own environment. Given that regional, national and international relationships are currently changing, the nature of this Koreanness and its relationship to constructions of Thainess and Asianness is likely to become an avenue for discussing these changes. Notably, many Chaiphaphum fans contrasted these expressions of Korean uniqueness to notions of Thainess then expressed their frustration with their own contemporary Thai context. For instance, when asked to explain what she meant by 'cultural identity' when describing Korean products, Mrs. B instead expressed her own frustrations with Thailand:

"The Koreans keep their culture very unique. For Thais, I think we take a little too much of western cultures. Thai teens follow trends too much. Um... for instance, if there are any foreign fashions then Thais will act the same as these. But Koreans don't. They keep their own ways."

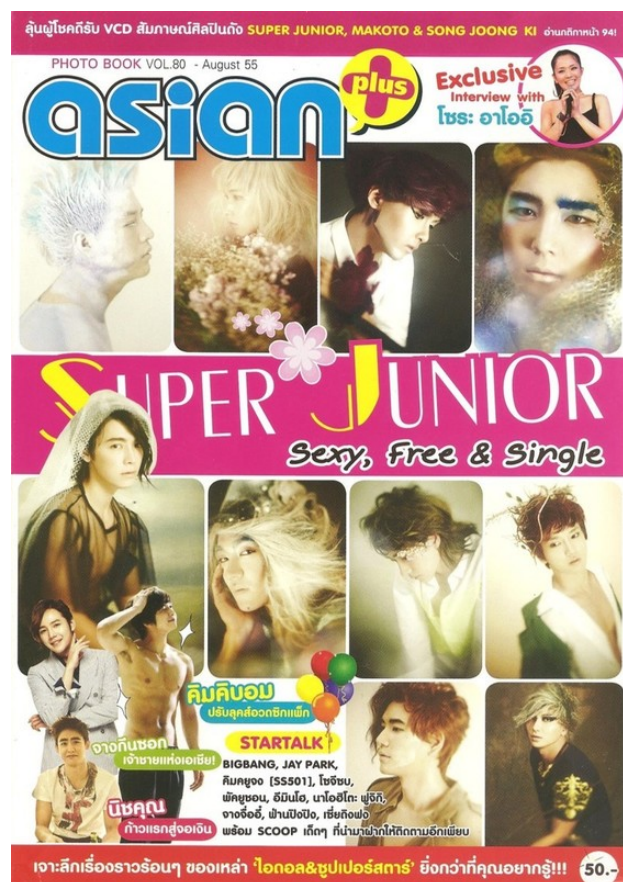
This statement seems to articulate Mrs. B's own position as an educated provincial middle-class Thai citizen. As an Laotian ethnic "other" and provincially located consumer she is outside of central Bangkokian Thainess which has shaped performative notions of Thai national identity. Such exclusivity is undesirable to her, and she criticises contemporary Thailand as a cultural construction that is merely a poor imitation of the West. In contrast her construction of Koreanness as clear, unique and strongly defined becomes a form of identity that to her appears easily accessible to and inclusive for all individuals within Korean national designation.

Similarly, Miss C also contrasted Korea with

Thailand along these lines: "In my opinion Korea is one of best in Asia... Our countries are in Asia, but what makes Korea do better than Thai. It's quite interesting." Again, Miss. C's comments can be connected to her own position within Thailand. However, rather than dissatisfaction with the constructed exclusivity of Thainess, further discussion indicated that she saw loyalty as a very desirable aspect of Korean uniqueness, a significant point for a citizen in a nation where recent political directions have been shaped by violent street demonstrations and military coups. Miss. C sought to uncover the reasons behind what she views as the advancement of Korea over Thailand; she asked me (as an outsider) why I felt Korea was doing so much "better" as a nation than Thailand. This began to transform the interview site into a space for discussion.



A Hallyu Fan in Chaiyaphum



Members of Super Junior Appear on the Cover of A Fashion Magazine

While the sample is far too small for quantitative analysis, it is worth noting that discussions about "Asianness" displayed the most consistent differences between participants from Chaiyaphum and Bangkok. Moreover, the perceived relationship between Korea and Thailand was interpreted very differently by each set of consumers, suggesting wider contextual differences in the spatial construction and relationship of Thailand to "Asia." Rural fans were much more likely to say that Thailand was "near" Korea and that the two countries had a special and close relationship due to their "Asianness." They expressed belief in a shared unique

cultural identity of Asia, though they struggled to articulate this specifically. In terms of culture and geography they expressed a close connection between Thailand and Korea and asserted strong cultural proximity, with one stating "in fact we are all Asian, we aren't much different." Fans in Chaiyaphum seemed to have more invested in and appeared more connected to *Hallyu* and images of Korea, despite being more economically and culturally removed from it than those in Bangkok. For rural viewers *Hallyu* also appears to act as an inclusive construction of modernity that is outside of traditional elitist Thai hierarchies once propagated by the Thai state. The "Asianness" that they speak of removed the unfair hierarchical structures they are subjected too, in keeping with the current changes in wider Thai society.

Urban viewers only expressed cultural proximity between Thailand and Korea when they contrasted Asia to "the West." While they did believe that there was a degree of regional similarity they stated that the two countries were "far" from one another and were much more likely to note differences within this "Asianness" (a term that was ultimately very unclear as a signifier). Fans in Bangkok also seemed more likely to recognise *Hallyu* as itinerant culture. They interpreted it as a phase, a new fashion in Asia, an impermanent wave that is part of wider cultural movements that come and go. Miss. C even stated "we can talk to friends about it, but I don't have to settle with it." Another student even questioned the logic behind learning Korean, despite the fact that she had chosen to study it herself: "I am not so sure about the Korean language, perhaps it's just a wave that comes and goes. If it changes in the future then English will still benefit me."

Conclusion

It is clear from this study that Korean cultural products have had an ongoing and complex

impact upon consumers in contemporary Thailand. Individual Thai viewers have responded to and incorporated this new "Koreanness" into their environment at a time when their own reality is changing considerably. Interviews with Thai fans indicate that *Hallyu* products have a strong affiliation with constructions of Koreanness for Thai consumers and specifically that these products allow them access to signifiers of Korean culture that fans can appropriate in numerous ways. Such appropriation includes critiquing existing hierarchies and spatial relationships within Thailand as well as functioning as an alternative symbol of freedom and creativity for those who feel stifled by their current environment.

Such responses also show that in the contemporary age the reception of *Hallyu* products can indicate the wider economic and cultural changes that Thai society is experiencing. Social relationships are being rethought-out, influenced, and challenged by a number of different forces. The rural and urban Thai consumers who have historically existed in separate geographic and cultural spheres are being brought closer together and Thailand's relationship to its immediate neighbours and the rest of Asia is changing due to the amalgamation of the region under ASEAN. Most significantly internally, the traditional hierarchies associated with these spatial dynamics within Thailand are breaking down and the growth of the rural middle class in particular problematizes the previous simplistic political and economic divisions of this nation. Thai fans interpret *Hallyu* products in ways that are specifically shaped to accommodate wider questions of social position and hierarchy. In essence, *Hallyu* becomes a vehicle for diverse consumers to express their frustrations and desires in this divided nation.

Finally, considering the differing attitudes of different *Hallyu* fans in Thailand enables us to (re)construct Southeast Asian consumers as

active constructors of both their own environment and a wider (imagined) Asian region. Far from being passive receivers of international products and discourses, Thai viewers are actively using Korean popular culture to construct and assess changing discourses of Thainess, Koreanness and Asianness. In doing so they actively mediate their own position within the newly emerging spatial dynamics of contemporary Thailand and pose questions regarding what will and should happen. The construction of Koreanness clearly plays a part in enabling them to do this, indicating that both new forms of transnational cultural products and their increasing presence may play an important part in forming such national and international relationships.

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SPECIAL FEATURE

Hallyu: The Korean Wave and Asia (3 of 6)

[Jooyeon Rhee and Nissim Otmazgin, "Expanding Transnational Dialogue in Asia through Hallyu."](#)

[Nissim Otmazgin, "A New Cultural Geography of East Asia: Imagining A 'Region' through Popular Culture."](#)

[Millie Creighton, "Through the Korean Wave Looking Glass: Gender, Consumerism, Transnationalism, Tourism Reflecting Japan-Korea Relations in Global East Asia."](#)

[Chikako Nagayama, "Women's Desire, Heterosexual Norms and Transnational Feminism: Kitahara Minori's *Good-bye Hallyu*."](#)

[Jooyeon Rhee, "Gendering Multiculturalism: Representation of Migrant Workers and Foreign Brides in Korean Popular Films."](#)

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Notes

¹ The data was collected in Thailand from August to December 2012. This consisted of five focus groups in Bangkok and one single individual interview. In Chaiphum, two focus groups and four single interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted in Thai and translated afterwards. Conscious of my own position as a Western 'outsider', I allowed the participants to lead the interviews. Participants were very eager to discuss their perception of Korea and Koreanness and the perceived relationship this held to Thailand and Thainess, indicating that such relationships were currently of relevance to consumers. They also appeared eager to 'educate' me about the differences between Korea and Thailand and about inter-Asian relations in general, possibly indicating that my position as an 'outsider' and 'other' in many ways actually encouraged them to talk freely and in-depth about issues that might be more problematic if raised with other Thais. The project is also based upon two hundred questionnaires asking about opinions and relationship to Korean dramas and Korean culture. Many participants left lengthy comments detailing their own preferences and opinions.