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Korean Overseas Investment and Soft Power: *Hallyu in Laos**

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Abstract

Accounts of Hallyu ("Korean Wave") exports in Southeast Asia often construct this phenomenon as a benevolent cultural force based upon a mutually beneficial arrangement designed to bring increased development and opportunity to the consumer. Such conclusions ignore the nature of Hallyu as soft power for Korean economic interests and also gloss over the complicated cultural differences that scholars understand have problematized its success in Southeast Asia. This article addresses the position of Hallyu in Laos, the poorest and least developed country in Southeast Asia and one of significant strategic importance to current Western and Eastern powers given its raw materials, geographical position, and current cultivation of overseas investment. While Hallyu in Laos may be constructed as part of a mutual exchange and beneficial arrangement, close analysis of the situation in Laos indicates a highly problematic situation in which Hallyu becomes part of a wider system of exploitation that is perhaps of little benefit to the ordinary Laotian consumer. Furthermore, close analysis of the few Korean cultural representations of Laos indicates that far from an equal partner, the nation is constructed as inferior, childlike, and in need of Korean assistance, in a discourse that is reminiscent of previous European-based Orientalism.

Keywords: Laos, Hallyu, soft power, overseas investment, Orientalism

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Introduction

Traced to the mid-2000s and the increasing export of Korean popular culture into neighboring East Asian countries, what is now known as the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, has received much academic and popular attention from both within and outside the region. Associated primarily with K-pop music and TV dramas after the significant overseas success of TV dramas such as *Winter Sonata* ("Gyeoul yeonga" in Korean; 2002) and *Dae Jang Geum* (2003), as well as later K-pop bands such as Girls' Generation and BIGBANG, this widespread phenomenon also encompasses food, movies, and other prominent cultural signifiers of Korea. As a cheaper alternative that quickly displaced the previous Euro-American cultural hegemony across the region and following in the wake of the previous success of Japanese *trendy dramas* of the 1990s, Hallyu is credited with creating enthusiasm for all things Korean across East and Southeast Asia. Today, the Korean Wave still remains the dominant incarnation of East Asian popular culture (Chua 2004). This particularly adept combination of high-quality aesthetics depicting a new model of pan-Asian urban modernity continues to allow these products to travel well and cross borders with ease. Indeed, the effects of the Korean Wave can be found across the Asia region in the many remakes, parodies, adoptions, and other forms of cultural adaptation in products from societies as diverse and wide reaching as Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, and Hong Kong.

Building upon such previous research, this article will offer an overview and analysis of Korean culture in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (hereafter, Laos), one of the economically poorest countries in Southeast Asia, which has also become one of the region's most strategically important nations in the last decade. It outlines how the international success of Hallyu in Laos (and elsewhere) is often constructed by Korean organizations as a benevolent force and a mutual arrangement whose success is attributed to vague notions of Asian affinity. Yet, it then demonstrates that Hallyu primarily functions to further South Korean strategic overseas economic interests in a nation that is extremely unequal in such a partnership, and becomes part of an agenda that is not necessarily of social and economic benefit to

the Laotian consumer. Korean representations of Laos also further highlight such inequalities, disputing notions of a bilateral partnership and agenda. This study therefore offers an uncomfortable case study of the role Hallyu can play as a very explicit and extreme form of soft power that ultimately appears of little benefit to local consumers and social development, despite often being presented as a benevolent grass-roots phenomenon.

Southeast Asia, Cultural Affinity, and Hallyu

As a means to explain the impressive global popularity of Hallyu, some Korean organizations tout "inter-Asian cultural affinity" as a significant reason for such popularity (see, for example, Korea Foundation 2011). This concept of affinity refers "to the sharing of a common identity, to the feeling of belonging to the same group, and to the degree of affinity between two countries" (Felbermayr and Toubal 2010, 279). What Felbermayr and Toubal call "conventional measures" of cultural proximity between two cultures are such variables as "common language, common legal origins, religious proximity, or ethnic ties" (2010, 291). These can include past colonial links, high levels of immigration, bilateral trade, and many other such connections. Indeed, bilateral trade in cultural goods is often used as a measure of cultural proximity and is seen as a "precondition" for the successful export of cultural products to other nations (La Pastina and Straubhaar 2005).

When used as an explanation behind the success of Hallyu in East and Southeast Asia, this concept implies the existence of a shared Asian culture that spreads across these regions and endears Korean texts to viewers within other Asian nations. Scholars do understand that Korean dramas depict the *traditional values* and sentiments of the Asia region, such as an emphasis on respect for family and elders, and so have clear *cultural relevance* to the societies of this region (Chon 2001; Chung 2013; Heo 2002; Shim 2008, 2013; Suh, Cho, and Kwon 2006). Likewise, many of these countries have experienced a similar level of economic growth and urbanization that is so clearly represented in the city-based *mise-en-scène* and professional characters that so many Hallyu dramas, songs, and movies depict. Such success also grows

in tandem with digitalization, as digital technology improves and increases then the circulation of Korean products is also enhanced as new economic dynamics become accessible for both consumers and producers (Lee 2009).

Within Southeast Asia in particular, Hallyu enjoys a widespread popularity that is often connected to the high number of internet users in countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia. These countries also have high levels of social media use and Korean products are often circulated through these local informal fan networks in what is described as a "bottom-up, audience-centered approach" (Chung 2013, 199). Yet characterizing this region in such a way as to demonstrate the *cultural relevance* of Hallyu products is ultimately difficult and problematic. Korean scholars recognize the problems inherent in such an attempt and have long criticized attributing Hallyu's success purely to reductive proximity arguments. Researchers find that such variables are not significant enough to explain the success of Hallyu, which likewise cannot easily take into account environmental and historical factors, nor explain the popularity of these products within specific social groups and countries that are often far removed (geographically and culturally) from Korea itself (Kim and Ryoo 2007; Oh 2009; Suh, Cho, and Kwon 2006; Yoo, Jo, and Jung 2014).

Undoubtedly, constructing the East and Southeast Asian regions as culturally similar is both convenient and appealing in the challenge it presents to the traditional dominance of Euro-American popular culture since the postwar era. Hallyu products offer new models of Asian identity that can challenge previous Western cultural hegemony and which scholars note can be successful for this reason (Iwabuchi 2004). Certainly, evidence suggests that Southeast Asian consumers are very keen to construct such cultural similarities and are drawn to the Asian cultural traits represented in Korean TV dramas and pop music (Ainslie 2015; Chung 2013; Park 2014). Likewise, the local content and production standards of pop culture products in countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines also demonstrate the adoption and integration of Hallyu influences.

Yet, deploying this explanation can also potentially homogenize the Asia region in a similar way to that of the older European colonialist project.

The reception of Hallyu in Southeast Asian countries is highly complex and warrants much closer inspection as to the ways in which these products intersect with local discourses. For instance, Tambunan (2015) understands that the metrosexual constructions of masculinity in Korean dramas and pop music clash with traditional Islamic-orientated masculine discourses for Indonesian consumers, thus problematizing the reception of Korean dramas in Indonesia. Likewise, Lim (2015) argues that Malaysian youth's engagement with Hallyu is designed to transcend and reshape current notions of Asianness, rather than simply replicate or imitate such aesthetics. Finally, Liew (2015) argues that Thai cinema uses Hallyu representations to project its own imaginaries back to Korea and speak back against (while also critiquing) dominant cultural flows.

Korean Soft Power and the CLMV Countries

As well as exploring such cultural notions, academic analysis of the spread of Hallyu also outlines the very explicit agenda of promoting Korean economic and business interests. This has resulted in the now familiar labeling of Hallyu as a form of soft power. This term was first linked with analysis by Joseph Nye (1990, 2002, 2011), who understood it as a process of achieving goals through framing an agenda to elicit positive "attraction" rather than through more direct methods such as payment, coercion, or direct force. Scholars have long explored the links between Hallyu promotion and the Korean economic agenda (Chung 2013; Hong 2014; Shim 2011, 2013; Suh, Cho, and Kwon 2006). The export of Hallyu is heavily supported and even subsidized by Korean authorities and at times is also artificially sustained to maintain the otherwise itinerant nature of such *waves*, an arrangement that is recognized by consumers and is also quite explicitly acknowledged by Korean authorities (see, for example, Korea Foundation 2011).

Such a dynamic is very significant when exploring the spread and popularity of Hallyu in the economically attractive emerging markets of Southeast Asia. There is substantial motivation for such soft power in Southeast Asia, all of which warrants the careful framing of South Korea and its inter-

ests as a positive and attractive force for the consumer. As a region known for both its rich natural resources (tin, rubber, rice, timber, and many more) and its strategic position between Chinese and American economic domination, Southeast Asia is of key importance in the economic and political struggles between Eastern and Western nations today. The region has been gradually increasing in economic and political prominence throughout the last decade, particularly during its recent amalgamation under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) banner and it is attracting significant overseas investment as a consequence. East Asian countries have been careful to retain their prominence in the region throughout the late 2000s push towards ASEAN integration and the solidification of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) (seen in initiatives such as ASEAN+3[1]), yet within this dynamic the actions of South Korea certainly deserve special attention.

Unlike the historically dominant powers of Japan and China, South Korea does not have a problematic background of historical domination in Southeast Asia and can therefore effectively act as a sort of balancing power to help allay Southeast Asian concerns and suspicions around the hegemonic activities of China, Japan, and the United States in the region (Ainslie and Lim 2015, 7; Tran 2002). The area is currently a significant export market for South Korea; ASEAN as a whole is noted as South Korea's second largest trading partner. In the mid-2000s, initiatives from Korea focused upon strengthening the Korea-ASEAN relationship, noted as crucial to improving Korea's overseas interests and investments (ISEAS 2005). Since then, South Korea has signed free trade agreements with all ASEAN nations and the area has become an important production base for Korean companies.

To add to such interest, while the Southeast Asian region as a whole remains an area of significant strategic importance to foreign investors, what are known as the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and

1. This initiative was formed between the Southeast Asian nations and the three East Asian nations of Japan, China, and South Korea. It was a means of countering the strength and influence of the US dollar following the 1997 financial crisis.

Vietnam) have retained a special position for their key importance as targets of overseas investment and production. Economists note not only the dramatic increase of trade between South Korea and ASEAN, but also Korea's overall huge increase in foreign investment in the CLMV countries. This subgrouping of nations within Southeast Asia, also known (with the exclusion of Thailand) as the Mekong River Basin Countries (MRBC), refers to the relatively less developed countries in ASEAN that have recently emerged as a very promising new developing market and are now attracting significant economic interest. These younger member states all became part of ASEAN in the late 1990s, a time during which they transitioned from centrally planned to open market economies, a process in which domestic controls upon foreign investment were gradually relaxed. Such economic transition has occurred alongside the transformation of ASEAN into a single integrated market and production base as of 2015.

There is a significant development gap between the CLMV countries and the other six ASEAN nations; in 2011 these four countries accounted for less than 10 percent of ASEANs nominal GDP and closing this gap is considered to be crucial to the final integration of both ASEAN and the wider East Asian community. Most notably, there is a dramatic difference between internet access and usage in wider Southeast Asia and in the three poorest CLMV countries. As of 2014, in Malaysia almost 70 percent of citizens were internet users, a figure that stood around 40 percent in the Philippines and Thailand. However, only 15 percent of the Laotian population was internet users, 10 percent in Cambodia, and merely 2 percent in Myanmar.[2]

With the aim of closing this development gap and further unifying ASEAN as a region, leaders from the CLMV countries meet every year to discuss social, political, and economic reforms. Strong emphasis continues to be placed upon the need for CLMV countries to attract foreign investment as a means to sustain their gradual economic growth in the twenty-first century. After 2000, the countries promoted private-sector development as a way to recover from the effects of the Asian financial crisis of 1997.

2. "Internet Users (per 100 People)," World Bank, accessed May 23, 2016, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2.

Governments signed regional trade agreements with partners across the region in keeping with the general policies and initiatives of ASEAN towards regional amalgamation, a move which further integrated the CLMV nations into the global market. Due to the opening up of these countries and their encouragement of foreign direct investment, all CLMV countries have recently emerged as attractive locations for export bases for foreign direct investment (FDI) and multinational companies. Such openness has been labeled "one of the defining characteristics of the CLMV economies since the mid-1990s" (OECD 2013, 296), particularly since, in the same time period, such FDI has declined in the other economically more prosperous ASEAN nations. Therefore, despite their small market size and as a result of such a dramatic change in attitudes and policies to FDI, the CLMV countries have emerged as "dynamic open economies" following about two decades of integration and transition (OECD 2013, 292) and very attractive locations for foreign investors.

Laos as an FDI Destination

Within the CLMV countries, Laos in particular has enjoyed very heavy foreign investment, overwhelmingly from China and Vietnam, the majority of which focuses upon agriculture, including rubber plantations, cash crops, and mining. Such significant investment can be explained through the country's abundant natural resources, cheap workforce, and burgeoning market economy—aspects that are all in keeping with the general situation of the CLMV countries. Because of the high reliance upon subsistence agriculture, there was very little infrastructure in Laos and as a result the government had been trying since the 1990s to cultivate investment. Laos itself became a full member of ASEAN in 1997 and, after waiting 15 years, eventually gained WTO membership in 2012. The Laos government has strongly promoted the country as an attractive location for foreign investment, touting itself through the slogan "Land of Ample Opportunities and Successes" as a safe investment climate with relative political stability within the region. An examination of figures indicates huge investment at an

extremely rapid rate and one that has increased significantly in recent years.[3]

Due to this rapid increase in foreign investment and the country's corresponding growing importance, Laos enjoys a much closer relationship with South Korea than the other more economically prominent Southeast Asian nations and the rest of the CLMV countries. After a period of relative isolation, diplomatic relations between Laos and South Korea were reestablished in 1995, the same period when the CLMV countries were rapidly transitioning to market economies favoring foreign investment and Laos was beginning to enjoy both increased overseas tourism and political stability. While this establishment was initially somewhat awkward due to Laos' previous position as a socialist country and enemy of the United States, Korean overseas direct investment (ODI) in the country increased dramatically to the extent that South Korea is now considered one of the top ten investors in Laos with a cumulative FDI of US$740 million from 1989 to 2012. Laos also receives grant aid from the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and loans from the Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF). Such investment shows no sign of slowing down: Laotian President Choummaly Sayasone's three-day visit to South Korea in 2013 was the first Korea–Laos state visit since the reestablishment of diplomatic ties and included summit talks with South Korean President Park Geun-hye, in which a Memorandum of Understanding was reached involving more

3. Laos' strategic geographical position between China and Thailand lends the country significance as a gateway to Southeast Asia for Chinese interests. In particular, the building of the multi-billion dollar Kunming–Vientiane high-speed rail connection is an indication of this; postponed numerous times throughout the 2000s, this proposal was finally invigorated in 2012 and is aimed at completion by 2019. The railway will offer a means through which to send raw materials directly from Laos to China and, in so doing, to draw Southeast Asia closer to China economically. While Southeast Asia's economic importance to China (which relies upon imports from this region to manufacture its exports) has increased in general, Laos is of particular significance given its location. Indeed, Chinese authorities are responsible for building hospitals in Luang Prabang and even funding that city's airport, all as a means of maintaining such economic and industrial ties. The deepening importance of this relationship has been noted by the United States, which has kept a close eye on such developments. In 2012, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Laos, the first visit by a senior US official to the country since 1955, to try and shore up Laos–US ties.

EDCF loans. Indeed, Korean overseas development grants worth US$18 million were extended to Laos for nine projects across 2010 and 2011, and Korea plans to extend EDCF loans by US$200 million over the next three years.[4]

Korean companies also have a heavy presence in Laos. The South Korean firms SK Engineering & Construction and Korean Western Power Company are the primary financers as well as builders of the 410-megawatt Xe Pian Xe Namnoy hydroelectric power station. This consists of constructing a series of dams across the Bolaven Plateau in the Mekong River in southern Laos and using the flow of water to generate electricity, 90 percent of which will be sent to Thailand. The estimated cost is over US$830 million, with completion in 2018 and commercial operations commencing in 2019. The automotive company Kolao Holdings, which makes and distributes cars and other vehicles in Laos, is also the biggest non-state company and private enterprise in the country. Registered as a Laotian company, Kolao Holdings was actually founded by a Korean and has been listed on Korea's stock index (KOSPI) since 2010. Likewise, the exporting of Korean products to Laos has increased and goods such as electronics, cosmetics, and mobile phones are of particular prominence (Lee and Somsamone 2011, 118). In 2011, Laos' new stock market Laos Securities Exchange opened, trading in only two countries. This was very much aimed at foreign investors, and as the BBC reported, "the funding for the set-up of the exchange has come from South Korea, which has invested $9.8m, or 49% of the capital, for the venture. The Bank of Laos, the country's central bank, has invested the rest."[5] Together with its similar financing of the Cambodian Stock Exchange, such radical commitment indicates Korea's desire to position itself as a significant power in control of CLMV financial centers.

Adding to such expensive projects, Korea has also engaged in major investment in Laotian higher education, and there has been a heavy concen-

4. Philip Iglauer, "Profile of Laos on the Rise," *Korea Herald*, February 23, 2014, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140223000410.
5. "Laos Stock Market Opens to Boost Economy," *BBC News*, January 11, 2011, http://www.bbc.com/news/business-12160402.

tration upon the development of Korean Studies in Laos. This has primarily targeted Souphanouvong University in Luang Prabang, at which authorities aimed to establish a Korean Studies institute by 2015. A new campus was built in 2007 financed by a loan from South Korea's EDCF, an arrangement set up by the Korean contractor POSDATA Consortium through the Korean government, which together would oversee the management of the university for the next thirty years. In 2008, the Korean Cooperation Center opened and the Lao-Korea Science and Technology Centre (LKSTC) *officially* opened at the university in 2015. Aimed at developing profitable agricultural technology, the latter center is largely staffed by Korean researchers. Overwhelmingly, the Korean embassy in Laos is concerned with promoting Korean language and culture through education and the Korean government also financially supports a small number of Laotian students to study in Korean universities. Korean tourism to Laos also increased significantly, between 2011 and 2012 the number of South Korean tourists to Laos increased by 46 percent, and airlines now operate direct flights between Seoul and the Laotian capital Vientiane. All such initiatives are indicative not only of Korea's heavy interest in Laos, but also the country's strategic plan to invest in projects that require a long-term presence and commitment.

Hallyu in Laos

It is no coincidence that Laos was (and continues to be) identified as a significant and important market for Hallyu products, despite its small consumer base and largely rural population. Alongside the educational support of Laos universities, the widespread promotion of Hallyu, largely through TV dramas and free concerts, is deeply connected to the promotion and support of Korean investment in the country and is part of a long-term strategy to both introduce and maintain a strong Korean presence in this geographically and economically significant nation. The heavily subsidized promotion of Hallyu in Laos is part of Korea's much-touted state-sponsored agenda of soft power. In this region of growing economic prominence and numerous raw materials, Hallyu is an important tool for reinforcing and

sustaining Korean influence in Laos, and depicting such influence as a desirable and beneficial phenomenon. The connection between Hallyu promotion and Korean economic interests in Laos is not hidden, and in fact can be quite explicit: in their overview of Hallyu in Laos, Lee and Somsamone openly state, "The Korean Wave [Hallyu] has contributed to a more positive perception of Korea and has strengthened the nation's 'soft power'" (2011, 117) while the popular Korean website Arirang states of Korean support for the Laos broadcasting industries that "continued exposure to Korean culture through collaborations like these have led to better business in Laos for Korean companies."[6]

This support of Laos broadcasting industries as a means of maintaining influence follows similar moves by other nations: broadcasting has been used extensively by China as a means to influence and assist investment in Laos. Various Chinese companies financed the improvement of Laos' telecommunications infrastructure during the 1990s and into the 2000s, of which the most notable outcome was the development of Laos' first satellite, LaoSat-1, which launched in November 2015, for which 70 percent of the funding came from China. This Laotian network is intended to coordinate with other Asian satellite networks and so allow Chinese companies to become the major operator and provider for this subregional Mekong area, a platform that can further promote China's space services internationally. Likewise, most foreign cable operators are Chinese or Vietnamese, reflecting the substantial influence and investments of these two countries in Laos. In 2013, Lao National Television (LNTV), the national television station which runs two channels, signed an MOU with Yunnan Radio and Television (YRT) of China, to "develop content and technology and enable 24 hour broadcasting,"[7] while in 2014 LNTV joined with Guangxi People's Broadcasting Station of China to produce and broadcast Chinese theatre productions.

In contrast to this strong Chinese and Vietnamese presence, Lee and

6. Shin Haejoo, "Korean Hit Dramas Shown in Laos," *Arirang News*, May 5, 2008, http://www.arirang.co.kr/News/News_View.asp?nseq=80590&code=Ne6&category=7.
7. Aishwariya S., "Laos to Introduce Digital Broadcasting," *Next TV Asia*, August 29, 2013, http://nextvasia.com/1-cable-dth/laos-to-introduce-digital-broadcasting.

Somsamone understand that the arrival of the Korean Wave in Laos was somewhat later than other countries "due to the lack of network and distribution channels" (2011, 116). However, the Korean Wave had actually already been established before it *officially* arrived in Laos in 2007–2008. Long before Laos began exploring and cultivating overseas investment options, South Korea was already well known in Laos due to Hallyu. The population was already familiar with South Korean cultural products, having had prior exposure through both Thai television channels and the extensive and cheap pirated VCD networks across Southeast Asia. Through this, Laos citizens have long consumed Thai game shows and *Lakhon* soap operas, both of which are particularly popular in the country given the close linguistic and other cultural links it shares with Thailand.

Yet while its *official* arrival may have been late, Korean popular culture has been both influential and prolific. In 2007, the Korea Broadcasting Commission donated almost US$100,000 worth of broadcasting facilities to Laos' state-run television network and its cultural ministry, after an MOU was signed between the broadcasting companies from the two countries. In November of that same year, three Korean hit drama series were then launched on Laos TV: the historical dramas *Hwang Jini* and *Dae Jang Geum* and the contemporary Cinderella story, *Stairway to Heaven* ("Cheonguk-ui gyedan" in Korean; 2003), all broadcasting a year after the incredibly successful 2005–2006 transmission of *Dae Jang Geum* in neighboring Thailand.[8] This broadcast was then quickly followed by a number of concerts from very prominent K-pop groups. In 2008, female K-pop band Baby V.O.X. Re.V gave a New Year's concert at the Lao international Trade Exhibition and Convention Center, the largest venue in the country. The mobile phone company Millicom Lao Co. Ltd. (known as Tigo) hosted the concert, and made free tickets available with a mobile phone top-up and lucky draw.[9]

8. "Korean Hit Dramas Shown in Laos," promotion website of the Korea Tourism Organization, last modified May 6, 2008, http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/CU/content/cms_view_556528.jsp.
9. Phoonsab Thevongsa, "Popular Korean Band 'Baby Vox' to Take the Stage in Vientiane, Laos," *Samakomlao*, accessed May 23, 2016, http://samakomlao.blogspot.com/2007/12/popular-korean-band-baby-vox-to-take.html.

In April of that same year, Tigo again brought a K-pop band to Laos: South Korea's web portal *Paran* gave a concert to an audience of ten thousand at the national football stadium in Vientiane—a record for a pop concert in Laos—to celebrate Tigo's anniversary. The event was also televised on the local channel Lao Star TV.[10] Again, tickets could be purchased through Tigo's phone service. Following Tigo's successful endeavor, in June 2008 a Korean B-boy break dancing troupe, vocalists, and beatbox performers gave a performance at the Laos National Culture Hall in Vientiane, organized and sponsored by the Korea Foundation, the Korean Embassy in Laos, and the Laos Ministry of Information and Culture. All the performances were reportedly free and attended by diplomats, while performers also visited local schools to "present scholarship aid and school supplies to students" (Korea Foundation 2008). The presence of Hallyu has continued and grown due to such initiatives. Writing in 2011, Lee and Somsamone (2011) reported that over 50 percent of all music programming on Lao Star TV channel consisted of Korean pop. Laotian viewers can also receive Korean dramas through both Thai TV and Lao Star TV, which has been showing Korean dramas continually throughout the year since 2009.

A *Mutual* Exchange?

Given the technical sophistication and huge financing behind Hallyu, the success of Korean products seems almost guaranteed given Laos' lack of broadcasting infrastructure and heavy reliance upon overseas investment. The artificial market-driven spread of the Korean Wave in Laos therefore becomes much more obvious and explicit than may be apparent in nations that possess more equal bilateral trade relations with Korea and much higher levels of economic growth. Identifying any form of affinity between these two nations as a reason behind Hallyu's success would ultimately be highly

10. Ounkham Pimmata, "Paran, Famous Korean Pop Will Perform in Laos," *Samakomlao*, accessed May 23, 2016, http://samakomlao.blogspot.com/2008/03/paran-famous-korean-pop-will-perform-in.html.

problematic and very difficult. The grass-roots informal fan networks and the "bottom-up, audience-centered approach" (Chung 2013, 199) attached to Hallyu in Southeast Asia is very difficult to gage and even envision in Laos, particularly given the overall lack of digitization in the country and the very small number of Laos consumers able to access the Internet. Yet this growth in popularity in Laos of Korean products, language courses, cuisine, and other signifiers notably continues to be presented by Korean organizations and social elites as a grass-roots and mutually beneficial organic arrangement that ignores and even erases the inequality between these two nations. Instead, the popularity of Hallyu in Laos is purportedly based upon a shared set of Asian values that exists between these radically different and unequal countries. Such a construction seeks to remove Korea and its heavy-handed promotion of Hallyu from any responsibility for investment that may ultimately not be in the Laotian people's best interests, thus attaching Hallyu to an agenda that begins to be somewhat damaging to Laos.

Such a construction is evident in this statement from the Laotian ambassador to South Korea, Khamla Xayachack, who directly attributes the success of Korean products in Laos to Hallyu. He indicates that what he calls the current "deepening and broadening exchange" between Laos and Korea—which consists exclusively of Korean investment in Laos—has been "underpinned by the Hallyu phenomenon rippling across Southeast Asia."[11] Despite this choice of words, there is very little evidence of "exchange" in this relationship. The use of the word "rippling" is also ultimately suggestive of a natural and harmless phenomenon rather than a deliberate (and at times aggressive) promotion. Likewise, in a newsletter from the Korea Foundation, the Korean B-boy performance in the Laos National Culture Hall is described as "cultural diplomacy," a phrase that removes any hint of soft power in favor of a negotiated mutually beneficial arrangement that will "enrich the life of the Lao people and develop more cooperative relations between our two countries" (Korea Foundation 2008). Again, the emphasis is upon language that implies mutual benefit and cooperation, even going so

11. Philip Iglauer, "Profile of Laos on the Rise," *Korea Herald*, February 23, 2014, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140223000410.

far as to depict a dance performance as "enriching" a country in which the majority of citizens exist in a state of extreme poverty.

Mr. Bae Chang-Heon, vice president of the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA)—which has involved in promoting Korea's export-led economic development and opened up an office in Vientiane in 2011—again describes this investment process as akin to an "exchange," stating:

> Laos has targeted [South] Korea as source of investments. In July, 2012, the Prime Minister of Laos and accompany with over 60 officials and business leaders joined Lao Investment seminar in at KOTRA Headquarter in Seoul. In return in this December, KOTRA has brought over 18 Korean firms to Vientiane capital for seeking the business opportunity and expand their business operation [*sic*].[12]

The suggestion that Korean firms are brought to Laos for expansion in return for the Laos Prime Minister's visit to Korea is highly dubious, as is the construction of the much poorer Laos "targeting" Korea, a term implying that Laos is in some way using Korea, rather than the other way around.

The Korea Foundation also financially supports cultural initiatives in Laos, including festival performances in Vientiane and beyond, which it states are designed to "introduce the diversity and richness of Korean culture to international communities and also to provide local audiences with increased opportunities for direct contact with Korean culture and arts" (Korea Foundation 2011, 28). This again conveniently removes any suggestion of soft power while also depicting local audiences as somehow active and eager participants in this process. Instead this is again depicted as an equal exchange that is mutually beneficial and one that is now even portrayed as evidence of Korean benevolence designed to assist Laos.

Perhaps the only academic study documenting the growth of Hallyu in Laos also deserves particular attention. Written with the assistance of a

12. "Elevating Level of Laos-Korea Investment Cooperation," Ministry of Planning and Investment, Investment Promotion Department, last modified September 2, 2016, http://www.investlaos.gov.la/index.php/news-and-events/item/4-elevating-level-of-laos-korea-investment-cooperation.

grant from the Academy of Korean Studies, the article argues that given the previous successes of Hallyu in Southeast Asia and the opening up of Laos, it "makes sense" for Hallyu to "catch on" in the country. The authors also attribute the success of the Korean Wave to what is termed "Asian cultural affinity" (Lee and Somsamone 2011, 117). Such phrases imply that the growth of Hallyu in Laos is an organic process instigated by consumers rather than Korean authorities, conveniently side-stepping the enormous benefits to Korean overseas interests. Korean economic gain is omitted in favor of constructing affinity between two nations that are in fact culturally, economically, and geographically very different due to the severe economic disparity between them. This inequality removes the possibility of any form of implied mutual exchange or cooperation that may be evident in the more economically advanced ASEAN countries such as Thailand, and even other CLMV countries such as Vietnam, both of which are digitized, have established media industries and products, and are actively responding to and incorporating influences from the Korean Wave.

Indeed, while Hallyu in Laos is an exemplar of a very blatant use of soft power, its agenda is also perhaps not necessarily in the current interests of many Laotian consumers. The Laos government's open door policy towards overseas investment and interests has left the country heavily dependent upon foreign aid and investment. UN describes Laos as a LLDC (landlocked developing country), which means the country is one of the least developed countries in the world. It is considered the poorest country in Southeast Asia and the most rural and agriculturally-based, in which around 80 percent of citizens are farmers and the majority practice subsistence farming. While the economy has grown thanks to Chinese and Vietnamese money and Laos is noted as a "top mover' in terms of human development, the country remains the most impoverished in Southeast Asia with 44 percent of children classified as malnourished[13] and maternal health significantly

13. "Rural Poverty in Lao People's Democratic Republic," Rural Poverty Portal, accessed May 23, 2016, http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/laos; and "Investing in Rural People in the Lao People's Democratic Republic," IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), accessed May 23, 2016, https://www.ifad.org/documents/10180/efd48154-5c30-4357-a52f-11a6b6826bf4.

below that of Cambodia.[14] The significantly low wages make Laos an attractive export base and indeed, many foreign companies such as Yamaki Co. have moved their factories from Thailand to Laos to take advantage of this cheaper workforce.

In particular, the Kunming–Vientiane high-speed rail connection is a shocking indication of the extent to which such FDI is not necessarily in the best interests of the Laotian people as well as an indication of the Laotian elite's corrupt close relationship with China. The project's US$7-billion cost will be entirely funded by Laos, with the money borrowed from Beijing in exchange for future raw materials. This initiative will make Laos one of the most indebted countries in the world and the Asian Development Bank ultimately called it "unaffordable" as a loan (Creak 2014, 159). There is also no suggestion of any compensation plan for the affected people and villages that will inevitably be displaced by the scheme. Likewise, in 2013, a number of governments and organizations (including the European Union, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank) expressed their concern around the building of the primarily Korean-funded Xe Pian Xe Namnoy hydroelectric power station and its series of dams across the Mekong river. The Mekong River Commission (MRC) Council stated that "building dams on the mainstream of the Mekong may irrevocably change the river and hence constitute a challenge for food security, sustainable development and biodiversity conservation," arguing that the potential environmental and social impacts of the project have not been adequately assessed.[15] Then, despite agreeing to a Vietnamese proposal of a ten-year moratorium on dam construction on the Mekong, the US-based advocacy group International Rivers found that the Laotian government had been secretly continuing with the project and even

14. "The Future of Laos: A Bleak Landscape," *Economist*, October 26, 2013, http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21588421-secretive-ruling-clique-and-murky-land-grabs-spell-trouble-poor-country-bleak-landscape.

15. "Laos' Neighbors Unhappy with Xayaburi Dam Construction," *HydroWorld.com*, last modified January 21, 2013, http://www.hydroworld.com/articles/2013/january/laos--neighbors-unhappy-with-xayaburi-dam-construction.html.

awarding more contracts to overseas construction companies.[16]

Likewise, while the economic reforms in Laos since the late 1980s were designed to turn the country from socialism to a market-orientated economy, there have been no accompanying democratic reforms and the country has remained a one-party state with no opposition. Economists note that the successful economic growth through FDI in the CLMV countries must be followed by corresponding social and political developments in which the benefits of such growth are shared across society (OECD 2013), yet in Laos very little dissent is allowed, and human rights violations, disappearances, and detentions without trial are still common. European diplomats who raise concerns are expelled while peasants are often forced to sell their land to make way for foreign companies. An article in *The Economist* noted how, "More land is now in the hands of foreigners than is used to grow rice" and cautioned of "the emergence of a landless poor."[17] Such developments have disproportionally affected ethnic minorities, who make up 70 percent of the Laos population and farm resource-rich upland areas that are often seized without compensation. NGOs warn that large-scale land leases to overseas private companies by the Laos government have left such citizens displaced and impoverished due to "land grabs," leading to increased mortality rates, social conflict, and reduced access to health and education (MacLean 2014).

Such problems indicate that very little of the benefit of current foreign investment is actually trickling down to the ordinary Laos consumer and that the rapid and vast opening up of the Laos economy to foreign investment continues to be problematic and worrying in many respects. Within this equation, South Korea (though it still trails China and Vietnam in terms of investment and presence in Laos) has played a central role, and Hallyu plays

16. "Laos' Neighbors Unhappy with Xayaburi Dam Construction," *HydroWorld.com*, last modified January 21, 2013, http://www.hydroworld.com/articles/2013/january/laos--neighbors-unhappy-with-xayaburi-dam-construction.html.

17. "The Future of Laos: A Bleak Landscape," *Economist*, October 26, 2013, http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21588421-secretive-ruling-clique-and-murky-land-grabs-spell-trouble-poor-country-bleak-landscape.

an important part in maintaining such centrality.[18] Korean popular culture therefore becomes extremely problematic as part of an exploitive agenda that furthers the huge disparity and inequality between Laos and Korea.

Korean Constructions of Laos

Such inequality is also evident in Korean pop culture representations of Laos. While Korean organizations and social elites may continue to refer to Hallyu as part of a mutually beneficial arrangement of "exchange," the few depictions of Laos by the Korean media belie this construction, and certainly do not depict the country as existing on an equal footing with Korea. Instead, such depictions emphasize differences (rather than similarities) between the two nations and do not reflect any element of affinity that the aforementioned Korean institutions are keen to emphasize. The small number of Korean texts that represent Laos construct an image akin to a stereotypical European view of Southeast Asia as a simplistic and impoverished premodern land that now primarily functions as a playground for the East Asian male. Such depictions are indicative of the huge increase in Korean tourism to Southeast Asia previously mentioned, and the position of Laos as a firm fixture on the Korean cheap holiday and backpacking circuit. They notably tend not to take into account either the country's rapid development and industrialization or the crippling rural poverty still endured by many of its citizens. Instead, images are reminiscent of stereotypical Euro-American constructions of Southeast Asia as an exotic and hedonistic playground for young male tourists in which anything goes.

Such constructions can be conceptualized through the very controver-

18. It is also perhaps a measure of South Korean's commitment to such schemes that very little commotion was raised about the 2013 decision by Laos authorities to send nine escaped young North Korean refugees back to Pyongyang, instead of allowing them passage to Thailand and eventually to South Korea. While such a decision acts as a reminder of Laos' former anti-US political alliances and previous socialist ideological stance, the incident is notable in that despite significant outrage from South Korean and other international agencies, there have been no repercussions toward the Laotian authorities.

sial theory of "re-Orientalism" (Lau and Mendes 2011). This nuanced reconstruction of older Orientalist discourses articulates how cultural production in the East engenders Orientalist perspectives and stereotypes, primarily in order to make a marketable commodity. Lau and Mendes understand that Occidental and Oriental spaces are now geographically and culturally mixed, with Europe now only "one node among many others" (2011, 10). The few existing Korean representations of Laos appear to function as another "node." These adopt a re-Orientalizing position that constructs South Korea as inherently culturally superior and benevolent in terms of the *civilized* influence that it can offer to the now-Orientalized and much more primitive Laos.

In July 2014, an episode of the reality travel show *Youths over Flowers* ("Kkot boda cheongchun" in Korean) was filmed in Laos as part of the successful Korean "Backpacking Project" series. The episode followed three performers from the young cast of *Reply 1994* ("Eungdaphara 1994" in Korean) as they travelled around the country on a budget and bonded over their mishaps. From the beginning, the primitivism of Laos is foregrounded. The program begins with the three protagonists responding with laughter, disappointment, and incredulous expressions as they are told they will be going to Laos, rather than the more conventional destinations they had expected, such as the United Kingdom. The intertitles mockingly state that, upon arrival, the trio is reduced to "beggars" sitting by the roadside, conveniently omitting the significant number of hotels and guesthouses available to tourists in Laos. The protagonists themselves remark, "'This wasn't the holiday I had in mind,' and are shown wandering along empty roads complete with cows and chirping insects. Rather than exploring Laos as a culture or a holiday destination, the country functions as little more than a backdrop against which to view the attractive physical bodies of the performers (who are constantly depicted showing off their muscles and wearing revealing clothing) as well as the developing relationships between them.

The examinations of Laos itself focus exclusively upon the men's reactions to and interpretations of their new environment. The protagonists are depicted laughing at the bundles of Lao currency they must handle, munching street food, navigating local wet markets, and staying in dormitory beds.

Activities include river tubing, go-karting, and swimming in waterfalls alongside Western backpackers. Humor is primarily created through the efforts and culture shock of these young and wealthy Korean stars being forced to navigate a nation that is much poorer and lacks the infrastructure and organization they are accustomed to. There is very little explanation or examination given of Laos culture and the only depictions of Lao people are as hawkers selling backpacking clothing and street food or "cute" children whom the protagonists wave to from their bicycles. The country is not depicted as a threatening or hostile environment, but instead embodies a primitive simplicity and spirituality. The scenery of Vang Vieng town in particular (a staple stop on the backpacker circuit) is highlighted, with long shots and takes of mountains and lagoons the protagonists visit, ultimately depicting Laos as an empty paradise ripe for conquest.

Likewise, in 2009, Korean actor Jang Dong-gun (one of the highest paid actors in Korea) shot a promotional antipoverty documentary in Laos as a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations World Food Program (WFP). The star spent a week touring provinces in Laos and visited Houay Hoy, a town that was heavily affected in 2009 by Typhoon Ketsana, which caused significant flooding and devastation across Southeast Asia. Most notably, the star's agency AM Entertainment sought to highlight their performer's commitment and contribution to the project by constructing Laos as a dangerous and disease-ridden nation, with a report stating:

> Many people were worried because he was going to a remote area where it is easy to catch an epidemic," an official at AM was quoted as saying. "But Jang Dong-gun was very determined [to go] (Han Cinema 2010).

This statement very deliberately seeks to portray the performer as heroic by constructing Laos as a backwards and primitive nation, an image very far from the previously promoted affinity between Laos and Korea.

Several promotional images from Jang Dong-gun's trip (see Figs. 1–4) also seek to construct Laos as an impoverished nation in need of modernity, assistance from *superior* nations, and, most of all perhaps, benevolence, all of which the images associate with the Koreanness of Jang Dong-gun. In Figure 1, the performer is located in the right side of the frame with several

Laotian children on the left, positioning Korea as a literally bigger and more mature elder in this relationship. Likewise, while Jang Dong-gun wears the *civilized* and *modern* garb of sandals, shorts, and shirt, the Laotian children are dressed in traditional Laos *sinh* skirts, are barefoot and backgrounded by a rural environment and traditional Laotian wooden home. The suggestion is one of idealized primitivism coupled with a childlike innocence and a backwardness compared to the sophistication of Korea. This construction is further complemented by the exaggerated whiteness of the East Asian Korean performer's skin tone, which contrasts sharply with the darkness of the Southeast Asian Laotian children. Jang Dong-gun is also depicted as bending over to interact with the children, whose reactions appear shy and perplexed, as if they lack the capacity to understand the benefits that interaction with the Korean can bring.

Figure 1. Actor Jang Dong-gun interacts with Laotian village children.

Source: Han Cinema (2010).

Figure 2. Actor Jang Dong-gun poses with Laotian village children.

Source: Han Cinema (2010).

Figure 2 further compliments this construction. This promotional image depicts the star surrounded by disheveled Laotian children, many of whom seem delighted to be in the frame. Again, the image is one of a primitive people who are grateful and happy to be connected to the superior and benevolent Korean. While such an image of idealized poverty may undermine previous constructions of affinity, it reinforces the construction of Hallyu (and Korean-ness in general) as a benevolent force bringing *understanding* to this nation.

This theme of benevolence continues in Figures 3 and 4. These depict the star with rice sacks, an activity described as "volunteering" and "feeding children," despite the fact that little is known about the actual financial arrangements between the WFP and AM Entertainment (Han Cinema 2010).[19] Again, the performer is much larger and more prominent than the Laotians in the frame and stands out due to his skin color. Long shots again highlight the background setting, again an agrarian impoverished environment with a very limited palette (highlighting the whiteness of Jang) and little visible infrastructure.

Figure 3. Actor Jang Dong-gun carries sacks of rice in Laos.

Source: Han Cinema (2010).

Figure 4. Actor Jang Dong-gun poses beside sacks of rice in a Laotian village.

Source: Han Cinema (2010).

Conclusion

A case study of Hallyu in Laos highlights the very explicit and often uncomfortable nature of Korean popular culture as a form of soft power targeted at a much poorer and underdeveloped nation. Such research suggests that Hallyu is overwhelmingly a one-sided phenomenon that is pushed purely as a means to benefit Korean overseas interests in this strategically important country. Given the levels of current economic and social exploita-

19. "Jang Dong Gun Volunteering in Laos," *Soompi*, last modified June 10, 2010, http://www.soompi.com/2010/06/10/jang-dong-gun-volunteering-in-laos.

tion in Laos and the country's higher level of inequality than Korea, a significant investor in the country, it is difficult to envision any form of mutual exchange. Yet, in official sources, the construction of Hallyu as a mutually beneficial and benevolent force based upon "Asian cultural affinity" certainly persists. However, such an interpretation is then undermined by the few representations of Laos in Korean popular culture. These images and texts attach an inferior and impoverished childlike persona to the country and construct Laos as very much an uncivilized and backwards *other* in contrast to a civilized and modern Korea.

Nevertheless, such a process is a problematic and reductive way of understanding the Korean Wave. While it is important to underline both the hypocrisy and the significant ethical issues in the overseas promotion of Hallyu in much poorer nations, to do so also removes agency from consumers. In the globalized context, Korean products can function as an important symbol of modernity in a rapidly changing society. While the artificiality of Hallyu's growth in Laos may serve to question the positive nature and celebratory analysis often connected to this phenomenon, we must still examine the mixed effects such imports have upon consumers and wider society. As one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia with a traumatic and troubled history, Laos remains at the bottom of a hierarchy in a region that is changing rapidly. Within Southeast Asia, a context that is particularly problematic due to its supposedly passive construction as a *receiver* of the economically more advanced East Asian nations, the reception of the Korean Wave has been diverse and complex. Hallyu products are indicative of a well-tailored and sophisticated entertainment product that offers a relevant and interesting construction of modern urban-based life that also reflects current changes in and challenges to social, gender, and class relations today. Therefore, such products potentially offer consumers new models of consumption and identity during a period of transition, though the position and status of such consumers also varies radically. More empirically-based research is needed to establish if and how Hallyu will and can benefit the local population and how it might change Laos in the same ways we witness in the other more affluent ASEAN nations.

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