



ÁREA TEMÁTICA: ARTE, CULTURA E COMUNICAÇÃO

RO-HALLYU: THE INFLUENCE OF KOREAN WAVE IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The “Korean wave” is a cultural phenomenon specific to Asia and it refers to the impact of cultural products from Korea (music, movies, TV series) on that part of the world (Dator and Seo, 2004; Endo and Matsumoto, 2004; Seo, 2005). For the Romanian society the exposure at the K-drama and Korean popular culture’s type of products is a very recent phenomenon that started in the summer of 2009 when the national television service broadcasted the first K-drama: “Jewelry of the Palace”. The “experiment” was a successful one, other twenty Korean “dramas” being broadcasted until present. The main reason for this editorial decision of the national television was the dramatic increase of this TV channel’s audience during the broadcasting of this type of cultural. At the same time, one of the Romanian TV musical channel (U-TV) started to weekly broadcast one hour of K-Pop music at the national level and the number of Romanian active K-Pop fan groups increased on the internet (there are around forty-five K-Pop fan-groups on-line active at present in Romania). The present study analyses the reception of the Korean cultural products in Romania. We were interested on one hand to identify the underlying reasons that lead a part of the Romanian public to view this type of cultural products, and, on the other, to offer some tentative answers at the research questions. The research questions of the study were: 1. What is the influence of the Korean popular culture products on the Romanians’ perceptions and representations about Asia culture and society? 2. What are the factors that explain the increasing popularity of this type of cultural products among Romanian audience? In order to answer at the above-mentioned questions we used a set of twenty interviews with Romanian viewers of Korean TV series and a survey made on 250 K-Pop Romanian fans. The results proved Liebes and Katz’s thesis about the cultural reasons underlying the media consumption in the case of Romanian audience (Katz, Liebes 1985: 188; Katz, Liebes 1986; Katz, Liebes 1988. Furthermore, the same set of data aimed at the “glocal” character of Korean cultural products.

Palavras-chave: Hallyu, Mass Media; Comunicação; Audiência; Cultura

Keywords: Hallyu, Mass media, Communication, Audience, Culture

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Introduction – The choice of the research topic

“The Korean Wave” is a national and, at the same time, an international phenomena, and it was defined by Keehyeung Lee (Keehyeung Lee, 2008: 175) as:

a highly complex and multilayered formation that is composed of real, imagined, and hybrid cultural practices, a diverse range of lived experiences, and sets of powerful discourses which exist at national, translocal, and transnational levels.

The first “mass” contact of the Romanian society with the Korean cultural products happened in the summer of 2009, when the main channel of the public television service (TVR1) broadcasted the first “K-drama”: “The Jewel of the Palace” (“Daejanggeum”). In one year (2009-2010) there were other four Korean historical series, also distributed in “prime-time” by the national public television. After two years ten Korean television series were broadcasted at the first national television channel – TVR1 - and, in the spring of 2011, three other national-private owned stations (NationalTV, N24Plus and EuforiaTV) started to air such TV-series. One of the main reasons of such editorial decision was the audience increase for the national public television channel during the entire broadcasting period of Korean series, as the director of programming department from NationalTV and N24Plus TV acknowledged in a discussion:

“When we considered the Korean series (i.e. „The Emperor of the Sea”/ „Haeshin”) we thought first at a TV product that could attract a larger audience. We did not consider artistic movies for that period of the day (i.e. 8-10 p.m) because there would not be any guarantee that this „alternative” would function in the present Romanian audiovisual market. Consequently, we decided to broadcast a TV series and we saw that Korean series had a constant rating at national television (i.e. TVR1). We consider that to be a successfull example and we bought one (i.e. Korean series) in order to broadcast it at our TV station this summer and autumn. We hope to obtain between 1 and 2 points Reach for a „target” audience (big urban, 18-49 years old).” (Personal discussion with Tudor Brates, April 2011).

In non-Asian spaces, the impact of such cultural industry type on consumers was connected to the way in which “Hallyu” was perceived especially inside large Asian communities residing in USA and less in Western Europe (Chan, Ma, 1996; Keane, 2006; Cunningham, Jacka, 1996).

Due to the fact that there is little knowledge and public awareness of the “New Korean Wave” in Romania it is difficult to estimate the scale of those phenomena without doing deeper empirical research starting with 2010 I was engaged in a research project related to the impact of “Hallyu” in Romania. With the help of Academy of Korean Studies, which granted me a fellowship in July-September 2011 the project was developed further and is ongoing at present.

General theoretical framework

Everyone knows that “Hallyu”, or “The Korean Wave”, is the generic name of the Korean cultural products’ exports both at the regional and at the international levels. The name was devised by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism at the end of the 1990’s (Young-Mook Choi, 2004) and was adopted first by the Chinese media (Ravina, 2009), and, after the success of the Korean popular culture abroad, was, and it is still, used worldwide (Montira Tada-amnuaychai, 2006).

According to the studies devoted to “Hallyu” phenomenon (Montira Tada-amnuaychai, 2006), the expansion of the Korean folk culture had two distinctive stages: the period before the year 2000 (“The First Korean Wave”) and after this date (“The Second Korean Wave”). If in the case of the first stage, Korea exported especially movies and television series in various countries, the untimely success of the Korean folk culture is based on the combination between “the cultural mix” and the use of the newly emerged economic opportunities – particularly the access to the digital scope (Internet) (Cho Hae-Joang, 2005).

In Romania the visible impact of “The New Korean Wave” is the one generated by the broadcasting of Korean historical TV series. Regarding Korean cultural products for television, we can notice the difference between two large series types: the so-called “romantic comedies”– similar with “soap operas” and Latin American TV series – and “historical dramas” or “sageuk-dramas” (Chua B. H., 2006).

An important “boost” for the increase of the Korean television series’ audience came from the high-profile Romanian intellectuals’ public support for this type of cultural products. Thus, in an editorial published in 19 August 2009 by the national newspaper “Adevarul” (“The Truth”) Andrei Plesu (philosopher, professor at the University of Bucharest, former minister of foreign affairs and director of the “New Europe” Institute for Advanced Studies extolled the quality of those TV-series:

Last week, by chance, I discovered, on the first channel of the national television, a South-Korean series: „The Jewel of the Palace”. In only few moments I had the impression to be invited on a different planet: a planet of discretion, of good taste, of rigor and of ineffable enchantment. Everything was very clear, without being explicit at the same time. Actors are masters in expressing their feelings in an implicit manner. [...] Expressivity is the opposite of the ostentation in this case. The story is educative but is never didactical in style.

Meanwhile, the impact and size of Hallyu in Romania is known only at a punctual level- to be more precise, is a reality that came mainly from the television station’s audience measurements, from public statements of distinguished intellectuals and from the on-line lives of K-culture groups of fans. If in Asia one can notice the development of the so-called “Anti-Hallyu” sentiment (Yoo Soh-jung, 2010) the Romanian interest in studying the impact “Korean” culture is somehow “ghettoized” inside the Academic environment – to be more precise, in the delivering lectures of Korean language at the faculties that have a Department of East-Asiatic Studies – and in translating and editing Korean literature.

What are the ingredients of success in the case of these Korean products? At a first glance, we could say that in spite of all the disadvantages that Korea might face in terms of language barrier and “cultural visibility” level (especially when compared to North-American cultural productions) its media products managed to turn the use of polyvalent cultural elements and the attentively articulated content into advantages. “The cultural value” of these products is multidimensional so that it doesn’t strictly reside at the language level known by the public or by just part of it (Cunningham and Sinclair, 2001). Regarding the content, the appeal to general common values allows cultural assimilation among Asian audiences, reducing thus the danger of cultural opposition or rejection. Moreover, standardization and specialization are necessary for such products in order to be able to reach global audiences. At the same time, regarding Asian markets and their aspects, we could add some economic factors as well. Thus, in Japan the distribution costs for the American movies are high enough, although there is a big demand for successful movies (*blockbusters*) similar to Hollywood productions.

The articles in the specialty literature referring to the impact of Korean folk culture products on East-European consumers are almost non-existing at present. Most of the studies that took an interest in the impact of such cultural products on external audiences were made on societies situated in the proximity of Korea (Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, China) or on diasporas placed in various geographical areas (USA, Western Europe).

That is why we considered that an exploring study on this topic could offer a series of answers related to consumption reasons and the impact of this type of cultural products on a “remote” society in terms of space and culture, completely different from the medium these products were initially conceived and produced.

The research project

The research project made with the help of the Academy of Korean Studies’s fellowship (July-September 2011) tried to increase the understanding from a European point of view of the expansion of Hallyu in a different cultural space, such as the Romanian one.

The project had two main research objectives.

A. The first research objective is to propose both a typology of the Eastern European (i.e. Romanian) publics and audiences, and to sketch a “chart” of the needs and gratifications sought by them through the consumption of the “New Korean Wave” cultural products.

B. The second research objective is to present an evaluation of the present situation on the basis of experts' knowledge and assessments about the phenomena of the "New Korean Wave" impact on Eastern Europe.

Starting from those objectives, the project seeks the answers at five empirical research questions:

1. What are the levels at which the New Korea Wave is spreading in Romania (i.e. Eastern Europe)?
2. What are the main characteristics of the consumers (publics/audiences) of "New Korean Wave" products in Romania (i.e. Eastern Europe)?
3. What are the influences of this type of popular culture products on the Romanians' perceptions and representations about Asia culture and society, on one hand, and, on the other, about European and American ones?
4. What are the factors that explain the increasing popularity of this type of cultural products among Romanian (i.e. Eastern European) audiences?
5. What are the main lines of development for the New Korean Wave in Eastern Europe and with what assumed results both for Eastern Europe (i.e. Romania) and Asia (i.e. Korea)?

As the main research methodology is a sociological one, based on the principle of „methods and data triangulation" (Denzin, 2006).

More precisely, the methods used in the research project are (Crabtree, Miller, 1992; Black, 1999; Asa Berger, 2000; Hine, 2000; Fairclough, 2001):

1. The semi-structured interview –the interview guide was applied in face-to-face meetings;
2. The discourse analysis;
3. The virtual ethnography.

At the level of research universe we used different samples, their projection and their realization being on the basis of the methods we already choose:

1. The semi structured interviews used an inductive sample of 35 people with the following internal structure: nine men and twenty-six women, ten subjects aged 14-25 years, thirteen subjects aged 26-50 years and twelve subjects aged over 51 years old, only five located in rural area and the rest living in towns.
2. The discourse analysis was made on a sample of three Romanian Internet forums devoted to Korean movies and TV-series. We choose those forums which had the most active both „virtual" and of-line life from a total of fifteen such Internet sites ;
3. The virtual ethnography was made on a sample of four Romanian Internet forums devoted to K-Pop. As in the case of Romanian internet forums devoted to Korean movies and TV series the rationale behind the choice of those was their activity and presence both in the on and off-line life. There are forty-four Romanian internet forums and pages devoted to K-pop active at present.

Analysis of the results

On the 19th January 2011, the evening news-hour at the second channel of the Romanian National Television (TVR2) hosted a debate about the popularity of Korean TV-series in Romania.

"The movie is more important than life!" ("Filmul bate viata!") was written on the screen when the anchormen asked the opinion of an important Romanian movie-critic – Irina Margareta Nistor – about the reasons behind this mass phenomena and the discussion was illustrated in background with images from (on-going at that time) "Jumong" TV-series.

The main reasons invoked by the expert in the favor of K-dramas 'success were: the series follow a general prescription in order to fit the tastes of a „Western public", there is an obvious „exotic character" of the TV-series which satisfies the need for new and un-usual in the case of a certain TV-audiences and there is a valuable school of cinematography in South Korea (Kim Ki Duk was invoked as an example in the debate)

that has its life apart from the products of “popular culture” – such is the case with TV series.

During the last three years there was, also, a Romanian printed press (newspapers and magazines) large coverage of the success recorded by the Korean television series in Romania. In the case of Romanian media coverage of the Korean television series the stress was put, as in the televised debate’s case, on the “exotic” character of those cultural products and, on the other hand, on their obvious artistic quality. The problem of the fit between the audience’s expectations and values and the Korean television series appeal at this set of values was not taken into consideration.

The sets of interviews made in 2010-2011 revealed that the members of the Korean TV-series’ audience assessed as their main values:

1. Wisdom (Mature understanding of life): 10.7%;
2. Security of the family: 10%;
3. True friendship and Freedom (Independence): 6.7% each
4. Peace in the world, Happiness and Peace in the world: 6% each.

The general value “decoding” procedures for Korean TV series indicated, as such, the fact that the subjects we interviewed had found in the Korean series an “axiological” substratum close or even similar to the personal one (e.g. the values stressed as important in the above-mentioned Figure 1). Thus, the respondents pointed towards the existence at the level of the Korean series’ script of certain values belonging to a common spiritual “family” with those contained in the Korean television series they watched: “Virtue”, “Honesty”, the love feeling, “Integrity”, “Respect”, “Loyalty” etc. This similarity between personal values and those delivered by the television series is to be found also in the analyzed online discussions at the Romanian Internet forums devoted to Korean movies and series. The participants at the virtual dialogues emphasized the return to certain personal values and interest topics present in the historical series viewed by them: “Love”, “Respect”, “Wisdom”, “Importance of the family” etc.

The set of interviews	Discussions on the internet forums devoted to Korean series
S16: Firstly, I mostly like the moral values these series promote – courage, virtue, honesty, strength of character. S8: The script is commercial indeed, but it also contains many values and deep visions. Eternal values such as: soul noblesse, honor, justice, deep love, refinement, knowledge thirst. S3: Integrity, honor and truth are the values I am mostly fond of and the way in which characters struggle in order to prove the truth is similar to what I would also do in a similar situation. S15: Yes, because truth and justice are predominant in these series. S7: In every series I can find a value that defines or characterizes me. It’s a little bit difficult to tell the differences or the resemblances between various series; however the Korean ones have certain topics that attract me more than others. S20: There is certainly a correspondence between	Al S: I watched half of the series on TVR and it captivated me so much that I looked for the first episodes on YouTube in order to understand better the action. I can say it is a wonderful series, very well directed and played by actors. But the one that conquered my heart was Bidam (an exceptional interpreting, a true acting feast). Why? Among many reasons, I can only say... maybe because he is the most human character. We all want in our lives a little affection, a little attention and appreciation from the part of others. Who has never made less inspired decisions? Who has never invested feelings and trust in other people who afterwards behaved in a disappointing way? mi: The wish of the little girl called Jangeum from “The jewel of the palace” series to learn, to write and her strength to persevere in learning as much as possible

certain topics that I identified and the values that count so much for me: loyalty, respect towards another, cleverness, sensibility, all these are values that count as much for me as for the main characters in these series, although these values are presented at a superior level, much higher from a spiritual point of view than in my own case.	helped her many times, even saving her from death. This feature of the series should be a message, an example to be followed by many Romanian young people of not giving up school, because only by leaning as much as possible they could get by in life
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Table 1 – The similarity between the personal values and those underlying the Korean television series watched

According to the answers registered in the interviews set and during the online discussions on forums devoted to these TV series, the defining attributes for the Korean folk culture products broadcast by the Romanian television could be the “historical” character, “the complexity” and “the surprising”, “the unexpected” (the last open with the meaning „different from what one could have initially assumed”). We find this stress put on the combination between the “unexpected” or/and “surprising „natural landscape and the appeal to perennial cultural elements (belonging to the specific history) as the main characteristic emphasized by the participants to the analyzed online dialogues:

The set of interviews	Discussions on the internet forums devoted to Korean series
S12: American series – materialism; South American series – soap-operas; Romanian - genuine; European – strange; Turkish – semi-exotic; Korean – historical.	mi: The Romanian television surprised us with these series after the American – movies- inflation and after the flood of “telemale” – this is to be read telenovellas-; it showed to us that it could be so different and therefore we discovered by mere chance the Korean movies.
S14: American TV series – money; South-American, Turkish, Romanian series- romance; Korean series: folk (historical) culture	
S6: American series: stupid; South-American: ridiculous; Romanian: embarrassing; European: it depends; Turkish: imitations; Korean: surprising	kam15: I watch the series on TVR1 and it’s fascinating; we can see something else than the oversea movies (which practically suffocate us) that are full of influences and lies.
S9: American series – endless; South-American series – exaggerated; Romanian series – Kitsch; European series - pointless; Turkish series – unlikely; Korean series – complex.	

Table 2 – Essence of the Korean television series

When asked about the main traits of the Korean television series the interviews offered the following: mainly with a fast action (23.3%), neither dense nor light as plot (30%); intense (23.3%); presenting an unique genre (16.7%), with a rather complex script (23.3%); neither with violent actions nor with non-violent ones (23.3%) ; with a “traditional” theme (43.3%); being obviously full of significance (23.3%) and with a truthful story-line (20%).

According to the same sets of interviews and forums’ discussions, the informational dimension represented the most important axis along which the motivation for watching Korean television series broadcast by the Romanian national television got structured. More precisely, the interviews set indicated some knowledge contribution related to this cultural-geographic space. The overwhelming majority of the respondents stated that, when initially viewing the first episode of these TV dramas, they possessed a minimum level of knowledge about the Asian culture, history and civilization. Those general informing function as well as the educational function exerted by the media in the case of the Korean historical TV series was, also, obvious for the people participating at the discussions on the Internet forums devoted to these series:

The set of interviews	Discussions on the internet forums devoted to Korean series
S6: Generally speaking, I don't know much about the Asian culture or history, at the university where I was attending lectures there was a Korean language department and they had some English magazines about their culture. I know that Japan, as well as South Korea, is a very powerful state from an economic point of view, which was literally reborn from its own ashes after the Second World War and which in less than a century became a powerful, developed country. I don't know much about the North Korean history besides the fact that being under a communist regime it got separated from South Korea; from an economic point of view these states are totally different. To conclude with, I think that these two countries are prototypes for what is happening on the Asian continent – on the one hand, very developed countries like Japan and also China and on the other hand countries that progress in an anachronism poverty and unemployment rate are high. I also know that in Thailand there is extensive human beings' trafficking. From a cultural and civilization point of view, Asian countries are quite privileged; they have a special architectural style, a specific sculpture, gastronomy etc.; nevertheless, they are more and more influenced by modernism. S15: I know that this country has a large history and a culture that is almost identical with the Chinese and Japanese ones. South Korea is in the Southern part of the Korean peninsula, in Eastern Asia and its landscapes are impressive. S18: Although I like their culture, I know very little about the Korean people. I know that they are very developed financially, Japan ranking among the world economic powers. Korea, a small country but full of values and traditions; they have a quite attractive history, meaning that they left behind a huge amount of knowledge, monuments, landscape attractions etc.	sa: It's an extraordinary series. Due to these two Korean series broadcast by TVR my interest for this area of the globe suddenly increased. mi: Korean historical series not only present to us a part of an unknown world and the agitated life of the Korean people in the Middle-Age, but also offer us a detailed image of different occupations such as culinary art, painting, different arts and crafts, the organizing of the army, the education system and others. a81: „Yi San” was the first Korean TV series that I watched, although not from the very first episode. I can say that it was the beginning of my new passion for Korean TV series, movies and OSTs and not only. Even their language seems interesting so that I started to look for certain materials on the internet and up to present I have already learnt some of the vocabulary, I can count, I know the days of the week, the months of the year and some of the usual expressions, anyway the knowledge required for a beginner's level. "Kamsahamnida"(thank you). flor sca: A terrific movie with wonderful actors who not only conquered me, but they also reached my soul and opened my heart towards Korean movies and the Asian culture about which (to my shame) I didn't know much.

Table 3 – Motivation for watching Korean television series

Conclusion

Popular cultural products and cultural consumption in the twenty-first century have become increasingly transnational as hybrid national, cultural and ethnic boundaries around the globe become less clearly defined. This assumption is especially true related to “Hallyu”, seen by Chua Beng Huat (Youna Kim, 2008) as an East Asia reply to Hollywood-type cultural products:

“The emergence of an East Asian pop culture stands significantly in the way of complete hegemony of the US media culture, which undoubtedly continues to dominate entertainment media globally.”

Here we can invoke that, in a similar vein, when referring to modern cultural identity as an essential element in the construction of social identity (for individuals and groups), St. Hall shows that (Hall, 1990: 225):

Cultural identity, in this sense, is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, they have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essential past, they are subjects of the continuous “play” of history, culture and power.

In the case of our study (2010-2012) the analysis of empirical data proved that the main element laying at the basis of the Romanians reasons for watching Korean series and being a K-Pop fan were the personal values through which those individuals defined themselves. Belonging especially to a spiritual register, they classify the audience of these series according to a specific typology which we can call a “Balanced-normative” one – centered on family, friends and general security of the society.

Much more, both the interviewees from the Korean television series’ public and the K-Pop fans had declared those values are decoded as fundamentals in the Korean cultural products they consumed.

We are thus witnessing an illustration of “glocalization” for these cultural products, a fact underlined by further analyses devoted to this phenomenon (Chan, J. M., Ma, E. K. w., 1996; Cho H. J., 2005; Dator, J., Y. Seo, 2004).

Given the lack of general, cultural and historical information through which the Romanian could be in the position to contextualize the consumed Korean cultural products we can say that in this specific case, we are witnessing the practical validation of Liebes and Katz’s theories (Katz, Liebes 1985: 188; Katz, Liebes 1986; Katz, Liebes 1988) referring to the cultural motivations involved in the media consumption.

The somehow difficult issue that needs further investigation is that of the export of Korean “high” culture’s products in Europe – in our case, in Romania.

As frequently stressed, Hallyu could and must be considered as the most vivid expression of the Korean people strength world-wide. Here we can quote You Hong-june (2006):

“... the Korean Wave is a phenomenon finally repositioning Korea from an age-old ‘importer of culture’ to an ‘exporter of culture’.”

We consider that our on-going analysis could open the way towards new questions related to the appearance of a new “cultural identity” in the case of postmodern public for various cultural products (Eun-Young Jung, 2009). As our research had proved, the hybrid cultural products consumption (Korean exported cultural products) is brought along not only by new consumption motivations (polyvalent) but also by new abilities to decode them (derived especially from the mix of media “genres” made possible through the technological and digital process). Accepting this type of “hybrid” cultural products can thus help us understand more precisely the challenges of a global world.

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