



From Korean Oppas to Bibimbap: The Socio-Cultural Dynamics of the Korean Wave in Sri Lanka

Amalini Fernando

INTRODUCTION

After the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1977, Sri Lanka and South Korea have bolstered their bilateral political and economic relations. The Korean wave has added a new cultural dimension to this dynamic relationship. After a decade of ups and downs, the Korean wave is impacting the cultural and media landscape of Sri Lanka. It is revolutionizing the understanding of how a foreign culture is assimilated in a linguistically, culturally and socially diverse society.

Previous studies (Dhawan 2017; Kaisii 2017; Akter 2019) have provided an overview of the Korean wave in South Asian countries but its spread in Sri Lanka is yet to be explored in detail. Apart from a

A. Fernando (✉)

Department of Political Science, Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany (SUNY), Albany, NY, USA
e-mail: afernando@albany.edu

handful of papers on Korean soap operas (Jinasena 2014) and the soft power of Korean culture (Betha 2013; Fernando 2018; Madurasinghe 2020), the Korean wave phenomenon in Sri Lanka has generally been overlooked. Such studies have not been conducted owing to the fact that the impact of the Korean wave is not ubiquitous in Sri Lankan society and the number of consumers and potential consumers are relatively small that has disqualified it as a subject worth delving into.

Nevertheless, the impact of the Korean wave, however small, is visible in the changing entertainment patterns within Sri Lanka. This merits discussion for several reasons. First, how contemporary Korean culture is received throughout the Asian markets that are culturally disparate to South Korea? Studies exploring the spread of the Korean wave have reported that contemporary Korean culture initially spread into countries that follow Confucius' traditions and later to other countries of diverse cultural backgrounds (Suh et al. 2006). Sri Lanka and South Korea do not share any significant historical or cultural ties, except for Buddhist religious links that predate modern bilateral relations. For Sri Lanka, South Korea is exotic, distant and different. Therefore, the dissemination of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka cannot be credited to close cultural and historical affinity despite the broader Asianess of both countries.

The study of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka—a country that is Asian yet is neither geographically nor culturally close to South Korea—thus offers a good opportunity to examine how popular culture is received and transmitted beyond geographic and cultural boundaries. How, when and why did the Korean wave hit Sri Lanka? Who are the major actors that contributed to its spread? What competition does it pose for the cultural status quo in the country? And what may be its short-term and long-term impact? Answers to these questions would further shed light on the globalization of popular media and transcultural flow in South Asia.

Second, since Sri Lanka does not share strong cultural and historical relations with South Korea, images and information about South Korea are unfamiliar to the ordinary Sri Lankan citizen. Sri Lankans harbour a generally negative attitude towards South Korea owing to stereotypical images associated with the Korean War and subsequent cycles of poverty, political instability and poor quality of life. In Sinhala, '*Koriyawa wage*' literally translates to 'it is like Korea', which is considered to be a derogatory term referring to slums, underprivileged and overcrowded areas. However, this outdated image is retained in the psyche of the older generations only but the young people today carry a positive image of the

vibrant South Korea grâce à the Korean wave. According to Fernando (2018), the constant consumption of Korean popular cultural products has positively impacted the image Sri Lankans have towards South Korea, and at the same time, it has improved their knowledge and perception about the country. It has also encouraged Sri Lankans to travel to South Korea, learn the language and build social networking ties with South Koreans. This serves as testimony to how popular culture assimilation leads to attitudinal and behavioural changes.

Lastly, because Sri Lanka sits next to India, the net exporter of movies, drama and music entertainment has made Indian culture an intrinsic factor in Sri Lankan life. Despite the complex political relations between the two, both these countries share a strong connection due to common cultural and historical heritage dating back to over 2,500 years. Hence, it is not a surprise that Bollywood movies have a far-reaching influence in Sri Lanka. Owing to the cultural affinity of the two neighbours, Indian popular culture is received unconsciously and spontaneously. At the same time, Sri Lankan movie-goers are no strangers to American cinema. Since the adoption of the open market policy in 1977 and globalization, the Sri Lankan market has been flooded with American cultural products. American cinema, music and popular culture are well received and are a mainstream form of entertainment in Sri Lanka.¹

Any exported cultural product carries embedded cultural values of the parent country. Cultural imports go through socio-cultural filtering in the recipient country after adjusting to the new culture. The success of the imported cultural product depends on the cultural competitiveness in the recipient country and how well the new product can harmonize with the local culture. Given the cultural dominance of India and America, it is interesting to see how the Korean wave prevails against the cultural competition it faces in Sri Lanka. To compete with the regional and global cultural powerhouses, the Korean wave in Sri Lanka needs to be a powerful global commercial force that is flexible, absorptive, crowd-pleasing and culturally relevant.

¹ Under the Film Importation Policy of the National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka, only 170 films can be imported to Sri Lanka within one calendar year. These include 70 Tamil, 65 English, 25 Hindi and 10 films of other languages that may be imported. This alone shows the patterns of cinema consumption in Sri Lanka (National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka, n.d.).

This chapter provides an understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka, investigating its origin, spread and future trends. It pays special attention to the other cultures present in the domestic entertainment market and how the Korean wave has successfully challenged the status quo. It also attempts to distinguish the characteristics of the fans interacting with the newfound Korean subculture. To examine the acculturation and the acceptance of Korean culture in Sri Lanka, two factors will be paid special attention to: cultural competitiveness and degree of interaction.

THE ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF THE KOREAN WAVE IN SRI LANKA

The Jewel in Sri Lanka

The first formal telecast of a Korean drama in Sri Lanka was in 2010 when the Korean TV show, *Full House*, was broadcast on the Independent Television Network (ITN), a major state television broadcaster in Sri Lanka. The drama, the first-ever experience of a Korean TV show for Sri Lankans, was subtitled in Sinhala and enjoyed moderate success. *Full House* was followed by *Autumn in My Heart* in 2010, another contemporary drama broadcast on the same television network. The two series were provided by the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Sri Lanka with the hope that the dramas would provide Sri Lankan viewers a glimpse of the Korean culture and lifestyle of the Korean youth and foster mutual cultural understanding between the two countries (Yahaluwa 2009).

However, the watershed of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka came in 2012 with the broadcast of the famous historical drama *Jewel in the Palace* (Dae Jang Geum) on the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (Rupavahini) network. Dubbed in Sinhala and titled *Sujatha Diyani* meaning ‘pure or legitimate daughter’, the show’s 54 episodes aired consecutively, five nights a week and became an instant success. The show is popularly known in Sri Lanka as *Changumi*; after the main character *Jang Geum* which was adapted into Sinhala as *Changumi*. The show was later dubbed in the Tamil language and telecasted on Nethra TV for the benefit of the Tamil audience in Sri Lanka.

The drama, *Jewel in the Palace* was gifted to Rupavahini from Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) under the patronage of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Sri Lanka. It earned a record-breaking income

of Sri Lanka Rs. 16.8 million during the period of October–December 2012 (Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation 2013). The drama, *Jewel in the Palace* was aired in the 6:30–7:30 pm airtime belt. This airtime belt previously lacked market value but since then has become a prime time slot in the local television industry (Ransirilal 2016). The show was widely praised for the quality of its dubbing and the heartfelt theme song translated into Sinhala.

Since its debut in South Korea in 2003, *Jewel in the Palace* has been a primary proponent of the Korean wave in other parts of the world. Thus, it is no surprise that it would become a household name in Sri Lanka. While its audience was wide-ranged, it was particularly popular among female viewers. A Sri Lankan national newspaper described the popularity of *Jewel in the Palace* as a ‘new craze’ among both children and adults (*Daily Mirror* 2013). As the show’s popularity surged, it became a cultural icon. Photos of the *Jewel in the Palace* cast were seen in weekly women’s papers and were sold in bookshops. The show was discussed in talk shows, newspapers and among people on a day-to-day level. Young girls dressed up and role played *Changumi* during their playtimes. ‘Changumi style’ hairpins rose in demand. The series was turned into a Sinhala novel. Photos of the show were used to promote commercial products. Many instances of copyright infringement were also reported (Sarasavi n.d.; Thajudeen 2013; Sooriyagoda 2013).

The show was a national phenomenon and did not go unnoticed by the upper echelons of the country. Speaking during a visit to a girls’ school, the then-president Mahinda Rajapakse announced that he too watched *Jewel in the Palace* and encouraged students to follow the example set in the story. Commenting on its popularity he said that *Jewel in the Palace* is ‘watched not only by you daughters but also by your mothers and grandmothers. When I used to go visiting to houses [*sic*] I have seen this teledrama being watched... with interest’ (*Gossip Lanka News* 2013). Having heard of the show’s success in Sri Lanka, *Jewel in the Palace* actress Lee Young-ae (Jang Geum) donated USD 100,000 to initiate the ‘*Sujatha Diyani Scholarship Fund*’ for female students of low-income families in 2014 (Cabinet Office Sri Lanka 2014). In 2017, she contributed USD 50,000 to support flood relief efforts in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Foreign Relations—Sri Lanka 2017). Lee Young-ae’s generous gesture fostered a warm reception in *Jewel in the Palace* fans towards South Korea.

Bethea (2013) writes that one of the major factors that contributed to the success of *Jewel in the Palace* in Sri Lanka was its positive portrayal of female characters. According to Bethea, the lead female characters in *Jewel in the Palace* are strong and independent and untypical of characters seen in local TV shows. Telecasting *Jewel in the Palace* ‘allowed for a change—or at the very least a break—in representational politics’ and thereby shattered ‘the mold set by nationally produced teledramas’. For Bethea, Sri Lankan TV channels have long conformed to gender stereotyping in TV shows in favour of what they deem culturally appropriate. Local TV shows typically present passive, compliant, and subordinate female characters as the norm. However, *Jewel in the Palace*, in contrast, deviates from the representation of what has traditionally been considered culturally appropriate and instead ‘presents an agentic character and directly addresses gender inequality’ (Bethea 2013). Consequently, the show provided strong role models for its female audience in Sri Lanka, becoming an outlier from typically telecasted dramas and attracting a large, predominantly female audience.

The Japanese drama *Oshin* also contributed to the favourable attitude towards *Jewel in the Palace*. (The contribution of Japanese drama to the success of the Korean wave will be explored later in this chapter). *Jewel in the Palace* gained viewers relatively easily because viewers considered Korean TV shows to be of the same genre and quality as Japanese drama. In 2012, immediately before *Jewel in the Palace* was telecasted, the Rupavahini reran the beloved *Oshin* series. The viewership included both older and younger generations. The 2012 rerun earned Rs. 11.9 million in revenue from May–October 2012, second only to *Jewel in the Palace* (Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation 2013). In this strategic move of airing *Jewel in the Palace* immediately after *Oshin* reruns secured the same group of a wide-ranging, high number of viewers accumulated through *Oshin*.

This revolution, initiated by Rupavahini, was the beginning of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka. Following the tremendous success of the *Jewel in the Palace*, the Rupavahini continued airing more historical Korean dramas such as *Jewel in the Crown*, *The Great Merchant*, *The King’s Doctor* and *Wind of the Palace*. Understanding the commercial value of telecasting popular Korean TV shows, other local TV networks followed suit. The year, 2015 saw the peak in competition with almost all major tv networks broadcasting Korean TV shows (See Table 9.1 for a complete

Table 9.1 List of Korean TV shows broadcast in Sri Lanka

	<i>English Name</i>	<i>Sinhala Name</i>	<i>Year Telecasted in Sri Lanka</i>	<i>TV Network</i>
1	Full House	<i>Full House</i>	2010	ITN
2	Autumn in My Heart	<i>Mahada Sara Sanda</i>	2010	ITN
3	Jewel in the Palace	<i>Sujatha Diyani</i>	2012	Rupavahini
4	Dong Yi	<i>Abheetha Diyani</i>	2013	Rupavahini
5	The Great Merchant	<i>Diriya Diyani</i>	2013	Rupavahini
6	Horse Doctor	<i>Isiwara Wedaduru</i>	2013	Rupavahini
7	Lee San, Wind of the Palace	<i>Tahapath Maharaja</i>	2014	Rupavahini
8	Boys over Flowers	<i>Boys over Flowers</i>	2014	TV Derana
9	Sungkyunkwan Scandal	<i>Asaliya Mala</i>	2014	ITN
10	The Heirs	<i>The Heirs</i>	2014	TV Derana
11	My Girl	<i>Thatu Ahimi Samanalee</i>	2014	Swarnavahini
12	Moon Embracing the Sun	<i>Hiru Sandu Aadarei</i>	2015	Rupavahini
13	Queen Seondeok	<i>Janabithakami Rajiniya</i>	2015	Rupavahini
14	West Palace	<i>Batabira Maaligawa</i>	2015	Rupavahini
15	Goddess of Fire	<i>Sirimati Sittbaravi</i>	2015	Rupavahini
16	Princess Man	<i>Sibina Kumara</i>	2015	TV Derana
17	My Love from another Star	<i>Ananthayen Aa Tharu Kumara</i>	2015	Sirasa TV
18	I Can Hear Your Voice	<i>Hima Thubina</i>	2015	Sirasa TV
19	Chilwu the Mighty	<i>Chilwu</i>	2015	ITN
20	City Hunter	<i>City Hunter</i>	2015	ITN
21	Secret Garden	<i>Me Adambarakari</i>	2016	TV One
22	Melody of love	<i>Melody of Love</i>	2016	TV Derana
23	Empress Ki	<i>Sooriya Diyani</i>	2016	Rupavahini
24	My Lovely Sam-Soon	<i>Hithata Horen</i>	2018	Rupavahini
25	Pinocchio	<i>Ikkai Maai</i>	2019	Sirasa TV
26	Descendants of the Sun	<i>Himanthara</i>	2020	Sirasa TV
27	Legend of the Blue Sea	<i>Sasara Kinnarawi</i>	2020	Rupavahini

(continued)

Table 9.1 (continued)

	<i>English Name</i>	<i>Sinhala Name</i>	<i>Year Telecasted in Sri Lanka</i>	<i>TV Network</i>
28	The Last Empress	<i>Agra</i>	2020	Sirasa TV

Source Author

list of Korean TV shows broadcast in Sri Lanka). Thus, the first waves of the Korean cultural revolution reached Sri Lanka through TV shows broadcasted on local channels, either dubbed or subtitled, accessible to all.

Changing Winds

A turning point in this trend came in 2017 when the Sri Lankan government sharply increased the levy charged on dubbed foreign movies, dramas and commercials (*The Gazette* 2017). Although the government has been charging a levy on teledrama, films and commercials imported to Sri Lanka since 2006, the 2017 tax hike severely affected the importation of foreign entertainment products.² The rise in taxes came in response to requests made by local drama and movie producers' organizations. These organizations asserted that foreign teledramas and commercial programmes broadcasted in the country were 'contrary to local traditions' (*Daily FT* 2017). Although these allegations were mostly levelled against Indian mega TV dramas, the consequences heavily affected the importation of Korean TV shows. Subsequent years saw a decrease in the telecast of Korean TV shows.

Nonetheless, Sri Lankans' love for Korean TV shows did not subside. Deprived of access to Korean dramas offline, Sri Lankan viewers turned to other means. DVDs became a popular means as cheap, pirated copies could be obtained for less than a US dollar. But the slew of new digital streaming services caused a shift to a new and powerful route—the Internet. Today, online video streaming websites such as *Kissasian*,

² After the tax increase in 2017, the fee of Rs. 90,000 previously charged for 30-min slots of programmes dubbed in Sinhala or Tamil was increased to Rs. 150,000 for the first four slots, Rs. 250,000 for the next four slots and Rs. 350,000 per balance slot (*The Gazette* 2017).

Dramacool and Dramafever which grant free and easy access to Korean TV shows have become the lifeline of Korean fandom in Sri Lanka. Additionally, streaming services such as Netflix and Iflix also stream several Korean dramas with English subtitles, some as early as 24 h after their original Korean broadcast. Korean TV channel SBS can be accessed through PEOTV—an IPTV service operated locally. Dubbed TV shows telecasted on local TV channels are also available on YouTube.

In the dubbing process, translators consider linguistic as well as socio-cultural factors of both the source language (Korean) and the target language (Sinhala and Tamil) to provide a better experience to the audience (Karunaratna 2015). However, since dubbing a foreign programme costs higher than adding subtitles and requires professional voice actors, dubbing is still limited to professional institutions such as TV networks. Fans instead turn to local websites that allow them to download Sinhala subtitles to Korean movies and TV shows. Websites such as *baiscope.lk*, *cinern.lk* and *subz.lk* contain subtitles for dozens of Korean programmes. These are not generated by teams of professional translators, but are ‘fansubbed’.³

The trajectory of the Korean wave outlined by Bok-rae (2015) is demonstrably true for Sri Lanka. Bok-rae identified 4 phases in the propagation of the Korean wave; In *Hallyu* 1.0 K-drama was propagated. In *Hallyu* 2.0, K-pop music gained popularity. In *Hallyu* 3.0 and *Hallyu* 4.0, K-culture and K-style came under the spotlight respectively. In Sri Lanka, fans were first introduced to Korean culture through TV shows and later moved to Korean popular music. But today the reverse is also true. Currently, more and more fans today are first introduced to Korean culture through Korean pop music and later venture to other avenues of the Korean wave. The staggering admiration Korean popular music enjoys in Sri Lanka is testimony to the impact of the Korean wave in the country. A 2018 online study by Lu investigating Korean pop music popularity in Sri Lanka recorded 85 per cent of respondents listening to Korean pop music multiple times a day. Fans have even made petitions to the Korean Embassy in Colombo requesting to bring down Korean music bands to Sri Lanka (Change.org. n.d.). According to the survey, fans are willing to pay as high as Rs. 20,000 (\$108) for a concert ticket (Lu 2018).

³ The process of adding subtitles to foreign films or television programs by fans, most often without the legal permission of the owners of the intellectual property.

Not surprisingly, the Korean wave in Sri Lanka has now expanded to K-culture; food, fashion, travel and lifestyle. Korean restaurants in Colombo are attracting hordes of fans curious to try *kimchi*, *samgyetang* and *bibimbap*. Similarly, as consumers positively perceived Korean products, they became eager to learn and know about Korean culture. The Colombo Public Library established the ‘Korea Corner’—a mini-cultural centre in 2014 under the patronage of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea (Embassy of the Republic of Korea 2014). With assistance from the Embassy, Korean language classes are conducted at King Sejong Institute Colombo and the Centre for Korean Studies at the University of Kelaniya. The Embassy also organizes annual cultural festivals such as the Korean Film Festival in Sri Lanka, National Preliminary Rounds for K-Pop World Festival and Quiz on Korea, and the Korean Ambassador’s Cup Taekwondo Championships.

It is not uncommon to see fans worshipping Korean idols. Many fans use images of Korean pop stars and other cultural icons as profile pictures in their social media accounts. Enamoured by the physical attractiveness of the Korean actors and actresses and their glamorous fashion, makeup, and hairstyles, fans follow these idols on social media platforms and stay updated on current happenings in their lives. As an extension of idolizing, fanfiction is now becoming a new hobby among fans. Fans both read and contribute to the growing world of Korean fanfiction.

In a nutshell, the foundation for the Korean wave was laid through the broadcast of Korean TV shows, dubbed or subtitled in Sinhala, by major TV networks. Korean culture received wide exposure through the airing of *Jewel in the Palace* in 2012, which became a household name. The momentum of the Korean wave encouraged fans to begin exploring other Korean cultural products. But this drive took a massive plunge in 2017 with the imposition of heavy taxes on imported entertainment products. As a result, the Korean wave receded and remained accessible only to a limited group of consumers.

THE FEATURES OF THE KOREAN WAVE IN SRI LANKA

Reasons for Popularity

The reasons for the popularity of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka are fourfold. The most significant reason is that it has provided an alternative to Hollywood and Bollywood entertainment cultures. As discussed

earlier, the Sri Lanka entertainment industry shares deep ties with its Indian counterpart. In the early 1990s, movies screened in Sri Lanka were mostly imported Tamil and Hindi films. From the 1940s onwards, the Sinhala cinema industry began to take shape, still heavily relying on Indian cinema. According to Tampoe-Hautin (2017), Indian cinema in Sri Lanka ‘succeeded in joining up colonial, political and geographical entities, and enhancing social, economic and cultural flows across borders’. Tampoe-Hautin dubs Indian cinema as a ‘cultural Adam’s Bridge’ that blurred conventional frontiers, overriding caste, class, religion and language between the two countries.

Today, Indian popular cinema and television are consumed in all parts of Sri Lanka—in rural, urban and semi-urban sectors. Both Hindi cinema and Tamil cinema are in demand, actors and actresses are well-known celebrities, movie songs are popular and they occupy primetime television hours in Sri Lanka. In recent decades, serialized Indian mega TV shows have gained popularity as a new form of entertainment. However, Bollywood cinema has often come under fire for its melodramatic and formulaic storylines accompanied by extravagant music, song, dance sequences, fight scenes, humour and long duration (Gokulsing and Dissanayake as cited in Jinadasa 2016). Korean culture emerged as a new cultural experience that does not conform to the stereotypical characteristics of Bollywood.

Second, though the Sri Lankan society has come to embrace western culture and values for the most part, like most Asian societies it is still uncomfortable with violence, sex and nudity frequently depicted in western cultural productions. Older generations often harbour anti-American sentiments and have little or no positive response to American culture. In contrast, younger generations accept American culture and prefer consuming it. For both audiences, Korean drama provides a ‘convenient and culturally safe alternative’ (Kim 2011). Park (2006) and Ryoo (2009) have argued that the success of the Korean wave can be attributed to the ability of Korean culture and the media industry to translate Western culture to fit Asian tastes (as cited in Reimeingam 2014). Because Korean dramas skillfully merge ‘Asian sentiments and Westernized modernity’ (Kwon 2017), it allows Asian audiences to easily relate to Korean culture while also experiencing the modern Westernized lifestyle. Shaped by Buddhist precepts, the Sri Lankan society values traditions immensely. Cultural products are endorsed only if they depict traditional values such as Asian family-friendly lifestyles, respect to elders,

the sanctity of marriage and modesty, etc. Although viewers are eager to explore Western culture, its explicit nature prevents them from publicly recognizing it. They readily welcomed Korean cultural products with its 'enticing image of westernized modernity' (Noh 2010) as an alternative to Hollywood.

Third, although Sri Lankans were unfamiliar with South Korean popular culture until a decade ago, Japanese TV shows had already made their debut in Sri Lanka. The telecasting of *Oshin*, the famous Japanese serialized television drama in 1989, was a major milestone in Sri Lankan television history. It was the first-ever foreign-language drama to be dubbed into Sinhala and Rupavahini which aired *Oshin* (and later *Jewel in the Palace*) was the first local television channel to dub foreign dramas in Sri Lanka. *Oshin* was instantly taken to heart with the greatest passion in Sri Lanka and was the highest-rated programme except for evening news (Sneider 1989). A Sri Lankan television executive has reportedly written to Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) that Sri Lankans were 'too eager to see the rest of the story of *Oshin* who has [by then] become a household character in [Sri Lanka]' (Sneider 1989). The success of *Oshin* paved the way for more Japanese serials to be telecast; most notably *Suzuran* in 2008 and *Carnation* in 2014. This dissemination of Japanese popular culture products introduced Sri Lankans to a new culture, consumption options and images.

How the exposure to Japanese popular culture positively impacted the Korean wave merits discussion. It begs the question of whether a fan of one genre of popular culture would be encouraged to be a fan of a similar culture. For the average Sri Lankan viewer, South Korea and Japan are culturally homogenous, since the two countries are geographically proximate and share historical ties. Being unfamiliar with South Korean popular culture, Sri Lankan viewers initially clumped Korean culture with Japanese culture which they perceived as culturally akin to that of Japan. Consequently, the positive experience Sri Lankans enjoyed with Japanese dramas created a welcoming environment for its Korean counterpart. Thus, at its introduction to Sri Lanka, Korean culture was not only cushioned against a potentially hostile cultural receiver but was welcomed with open arms.

Lastly, apart from the 'Asianess' of Korean cultural products, Sri Lankan fans also appreciate the quality of Korean productions. The skillful storytelling, gripping plotlines, relatable themes and insight into the modern Korean lifestyle in Korean dramas are a refreshing break

from Hindi or Tamil dramas. In Korean popular music, the excellent singing, precise dancing moves, attractiveness of singers and first-rate performances are aesthetically pleasing and quickly won popularity among viewers.

Characteristics of the Fandom

Korean popular culture fans in Sri Lanka share a number of characteristics with fans in other parts of the world (see Otmazgin and Lyan 2013 on Israel and Palestine; Hübinette 2012 on Sweden). First, Korean TV shows and music are popular mostly among the young, urban, female population of ages between 10 and 40 belonging to middle-income households. Lu's online study in 2018 showed that out of 1230 surveyed Korean pop music fans in Sri Lanka, 49 per cent were between the ages of 16–20 while 33 per cent fell between ages 21–25. Around 39 per cent of fans were engaged in higher education, 35 per cent were schooling and 19 per cent were employed. Based on Lu, it can be inferred that Korean pop music has attracted mostly teenagers and youth, while the older generation remains strangers to Korean pop music. Further, a majority of 57 per cent of fans were based in Colombo while no responders were recorded from rural districts in Sri Lanka such as Amapara, Batticaloa, Killinochchi, Monaragala and Vavuniya (Lu 2018). The concentrated audience shows that the Korean wave has not yet reached a wide audience across different regions and social levels. Further, an overwhelming 94 per cent of the surveyed fans were female. This feminized nature of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka is not surprising, considering research on the gender dimension of the Korean wave has shown that women are actively engaging and disseminating Korean pop culture in many countries (Noh 2010). In Sri Lanka too, the female audience is the driving force of the Korean wave, disseminating Korean popular culture among more young, female populations.

Second, fandoms are an integral part of the growth of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka. These fandoms are primarily virtual and are mostly based on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube platforms. Fan communities are independently created and run, with daily content updates. Numerous Internet fora dedicated to music and drama, both in English and Sinhala function as platforms for fans to share news, images and videos about idols. Fans post questions, reviews and suggestions for music and TV shows. Other content includes updates about Korean idols and

their lifestyles; facts about Korean cuisine; places to visit in Korea; Korean products; and explanations about Korean culture, traditions and festivals commonly seen in shows. They also serve as a place for fans to meet and greet other fans and bond over similar preferences. Fans join both local and international groups. This development has concentrated the Korean wave among tech-savvy youth.

Fandoms are, however, not limited to the internet. Although there have not been any large-scale offline gatherings, smaller gatherings have been organized from time-to-time. One successful meetup was in 2019 organized by the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Colombo (Korean Embassy in Sri Lanka 2019). Yet, this cannot be compared to the success of other popular art forms such as comic books or comic book culture in Sri Lanka. For example, the Lanka Comic-con is one of the fastest-growing annual cultural festivals in Sri Lanka which in 2018 drew over 7,000 visitors (Innasithamby 2019). Since 2015, Lanka Comic-con has attracted fans of comic books, movies, costumes, music and art related to popular culture, cosplayers, video gamers and merchandise vendors. The founders of the event '*The Geek Club of Sri Lanka*' maintain a Facebook group of over 22,000 Sri Lankan comic book enthusiasts. Although Japanese manga and anime are featured in these events, Korean popular culture has not penetrated the terrain. Korean fandoms in Sri Lanka are less mobilized and lack the capacity to organize large-scale public events independently.

Third, fascination with Korean culture has led fans to explore other cultural products such as food and language. A study conducted by Lu (2018) showed that 54 per cent of surveyed fans have purchased some type of official merchandise including Korean pop music albums, concert DVDs, official posters, photo books and T-shirts. Korean franchises established in Colombo such as KiMo (launched in 2017) and Ximivogue (launched in 2018) have come to be known for K-beauty, K-fashion, and K-sports products. Products such as Korean face masks and hair accessories are ever popular.

Last, Korean pop music fans actively disseminate Korean culture in their environments. They act as dedicated 'cultural missionaries' bringing more people to the fandom. Each new fan recruits more fans into the umbrella, expanding the circle of penetration. This process is an integral feature of the spread of Korean culture. Here, the role of the Internet and social media in shaping the community cannot be discounted. The

Internet provides fans access to videos and music while social media enables communities to communicate and recruit new members.

There is also a portion of the population that consciously refuses to consume Korean popular culture. Many individuals (both male and female) are reluctant to acknowledge the appearances of masculine artists that are not ‘typically’ masculine and deviate from the male image endorsed by Western culture (see Prashant Pradhan in this volume for a gendered perspective on the Korean wave). At the same time, the immense popularity of American popular culture to which fans are exposed from childhood is unmatched by the emerging Korean culture. Linguistic differences and cultural distance are also reasons for indifference towards Korean culture. This causes individuals to show disinterest in anything related to Korean culture or refuse to engage with Korean popular culture altogether.

THE FUTURE OF THE KOREAN WAVE IN SRI LANKA

While it is apparent that the Korean wave does exist and has a great potential to change certain dynamics of the cultural consumption patterns in Sri Lanka, there are also numerous challenges it must overcome. The main challenges to the long-term survival of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka are dichotomous. They are (a) cultural competition and (b) degree of interaction.

First, let us consider the cultural competition. To date, cultural flow towards Sri Lanka has been dominated by India and Western countries. The flow from India is inevitable given the significant cultural and historic relations. Western cultural inflow was initially a result of imperialism, later neo-colonialism and globalization. These two cultures have assimilated and become deeply embedded in the local culture. The difference between Indian and Western popular culture and Korean popular culture lies in the fact that South Korean culture was the first to be *consciously* recognized in Sri Lanka. Though Japanese culture enjoyed a degree of popularity in Sri Lanka before the Korean wave, it lacked the force and magnitude with which Korean popular culture has gripped the market. Bok-rae (2015) asserts that the Korean wave is not another form of cultural imperialism. He states that ‘*Hallyu* is different from cultural imperialism, not hegemonic, cultural imperialism but a ‘World Wave’ which harmoniously embraces all kinds of cultures in a global village’. The Korean wave is overwhelmingly fan-driven. Because demand from

local fans is the driving force behind the dissemination and consumption of Korean culture, the spread of the Korean wave is more organic and spontaneous. But while Korean popular culture has managed to rapidly penetrate and spread, it does not yet have a stable, long-standing grip of cultural domination in Sri Lanka. Rather, without real measures, it lacks the risk of being limited to a niche community of fans.

To go up against two giant cultural exporters, Korean culture has to appeal to the Sri Lankan masses and completely reroute the way they receive and consume entertainment. This entails not only providing entertainment to its audiences but also changing audiences' consumption patterns. Korean productions must be localized and adapted to incite interest and cultivate appreciation to survive. The momentum that was gained through the network of promoters and agents and constant support from the local entertainment industry is necessary for the Korean wave to reach a wider range of consumers in Sri Lanka.

Second, interaction with the Korean wave has today shifted almost exclusively to the digital world. The scholarship about the role of the Internet in the Korean wave all claims that Social networking sites, YouTube and streaming websites are part of the new dimension that enables the Korean wave to survive and flourish. This carries implications for Sri Lanka in two ways. First, consumers who are not technologically savvy, such as older generations are left out of the Korean wave. This explains why Korean culture is more popular among the youth, as older generations do not actively seek out cultural products on the Internet. Older consumers mostly rely on traditional means such as television, radio or newspapers for information and entertainment—sources that do not contain Korean popular culture. Similarly, if consumers do not have access to the Internet, there too is a chasm in the flow of information. Often due to expensive internet charges or lack of Internet access in rural areas, individuals are excluded from participating in the Korean wave. If Korean cultural products are exclusively available online or on digital means, then limited access to these products inhibits the growth of the Korean wave.

The next problem with receiving popular culture through the internet is the digital language divide. To consume Korean culture, consumers must either be proficient in the Korean language or English, the language of the internet. The average Sri Lankan fan with little or no knowledge of the Korean language, who wishes to consume Korean TV shows, must rely upon on-screen translations in English. In Sri Lanka, English literacy is just 22 per cent among the population above 15 years of age

(Abayasekara 2018). Other than the few dozen movies and TV shows dubbed or subtitled in Sinhala, there are no Korean cultural products accessible in Sinhala. A handful of TV shows have been dubbed or subtitled in Tamil and telecasted by TV networks. But virtually no Tamil subtitles are available online. Language constraints are resulting in a potential lack of access to information.

If Korean cultural products are to attract a wider range of general audiences in Sri Lanka, a bottom-up process of delivering the products in local languages and improving access to products must take place. Private individuals or companies should take initiative to become linguistic gatekeepers that provide Sinhala and Tamil subtitles. Though fansubbing already occurs in Sri Lanka, the quality of these translations remains low. With enough initiative, professional translations can be introduced in both Sinhala and Tamil languages.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the socio-cultural dynamics of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka with special attention to the origin, spread and future of the wave. Academic scholarship on the Korean wave has typically analyzed how Korean popular culture is received outside geographically and culturally proximate countries. But the case of Sri Lanka offers an opportunity to study the dissemination and consumption of the Korean wave in a country that is heavily influenced by colonial and historical roots and broadly falls under the umbrella of Asianess. It is a case study of how new culture is acculturated in a country.

The analysis of this subcultural phenomenon helps one to understand the cultural and media landscape of Sri Lanka. The economic liberalization in Sri Lanka in 1977 led to an influx of foreign entertainment products. Over time, Indian, American, British and Japanese products adapted to suit local consumption patterns. But this cultural domination has been challenged by the Korean wave. It has provided a new entertainment option for its audience, changed the audiences' consumption patterns and changed cultural import practices.

The Sri Lankan fandom shares similarities with fandoms across the globe. Fans actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content by using social media and expanding their fan-driven community. Today, with the Korean wave moving to digitalized platforms, youth

social media activity has constructed a new global cultural dissemination model. Interestingly, however, while there are fans who actively disseminate Korean culture within their circles to recruit more followers, there are also non-consumers who consciously refuse to consume Korean popular culture.

The Korean wave in Sri Lanka saw a decade of ups and downs. The phenomenon will be a short-lived success unless measures are taken to overhaul how it currently operates. Ways to assimilate into local culture can be learned by observing the dominant cultures previously imported to Sri Lanka. With more bilateral, government-led initiatives and social participation, the Korean wave can actualize its potential to be an alternative entertainment source in the country. While the Korean wave may still not be fully-fledged in Sri Lanka, the ripple it has caused in the Sri Lankan cultural and media waters is already disrupting the local entertainment culture.

REFERENCES

- Abayasekara, A. 2018. 'Building a more English-literate Sri Lanka: The Need to Combat Inequities.' Retrieved from <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2018/04/23/building-a-more-english-literate-sri-lanka-the-need-to-combat-inequities/#:~:text=Although%20teaching%20English%20as%20a,above%2015%20years%20of%20age> (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Akter, S. 2019. 'Emergence of the "Korean Wave" and its influence on Bangladesh.' Masters dissertation, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University. Retrieved from https://ritsumei.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_action_common_download&item_id=11999&item_no=1&attribute_id=20&file_no=1 (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Bethea, A. 2013. 'The Politics of Cultural Import in Postwar Sri Lanka.' *The Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Journal*. Retrieved from https://uraf.harvard.edu/files/uraf/files/2013_mmuf_journal.pdf (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Bok-rae, K. 2015. 'Past, Present, and Future of Hallyu (Korean Wave).' *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 5 (5): 154–160.
- Cabinet Office Sri Lanka. 2014. *Sujatha Diyani Scholarship Fund*. Retrieved from http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.lk/cab/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&cid=16&Itemid=49&lang=en&dID=5388 (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Change.org. (n.d.). *Bring Kpop Idols to Sri Lanka*. Retrieved from <https://www.change.org/p/korean-embassy-in-srilanka-bring-kpop-idols-to-srilanka> (last accessed on 16 May 2021).

- Daily FT*. 9 November 2017. 'Government Raises Taxes on Dubbed Foreign Movies, Dramas and Commercial Shows.' Retrieved from <http://www.ft.lk/news/Govt--raises-taxes-on-dubbed-foreign-movies--dramas--and-commercial-shows/56-643049> (last accessed on 30 June 2020).
- Daily Mirror*. 22 April 2013. 'Vasana Sewwandi: The Obsessive Changumi Fan.' Retrieved from <https://www.pressreader.com/sri-lanka/daily-mirror-sri-lanka/20130422/282969627554821>
- Dhawan, R. 2017. 'Korea's Cultural Diplomacy: An Analysis of the Hallyu in India.' *Strategic Analysis* 41 (6): 559–570. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2017.1377895>
- Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. 2014. *Korea Corner at the Colombo Public Library*. Retrieved from http://overseas.mofa.go.kr/lk-en/brd/m_2321/view.do?seq=707745&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm= (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Fernando, A. 2018. *Soft Power of Korean Popular Culture in Sri Lanka* [Symposium]. 4th International Conference on Social Sciences 2018, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. Retrieved from <http://repository.kln.ac.lk/handle/123456789/19515> (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Gossip Lanka News*. 19 February 2013. 'Why President Watched Sujatha Diyani?' Retrieved from <https://english.gossiplankanews.com/2013/02/why-president-watched-sujatha-diyani.html> (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Hübinette, T. 2012. 'The Reception and Consumption of Hallyu in Sweden: Preliminary Findings and Reflections.' *Korea Observer* 43 (3): 503–525.
- Innasithamby, D. 11 December 2019. WTF—Cosplay. *Life Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.life.lk/article/wtf/WTF-%E2%80%93-Cosplay/34/19064> (last accessed on 1 July 2020).
- Jinadasa, M. 2016. 'Psychological and Philosophical Readings of the Spectatorship of Bollywood and Indian Tamil film in Sri Lanka.' *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 6 (4): 201–212. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2160-6579/2016.04.003>
- Jinasena, S. 2014. 'How the Korean Soap Opera Influence Sri Lankans' life.' *Sport and Art* 2 (5): 85–90. <https://doi.org/10.13189/saj.2014.020502>
- Kaisij, A. 2017. 'Globalization, Hybridization and Cultural Invasion Korean Wave in India's North East.' *Asian Communication Research* 14 (1): 10–35. <https://doi.org/10.20879/acr.2017.14.1.10>
- Karunarithna, B. 2015. 'Translating the Untranslatable: An Analysis on Translating Culture Specific References in Translating a Script for Dubbing Purpose.' *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 2 (2): 19–21.
- Kim, J. 2011. *Korean Wave in China: Its Impact on the South Korean-Chinese Relations*. Masters Dissertation, University of British Columbia.

- Retrieved from <https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/download/pdf/24/1.0072403/1> (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Korean Embassy in Sri Lanka. 16 April 2019. 'Korean Embassy Meeting with K-POP Fans in Sri Lanka.' Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/korembsl/posts/korean-embassy-meeting-with-k-pop-fans-in-sri-lanka-ayu-bowanth-the-korean-embassy-i/2543689615658399/> (last accessed on 8 June 2020).
- Kwon, E. 2017. 'Korean Wave: Discourse Analysis on Korean Popular Culture in US and UK Digital Newspapers.' Masters dissertation, Radboud University. Retrieved from https://theses.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/123456789/4898/Kwon%2C_E.J._1.pdf?sequence=1
- Lu, M. 2018. 'K-pop fans in Sri Lanka 2018.' [Facebook]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/HallyuFansSL/> (last accessed on 8 June 2020).
- Madurasinghe, D. 2020. 'A Study on Culture-centered Soft Power in International Public Relations: Special Reference to Sri Lanka and South Korea.' In *Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in India and China*, edited by B. Biswas, 53–66. New Delhi, India: Indu Book Services Pvt. Ltd.
- Ministry of Foreign Relations—Sri Lanka. 2017. 'Korean Actress Lee Young-ae supports flood relief efforts in Sri Lanka.' Retrieved from <https://mfa.gov.lk/korean-actress-lee-young-ae-supports-flood-relief-efforts-in-sri-lanka/> (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka. (n.d.). *Film Importation Policy of National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka*. Retrieved from <http://www.nfc.gov.lk/importation.php> (last accessed on 17 July 2020).
- Noh, S. 2010. 'Unveiling the Korean Wave in the Middle East.' In *Hallyu: Influence of Korean Culture in Asia and Beyond*, edited by D. Kim and Min-Sun Kim, 331–367. Seoul: Seoul National University Press.
- Otmazgin, N., and I. Lyan. 2013. 'Hallyu Across the Desert: K-pop Fandom in Israel and Palestine.' *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 1 (9): 32–55.
- Park, Jung-Sun. 2006. 'The Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Flows in East Asia.' In *Korea at the Center: Dynamics of Regionalism in Northeast Asia*, edited by C. K. Armstrong, G. Rozman, S. S. Kim, and S. Kotkin, 244–256. New York, USA: M. E. Sharpe.
- Ransirilal, A. 2016. 'The Current Situation of Sri Lanka TV Media and the Challenges Ahead [Symposium].' 24th JAMCO Online International Symposium, Japan. Retrieved from <https://www.jamco.or.jp/en/symposium/24/5/> (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Reimeingam, M. 2014. 'Korean Wave and Korean Media Consumption in Manipur.' *Journal of North East India Studies* 4 (2): 15–30.

- Ryoo, W. 2009. 'Globalization, or the Logic of Cultural Hybridization: The Case of the Korean Wave.' *Asian Journal of Communication* 19 (2): 137–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292980902826427>
- Sarasavi. (n.d.). *Sujatha Diyani—I Kotasa*. Retrieved from <https://www.sarasavi.lk/Book/Sujatha-Diyani-I-Kotasa-9556615601> (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Sneider, D. 25 January 1989. 'Tokyo's Latest Export: TV Shows. All Eyes Glued on Japan.' *The Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved from <https://www.csmmonitor.com/1989/0125/otv.html> (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Sooriyagoda, L. 27 June 2013. 'Pettah Trader Charged for Infringement of Copyright.' *Daily FT*. Retrieved from <http://www.ft.lk/article/159617/Pettah-trader-charged-for-infringement-of-copyright> (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, 2013. *Annual Report 2012*. Retrieved from https://sri-lanka.mom-rsf.org/uploads/tx_lfrogram/documents/25-1360_import.pdf (last accessed on 8 July 2020).
- Suh, C., Y. Cho and S. Kwon 2006. *An Analysis of the Korean Wave and Cultural Proximity in Southeast Asia*. Sydney, Australia: Korea-Australasia Research Centre.
- Tampoe-Hautin, V. 2017. 'Blurring Boundaries: Early Sinhala Cinema as Another *Adam's Bridge* between Ceylon and India (1948–1968).' *E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone* 14 (2). <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.5862>
- The Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka*. 7 November 2017. 'Finance (Teledrama, Films and Commercial Levy) Regulations, No. 1 of 2017.' Retrieved from http://www.treasury.gov.lk/documents/10181/361586/Gazette+-+2044-21_eng_Rev.pdf/e0f36203-9dc7-4c37-af8f-0d72e9e3ef96?version=1.0
- Thajudeen, T. 27 February 2013. 'Restraining Order on "Changumi" Novel.' *Daily Mirror Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymirror.lk/26048/restraining-order-on-changumi-novel> (last accessed on 16 May 2021).
- Yahaluwa. 1 September 2009. *ITN will Telecast Korean Teledramas. 01.09.2009 INT news Sri Lanka*. [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCnM2d6IpQ8>