



A case study on the evolution of K-pop and K-drama related fandom in Bulgaria

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Summary

Hallyu or the so-called Korean wave has been spreading South Korea's influence since the end of the 90s. Since then globally a lot has been written about the history and the features of the phenomenon, however little research has been done on the subject in Bulgarian context. The following paper deals with Bulgarian fandom related to South Korea's popular culture with K-drama and K-pop fandom in focus. Some of the most significant features of Hallyu's history in Bulgarian context have been introduced through interviews with representative Bulgarian fans of different ages. The paper also reviews the dynamics connected to the transition from a K-drama fan to a K-pop fan and vice versa. Furthermore, it presents the changes in Bulgarian fans' behavior since the year 2008.

Keywords: Hallyu, Korean wave, South Korea's popular culture, K-pop, K-drama, fandom, Bulgarian fans

Introduction

Hallyu or the so-called Korean wave has been spreading South Korea's influence since the 90s. It started with the countries of East and Southeast Asia and slowly spread around the globe especially since PSY's hit of 2012 "Gangnam style". Initially it covered areas such as films, TV-drama and Pop music but gradually broadened its range to include Korean fashion, cosmetics, food, computer games (e-sports), animations, literature - in one word everything that gains international recognition and enhances South Korea's global influence. Based on the immense impact of Hallyu's spread on South Korea's economy, foreign policy, national image and reputation, some experts started to directly link the Korean wave to South Korea's "soft power" (Ryoo, 2009; Sung, 2010; Hübinette, 2012, Nye & Kim, 2013; Levkowitz, 2017).

Since its initial spread at the end of the 90s, the Korean wave has evolved a lot. The initial phase was limited to Asian countries, such as China, Taiwan, Japan etc. and the leading product was Korean TV-dramas, distributed by TV channels, with

middle-aged housewives as the prime audience (Yang, 2012; Jin, 2014; Song, 2020). The second phase of Hallyu began around the second half of the 2000s, when the Internet spread globally and sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were created (2004, 2005 and 2006 respectively). Fans were no longer dependent on television and radio and could choose what to watch and when to do it; they could share videos, photos, articles about their objects of passion, they could comment, easily connect to other fans, becoming actively involved into the further spread of Hallyu content. One of the most significant changes in the second phase of the Korean wave was the shift from TV-dramas to K-pop music as a leading product – a result directly related to the so called idol groups, which started gaining fans in their 10s and 20s all over the globe thanks to YouTube and SNS. Furthermore, Hallyu's range broadened as it began to include much more diverse products, such as Korean cosmetic products, food, video games, animations etc., which started being labelled as K-something (K-beauty, K-food, K-fashion, K-sports, K-literature etc.) (Jin, 2014; Jin & Yoon, 2016; Kim, Unger & Wagner, 2017).

The third phase of Hallyu's evolution which we are still witnessing started somewhere around the second half of the 2010s. It can be linked to several things - the development of mobile technologies including mobile internet; the international success of the K-pop group BTS; YouTube's content, popular as *Meokbang* (derived from the Korean words 먹자, meaning "let's eat" and 방송, meaning "broadcast"¹), which involves preparing food and/or consuming it in front of the camera while sharing thought with the audience or with our company of friends who participate too; the Korean movies and TV-dramas produced with foreign funds from major global media companies such as Netflix (Sun & Liew, 2019; Song, 2020).

Purpose of the Study & Methodology

Since the 90s a lot has been written about the history and the features of the phenomenon Hallyu as a whole and about Korean pop music and Korean cinema in particular. With K-pop at the centre of the growing international interest South Korea has been recognized as more than just an economic power. Researchers started studying Hallyu and went on publishing books in their desire to promote it to the public, talking about the influence of the Korean popular culture in Asia and beyond (Kim & Kim, 2011; Song, 2012; Marinescu, 2014), about Hallyu 2.0 (Nornes & Lee, 2015; Jin, 2016) and Hallyu 3.0 (Kim, 2016, Song, 2020). In Bulgaria however little research has been done on the subject. It was only recently

that the general public became conscious of the Korean entertainment industry hence research in Bulgarian context was not an issue.

PSY's "Gangnam Style" drew people's attention but among other factors it was mainly BTS's unforeseen success that fueled the further spread of Hallyu in Bulgaria as elsewhere in the world. The diffusion and evolution of the Korean wave in Bulgaria follows similar pattern to other European countries' cases. However, analysis of the regional features of Hallyu in Bulgarian context can cast new light on its study, since on top of being far distant from the Korean peninsula, Bulgaria is a small state that does not have a large Diaspora of Koreans and does not represent a popular tourist destination for the Korean people.

The aim of this study is to examine Bulgarian fandom related to South Korea's popular culture with K-drama and K-pop fandom in focus. Interviews with representative Bulgarian fans of various age, connected to major South Korea related institutions in Bulgaria, such as the Korean Studies Department at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", the King Sejong Institute in Sofia, the 18 State School "William Gladstone" etc., have been conducted in order to support the study as the three distinguishable generations of Hallyu fans in the country share similar fandom history. The interviews have been carried out face to face, via email and on the phone within 2 weeks during the period 27 January - 9 February 2020.

Early History of Hallyu Related Fandom in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the beginning of the fandom related to South Korea's entertainment industry can be traced back to the year 2008 when an Internet community named Eastern Spirit was created. There is hardly anyone among the first generation of Bulgarian K-drama and K-pop fans who hasn't heard of it or hasn't browsed through the Eastern Spirit's website for recommendations, free subtitles in Bulgarian or just for fun.² In the early history of the forum many people simply joined in search for alternatives to the American productions dominating TV and radio channels and *telenovelas* from Latin America which dominated the TV soap opera sector. In most big cities there was already established a well-supported Internet network and many households had unlimited Internet access with fast speed Internet. So viewers searching for alternatives had the opportunity to find them online. Korean TV-series of 16 to 24 episodes in their majority came as a nice surprise – their production quality was good, the background was beautiful and well presented, the actors seemed natural, the relationships between the characters were romantic, innocent and bashful, as opposed to the sexualized and time-

consuming U.S. and Latin American TV-productions. "Madlen Filipova" (35 years old), one of the very few students to complete the highest possible level at the King Sejong Institute in Bulgaria as well as a co-founder of the first K-pop radio in the country named K.Sound shared:

*"I grew up watching American movies and TV-series, while listening to American music. I wanted something new since at a certain point I grew fed up with everything American. I especially didn't like the fact that there was sex everywhere. When I watched my first Korean TV-drama after a friend recommended it to me I was extremely impressed. Especially with the relationships depicted in the series. There it was - the tender love I have been missing and seeking on screen. I watched all 24 episodes within just two days and decided that I want to learn that language so I joined the courses at the King Sejong Institute in Sofia. Then came the passion for K-pop and here I am now. My passion for South Korea completely changed my life."*³

The Eastern Spirit forum was not merely dedicated to South Korea's media content but presented productions from other East and Southeast Asian countries such as Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong etc. As time went by however the two main competing sides turned out to be the Korean and the Japanese as it is still evident on the forum's website – as of 12 June 2020 on the Eastern Spirit forum 7 186 posts regarding Korean movies were made as opposed to 6 077 posts regarding Japanese and 2 842 posts regarding Chinese and Taiwanese movies; 39 082 posts regarding Korean TV-dramas were made as opposed to 9 309 posts regarding Japanese and 7 245 posts regarding Chinese and Taiwanese TV-dramas.⁴ Comparison was not so difficult especially in the case of TV-series based on the very same manga series such as: "Hana Yori Dango" (2005, Japanese) and "Boys Over Flowers" (2009, Korean), "Hana-Kimi" (2007, Japanese) and "To the Beautiful You" (2012, Korean), "Nodame Cantabile" (Japanese, 2006) and "Naeil's Cantabile" (Korean, 2014) etc. "Penka Yurukova" (52 years old) who is among the first generation of Bulgarian Hallyu fans shared:

"For me it all started some ten years ago with a Japanese drama, introduced to me by a friend. Then came the first Korean drama and I really liked it. At the time my daughter was 9 and I was looking for ways to broaden her mind, introducing her to different cultures. Censorship on violence, sex, swear-words etc. was very important to me. I found what I was looking for in East Asia TV-series. At the time we would watch Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Taiwanese dramas spending time together, laughing and discussing our favorite actors. Slowly we developed deeper interest towards the Korean and the Japanese productions. I still find the Japanese culture fascinating but I have to admit that in terms of cinema I prefer the Korean

productions – I do not like the typical exaggeration of people's reactions in the Japanese dramas. My daughter is now 18 years old and is still in love with K-dramas. She is now learning Korean as a hobby and looking for a good-looking Korean to marry."

Then as it is now Internet was the main source to provide Hallyu related media content as it is poorly presented on Bulgarian TV. Since 2011 several attempts to show K-dramas to the general public in Bulgaria have been made by Bulgarian major TV channels, but still Korean presence is not notably felt. So Bulgarian fans rely mainly on Internet sites where they can either watch videos online (on websites such as YouTube and Rakuten Viki or by using the services of Netflix), or download videos from torrent sites since the regulations concerning foreign copyright in Bulgaria are not very clear.

The second generation of fans in Bulgaria

Around the year 2012 a new generation of Bulgarian fans emerge. The first generation of Hallyu fans in the country were predominantly K-drama fans at a mature age, who simply enjoyed K-dramas while merely promoted them to their friends. The new generation on the other hand was consisted of mostly younger people in their 10s and 20s who would enthusiastically take part in the various offline Hallyu related activities, some of which they organized themselves, while actively promoted the further diffusion of Hallyu in Bulgaria mostly through the means of Internet and social media sites. They would take part in flash mobs in front of the National palace of Culture, attend K-pop events, eat at Korean restaurants, start learning Korean, attend Korean dance classes, order Korean products via the Internet, etc. Some of the more passionate fans would even pursue the dream of seeing their beloved idols on stage attending K-pop idols' concerts abroad ⁵ whenever they get the chance. "Denitsa Dimitrova and Preslava Georgieva" (both 22 years old) who are studying Korean as an elective subject at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" shared:

"In 2018 we traveled to Paris to see our favorite K-pop idol group BTS on stage. We have been checking online information hoping to get the chance to see them. So when we saw the announcement that they are coming to Europe as part of their world tour "Love Yourself" we just chose between London, Amsterdam, Berlin and Paris and made sure we got the tickets. Seeing them on stage was amazing!!! Like a dream come true!"

The years to follow the success of PSY's hit "Gangnam Style" (2012) were the time when K-pop cover dance groups started to mushroom. Fans would show off their skills on the stages of the various Asia related events organized in Bulgaria⁶, making impression through catchy requisite, make-up and complex choreography usually following the original dance moves of the music video. Their performances would be extremely spectacular for the stage of "Go To Korea" since the grand prize of the event is a return ticket to South Korea and the opportunity to qualify for the World K-pop dance contest held in South Korea every year. In 2018 for the first time a Bulgarian K-pop cover dance group named TOXIC (winners of Go To Korea 2018) was able to participate in the finals after additional online vote.

The transition from a K-drama to a K-pop fan and vice versa

The smooth interaction between the different segments of the entertainment industry in South Korea, where talented music idols transform into good actors, created such an effect that often K-drama fans would become K-pop fans and vice versa. The well presented OSTs going along with the TV-dramas and movies commonly performed by pop idols can easily be pointed out as another reason for the transition. Since the 2000s when a new generation of music idols emerged in South Korea the following notable change has taken place:

The relationship between talent agencies and national television networks and cable broadcasting companies grew closer. While first generation idol groups built fandom and gained popularity mainly on the basis of music programs on national TV networks, after the 2000s it became more common to expand awareness of a group through weekend entertainment programs. For example the idol boy band G.O.D. obtained popularity through the segment "G.O.D.'s Babysitting diaries" on MBC's "Sunday, Sunday Night", and thus established the fact that idol singers could achieve certain desired effects in marketing better through entertainment programs than through music programs. From that point on there has been increasingly fierce competition among idol groups for appearances on TV entertainment program. (Kim, 2012, p. 103).

This is how the second generation Korean idols' activities evolved into something more than just singing and dancing: they would appear on TV entertainment programs, TV reality shows, TV commercials, TV-drama series, musicals, movies in order to publicize themselves and gain popularity (Kim, 2012, pp. 103-106).

In Bulgaria in numerous cases fans of Korean TV-dramas would discover K-pop out of curiosity after checking online information about the TV-drama they liked

and discovering that somebody from the cast (not necessarily one of the leading actors) is actually a music idol or a member of a group. Following a pattern that has been observed in other countries as well (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013; Oh & Chae, 2013) they would check the discography of that group and the odds of them becoming fans of that particular group were very high. That was the case with Pamela Nikolova (20 years old), a graduate at the 18th State School "William Gladstone" in Sofia with Korean as a first foreign language. She shared:

"In the summer of 2011 my parents and I went to spend a few weeks at my grandmother's house. We would spend every evening together watching television and talking. At the time the BTV channel was broadcasting a Korean TV-series named "IRIS" and we all liked it. My father especially liked it! I was curious and made an online check of the cast and found out that one of the actors, nicknamed T.O.P., was a member of a popular music band. I checked their videos in YouTube and really liked them. That is how I became a BIGBANG fan."

The third generation of fans in Bulgaria

Around the second half of the 2010s a new, even younger generation of K-pop fans came forward. It consisted of mostly girls in their 10s who have grown fond of BTS, following the group's global success. They would passionately support their beloved members via the means of Internet by sharing, commenting and (some of them) even joining the group's international fan club known as ARMY; they became interested in studying Korean with a private tutor in most cases, started attending dance classes etc.

While K-pop was still the core of Hallyu's success, TV-dramas broadcasted on Bulgarian TV channels, also contributed to the further spread of Hallyu's influence. In 2018 several K-dramas were broadcasted on the Bulgarian National Television⁷. Since they were aired in the primetime slot many watched the TV-series with their family while having dinner, or simply at the end of the day while spending some family time in front of the TV. Those series attracted audience of various age and lured some of them to further explore the sea of Korean TV-dramas available online. "Katherina Dimitrova" (11 years old) who studies Korean with a private tutor shared:

"I became interested in the Korean culture after watching "Jewel in the palace" some 2 years ago on TV. Then a friend of mine introduced me to K-pop and I liked it - I liked its rhythm, dance moves; I even liked the appearance of the members, who wear makeup, which can be considered quite odd here in Bulgaria. Slowly I

developed an interest in the language as well - in "Jewel in the palace" I saw their writing system, which seemed very difficult and when trying to check it out online I saw that in Korea they have their own alphabet and the letters are different from what I saw in the TV-drama. This further powered my curiosity so I decided to give it a try and start learning Korean."

The examples given above all illustrate a newly established tendency - with the Korean wave penetrating the country the main reasons to study Korean slowly shifted towards connected to people's interests and hobbies (Sotirova, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion some aspects of the Hallyu related fandom in Bulgaria need to be emphasized. The initial phase of Hallyu's diffusion in the country started with Korean TV-drama watched via the means of Internet. K-drama offered something fresh, new and different from the U.S., Latin American and European content; something that was long missing from the American productions dominating the Bulgarian television – innocence, bashfulness, modesty, frankness and romance lacking excessive sexuality. The tender love presented on screen gave the predominantly female fans "butterflies in the stomach" and something to dream about – a partner who is as romantic, tactful, protective and frank as the Korean men seen on screen. A certain degree of cultural proximity despite the geographic distance between the countries was another reason for the warm welcome that K-drama received – a result to the well balanced fusion of Eastern and Western values presented there. Korean media content started circulating among a relatively small group of people who would recommend it to their friends bringing more people together under the umbrella of Hallyu fandom.

Owing to the fact that often K-pop idols become part of the cast of TV-series many people interested in TV-dramas turned to K-pop and vice versa. They would use the Internet as a powerful tool for their research and easily find the desired information online.

The sensational success of PSY's hit "Gangnam Style" attracted the attention of the general public as the song was literally everywhere to be heard - on TV music channels, on the radio, in disco clubs. A simple search in YouTube would result to hundreds of automatically generated video suggestions that would lure users to further explore the world of K-pop. This is how the second generation of Bulgarian fans emerged - like elsewhere in the world they were younger than the previous generation of fans and particularly attracted to K-pop rather than K-drama.

The third generation of Bulgarian fans emerged with BTS's global success. BBC called them "the Beatles of the 21st century"⁸ and by contrast with PSY who was able to release only one successful hit, they started setting record after record making world music history. After the group gained global popularity many Bulgarian teenagers became their fans and started paying attention to other aspects of Hallyu while further decreasing the average age of Bulgarian fans.

The circulation of Korean TV-series on Bulgarian TV channels also contributed to the intra-circulation of Hallyu media content within the country drawing the attention of more mature Bulgarians towards the South Korea popular culture – a pattern that closely follows the evolution of Hallyu in other parts of the world.

Notes

1 According to The Urban Dictionary: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Mukbang>

2 The history of Hallyu in Bulgaria has been reviewed in further details in the paper *The Korean Wave in Bulgarian Context* (Borisova, 2020) which is to be presented on a forthcoming international conference at the Department of Korean Studies at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in 2020. The paper is a chapter in the forthcoming book, titled "Globalization in Korea: On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Korea".

3 Other aspects of the interview with Madlen Filipova are cited in the paper *The Korean Wave in Bulgarian Context* (Borisova, 2020).

4 <http://www.easternspirit.org/forum/index.php>

5 The first Korean music company to discover Europe's potential was SM Entertainment. In June 2011 they put on a concert in Paris and the event was such a success that other music companies followed very quickly (Kim, 2012, p. 133). Since 2011 various groups and solo singers have performed on West European stages including BTS, SHINee, Bigbang, FTIsland, EXO, Super Junior, Got7, Monsta X, Blackpink, Girl's Generation, Rain, Jay Park, G-Dragon, Hyolyn etc. Their concerts would attract fans from all over Europe, including Bulgaria.

6 Such as "Go to Korea", "Aniventure", "Aniplay", "AniFest", AnimeS etc.

7 In 2018 The Bulgarian National Television broadcasted 3 Korean TV-series dubbed in Bulgarian, namely "Jewel in the palace (2003), Dr. Romantic (2016) and "Descendents of the Sun" (2016). In 2020 another major TV channel - BTV Lady - again in its primetime slot broadcasted the hit TV-drama "Goblin" (2016-2017).

8 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-45800924>

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