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IMMIGRANT MINISTRY IMPLICATIONS OF HALLYU

Exploration of the Potential Impact of South Korean Popular Cultural Flow on Ministry by and to Immigrants

David Kim, DMin

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of Hallyu—Korean popular culture—is globally extensive in its influence and reception. Hallyu has transformed how South Koreans and Korean American immigrants perceive their identity and cultural esteem. Coupled with the Korean American immigrant church’s central role in establishing and growing its communities, Hallyu conditions present an opportunity to impact the immigrant ministry in North America. This study suggests that Hallyu lowers barriers to cross-cultural engagement and connection which can positively impact ministry conducted by immigrants and to immigrants.

INTRODUCTION

Disembarking from an airplane at the Los Angeles International Airport, as a six-year-old immigrant boy from South Korea, I could not grasp or imagine the extent of the emotional trauma that would accompany my transplantation to a new country. From that moment on, I would no longer be considered a native of the country in which I lived, despite the attempts to emulate them. It would lead to feelings of alienation throughout my childhood and into my young life. This experience has profoundly impacted my self-perception and my perception of the world, influencing virtually every aspect of my life.

Additionally, this sense of “otherness” mediated how I related to the mainstream culture and the level of rejection of my own heritage. This condition, however, would begin to gradually shift as a result of the increasing global popularity of the South Korean popular culture, also known as Hallyu. This newfound cultural reality permitted a

redefinition of the immigrant identity that contributes to a transformation of my self-image and how I perceive the gaze of the world.

If my experience of a shifted sense of immigrant identity is shared by other Korean American immigrants, studying the impact of Hallyu upon both the immigrant and mainstream culture would offer deeper insights into the characteristics of Korean immigrants and the potential impact upon the global and local communities. Accordingly, this paper will explore the topic by briefly outlining the history of Korean American immigrant church in the United States, examine the concept and the reach of Hallyu, characterize the influence of Hallyu on Korean’s self-perceptions, and draw implications of Hallyu on outreach and evangelism methods and approaches. The research will draw conclusions based on the finding and will offer recommendations and areas of further study.

BRIEF HISTORY OF KOREAN AMERICAN IMMIGRANT CHURCH EXPERIENCE

South Korean immigration to the United States has a relatively short but notable history that dates back to the early 20th century. The very first Korean immigrants were recruits of the Hawaiian Sugarcane Association in 1902 (Shinjong Baeq et al. 2011, 28), when approximately 7,200 Koreans arrived in Hawaii (Shin and Park 2018, 599). In the decades following the Korean War (1950-1953), a significant increase in South Korean immigration to the US began as a result of the US government's decision to allow more professional and highly skilled individuals to enter the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this time, many South Koreans came to the US to study and eventually settled permanently, with the majority settling in California and New York. The 1980s and 1990s saw another wave of South Korean immigration to the US, largely due to the Korean peninsula's economic downturn and political instability, leading to a sharp increase in the number of South Korean immigrants to the US (Shin and Park 2018, 599). By the 2000s, Koreans constituted one of the largest and fastest growing immigrant groups in the US, the fifth largest Asian immigrant group, and seventh largest immigrant group overall (Yook, Yum, and Kim 2014, 9).

From the earliest arrivals, Korean immigrants relied on establishing churches for social and community support, helping new arrivals to adjust and navigate life in the new land. The churches provided a way for the first generation immigrants to thrive and maintain their cultural identity which became closely tied to their faith identity. Successive generations, however, experienced a “silent exodus” of youth from the church communities (Winston 2018) as young people disengaged with the strictly Korean identity and its close connection with the immigrant church. Korean American youth describe wrestling with their complicated identity in America, being comfortable with the mainstream culture that looks very different from their home lives with their parents who often communicate with them in Korean.

The “silent exodus” of Korean American youth from immigrant churches is evident to Robin Park, pastor of the Yorba Linda SDA church in Orange County, California (Personal video interview with Robin Park, Jan 24, 2023). Park founded this church in Yorba Linda after leaving the Cerritos Korean SDA church with the English-speaking members who followed him. Fourteen years later, Yorba Linda is a multicultural church that holds primarily English services and is composed of members of various

ethnic backgrounds. Park noted an accelerating and troubling trend of Korean youth and young adults leaving the immigrant churches in Southern California and throughout North America. Park's assessment of the state of the Korean American churches reflects many other Korean church leaders who are anxious about the future growth and relevance of the ministry to and by immigrants, especially since the number of immigrants from Korea seem to be waning recently (Kim 2020, 177). Park suggested this is due to the improved economic opportunities available in South Korea and the prominence Korea currently enjoys on the world stage because of Hallyu.

THE HALLYU PHENOMENA

Prior to the 1990s, the predominant perceptions in the minds of the American public of South Korea was likely from the popular TV show “M*A*S*H,” a comedy drama that “portrayed the day-to-day experiences of army surgeons and nursing officers in a mobile army surgical hospital located in Uijeongbu during the Korean War. The show depicted a war-torn, poor, and undeveloped country with limited global significance and reliance on American aid (Shin 2022, 2). Just 70 years later, the South Korea of the 21st century is radically different, and the global perception is a modern country of rich culture, technological advancement, and economic significance. This transformation in perception is a direct result of Hallyu.

The term “Hallyu,” which means “Korean Wave,” is used to describe the global popularity and spread of South Korean culture, including its music, television dramas, movies, fashion, beauty, and food. The roots of Hallyu can be traced back to the 1990s, when the South Korean government launched a series of cultural policies to promote Korean culture and exports. The intentional effort to raise the profile of South Korean culture in American cities resulted in partnerships with local Korean community leaders (Min 2017, 1155) and churches. These policies, which included support for the entertainment industry, helped to create waves of Korean pop culture that spread initially in East and Southeast Asia, including China, Japan, and Taiwan. The spread of Hallyu accelerated in the 2010s, as social media and online streaming platforms allowed Korean culture to reach a global audience. Korean pop music, or K-pop, became a global phenomenon, with groups like BTS, Blackpink, and EXO gaining huge followings around the world (Ju and Lee 2015, 1-3). The Hallyu effect has a significantly positive impact on South Korean revenue and is a major force in the global entertainment industry, with Korean

culture continuing to influence and shape global trends in music, fashion, and beauty.

IMPACT OF HALLYU ON THE GLOBAL CULTURE

The transnational significance of the Korean Wave on the global culture is beginning to be studied and quantified, and a survey of literature suggests Hallyu is recognized as pervasive and far-reaching. Academic and popular media around the world report rising trends and the influence of Korean entertainment on their country's youth. An independent journalist in Bangladesh characterized the "K-wave" as a "cultural aggression" that targets and influences the youth of Bangladesh, capturing their imagination and adoration with Korean TV shows, movies, songs, and beauty ideals (Mahi and Obaidullah 2022). Mahi acknowledged that K-wave espouses certain desirable values—family ties, duty to parents, sibling love, virtuous relationships—which align with those of Bangladesh, but worries that the obsessed youth will imitate and prefer the Korean culture over their own, potentially worsening the loss of Bangladesh culture.

In Qatar, youth consumption of K-pop—Korean popular culture—through social media contributes to feelings of frustration with Arab culture where it diverges from those portrayed in Korean TV dramas (Izzeldin Malik 2019). Another study examined the purchasing decisions of Vietnamese youth who consume Korean popular media and concluded that Hallyu has a statistically significant influence on purchasing Korea-related products (Xuan 2018). Additional research surveying African college students concluded that consumption of Hallyu is correlated with a positive perception of Korea (Kim, Lee, and Kim 2020, 8). In China, some prominent actors and media producers characterize Hallyu's penetration as "cultural invasion" (Chen 2011, 114).

Globally, researchers studying Hallyu's influence, particularly over the youth, have elicited some calls for caution and further examination. The responses from the consumers of Hallyu themselves, however, show enthusiastic acceptance and preference for K-wave products and values. Fans of Korean celebrities in movies and sports connect with each other through social media and are responsible for millions of online video views. Korean beauty products and foods have seen wider global distribution, and the level of prestige of Korean products has trended higher (Shin 2022). Interest in learning the Korean language has seen dramatic increases of 95% in graduate and undergraduate classes (Lee 2018). Min Joo Lee has interviewed and

examined the experiences of women from North America, Western Europe, and Russia who travel to South Korea in search of Korean boyfriends (Lee 2022), an indication that Hallyu increases the perceived attractiveness of Korean men outside of South Korea.

IMPACT OF HALLYU ON KOREANS AND IMMIGRANTS IN THE US

The transformation of the image of South Korea on the world stage has raised the level of national pride and cultural identity in South Korea (Chen 2011). Understandably, the increase in revenue related to Hallyu, estimated to be \$43.5 billion in 2003, a five-fold increase in a four-year span, contributes to feelings of economic well-being and nationalistic confidence. Chen suggested that Korean male celebrities, among the highest-paid actors in the world outside of Hollywood, are pleasantly surprised at their global popularity. South Koreans are increasingly seeing themselves as important contributors to the global society as an open, democratic, and industrialized country. Images of a "feudalistic, male-centered society" more akin to what was portrayed on the TV show *M*A*S*H*, are viewed as archaic and superseded. Hallyu is effectively redefining "Korean-ness" for Koreans and the world (Kim 2022).

Hallyu has had a similar positive impact on Korean immigrants living in the United States. One study that surveyed Korean and non-Korean transnationals found that Hallyu's influence was stronger in non-Korean immigrants and 1.5 generation Korean immigrants (Yook, Yum, and Kim 2014). Indeed, Korean Americans experience a sense of pride, connecting better with their cultural heritage, as a result of seeing Korean and Asian representation in popular media (Shin and Park 2018). East Asian communities in general are appreciative of Hallyu popularity in the United States because it addresses underrepresentation in entertainment media, it fosters and validates Asian experiences, and it portrays more conservative values—e.g. non-explicit language and less violent TV scenes—in its media.

Each of my interviewees expressed a sense of heightened cultural self-identity, pride, and validation as a result of the influence and popularity of Hallyu (Personal video interviews with Robin Park, January 24, 2023; Mike Yun, January 22, 2023; Jae Sungmin Cheong, January 26, 2023). Cheong, associate pastor of Central New Jersey Korean SDA church in Edison, New Jersey, was surprised at what seemed to him a sudden popularity of all things Korean. Cheong considered himself a 1.5 generation immigrant and believed his

second and third generation members experience more self-esteem and pride about their Korean culture because of the Hallyu phenomena. Yun, as associate pastor of the Rockville mission group in Rockville, Maryland, found his efforts to reach Asians made somewhat easier because of Hallyu's attraction, and he feels relief and closer identification with his Korean identity.

Park who considered himself a 1.5 generation immigrant, likened his immigrant experience to someone who stood outside peering into the house where a party is happening, but with the recent Hallyu impact in the US, he now sees himself inside enjoying the party, albeit as a guest. Park surmised that his children, second generation Koreans, may identify as authentic residents of this house in his analogy.

When I reflect on my own immigrant experience, my thoughts and feelings align with those of my interviewees. As a young adult in the early 1980s, I felt profoundly alienated and conflicted. My sense of personal and cultural identity was in tension with what I desired—to belong with the mainstream society—and what I observed—radically different in appearance and home environs. As mentioned in the introduction, my self-perception and cultural identity underwent a gradual change as the reach of Hallyu became more prominent. Particularly acute was the realization that I had feelings of inadequacy as an Asian male that stemmed from popular media's reinforcement of the stereotype that Asian males are impotent and ineffectual. The revelation that a segment of the global population viewed Asians as desirable, even attractive, was a boost to my self-esteem and confidence. A review of literature suggests that this experience is shared among Korean immigrants and most strongly by 1.5 generation Asian immigrants.

IMPLICATIONS OF HALLYU ON IMMIGRANT MINISTRY

Given the history and current state of Korean immigrant church experience and the phenomenon of Hallyu as discussed above, the implications and impact of Hallyu to immigrant ministry can be explored. This section will first examine whether any parallels can be made to the global reception of Japanese popular culture. Then, trends in religion and reports from the faith-based organizations will be brought into dialogue with the reports of experience from my personal interviews. Finally, Hallyu implications and potential future ministry methodology will be offered.

BRIEF COMPARISON OF HALLYU WITH JAPANESE POP CULTURE

Because the global spread of Japanese popular culture preceded Hallyu by a few decades, examining "J-pop" reception, influence, and its course through history may yield clues to how Hallyu may mature as a cultural trend. There are observable similarities between J-pop and K-pop, including a large global fan base and culture and influential trends in music, fashion, cuisine, art, and beauty (Iwabuchi 2001). Several differences exist, however, that may indicate a very different response and trajectory between the two transcultural flows. J-pop struggled to make inroads into China, in comparison to K-pop, which was embraced. In Asia, J-pop carried with it initial resistance because of Japan's past imperialistic efforts in the region. Researchers caution making direct connection between Japan's imperialistic history and any lingering reticence among audiences of East Asia and the West to J-pop, but they warrant more study is indicated. The distinguishing context nevertheless remains that K-pop does not carry a historical or political stigma in the West. This doesn't discount the fact that Hallyu contains troubling aspects within its production, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. Hallyu may enjoy a lower barrier for its acceptance compared to J-pop, and certain conservative traditional cultures may find it less objectionable than Japanese or Western popular culture.

HALLYU AND THE EVANGELICAL EFFORT

Pew Research Center's religious trends identified that believing in God and maintaining religious practice are important priorities for immigrants, with higher percentages than non-immigrant populations in the United States (Pew Research Center 2015). This is true of the Korean American immigrants because, as mentioned earlier, the establishment, growth, and retention of Korean American communities revolved around the church. Exact motivations are unclear, but Korean evangelical efforts are extensive. Korean churches in South Korea and in America have consistently sent out increasing numbers of missionaries even during the Japanese colonization (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953), with the number of missionaries sent out doubling every four years and reaching more than 20,000 in 2010 (Shinjong Baeq et al. 2011). While not directly addressing the influence of Hallyu, Baeq nevertheless reported that Koreans were actively and successfully reaching other ethnic minorities in North America. He suggested that Southeast Asian immigrant groups are receptive because "these countries share cultures and

backgrounds similar to those of Korea” (Shinjong Baeq et al. 2011, 28).

Dae Sung Kim asserted that Korean American churches are already conducting cross-cultural ministry within their own churches when they cater to the second generation youth and young adults (Kim 2020) and therefore are already positioned to conduct outreach to multi-ethnic and cross-cultural populations. Lee would agree and suggested that Korean churches can appropriate the popularity of Korean culture to use as an effective tool for evangelism (Lee 2019).

Mike Yun, one of my interviewees, described several conversations he had with people from Jordan, China, and Afghanistan who were more willing to engage with him because of their interest, familiarity, and affinity to Koreans through their consumption of Hallyu. Themes from popular K-drama programs became launching points for meaningful dialogue about many topics, including religion and spiritual matters. Hallyu proved to be effective in lowering barriers, offering instant commonality, and reducing suspicion.

Additionally, Hallyu and recent positive representations of Koreans in media have contributed to a sense of cultural value and belonging for Koreans as they see themselves more connected with the mainstream culture. It creates a higher degree of willingness to approach non-Koreans to engage in conversations that could lead to sharing the gospel.

Immigration is a divisive topic in North America, and immigrants have suffered harm, received blame, and were ostracized. Hallyu, however, is a conduit for conversation and connection with mainstream society, and a cultural platform for examining these difficult issues in a safe and accepting way for many immigrants.

Yun noted that there is a “golden time” of evangelism when immigrants have just arrived in a new land and are most receptive to finding a community. Robin Park and Jae Cheong recounted similar experiences, and all three pastors counseled that “we must be ready” to offer a welcoming community of Jesus to the crowds drawn to our churches through their encounter with Hallyu.

In summary, Hallyu has provided an opportunity for Korean and Asian immigrants to utilize this global phenomenon to more easily reach cross-culturally to other immigrants and mainstream culture. K-pop’s global popularity has

the potential to make significant inroads to connect with difficult-to-reach cultures. Hallyu’s values can be a channel through which commonality can be found and faith concepts can be transmitted. The confluence of the unique characteristics of Korean American immigrant churches and the cultural trend which allows for greater commonality on a global scale presents a golden opportunity that could have far-reaching implications for ministry by and to immigrant populations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Hallyu is not without problems. Several deeply important issues need to be resolved involving transnational cultural flows. Issues such as insensitive appropriation of culture, abuses documented in K-pop entertainment industry, and questionable or inappropriate concepts exist within Hallyu. These get propagated. This research is not recommending the wholesale acceptance of Hallyu’s values or its trajectory among global influences. Indeed, all three of my interviewees and other religious researchers express caution and the need for discernment when Hallyu is used for the gospel. The opportunities, however, need to be recognized. The Hallyu effect has lowered the barrier to inter-cultural connections between Korean and mainstream populations as well as Asian and non-Asian immigrant ethnic groups. This research would suggest that immigrant churches, specifically Korean congregations, are poised to make positive contributions to mainstream and other immigrant cultural outreach.

Recommendations for application of this research are offered in two categories: re-imagining the inward self-identity and empowering outreach approaches informed by Hallyu. To encourage a revitalized self-identity among Korean congregations, local conference leaders can hold seminars for Korean pastors and leaders on the current immigration landscape and the impact of Hallyu on lowering the barrier to inter-cultural connections between Korean and mainstream populations as well as Asian and non-Asian immigrant ethnic groups. Conference leadership can encourage Korean church pastors and leaders to re-imagine their evangelistic target audience to include a broader population.

Local conference leadership can foster and encourage more partnerships between immigrant congregations and mainstream churches. Mainstream congregations could be encouraged to partner with smaller, less-resourced immigrant churches to enhance their own outreach

programming, adding language interpreters to their English programming (Sabbath Schools, worship, seminars, etc.) to broaden their reach.

Additionally, conferences leadership can leverage the Hallyu effect by recruiting Korean, Asian, and immigrant church planters to start multiethnic church groups. The experience of Mike Yun suggests that immigrant church planters have a lower barrier to connecting with Asian and other immigrants and established populations.

Recommendations to Korean pastors are to hold training and strategic planning sessions with their congregations that begin with the realities of Hallyu and its potential and then progress to practical outreach plans with input from both first and successive generational members. One of the goals of the sessions is to dispel the reticence that members may have from actively engaging with non-Koreans because of their perceived barriers of language and cultural differences.

With a re-invigorated idea of self-identity and an emboldened sense of a place at the cultural table, Korean Pastors and congregations can practically apply Hallyu-informed approaches to outreach. Korean congregations can form partnerships with surrounding churches to enhance their evangelistic projects. Korean members may, for example, offer their cultural distinctives to a local non-Korean evangelistic effort which could allow for a broader appeal. The Washington-Spencerville Korean SDA church in Silver Spring, Maryland, participates in the local conference's F.L.A.G. camp where the conference camp staff comes to the church to conduct a week-long summer day camp program. At the Korean church's location, however, Korean-themed cultural activities are added to the camp program which are appreciated by Korean and other Asian parents as well as the general population who find value in diversity encounters.

Korean congregations can highlight their Korean-centric programming to the wider communities. For example, Korean language classes which are frequently offered to the children of Korean church members can be advertised and opened to the community. Similarly, Korean cooking classes, cultural instruction, social functions, and Korean language worship services, can be used to attract and engage with a population who may already be connected with K-pop. Korean-American young adults can host Korean street food tasting events, Korean movie discussions, Karaoke, and other Korean-themed activities as ways to connect

and build relationships that lead to spiritual opportunities. Such activities also have the potential to positively deepen or awaken the Korean-American youth's own cultural self-identity, likely leading to greater connection and participation in the church.

In conclusion, this research suggests that the Hallyu effect, although rooted in the Korean culture, does have implications for immigrant and non-immigrant ministries. Hallyu phenomena suggest that in North America, and globally as well, racial diversity, ethnic representation, and cultural inclusion are increasingly appreciated. This shift is reflected in and perpetuated by social media's propagated global cultural flow. The increasing global connectedness has mediated a greater multicultural reality. This research indicates that empowering immigrant congregations for multicultural outreach and evangelism would be a promising strategy for regions that are seeing membership losses.

Korean American immigrant church experience lends itself to leveraging the Hallyu global impact to connect with mainstream and immigrant cultures in North America and beyond. Church attendance is declining at a rapid pace, but a further study of appropriate and relevant methods of Hallyu-mediated outreach could present the potential to stem the trend of church exodus. Additionally, research into how Hallyu can be leveraged by non-Korean immigrant and mainstream church groups would potentially widen the outreach potential.

Throughout the history of the Christian church, trends and events have served to be catalysts for exponential growth of God's church on Earth. Whether Hallyu will turn out to be one of those trends is yet to be determined, but God's call is for his servants to use every opportunity and means to call people into salvation.

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