Consuming the Contra-Flow of K-pop in Spain

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Abstract

South Korean idol pop music (K-pop) has been circulated transnationally and has attracted fans globally. Drawing on qualitative interviews with K-pop fans in Spain, this article explores how this cultural form is represented in the mainstream media and negotiated by its overseas fans. In particular, the article questions how the geo-cultural difference and distance signified by K-pop are consumed in the Spanish context, in which non-Western cultural forms are often othered and marginalised. The article shows that, while K-pop is stereotyped and racialized as a *Chinos* (Chinese) commodity in Spain, the fans questions the pervasive association of K-pop with the Chinos and appropriate K-pop as a cultural resource for engaging with alternative possible lives.

Keywords: K-pop, Hallyu (the Korean Wave), Contra-flows, Fans, Othering, Racialization.

Vanessa, a 19-year-old student in Madrid, Spain, is a relatively new fan of South Korean idol pop music (K-pop). She imagines herself to be a future K-pop idol or to at least be able to perform as well as the idols do. She knew little about Korea and its culture; however, one day, she became captivated while listening to a song by EXO, a popular K-pop idol group (2012 to present). Vanessa recalled the following:

> One day, I accidentally came across K-pop on YouTube. I thought the K-pop idols sang and danced very well. Among K-pop groups, my favourite is EXO. I went to a couple of K-pop concerts [held in Spain], although they were quite expensive. These days, I go to the K-pop Academy four times a week to learn K-pop dance and stuff. [1]

Vanessa's initiation as a K-pop fan is not exceptional; rather, it was common among the Spanish K-pop fans who were interviewed for this article in 2018. Many Spanish fans were introduced to K-pop through accidental online encounters, after which they participated physically in K-pop concerts or events. Vanessa and other fans became dedicated to this cultural form, which her peers sometimes considered as a *Chinos* (Chinese) commodity. In so doing, these fans distinguished themselves from others. While seeking a unique self- or group identity through identification with fan objects is common to most types of media fandom (Sandvoss 2005), consuming K-pop in a particular context, such as Spain, in which Asians and their

cultures have been stereotyped and homogenised, further complicates the meanings of fan activities.

Until the mid- to late-2010s, the so-called 'Korean Wave' (*Hallyu* in Korean) has been almost invisible in Spain, with the exception of sporadic media attention to K-pop and the activities of a small number of grassroots fans. Reportedly, only six small Korean popular culture fan clubs were active in Spain in 2017, and some of them were not dedicated exclusively to Korean popular culture but, rather, engaged with Asian popular culture more generally (Korea Foundation 2017). In 2018, when the fieldwork was being conducted for this article, the Spanish fans confirmed the relatively late arrival of Hallyu in their country. They pointed out that the Spanish-speaking Latin American countries might have adopted Hallyu earlier and that most of the earlier Spanish language subtitles of Korean dramas and K-pop music videos were, therefore, produced by Latin American rather than Spanish fans.

Moreover, the Hallyu discourse was nearly invisible in the Spanish media, with the exception of the short-term attention that was paid to the 'Gangnam Style' video and K-pop in the early 2010s. The Spanish media reports on Korean popular cultural stars and texts has continued to be rather sporadic. For example, even during and since the 'Gangnam Style' phenomenon (2012–2018), *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC*, three major Spanish broadsheet newspapers, have covered K-pop fewer than five times annually, and it was excessively represented by Psy and 'Gangnam Style.' The random and irregular coverage of K-pop in the major Spanish newspapers may imply that, until recently, Spain's mainstream audiences have not been exposed to Hallyu.

Despite its late arrival, the emergence of Hallyu has been noticeable. In 2019, several K-pop groups, such as Blackpink and MonstaX, travelled to Spain to perform. For example, in July 2019, Blackpink successfully held a stadium concert at the Palau Sant Jordi arena in Barcelona; it was the first K-pop group to have ever performed at this stadium, and 10,000 tickets were sold out quickly. Given the announced line-ups of 2019–2020 K-pop concerts (Jay Park, GOT7, and Day 6, in addition to the aforementioned Blackpink and Monsta X), Madrid and Barcelona are apparently becoming regular destinations for K-pop groups on world tours.

The emergence of K-pop and its live and online music market in Spain, similar to other receiving locations, occurred as a result of this cultural form's integration into social media. In a recent investigative report, Pitch Tune, a K-pop promoter in Spain, identified social media as the main factor influencing the emergence of Hallyu in the country:

> The main factor has been, above all, social networks (…) Nowadays, with its immediacy, it is much easier to share, explore, discover what happens in the other part of the world even at the hands of own artists and their companies. It's much easier now to be an international fan than it was before. (Coca 2019)

In response to the social media buzz among K-pop fans, Spanish mainstream media has now begun to pay more detailed attention to this new cultural trend. Illustrating the increasing public attention to K-pop, the major Spanish daily *ABC* described the enthusiasm and liveliness of the atmosphere at Blackpink's 2019 concert in Barcelona: 'Everyone sang (in Korean) as if there was no tomorrow' (Morán 2019). Another daily newspaper, *El Periódico*, described Blackpink's performance as a revelation of 'Hurricane K-pop' that 'wants to dominate the world' (Manuel Freire 2019). Indeed, both BTS and Blackpink have recently appeared on Spain's major music charts, such as Los 40 radio station's Top 40 in 2018 and 2019. According to the music

streaming service Spotify, as of 2019, Spain is ranked eighth among the top 10 overseas K-pop streaming markets outside Asia. Spotify-based streaming of K-pop in Spain increased 718% between 2014 and 2018. While the number of K-pop fans has increased gradually since the early 2010s, there has been a noticeable emergence of larger K-pop markets in 2018 and 2019, when several new BTS songs hit the Spanish markets and rose as high as number three.

Spanish fans' engagement with K-pop may offer a unique empirical example that enables a better understanding of Hallyu as transnational 'contra' cultural flows 'originating from the erstwhile peripheries of global media industries' (Thussu 2006: 10). Spain may be a useful example to illustrate how Hallyu spreads beyond zones of geo-cultural proximity. As a relatively new overseas fan base of this cultural flow, Spain can be compared with older intra-Asian reception points, on the one hand, and other newer fan bases in the West, on the other.[2] As an emerging audience group of this new cultural trend, Spanish K-pop fans may illustrate how Hallyu is signified and consumed in a cultural context that is geo-culturally distant from the place of origin and demonstrate that the wave arrived relatively late. In light of Hallyu's recent arrival and rapid emergence in Spain, it is timely to explore how this transnational cultural flow is negotiated by its early adopters in this different geo-cultural context. In their analysis of K-pop fandom in Israel and Palestine, Otmazgin and Lyan examined the roles of early adopters who 'are ready to "take the risk" and be the first consumers of a new cultural genre' (2014: 34). Drawing on qualitative interviews, this study closely examines how Spanish fans engage with K-pop as a new cultural form. It questions how the geo-cultural difference and distance signified by K-pop are consumed in the Spanish context, in which Asian cultural forms have been othered and marginalised.

Consuming Hallyu in the West

When Korean popular culture emerged primarily in Asian countries leading up to the mid-2000s, the intra-Asian flows of K-dramas and K-pop were examined in terms of cultural proximity, emphasising the content's geo-linguistic and cultural similarities with those of its intra-Asian audiences.[3] In comparison with Hallyu in the intra-Asian context, more recent flows of Korean popular culture – K-pop in particular – have been considered by media researchers as an example of the 'contra-flow' (Thussu 2006) of cultural forms from a non-Western country to Western societies (Jin 2016). Hallyu as a contra-flow raises the question of how and why distant and different cultural content is consumed in countries that do not have geo-cultural proximity to Korea. Few academic studies of Hallyu in Spain exist; the exceptions include a few student theses (for example, Olmedo Señor 2018) and an online survey-based study conducted by Madrid-Morales and Lovric (2015).

Several empirical studies examining Hallyu outside Asia as a contra-flow have revealed the cultural barriers to the Western consumption of Korean popular culture. In particular, according to these studies, cultural barriers and distance entail the othering of Korean popular culture as the distant and racialised variant of its Western counterpart. Even the recent rise of K-pop on a global scale may not be free of the racialisation of non-Western cultural forms (Glynn and Kim 2013; E-Y. Jung 2013; Kim 2017; Oh 2017; Yoon 2019). As illustrated in these studies, the othering of Hallyu (especially K-pop) outside Asia is observed (a) when Korean popular cultural forms are represented in the Western mainstream media and (b) when overseas audiences interpret and engage with Korean popular culture.

First, as evidenced by the United States (US) media's coverage of K-pop idol groups, at least until the mid-2010s, Western mainstream media has racially stereotyped Hallyu stars, content, and fans (E-Y. Jung 2013; Kim 2017). According to E-Y. Jung's (2013) analysis, the K-pop girl groups Wonder Girls and Girls' Generation were explicitly racialised as sexy and vulnerable Asian women in their media representation in the US. The author found that these representations of the K-pop groups conformed to the American audience's racial imaginations, in which Asians are stereotyped as 'the perpetual foreigners in the US who "can't speak English"' (E-Y. Jung 2013: 116). Interestingly, not only the US media but also K-pop corporations reproduced the stereotypical representation of K-pop for Western markets. Kim's (2017) study of K-pop's US market penetration with reference to the representation of Girls' Generation in the US media also addressed how the K-pop industry reproduced and conformed to Western mainstream media's stereotypes of Asian culture. Kim (2017) argued that K-pop is 'the product of a systematic value structure that has conditioned Korean society to consider anything American as the most desirable ideal' (2379). This study suggests that K-pop's cultural and industrial practices in the recent phase of global Hallyu (that is, Hallyu outside Asia) are not free of the Western discourse of 'the Orient'; this can be considered an example of Orientalism (Said 1978). That is, the Western media's representation of Korean popular cultural texts may reproduce lingering Western fantasies through which non-Western cultural forms' exotic differences are consumed and reinforced.

Second, it has been found that Western audiences consume Hallyu as the cultural form of the other. Several studies have explored how Western audiences consume Hallyu as a set of non-Western cultural texts (Mazaná 2014; Oh 2017; Yoon 2019) and illustrate how Korean popular culture is racialised among mainstream audiences in non-Asian countries and partly among Hallyu fans in the region. While mainstream audience members in non-Asian countries are increasingly exposed to Korean popular culture, they tend to disapprove of this new cultural trend; thus, its fans are reportedly marginalised (Mazaná 2014; Yoon 2019). The racialisation of Hallyu is even noticed among fans. A few studies conducted in North America have examined, at least in part if not entirely, the racialisation of K-pop among Western (White) fans. Oh (2017) studied White fans' reactions to K-pop music videos and investigated how the existing racial order and White privilege may be reproduced. He suggested that, compared to other racial groups, 'White fans have relatively more power' to 'fetishize K-pop or to be dismissive of it' (Oh 2017: 2282). Yoon's (2019) ethnographic study also examined Western (White and other racial groups) fans' consumption of K-pop and its implications for the discussion of the racialisation of Hallyu in the West; some White fans in his study considered K-pop an item of 'choice' that can be consumed conveniently, whereas fans of Asian heritage interpreted and enjoyed K-pop in relation to their own ethnic identities. The racialisation and marginalisation of K-pop in non-Asian contexts have also been reported in a case study of Eastern Europe. In her study of mainstream audiences' response to Hallyu in the Czech Republic, Mazaná (2014) found racist attitudes, in the form of Korean male stars being largely disregarded and stereotyped and Hallyu fans being bullied in public. She concluded that 'Racism is rooted in Czech society and the rising popularity of K-pop does not seem to have an impact on changing these attitudes' (56).

The aforementioned studies show how Hallyu may be othered by mainstream media and audiences in geo-cultural contexts that are distant from the wave's origin. However, the studies do not necessarily confirm that Hallyu is always and homogeneously othered. Rather, they acknowledge that different audience groups may engage with Hallyu based on their own perspectives (Oh 2017; Yoon 2019) and that media representations of Hallyu are evolving as this

cultural wave continues to spread widely. In particular, one group of studies illustrated that dedicated K-pop fans in non-Asian regions consume this cultural form as a signifier of the exotic and racialised other, yet appropriate it positively and as a tool of self-empowerment and the symbolic negotiation of their daily lives (Carranza Ko, No, Kim, and Gobbi Simões 2014; Han 2017; Min 2017). In those studies, the fans fantasised about the kaleidoscopic world of K-pop as the exotic other of the familiar Western or national popular culture. In so doing, they imagined the 'K' in 'K-pop' as a signifier of difference and distance. In her study of French fandom of Korean popular culture, Hong (2013) found that Hallyu did not represent the Orient desired by the West as the primitive other but, rather, was characterised by ambivalent Western desires as the hybrid, postmodern other. That is, the recurring Orientalist consumption of Hallyu as the other of the West is reinterpreted and questioned, at least in part, by the dedicated fans of this cultural trend.

These existing studies of Hallyu in non-Asian contexts – the Western context in particular – have only partially examined how Korean popular cultural forms are othered; thus, further empirical investigations and theorisation of how the otherness of Hallyu is negotiated by overseas audiences are needed. While some critics have suggested that the increasing media coverage and exposure of Hallyu in the West may contribute to toppling Asian stereotypes and racism (Lim 2018), there is a lack of academic analysis of how Hallyu is received by its overseas fans in relation to the existing racialisation and othering of non-Western culture. Being aware of the previously mentioned case studies that were conducted in North America, Latin America, and Europe, the present study addresses Spanish fans' consumption of K-pop. Given that Spain is a new territory of K-pop fan bases, this study explores how fans as early adopters of an unknown cultural form are involved with or challenge the consumption of the other.

Methods

To explore Spanish fans' reception of K-pop and Hallyu, this study draws on in-depth interviews, which were conducted during the second half of 2018. A total of 16 K-pop fans in Spain, who are referred to by their pseudonyms in this article, participated in individual interviews, each of which lasted between 40 and 120 minutes. Among the 16 participants, 12 were interviewed face to face in Madrid. Of these participants, eight were recruited through one fan group and the other four through a different fan group. Thereafter, four additional online (Skype) interviews were conducted: one with a Barcelona-based fan and three with Madrid-based fans.

Despite the research team's effort to recruit a wide range of K-pop fans in terms of age and gender, all participants were relatively young females (from mid-teens to early thirties), with the exception of one participant who was in her early forties. This gender bias seems to mirror the national demographic of Spanish K-pop fans, as confirmed by several interviewees that were conducted for the present study, as well as a recent survey conducted by Olmedo Señor (2018). Despite this gender bias, the interview participants in the present research were not a homogeneous group; rather, they had different personal fan histories and diverse occupations. While nearly half of the participants were students (n=7), the remainder comprised recent graduates or young professionals who were mostly in their late twenties and thirties. The former were relatively new fans who had been introduced to K-pop in the past six months to two years, whereas the latter were older fans who had been interested in K-pop and other Korean popular

culture content since the early- to mid-2010s. In this regard, Mariana, one of the older long-time fans, defined herself and her peer fans as ‘the first generation of K-pop fans in Spain.’ Interviews with both older and newer fans offered a better understanding of the history, changes, and challenges related to Spanish K-pop fandom.

For this study, the interviews, which were conducted in Spanish, were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Thus, all the interview excerpts presented in this paper were the field researcher’s translation from Spanish. During the semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked about their introduction to K-pop, fan activities, relationships with other fans, and feelings about their favourite K-pop idols and music. As they pointed out the ways in which Korean popular culture and its fan activities were marginalised in Spain, the participants were further asked to discuss how they responded to the ongoing ‘othering’ of K-pop in Spanish society.

Consuming the Chinos

According to the interviews with K-pop fans in the study, a common perception regarding Koreans and Korean culture in Spain can be summarised in association with the term Chinos. Reportedly, ethnic Asians, including Koreans, have been discriminated against and homogenously stereotyped as ‘Chinese’ in public (Rosati 2018). This resonates with what Kibria (2003) in her study of Asian Americans refers to as ‘the racialization of ethnicity,’ in which Asian Americans were often assumed to be members of ‘a generalized Asian community’ and to have an Asian identity. The lack of a Korean cultural presence and the racialisation of ethnicity in Spain may be related in part to the small Korean ethnic community in the country. The Korean community in Spain is much smaller than in some other countries with major Hallyu fan bases, such as the US, Canada, and Mexico; in 2017, only 4,520 ethnic Koreans resided in Spain (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). In addition to the small population of ethnic Koreans, which may have led to a lack of representation of this ethnic group among the public, the recurring racialisation of East Asians in Spain may have affected how Koreans and their culture are signified.

For the interviewees, other Spanish people’s most common response to their interest in Korean popular culture was derogatory surprise, due to the pervasive association of Korean culture with Chinos. While the literal meaning of ‘Chinos’ is ‘Chinese’ in Spanish,[4] it is not necessarily a term that is used neutrally to refer to a nationality; rather, it is frequently used to racialise Asians. In Spain, the term Chinos is often used to negatively label and stereotype Asians, including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese people, and their cultures. In the discourse surrounding Chinos, Korea is reduced to a homogenous and essentialised entity of Asia, and prejudice against Chinos is a common barrier that Spanish K-pop fans encounter. According to Diana, a young professional in her mid-twenties, ‘[When they noticed my interest in K-pop,] my friends said [in a derogatory tone], “Ah, the Chinos! You like Chinos! How weird!”’ Mariana, the aforementioned fan in her thirties who works as a tour guide in Madrid, lamented that her dedication to K-pop even caused conflicts with her family members:

> I have had serious discussions with my family. My mom doesn’t understand why I like the Chinos. She doesn’t understand why I want to go to Korea. Now, she asks me, ‘When are you going to Korea? Get out of this house.’

The interviewees frequently pointed out stereotypical representations of Korean culture and K-pop in the public. Even among their peers, interest in K-pop was considered odd. Gabriela, a student in her mid-twenties, stated, ‘My friends consider me freaky.’ However, for younger K-pop fans, it seemed that such cultural stigma was gradually being diluted. Significantly, Leticia, a younger and newer fan in her mid-teens who became dedicated to K-pop only six months ago, commented on the gradual change in her peers’ attitudes:

> K-pop is a lot more widespread now, and liking K-pop doesn’t look as bad as before. Previously, people asked me, ‘Why do you listen to K-pop?’ [in a derogatory tone]. Now, people ask me, ‘What do the lyrics mean? It sounds different’ [with a tone of interest].

The association of K-pop with Chinos may reflect the dominant way in which Asian cultural forms are represented and consumed in Spain. That is, the imagination of Asia in Spanish popular media and public discourse has resembled what is referred to as Orientalism. As a discursive system constructed in the West, Orientalism draws on an essentialist myth of the Orient as an inferior, primitive other (Said 1978).

Interestingly, compared to other Asian popular cultural forms – Japanese animation, in particular – K-pop seems to have been a marginal cultural taste in Spain until recently. A few fans noted that the public was more accepting of Japanese popular culture than K-pop. According to Bianca, who is in her early thirties, ‘Japanese manga and anime are not considered as weird as K-pop. However, when I tell people I like K-pop, they say, “So, what is that?” [in a derogatory tone].’ The relative acceptance of Japanese animation and its fans in Spain may be due to their decades-long presence. Several Japanese animations, such as ‘Dragon Ball,’ were imported and released on a wide scale in the early 1990s; thus, it is not surprising that the interviewees grew up along with Japanese characters, such as Pokémon. Indeed, Spain is known for its early lead in the consumption of Japanese manga and Anime in Europe (Malone 2010).

Interestingly, some Spanish fans’ initial encounters with and interests in K-pop were triggered by their earlier interest in Japanese popular culture. For example, Vanessa, the teenage fan mentioned at the beginning of this article, recalled, ‘I liked Japanese manga and anime before I liked K-pop.’ Several other fans also expressed their previous or ongoing interests in various Asian cultural forms in addition to K-pop. For them, Asian popular media content was a cultural repertoire comprising different genres, stars, and styles, which were, thus, sometimes consumed in relation to each other. Several interviewees had already been long-time fans of Asian popular culture. Bianca stated, ‘I always liked Asian culture, such as manga and anime,’ and Mariana noted how different Asian popular cultural forms can be potentially synergetic:

> I liked Japanese manga and anime. I found out about Korean dramas through Japanese culture. I also liked Taiwanese manga and dramas. When I found out about Korean dramas, I was hooked. I looked for different versions of dramas that were based on manga. Then, I found K-pop.

As this respondent noted, K-pop is not necessarily a stand-alone cultural form but, rather, is potentially related to other Asian cultural texts. For some study participants, K-pop represented a relatively recent form of Asian cultural content that may partly replace or supplement other

Asian cultural content. This finding resonates with those of Hong's (2013) France-based study, in which the Hallyu fans' earlier interests in Japanese media led them to Korean TV shows and music videos inserted in Japanese content or recommended by fans of Japanese media.

The Spanish fans' consumption of K-pop as a new addition to their Asian cultural repertoire might resonate with the dominant perspective, in which Asian popular cultural forms are consumed as an imagined and different entity. As Estela, a university student in her early twenties, noted, 'I like K-pop songs because they sound entirely different from Spanish or American songs (…) I always liked Asian culture in general.' Likewise, the interview participants tended to consume K-pop as a part of their Asian popular cultural repertoires. In several fans' narratives, K-pop and other Asian popular cultural forms were collectively and categorically distinguished from mainstream Spanish popular culture. K-pop idols were perceived as mysterious yet attractive stars who differed from the familiar Western personalities. For example, Amalia, who was in her early thirties and a dedicated fan of Big Bang, the popular K-pop boy band, stated, 'The four members of Big Bang have an absolutely different style of masculinity. It's *so* cool when male singers apply makeup.' For several interviewees, K-pop idols are particularly attractive because they may represent what S. Jung (2011) defines as 'soft masculinity,' which involves attributes such as tenderness, charisma, purity, and politeness. A few fans described K-pop as more soulful than familiar popular music styles; for Gabriela, a K-pop fan in her mid-twenties, the music of some K-pop artists, including her favourite girl group Mamamoo, is 'different from American and Latin American pop music, which is always the same. For example, Mamamoo's songs have a soul. Even compared with other K-pop groups, Mamamoo is less artificial.'

The Spanish fans' attraction to the difference signified in K-pop might resemble that of the French K-pop fans in Hong's study (2013), in which the genre's appeal among the female fans was driven by the male idols' images of enigmatic Asian modernity, which was distinguished from materialistic Western modernity. According to Hong (2013), this consumption pattern may be a new mode of Orientalism, as it still draws, at least in part, on the homogeneous grouping of Asian cultural content as a mysterious other. Similarly, in her study of Hallyu in the West, S. Jung (2011) noted that 'Western audiences fetishize and desire the different and transgressive modern aspects' (138) represented in Korean popular culture.

Such Western desire for the distant other may also be observed in Spanish fans' preference for Korean-language songs over hybrid K-pop songs. Despite the increasing use of English and Spanish in K-pop lyrics, Korean-language K-pop is preferred by most Spanish fans. They did not generally welcome the hybrid of Korean and Spanish lyrics, observable in several recent K-pop songs, although a few fans were tolerant of these lyrics. Diana, the aforementioned fan in her mid-twenties, commented on the incorporation of Spanish lyrics into K-pop: 'I think K-pop incorporates lyrics in Spanish because there are many Spanish-speaking fans. I think it's OK but weird.' Adriana, a fan in her mid-twenties, was also critical of this linguistic hybrid in K-pop, stating, 'The lyrics in English or Spanish make me nervous. They sound strange to me. I don't even understand the K-pop lyrics written in Spanish.' For Gabriella, the aforementioned fan of Mamamoo, the group is a 'real' K-pop group, as there are 'no lyrics in English or Spanish' in its songs.

In this manner, the Spanish fans consumed K-pop as the enigmatic other, rather than as a cultural form that can be easily incorporated into and hybridised with the Spanish culture. The fans seemed to consume the distance and difference signified in K-pop to distinguish themselves

from their peers, who were widely exposed to mainstream Spanish or Western cultural forms. According to the fans' accounts, K-pop in Spain seemed to be stereotyped as an item constituting the racial and cultural repertoire of Chinos. The fans noticed this Orientalist gaze through which different Asian cultural forms were reduced to and associated with Chinos as a racialised signifier. However, the fans were not entirely free from the Orientalist discourse, as they were often introduced to and consumed K-pop in relation to other Asian cultural forms, which might not be fundamentally different from the way in which K-pop was typically identified in the Chinos discourse. That is, the essentialisation of K-pop as a Chinos commodity was not completely disregarded by the fans but, rather, questioned by them. The fans in the study attempted to move away from the Orientalist consumption of Hallyu by engaging with K-pop as a new cultural resource by which they fantasise about alternative and possible lives, as further discussed in the following section.

Re-imagining the Other

While the Orientalist consumption of exotic otherness was observed among the Spanish fans who fantasised about K-pop as an expansion of their Asian repertoires, this tendency seemed to be eroded by some fans' reflexive engagements with K-pop. Thus, the fans' appropriation of the difference signified in K-pop was not simply to fetishise the exotic and primitive otherness. The fans challenged, at least to a limited extent, the essentialised otherness constructed through the Orientalist discourse of K-pop as a Chinos commodity. They attempted to avoid an essentialist definition of K-pop while differentiating themselves from mainstream audiences, who primarily perceived Hallyu as the essentialised other. K-pop was also an alternative cultural resource that enabled escape from and negotiation of the dominant social order (Carranza Ko et al. 2014). In so doing, K-pop fans rethought their local contexts and sought personal growth through their engagement with K-pop. Moreover, several interviewees consumed K-pop as a way to engage in intercultural learning while distinguishing themselves from those who fetishise Asian culture. The difference of K-pop was not only essentialised but also utilised as a versatile resource.

First, the fans in the study questioned any attempts to reduce the diversity of K-pop to one or a few representative idols and their songs. For the fans, K-pop was not a homogenisable entity but, rather, evolved in diverse ways, depending on the characteristics of the idols and their fans. As Mamamoo fan Gabriela noted, there are different styles of K-pop, thus generating diverse fan–idol relationships and worlds. She also lamented that K-pop was often represented by a few major groups, such as BTS: 'BTS? I don't like the groups with mega popularity. BTS doesn't touch my heart as much as Mamamoo.' Francisca, a fan in her early-twenties, emphasised that K-pop extended far beyond a few internationally known groups, such as BTS. She seemed to believe that K-pop is standardised and is being rapidly incorporated into mainstream music market; she, thus, was not simply in support of K-pop's global fame. She noted: 'I am afraid that recent K-pop songs lost the personality. I liked BTS when they debuted. But now, all the BTS songs sound similar. I am getting tired of people talking about BTS all the time'. Most interviewees appreciated the diversity of K-pop, as they were sceptical about the Western media's coverage of K-pop as a homogeneous genre of Korean popular music. Whereas several empirical studies on K-pop have described Western K-pop fans as those who are dedicated to K-pop as a clearly demarcated genre and style (S. Jung 2017), some interviewees in the present study were sceptical of this categorisation. The fans seemed to have their own K-pop universe. Camila, a teenage fan in Madrid, stated succinctly, 'Others never understand why I like

K-pop. I just like it.' The 'it' does not necessarily mean K-pop in a collective sense; rather, it refers to particular K-pop idols and their music.

Second, the fans seemed to distance themselves from those who consumed exotic otherness through K-pop. While consuming the difference signified in K-pop, the Spanish fans in the study challenged the superficial understanding of this cultural form as a new and different consumable. Several long-time fans seemed to have in-depth knowledge of the K-pop context, including its production system. In other words, they were keenly aware of the intercultural context in which K-pop is produced and circulated. For these fans, being a K-pop fan meant understanding the intercultural context without being simply fascinated by the text (music or idols). Leticia, the aforementioned young fan, critically distinguished herself from other 'simple-minded' fans: 'Those fans would like to visit Korea only because they want to meet their favourite idols. However, those fans do not know much about Korea.' This respondent, who had been enthusiastic about K-pop for about three years, was learning the Korean language to enable her to better understand the context of K-pop and Korean society. Mariana, the above-mentioned long-time fan, critically observed some Spanish K-pop fans who were hyperactive and 'too expressive' online. According to her, they were novices rather than genuine fans: 'Most of the SNS of fan clubs show something "kawaii (cute)." They are very "otaku."[5] Those kinds of people are beginners.' Likewise, Mariana, who identified herself as a mature and 'truly dedicated' K-pop fan, compared those novice K-pop fans who were 'excessively' attached to their fan objects with the stereotypes of Asian popular culture fans in Spain and elsewhere. For her, the novice fans may consume K-pop as a set of materials from the Orient. Similarly, several other interviewees appeared to distance themselves from those novice fans who, albeit positively, stereotyped Hallyu as the other of their own culture, through which the meaning of K-pop was essentialised as a component of exotic Asian culture. Francisca contrasted younger and older fans:

> New teenage fans like K-pop to be different from other young people because K-pop is different from American or Spanish pop songs. Fans in their twenties and older have an interest in learning the language and culture, not only limited to the enjoyment of the music.

In this manner, the interviewees tended to critically endorse their favourite K-pop idols to avoid being deemed simple-minded fans – that is, those who, in their view, excessively expressed their cultural tastes and irritated other fans.

Third, for the Spanish fans in the study, K-pop's difference implied a means of re-engaging with the local context and imagining an alternative future. For these fans, K-pop's universe appeared to be imagined as a virtual space that is sharply contrasted with their locale. By consuming K-pop, the fans projected themselves into a distant temporal and spatial setting. K-pop's geo-cultural distance (from Spain) functions as an imaginary space into which the Spanish fans project their futures and desires. The cultural differences and distance signified in K-pop seemed to allow the Spanish fans (especially the young ones) to fantasise about possible lives. For the fans, K-pop appeared to represent an alternative future, which they could not imagine in Spanish society. The difference implied in K-pop seemed to offer the fans an alternative resource that extends beyond what is absent from mainstream cultural content. As Isidora, a Madrid-based fan in her early forties and the oldest among the research participants emphasized, K-pop is a youthful cultural item: 'K-pop is popular for young people because young people always look for something different from what is normal. Young people also know

how to access such stuff through the Internet'. For Isidora, being a K-pop fan might be the symbolic pursuit of cultural taste beyond the conventional, thus distinguishing her from other middle-aged people. According to a few fans who were especially interested in the lyrics, K-pop 'addresses delicate social issues,' such as the social class conflicts mentioned in BTS's songs, whereas 'Spanish songs always talk about the same thing – love (Estela, the aforementioned university student in her early twenties).' Consequently, the fans often considered K-pop an alternative to the conventional mainstream culture and social order. For the study participants, Spain was often described as a conventional and inflexible society. By pointing out the closed and conservative nature of Spanish society in regard to its acceptance of other cultures, Mariana lamented, 'There is no future in Spain.' In this manner, by consuming the distant cultural item, the Spanish fans symbolically escaped the restrictive forces that they faced in their everyday contexts. These findings can be compared with those of Latin American case studies of K-pop fans (Carranza Ko et al. 2014; Han 2017). The Spanish fans' engagements with K-pop in the present study not only involved the consumption of the essentialised, backward-looking Orient but also the potential versatility of the new cultural form.

Fourth, the fans sought personal growth through their engagement with the K-pop idols' universe. In particular, the fans were inspired by K-pop idols' work ethic and shared a sense of growing up with the idols and other fans. The interviewees often expressed their gratitude to their K-pop idols, who 'work so hard – much harder than singers in Spain or the USA' (Estela, the aforementioned university student). The K-pop idols' work ethic was highly regarded by overseas fans, who were motivated by the idols' pursuit of 'perfect' choreographies. Consequently, despite the public stereotypes of Chinos, the Spanish fans considered their K-pop idols as role models. As Francisca in her early-twenties stated succinctly, '(If I could meet my favourite K-pop idols), I would say "Thank you."' While consuming the youthful images of K-pop, individual fans appeared to be touched by their idols' performances, characters, and effort. In so doing, they seemed to participate in the K-pop idols' narrative of self-development (Yoon 2019). Several K-pop idols, who made their debuts in their teens and underwent lengthy and difficult training, have effectively developed their identities, drawing on storytelling about 'growing up' (Park 2017). This sense of growing up was enhanced by their imaginary attachments to K-pop idols beyond racial, linguistic, and cultural borders. Social media postings and webcasts covering the everyday lives of K-pop idols contributed to enhancing the transcultural affinities between the idols and their overseas fans, who are geo-culturally distant from each other: 'K-pop idols or their agencies offer a great deal of information about them. I like that. I know that Monsta X eats bacon every morning (laughs). I feel closer to them' (Diana). The fans' identification with and love of K-pop idols offers them motivation and fulfilment. 'I feel happier since being immersed in this universe. K-pop has definitely made me happier,' stated Gabriela, the aforementioned fan who began learning the Korean language to enable her to better understand the K-pop universe.

As discussed in this section, the Spanish fans in the study attempted to avoid simply consuming the exotic otherness of K-pop. Instead, they engaged with K-pop as a way of rethinking their local contexts, imagining an alternative future, seeking personal growth, and exploring intercultural understanding. In doing so, they attempted not to fetishise K-pop as a signifier of the Orient or Chinos. By negotiating the pervasive stereotyping of K-pop as the culture of Chinos, these fans might engage in intercultural learning.

Conclusion

Drawing on interviews with Spanish fans, this article has examined how the difference signified in K-pop is consumed and negotiated. Until recently, Hallyu has remained underrepresented in Spain. The fans in the study, especially those who constitute an older group, recalled the cultural stigma associated with K-pop and K-dramas. Indeed, K-pop fans in Spain had to cope with pervasive prejudices about the Chinos, in which K-pop was essentialised as a cultural form of the unknown other. By expressing their cultural taste for K-pop, the fans were stereotyped by their peers and families as enthusiasts of Chinos culture. While the symbolic values of K-pop were not recognised in Spanish society, the fans dedicated themselves to the cultural form and its universe. Their interests in this cultural form were often triggered by their previous interests in other Asian popular cultural forms, which were often contrasted with mainstream Spanish culture. The fans who had already enjoyed consuming the cultural differences signified in Asian popular cultural forms became interested in K-pop. This practice of consuming K-pop as a new component of their Asian repertoire may be partly indicative of the Orientalist consumption of the exotic other.

In response to the dominant consumption of K-pop, in which its exotic otherness as a component of an imagined Asian repertoire is conveniently consumed, the fans seemed to explore new ways of consuming the Chinos. That is, they questioned the pervasive association of K-pop with the Chinos and re-imagined the ‘K’ in ‘K-pop’ as a route to alternative possible lives. They appropriated K-pop as a cultural resource for rethinking their local contexts, seeking personal growth. This fan appropriation of K-pop in Spain may be similar with what Min, Jin, and Han (2019) found in their Latin American case study, in which K-pop seemed to offer overseas the young people ‘an alternative space of global cultural imagination that is not rooted in between the West and the East’ (615). As an early adopter of the new cultural trend and form of K-pop, the fans seemed unafraid of the different language and the geo-cultural distance signified in this set of cultural texts. Sixteen-year-old Leticia, the youngest study participant, described succinctly how K-pop offered its overseas fans the moments of transcending cultural distance by providing a new way of enjoying the music of a distant geo-cultural context. She stated, “The way people listen to music has changed. K-pop taught me that it doesn’t matter what language the music is in or what style of music it is. One can still enjoy the music”.

The consumption of difference is a particularly important issue in analysing contra-cultural flows, such as K-pop in Spain. The fans constantly question the dominant construction of K-pop, while appropriating and re-interpreting this new cultural form. The practices of othering K-pop in Spain, such as racialization, may not disappear completely in the near future. However, the fans may reinterpret the cultural difference associated with K-pop, and in so doing, the dominant construction of K-pop and Hallyu may be challenged and revised. For example, the racial implications of K-pop may not be eradicated but reformed and resignified. The consumption of non-Western contra-flows may reveals how cultural differences, such as race, are contingent constructs and thus likely to be re-constructed (Pitcher, 2014). The Spanish fans as a group of early adopters question and attempt to move away from the Orientalist consumption of K-pop as the essentialised, non-Western other. As discussed in the present study, consuming K-pop involves the ongoing negotiation of otherness. The contra-cultural flow of Hallyu reveals how difference, such as race, in popular culture is consumed, imagined, and incorporated into our everyday lives.

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Notes

[1] The K-pop Academy is an education programme organised by the Korean Cultural Center, an affiliate of the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. As of 2019, the event is held regularly at 25 locations worldwide, including Madrid. The one-month programme offers lessons on K-pop dancing and singing, as well as Korean culture (Kim and Lee 2019).

[2] While Spain is often categorized as the West in the framework of the West vs. the Rest, the country was defined as being "an edge of Europe" (McSweeney and Hopkins, 2017, p.3) and even an "Oriental" space, due to several factors such as its historical relations to Islam; that is, the country colonized and objectified some non-Western territories especially in Latin America and their cultures, yet was Orientalized by other Western Europeans. Thus, McSweeney & Hopkins (2017) argue that Spain assumed a paradoxical, 'double position', in which it has been both subject and object of the Orientalist gaze. However, despite Spain's ambivalent position in Europe, the country's public imagination of Asia has not differed substantially from other Western countries' othering of non-Western cultures (McSweeney and Hopkins, 2017; Prado-Fonts 2018).

[3] This cultural proximity did not necessarily relate to essentialised cultural norms, such as Confucianism, but included similar experiences with regard to modernisation (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008' Iwabuchi 2002). Moreover, the way in which cultural proximity operates in Asia might be diverse, depending on several factors, such as genres and audience groups: Korean dramas tend to revolve around family norms, which might be shared among intra-Asian audiences, while K-pop has engaged with the trans-Asian urban youth culture (Chua 2012).

[4] In addition, the term *Chinito*, which literally means 'little Chinese boy,' is used to refer to Asians.

[5] In this quotation, the interviewee seemed to refer to the novice K-pop fans as 'otaku' to emphasize their obsession and excessiveness in fan activities. The Japanese term 'otaku' is often considered to be equivalent to the English term 'nerd'. While otaku tends to be regarded negatively because of his/her antisocial attitudes, some argues certain otaku subcultures can contribute to collective social actions (Sone, 2014).

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