

## The Reception and Consumption of Hallyu in Sweden: Preliminary Findings and Reflections

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The winds of hallyu, which for several years have swept through most of Asia and parts of South America and Africa, have not yet been able to penetrate the part of the world that is usually known as the West. The reasons for the relatively meagre breakthrough and presence of all things hallyu in Western countries are of course many and complex as well as differentiating according to country and region. The state of the popularity and spread of hallyu and its type of audience, users and consumers is therefore not the same in North America with its big and territorialised Korean and Asian diasporic communities or in Australia and New Zealand which apart from their large Korean and Asian minorities also benefit from a geographic proximity to Korea compared to in Europe where the Korean presence is thin and where Korea is generally an unknown country.

This article presents the situation concerning the reception and consumption of hallyu in today's Sweden, a Northern and Western European country with a small Korean and Asian population but

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nonetheless with a long and continuous relationship to Korea in modern history. The article which is based on interviews with Swedish hallyu fans, on Swedish media reports and fan texts on the phenomenon and on personal observations and experiences as a hallyu consumer, should be seen as a preliminary study of the reception and consumption of hallyu in Sweden, which at least in parts could be generalizable to other Northern and Western European countries, thereby contributing to an understanding of the future potential for hallyu in Europe. How is hallyu being received and consumed in Sweden with an emphasis on Korean film and K-pop? When did hallyu come to Sweden, and where and how is it present in terms of resources, users and activities? And which groups and categories are involved and participating as consumers and fans in terms of generation, gender, class and ethnicity?

**Key Words:** Hallyu, Korean Film, K-pop, Reception, Audience, Sweden

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## I. Introduction

The spread and popularity of South Korean popular culture, commonly known as hallyu or the Korean wave and encompassing genres such as film (sometimes K-film), comics (manhwa), television dramas (K-drama) and pop music (K-pop), outside of the Korean peninsula has indeed been both an extraordinary phenomenon and an unexpected development given the relative smallness of the country and its peripheral position in the world system as a whole. However, whether the explanations for this recent and rapid can be found in the emergence of a new pan-Asian and postcolonial consciousness, in postimperial nostalgia (in Japan), in the marketability of a specific Korean masculinity or in the hybridised character of the Korean cultural industry just to mention a few of the many hypotheses that scholars have put forward within the burgeoning and highly multi-disciplinary field of hallyu studies, it is a fact that hallyu has mainly

been able to gain a mass following in Asia and in certain parts of South America and Africa (Shim, 2006; Hirata, 2008; Oh, 2009, 2011; Shin, 2009; Jung, 2011). Although Korean dramas have been screened by television channels in a few countries in Eastern Europe and even if Korean films have been shown regularly at film festivals in Europe and North America since the 1990s and Korean pop artists have given a couple of concerts in the U.S. and in France during recent years, it is a well-known fact that hallyu has first and foremost gained a non-Western following with particular strongholds in countries like Singapore, Japan, China, Taiwan, Chile, Egypt and Iran.

This article introduces the situation concerning the reception and consumption of hallyu in contemporary Sweden, a Northern and Western European country with a small Korean and Asian minority but nonetheless with a long and continuous relationship to Korea in modern history. This qualitative audience study is based on interviews with Swedish hallyu fans, on Swedish media reports and Swedish fan texts on the phenomenon and on personal observations and experiences as being a Swedish adopted Korean who has followed and also consumed hallyu ever since it started to sip into the country at the end of the 1990s. The article is a preliminary study of the reception and consumption of hallyu in Sweden, and the Swedish situation might at least in parts be generalizable to other Northern and Western European countries, thereby contributing to an understanding of the possibilities for a future breakthrough of hallyu in Europe. The article aims at trying to cover the following questions: How is hallyu being received and consumed in Sweden with an emphasis on Korean film and K-pop? When did hallyu come to Sweden, and where and how is it present in terms of resources, users and activities? And which groups and categories are involved and participating as consumers and fans in terms of generation, gender, class and ethnicity?

I start by introducing the material, the methods and the theoretical perspectives of the study, and continues with a presentation of Swedish-Korean relations, the Korean and Asian demographic presence in today's Sweden and Swedish images and representations of Korea and of Asian people as a way of providing the contextual conditions

for the present and future reception of hallyu among Swedes. The article thereafter maps out the presence of hallyu products, resources and activities in Sweden according to genres and attempts at categorizing the fan base and the consumers and users before I end with a discussion on the future of hallyu in Sweden.

## II. To Study Hallyu in Sweden

There are no previous studies of hallyu in Sweden, and with few exceptions there are hardly any studies of Swedish or even Nordic fans of East Asian pop culture at all in spite of the fact that there does exist a fandom world of Japanese popular culture in Sweden and in the Nordic countries just as in other Western countries (Napier, 2007). One exception is Katja Valaskivi's (2011) study of Japanese pop culture fans in Finland based on internet surveys and interviews with fans and distributors of Japanese popular cultural products and with an emphasis on manga and anime, and where she among others finds that Finnish fans have appropriated the Japanese otaku term as a self-identifying position and that the fandom world is very much a virtual fan community.

Given the complete absence of research on hallyu in Sweden, this study is therefore a pioneering one and its contents should therefore be seen as preliminary findings and the conclusions as preliminary reflections. The study is based on interviews and discussions with 9 Swedish fans of hallyu, all of whom I already knew about as the world of everything related to Korea in Sweden is very small to say the least, although none of them are close acquaintances. It was therefore not difficult to contact and get to discuss with them about the state of hallyu in Sweden, and all of the interviews were conducted during the first quarter of 2012; one focus group interview with four participants, one interview by phone with a father whose 10 years' old daughter is an ardent fan, one e-mail interview and finally three individual discussions. The interviewees and discussants were between the ages of 10-30, 7 are women and two men, and four of them have a

non-Swedish background.

The second type of source material used in the study consists of media texts reporting on hallyu in Sweden in the form of newspaper and magazine articles, and radio and television programs, as well as fan texts that have been published on blogs and in social media forums. This material is not big and has been found by the way of the national Swedish media database Retriever which more or less covers all Swedish media, and includes no more than 15 articles, five radio and television broadcasts and observations from around 10 blogs and homepages and the two Facebook groups called “Swedish Kpop fans” and “K-pop Sverige.” Finally, the mapping out data have been collected by myself by systematically browsing in shops and on internet sites involved in the merchandise of hallyu products, and the historical account of how hallyu arrived in Sweden is mainly based on my own observations and experiences as being a hallyu consumer and actively involved as an adopted Korean within the Swedish community of people having an interest in Korea in general for several years.

This means that I have myself been able to experience when hallyu came to Sweden and how it has developed since the second half of the 1990s as a fan and a consumer myself. While my own disciplinary grounding originally comes from Korean studies, the methodological and theoretical approaches and inspirations to the study come from the inter- and multidisciplinary research field of cultural studies and its offshoot visual studies which takes into account the general mass mediation, aesthetisation and digitisation of the cultural field in late modernity, and the breakdown of the borders between high and popular culture, as well as from postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis and affect studies, queer theory and race and whiteness studies. This means that, as will be evident, I am particularly harbouring an interest in the colonial and racial aspects of the subject of the reception of hallyu in Sweden including the different social categories that are engaged in the phenomenon and how they intersect with each other, as well as in questions of desires and identifications.

### III. Swedish-Korean Relations and Koreans in Sweden

To be able to understand the historical background and contemporary context behind hallyu in Sweden, it is necessary to account for and recapitulate Sweden's relations to Korea past and present and the Korean presence in today's Sweden. To begin with, there have been continuous interactions between Koreans and Swedes ever since around 1900 and throughout the colonial period in the form of travellers, scientists, journalists, merchantmen and missionaries, of whom some stayed and lived in Korea for several years in a row (Hübinette, 2003). Among others, there were Amanda Gardelin who visited the court of king Kojong in 1895 and cured a member of the royal family for which she received a tea box as a gift, the journalist Willy A: son Grebst who visited Korea during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 and published the first Swedish book on the country when he came back, and Sten Bergman who stayed in the northern part of the peninsula between 1935-1936 to explore the fauna. Furthermore, missionaries from the Salvation Army such as Erland Richter and Verna Olsson stayed in Korea from the 1910s, the last one even up until 1938 before she was expelled by the Japanese colonial administration to a camp for Westerners in China. In 1926, the Swedish crown prince and his wife, the later king Gustav VI Adolf and queen Louise, went to Korea and took part in the excavations in Kyongju where he found a gold crown from the mound today known as Sobong Chong, the Swedish Phoenix, and a year later, the Korean crown prince Yi Un and Princess Yi Pangja answered by paying a visit to Stockholm.

The relations between Sweden and Korea became even more accentuated and institutionalised after the liberation, the division and the Korean War (Embassy of Sweden in Seoul, 2009). At the outbreak of the war, the Swedish government dispatched a field hospital to help the South, the Swedish Red Cross Hospital. In 1958, the field hospital was transformed into the pan-Scandinavian National Medical Centre in Seoul which was handed over to the Korean Government ten years later. After the armistice in 1953, the Neutral Nations' Supervisory Committee was set up by the UN and stationed in Panmunjom

with Sweden as one out of four participating countries. The Swedish contingent is still active and in place, and in 1961 a group of officers who had served in Korea founded the Korean Association in Sweden, today the organisation in Sweden for Swedes who harbour an interest in Korea. The association has since its foundation published the magazine *Yoboseyo* which also nowadays sometimes write about hallyu. In 1959, formal diplomatic relations were set up between Sweden and the Republic of Korea, from 1969 it has been possible to study Korean language and Korean studies at Stockholm University, and since 2012 there is a permanent Korean exhibition at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm. All this means that Swedes have been visiting Korea for more than 100 years by now, and the Swedish presence in Korea has among others meant that a couple of thousands of Swedes have lived, worked and studied in Korea throughout the years.

The Korean presence in Sweden is of a more recent date, and started in earnest by the way of immigration from 1953, in the beginning and still very much so in the form of Korean women marrying Swedish men, and above all by the way of adoption from 1957. Today there are in total 10,500 individuals in Sweden born in South Korea of whom 9,000 are adoptees and of whom more than 60 percent are female, and there are also around 100 individuals living in Sweden and born in the DPRK (Hübinette, 2012). Koreans constitute the 31<sup>st</sup> largest immigrant group in Sweden and the 4<sup>th</sup> biggest Pacific Asian minority as there are also around 7,500 individuals born in Sweden of Korean descent including the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation (those born in Sweden with two Korea-born parents: around 250 individuals) and mixed Koreans who both mean children of international marriages (parented by Swedish men and Korean women) and the children of adoptees who are mostly mixed - altogether more than 7,000 or well over 95 percent of the Sweden-born Korean descent population is mixed. The vast majority of the adopted Koreans and their children as well as of the Korean immigrant women married to Swedish men and their children are living in white dominated neighbourhoods and areas and are in all respects fully integrated and assimilated into the Swedish

majority society on a cultural and linguistic level if not for obvious reasons on a racial level.

#### **IV. Multicultural Sweden and Swedish Images of Koreans and Asians**

There are in total around 150,000 people in Sweden who derive from Pacific Asia meaning Northeast and Southeast Asia taken together, an absolute number which is not big compared to many other Western countries and compared to other minorities in Sweden as well as in relation to the 9,5 million total population of Sweden, meaning less than 1,6 percent. Two out of three of the Asian minority in Sweden are female, and almost 110,000 are born in Asia out of whom 20,000 are adopted and around 50,000 are women married to Swedish men, and approximately 40,000 are born in Sweden out of whom 30,000 are mixed due to the extremely high proportions of international marriages and international adoptions within this minority. These statistics are important to keep in mind, as the presence of a big Korean diaspora and of a substantial Asian minority has been crucial in Western countries when it comes to the success of hallyu, something which is evident in the U.S. and Canada and also in Australia, France and the UK, countries which all out of historical reasons are hosting huge Korean and Asian populations.

As a whole, the non-white population of Sweden stands at around 10 percent or around 1 million of the total Swedish population, of whom more than half derive from the Middle East including North Africa (550,000), and the rest are divided between Pacific Asians (150,000), South and Central Asians (70,000), Sub-Saharan Africans (160,000) and Caribbeans and South Americans (130,000) (HübINETTE, 2012). In addition, there are 1,5 million people in Sweden with a background and descent in other white dominated Western countries, which means that more than 25 percent of the total Swedish population has what is called a foreign background signifying that they are either themselves born abroad or have one or two parents who are born



abroad. This statistical fact makes Sweden unique in a Nordic comparison, and the country's multiracial and multicultural diversity can well be compared to the hyperdiverse demographics of North America, Western Europe and Australia.

To continue with the specific images and representations of Korea and Koreans in Sweden and generally also in Europe, some studies based on questionnaires and on textual material strongly indicate that Korea is the least known country in Pacific Asia among majority Swedes and less known than many of the countries in South-east Asia or in other parts of Asia (Demir, 2002; Hübinette, 2002). The knowledge of Korea among Swedes is apparently fragmented and obscure as Korea is for example no tourist country for Swedes, and there are few Swedes living in Korea: currently there are just 165 Swedish students living in Korea. In Ema Kristina Demir's (2002) survey study based on white Swedish school pupils at the time of the Japan-Korea co-hosted soccer World Cup in 2002, these were common keywords stated by the informants who were between 15-19 years when they thought about Korea and Koreans: adoption and adoptees, war and North Korea, poverty and dictatorship, student demonstrations and workers' strikes, patriarchy and sexism, eating dogs, manufacturing cars, and online gaming. Even if South Korea is an industrialized, urbanized and democratic country with several international companies and brands, Swedes do not always know that for example Samsung or LG are Korean and might associate them with Japan, and many still think of Korea as a poor Third World dictatorship as they either confuse South with North Korea or think of adoption which is normally connected to poverty, underdevelopment and authoritarian regimes.

When it comes to the images and representations of Asia and Asians in today's Sweden, and again in Europe in general, there is a strong and unfortunately increasing tendency to collectivise and homogenise Asia and Asians, who are stereotyped and radicalised in the form of a certain and highly popular "gook humour." In Demir's study from 2002, these were some of the keywords stated by Swedes between 15-19 years when they thought about Asia and Asians: rice,

chopsticks, slant eyes, flat noses, many people, short people, strange people, crazy people, tradition, and prostitution. In study conducted by myself and based on visual and audiovisual as well as on performative representations of Asians in ads and commercials, in films and television programs and on stage and at public or private events when white Swedes stage and play Asian characters, it becomes apparent that Asians, and especially Asian men, are without competition the most common non-white minority in Sweden that is ridiculed and even harassed and humiliated in both the public and private spheres deeming from the vast number of contemporary Swedish examples (Hübinette and Tigervall, 2011). Asians in general are according to this “gook humour” considered to look funny and ugly, and Asian women are associated with prostitution and international marriage, while Asian men are linked to everything that is not considered masculine thereby being both emasculated and infantilised.

In 2011, according to a poll conducted by the Gallup institute Sifo, only three percent responded that they agreed on that an explicitly stereotypical and racist caricature of an Asian man who is the logo of a famous and popular Swedish chocolate bar might be hurtful to someone in Sweden, pointing to the massive support of “gook humour” in the today’s Sweden. The poll was the result of a public debate that had been initiated by a male adopted Korean journalist who had written a syndicated column where he told about the constant everyday racism that he is exposed to as an Asian man, and where he reminded the reader that there is a connection between what he is subjected to in his everyday life and the visual and audio-visual images and representations of Asians in contemporary Swedish culture (Lundberg, 2011). All this means that the reception and consumption of hallyu takes place in a context and in a country wherein many if not most people find Asian people funny, ridiculous and pitiful and might not even take Asians seriously including Koreans and Asians in Korean and Asian films and dramas, Koreans and Asians in Korean and Asian comics, and perhaps above all Korean and Asian music and dance artists who can be laughed at and made fun of openly and in public without risking any accusation of being racist as this “gook

humour” is not considered to be racist at all.

## **V. Hallyu in Sweden in Terms of Resources and Activities**

When mapping out the presence of hallyu in Sweden in terms of resources and activities, it is possible to divide it between the genres of film, manhwa, K-drama and K-pop as these five hallyu phenomena would be the ones that without doubt are the most present, popular, accessible and purchasable in today’s Sweden, although as we shall see not always marketed as Korean. Until the end of the 1990s, only one Korean feature film had ever been screened on a Swedish television channel — Bae Yong-kyun’s *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* from 1989, which was one of the first Korean that was shown at the Cannes Film Festival. The knowledge of Korean film was in other words more or less nil in Sweden until the two main and biggest and most influential film festivals in Sweden, the ones in Gothenburg and in Stockholm respectively, started to screen Korean films regularly from 1997 and onwards. Korean films are at these festivals normally categorised as contemporary Asian film and are often represented by art house titles or by works that would be considered “difficult,” “odd” and marginal in Korea with a strong emphasis on films having a violent and sexual content, a tendency which is common when it comes to Asian films in general consumed by Westerners (Jung, 2011: 134-139; Kim, 2011).

The nowadays world-famous director Kim Ki-duk visited the film festival in Gothenburg as the first Korean film director coming to a Swedish film festival in 1997 in front of a very small audience of mostly film industry people and film fanatics plus some immigrant and adopted Koreans including myself. This somewhat poor start of the reception of Korean cinema in Sweden can be compared to Stockholm’s film festival in 2005, when the equally well-known Korean director Park Chan-wook visited Sweden and when his film *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* from the same year was screened in a completely

sold out theatre, and where the absolute majority of the spectators at that time were not of Korean descent although many Koreans in Sweden did turn up as well for the event including the ambassador, representatives from Korean companies and many immigrant and adopted Koreans. What had happened in-between 1997 and 2005, was that a Swedish video distribution company, Noble Entertainment, had started to market Korean films from 2002 in its Asian Vision series, subtitled into Swedish from English language subtitles and distributed with Swedish titles, with the result that a small but strong fan base slowly developed among mainly white male cultural and intellectual Left-leaning circles. During this period, I was myself teaching Korean studies at Stockholm University, and some of these consumers of Korean cinema started to turn up there as students, even if they were maybe more interested in the visual aspects of Korea than the linguistic ones deeming from the high dropout rate among those students.

In 2007 one of the Swedish film fans initiated the Seoul-Stockholm Korean Film Festival with strong support including money from the Korean Embassy, and which in its last 2011 version ran for as many as 5 days although few of the screenings attracted a large audience at the quite small theatre called Zita in downtown Stockholm which has been used as the venue ever since the first festival. Since 2009, the Korean Embassy also invites anyone who wants to come to occasional and free film screenings at the embassy building itself. The invitations are normally sent out to the previously mentioned Korean Association in Sweden which organises the bulk of white Swedes who have an interest in Korea including many adoptive parents and to the association for Korean immigrants and the association for adopted Koreans plus Stockholm University's Korean language and Korean studies students. At the film screenings at the most 30-40 people usually turn up. These events certainly comply to the Korean Government's soft power policy to spread the knowledge of Korea through hallyu and, in Western countries like Sweden where the negative, stereotypical or even almost non-existent image of Korea is well-known to Korean diplomats, also to help updating the knowledge of

Korea by showing films portraying a modern and developed country (Kim and Ni, 2011).

Today, mainstream cinema theatres and public service television channels sometimes but very infrequently do show Korean films, and DVD versions subtitled into Swedish and with Swedish film titles are easily and widely accessed for rent or for purchase almost everywhere in the country through distribution companies like Atlantic as well as through streaming and pay-per-view service by the way of cable television companies, but the peak of Korean cinema fandom is over and probably saw its best days between around 2004-2008 when even Swedish film critics and academics could cover Korean films now and then in newspapers and magazines. Korean film has on the one hand partly become mainstream in terms of at least its accessibility, but on the other hand retracted to a small principally white and male dominated middle- and upper-class based subculture which also consumes other Asian or non-Western cinema such as Bollywood films.

Continuing with manhwa, a surprisingly high number of Korean comic books have been translated from English and published in Swedish since 2005 by several of the leading and biggest Swedish publishers, for example Wahlströms and Bonnier, and they are sold practically in all bookstores and can be borrowed at most public libraries as well. At least around 100 titles are available in Swedish, but they are all marketed as Japanese and included in specific book series that are categorised as manga. Of course, the more actively engaged Swedes who are well versed in Asian popular culture are aware that quite many manga books translated into Swedish are in fact manhwa books, but the ordinary reader and buyer of cartoons probably cannot make that differentiation even if it is common that certain exclamations, interjections and onomatopoeic words are left untranslated in hangul in many of the books. Additionally, several English language manhwa books are sold at special comic book stores, and there they are of course marketed and categorised as Korean comics as these shops are catering to comics connoisseurs. When it comes to Korean animation film, only one short film has been screened on a Swedish television channel but no Korean animated

film has yet been shown at a cinema theatre.

The Swedish fans of East Asian pop culture are almost solely focused on Japanese popular culture with manga and anime and computer games being the most common genres, and in part also film and pop music, and they are also engaged in typical fan activities such as cosplay and fan fiction. Since 2001, UppCon or the Uppsala Convent for East Asian popular culture has been the main annual event to convene and meet up with each other for these fans. The event is based in the university city of Uppsala and was founded by the first generation of Swedes who had an interest in East Asian and mainly Japanese pop culture, and the number of participants has grown exponentially from around 50-100 to 3,500-4,000 making it one of the bigger regular youth and young adult events in the country. However in 2012, the last UppCon, at least in its original version, took place and the future of the event is at the time of writing unclear. There were at least 4,000 visitors, myself being one of them, and there was a small but visible hallyu presence in the form of some computer gaming, one or two stalls selling manhwa and a special K-pop noraebang room.

Furthermore, to continue with K-drama, there is no regular distribution in Sweden of Korean dramas, and there are in other words no DVD boxes for sale subtitled into Swedish and with Swedish titles, so most K-drama fans order DVDs through companies like YesAsia or watch K-drama on the Internet. This is somewhat surprising given that K-drama is usually the genre that has been the most successful outside of Korea together with K-pop (Lee and Ju, 2011). In Europe however, Korean television dramas have only been screened in Romania, Hungary and Ukraine, and also quite recently. However, there are some Swedish blogs written by Swedish fans of Korean dramas with links to Internet sites for streaming such as Dramacrazy and MySoju. It is also technically wrong to claim that K-drama has no presence in Sweden as well as in other Western and Northern European countries, as the migrant communities normally have access to their home countries' television channels by the way of satellite receivers, and which in practice means that Korean dramas

are regularly shown in Sweden to albeit only to a minority audience by the way of for example Iranian, Chilean, Turkish, Chinese, Arabic and Indian channels. I will come back to this particular minority audience base of hallyu in general in the following sections.

Finally, when it comes to K-pop, there is a very small and private import distribution in Sweden of CDs on the Internet catering for an equally small consumer base, but as most K-pop consumers purchase songs and albums digitally it is mainly through iTunes and other similar Internet distribution channels that K-pop is accessed and purchased. There are several blogs written by dedicated, well-informed and almost fanatical Swedish fans of K-pop with links to YouTube and other Internet sites where music videos and concert recordings are posted, of which some according to the interviewees have gained a relatively large number of readers both inside and outside of Sweden such as the Indieful ROK blog (<http://indiefulrok.blogspot.se>) and Noona blog (<http://noonablog.com>).

The first K-pop fans turned up as students at Stockholm University and were my classmates and later on students during the first half of the 2000s, and at that time according to one of the informants the extremely hard-to-get music in the form of odd CDs, burnt DVDs and even recorded cassettes was shared among a group of probably less than 20 people around the country who got to know each other through the Internet and by the way of being part of the larger community of Swedish fans of Japanese popular culture which started to grow dramatically during the same period. Thereafter, the number of K-pop listeners has grown slowly but steadily, and at the 2012 UppCon the noraebang room was more or less used throughout the three days' event although it was never completely filled. In March 2012, SHINee's mini album *Sherlock* climbed to the 6<sup>th</sup> place on the Swedish iTunes list in terms of sales, and in July 2012 2NE1's single *I Love You* was included among the top 20 most sold songs of the same list, indicating that something is going on when it comes to the reception of K-pop in Sweden.

Since 2009, my discussion partners have told me that physical fan meetings and fan events in the big and middle-sized cities of Sweden

are taking place, often recorded and afterwards posted on the Internet, and where K-pop is discussed, played, sang and danced to. There are nowadays also several Facebook groups and some dance clubs playing K-pop now and then on certain evenings, and there are K-pop flash mobs and cover dance groups staging K-pop dancing at public spaces as well as K-pop noraebang events, and some Swedish fans also visit K-pop concerts in other parts of Europe and even go to Korea for events. There is also an artist video project on K-pop in Sweden run by the hallyu fans Elin Mellerstedt and Johanna Stillman, "Dancing on Our Own," which was screened at the opening of the permanent Korean exhibition at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm in the spring of 2012, and where different and "ordinary" white Swedes dance to K-pop music in typical and Swedish settings ([www.youtube.com/DancingOnOurOwn](http://www.youtube.com/DancingOnOurOwn)).

## VI. The Swedish Hallyu Users and Consumers

So after this perhaps too word consuming survey, exposition and chronicling of Swedish-Korean relations, Swedish images and attitudes to Korea and to Asians, and of the presence of hallyu in Sweden according to resources and activities, who are then the Swedish hallyu fans according to generation, gender, class and ethnicity? To begin with, when it comes to the size of the consumer base of hallyu in Sweden, it is worth noting that the 15 articles that I found through Retriever in analogue paper media and the five radio and television broadcasts reporting on the phenomenon almost all derive from 2009 and onwards and half of them are from 2011-2012, meaning that it is now that hallyu is getting a fan base in the country. There are usually around 3,000 Swedish YouTube views for a certain K-pop clip, around 1,000 Facebook members in the fan groups, and between 20-150 participants turn up at K-pop events according to my estimations. All this means that there is nowadays in Sweden a small but dedicated fan base, and outside of it there is a bigger group of people who at



least know about and consume hallyu now and then, and who might become regular consumers and users of hallyu in the future, and it might therefore be possible to predict a coming hallyu breakthrough in Sweden spurred mainly by K-pop.

Regarding the general fan base and the core consumers of hallyu and particularly of K-pop in Sweden, according to my informants and to my own observations most fans are children, teenagers and young adults born in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, and with a strong emphasis on the last two decades, that is most of them are below 25 years old, but there are also fans in their 30s and some in their 40s. The vast majority of fans of K-pop are girls and women,

which is contrary to the Swedish fans of Korean cinema with most fans being boys and men and partly also different from the Swedish fans of Japanese pop culture of whom the first generation was almost exclusively male even if the sex-ratio is more balanced today deeming from the participants at UppCon 2012. When it comes to sexual orientation, although the majority is heterosexual some fans of K-pop in Sweden are also LGBTQ (non-heterosexual), and there even seems to be a slight overrepresentation of the group among the fans — two of the interviewees were for example self-identifying as LGBTQ.

To continue with class and ethnicity, deeming from the articles that exist which portray fans and according to my informants, it seems to be possible to divide the audience into two main groups. Many if not most fans of K-pop are non-white working-class and often belong to the so-called 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, children of usually non-Western migrants, who live in segregated and underprivileged areas and suburbs dominated by a non-white population in the bigger and middle-sized cities of Sweden. The other group of fans belong to the educated white middle-class in the bigger cities, but there are also white working-class consumers of hallyu in small towns. Not surprisingly, quite many but not all of the non-white fans have a Pacific Asian origin — they are adopted Koreans and adopted Asians, Asian migrants, both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, and mixed Asians, but they can also have an origin from for example Chile, Turkey, India, and North Africa.

## VII. The Future of Hallyu in Sweden

In this final section, I will discuss some factors and aspects to be considered to be able to understand and predict the future of hallyu in Sweden and possibly also in other European countries. Some of these issues were brought up by and with some of the interviewees, while others are my own reflections. Firstly, when trying to project and understand the current state and the coming future of hallyu in Sweden, it is important to remember that due to the young consumer base and the fast changing popular cultural scene and market in general with never ending ups and downs regarding different styles, idols and genres, it is important to make a difference between being a so-called hipster and a so-called nerd, a difference which can be expressed as being informed and being dedicated. This basically means that many people might know a bit about hallyu and even consume it now and then, but very few are still what can be called loyal fans and regular users of hallyu. One informant mentioned that the term K-pop itself can even be seen as a form of a codeword in the sense that if you know what the acronym at least stands for, that is South Korean pop music, it indicates that you are probably at least sometimes a consumer.

There is also the typical desire and need to be cool and unique which is a part of being young in general. This means that many fans might make use of hallyu in their identity building process to feel special, particularly perhaps because Japanese pop culture has become almost mainstream, and which means that those who like hallyu can feel "chosen," but this engagement with hallyu might also be a question of a very short and temporary period of one's life. The similarities and differences between Japanese pop culture also have to be taken into account as a decisive factor in a country like Sweden where the knowledge of Korea is so minimal. Hallyu will from this perspective always live in the shadow of Japanese pop culture how colonial that might sound, and it is therefore also dependent on its presence in Sweden. As long as Japanese pop culture is popular, hallyu might continue to benefit from being "special" and "cool," that is having a strong hip factor, but this dependence and interrelationship

might also simultaneously limit its potentialities to reach a larger fan base. And if Japanese popular culture will decrease in popularity in the future, so will as a consequence most probably also hallyu.

The strong contemporary focus on pop music as a genre, sometimes called hallyu or Korean wave 3.0, will also no doubt contribute to deciding the future of hallyu. Up until recently, as has been mentioned, hallyu in Sweden was more about Korean film but today it is increasingly only about K-pop, as Korean drama never has reached Sweden in the same way as it has in non-Western countries where K-drama even has been the principal genre. This shift in genres is also a shift in the fan base in the sense that most art house cinephiles who are the core fans of Korean film are white middle- and upper-class Swedish men, while many if not most fans of K-pop are as already stated more or less the opposite. This means that hallyu has lost its societal and cultural status, at least among white majority Swedes and in mainstream Swedish society. Hallyu's future is also linked to other Korean presences in Sweden. There is for example a small presence and knowledge of Korean fashion and design, of Korean animation, of Korean computer gaming, of Korean literature and performing art and of Korean food in Sweden as well, something which might also influence the future of hallyu.

One crucial impediment for hallyu's future is the previously mentioned general image of Korea and of Asians, especially of Asian men, and which is becoming increasingly disparaging and demeaning in a time when Europe is in decline and Asia is raising. This anti-Asian sentiment certainly limits the number of fans of hallyu: for many white Swedes and white Europeans, K-pop artists are simply just "funny gooks" who look weird and act weirdly. On the other hand, the female dominated fan base might contribute to developing new images and perspectives on Asian men who today in Sweden and in Europe have an extremely low status in terms of attractiveness and masculinity, and which will go beyond the hegemonic understandings of Asian men in the West. On the other hand, some of the white girls and white women who consume hallyu might also be attracted to what can be called a combination of the aesthetics of fetish

and kitsch, meaning that they are attracted to for example certain gender roles and gender performances that are expressed in K-pop, in Korean dramas and in Korean film because they are so different from the ones that they are used to in the West. Some fans of hallyu and especially of K-pop also do seem to like it because it is “weird” and “fun” in a Swedish, European and Western perspective, similar to how other white Westerners might think of Asians as “funny” and “crazy” in general. Related to this is the queer aesthetics of camp, which some non-heterosexual fans might find and identify with in hallyu when they consume and decode it from their Western perspective such as for example certain “feminine” and homosocial styles among Korean and Asian men.

Regarding the non-Western and non-white aspects of hallyu and their connections to the fan base among minority Swedes, it is important to remember that Swedish and Western pop culture and hallyu are very different from each other in terms of gender roles and views on for example violence, sex and drugs as well as on family values and patriarchy and homosexuality. This means that children of Third World migrants from Asia, Africa and South America most probably can recognize themselves more in hallyu than in Swedish and Western pop culture due to its patriarchal and traditional aspects. The traditional Korean way of so-called matrilocal parenting which often results in intimate mother-son relationships are for example also similar to other non-Western countries’ family structures. There is here a parallel to Bollywood cinema and Indian and South Asian pop culture, which also has been quite popular among non-Western migrants in Sweden. Another aspect of this non-Western familiarity, is that the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation non-white youth in Sweden can by the way of hallyu develop new identifications and new desires which will empower them in relation to the white majority population in Sweden, and which also maybe will have strong political implications in the future as Sweden just like any other European country is heavily segregated according to racial lines.

It can from this perspective almost be seen as a radical act coming from the side of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generationers when they turn their interest to

Korea and hallyu instead of feeling subordinated and less worthy in relation to Swedish majority society and Swedish pop culture. On the other hand, the idealising of white body ideals which is so common in hallyu seems to have an appeal both to white and non-white Swedes alike, although this appeal probably derives from different desires and identifications. The whitening of Korean bodies and the relative “odourless” of hallyu in terms of de-Koreanisation and Westernisation can be appealing to white fans, and also to non-white fans, as both groups tend to idealise whiteness. However, the whitening of hallyu may also make it less appealing to white fans who are actively seeking something which is non-Western, Asian and exotic, and it may also discard non-white fans who will not be able to identify with the whitened bodies of hallyu.

I will end this presentation with a citation from a Swedish blog discussion on the future and the prospects and potentials of the reception and consumption of hallyu in Sweden, cited and conveyed to me by one of the interviewees:

A: But I don't know if I want K-pop to come here in that way. Don't want it to become a mainstream thing and lower teen music. (But we will see what will happen).

B: I know how you feel, and I felt so before as well, but now I think it's fun that more people like K-pop in Sweden, cause then we will get a chance to see a K-pop group here. And that is what we at swe kpop (a fan community) try to accomplish. But that K-pop will become lower teen music, you don't need to worry about that, because all popular teen girls that I know call K-pop “shit music” as they don't understand what they sing. As long as the artists start to sing in English, you don't have to worry.

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