Korean Wave as Cultural Imperialism

A study of K-pop Reception in Vietnam

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Introduction

During my four years of college in Korea, I went back to my home country Vietnam a couple of times. Whenever I told people that I was studying in Korea, one of the most common reactions was: "Oh, so did you see any *oppa*?" It never took me more than two seconds to realize they were talking about K-pop idols. Interestingly, that question did not only come from underclassmen or children of my family's friends who aspire to follow my footsteps, I often got asked by many of the adults around me as well. Usually they would continue to ask why I chose to go to Korea, to which my older brother often jokingly answered: "Because she is a crazy K-pop fan." "Crazy" may not be the most equivalent English word, if anything it actually carries a much milder connotation. What my brother called me in Vietnamese was *fan cuồng K-pop*—a term no longer uncommon in Vietnamese colloquial language ever since the local media started to use it to label K-pop fans in Vietnam. Before having anything to do with K-pop, the word *cuồng* (/kʊəŋ/) in Vietnamese comes closest to describe an overly devout believer of a religion; thus "fanatical" seems to be a better translation. With such a negative connotation, I am certainly not happy with my brother's statement. However, that puts me in a dilemma because he is neither completely right nor completely wrong. I am not keen on K-pop in general but I am indeed a fan of one particular idol boygroup. I remember spending a good amount of my scholarship money on buying their products (whether music-related or not) and attending their concerts (not only the ones in Korea but also in Japan and China). One of the most memorable episodes during my "fangirl" career is the day when I waited for 10 hours under falling snow outside KBS building in Seoul just to see my idols perform for 5 minutes. How fanatical am I then? What is it about them that makes me so willing to do all of those things? How come I never feel the same way about Vietnamese singers?

It is this personal experience that drives me to gain further insights into Vietnamese reception of K-pop, for as a matter of fact there are thousands of Vietnamese youngsters out there who are a lot more fanatical than I am. Judging from the rapid expansion of (online) fan communities and the amount of local media coverage, the successful reception of K-pop in Vietnam has probably gone beyond its intended aims. As the tidal wave of K-pop reached ascendency in Vietnam, *fan cuồng K-pop* has also emerged as a phenomenon unprecedented in local popular culture and drawn enormous public attention. Furthermore, it has become the main discourse that the local media employs to criticize the fanatical behaviors of Vietnamese K-pop fans and to express concerns about the dangerous influence of K-pop on Vietnamese youths as well as the future of Vietnamese culture. Why are the K-pop fans so fanatical and why is the media so critical? If we see this one-way influx of Korean popular culture in light of the unequal power structure between Korea—the sender and Vietnam—the receiver together with the possible impacts of its ideological characteristics, the proliferation of K-pop in Vietnam exhibits traits of cultural imperialism. I therefore find the fundamental question of the cultural imperialism thesis—how local audiences react to and/or are influenced by foreign cultural products—highly relevant in understanding the divergence among dominant, negotiated and oppositional responses to the pervasive presence of K-pop in Vietnam.

By situating this reception study within the cultural imperialism framework, I seek to explore the specific ways K-pop and K-pop culture impinge upon and penetrate into the life experiences of Vietnamese youths. Through a close reading of Vietnamese K-pop fans' online writings and discussions, I contend that increased exposure to K-pop and engagement in K-pop participatory culture influence not only the ways Vietnamese youths make sense of their surroundings and everyday life experience but also their preference for pleasure-seeking

activities from which a kind of shared mentality among K-pop fans arises. It is through this process of self-reflexivity and construction of pleasure that K-pop fans in Vietnam emerge as active agents in allowing K-pop to develop into a new form of cultural imperialism. To have a more comprehensive view, I also look at the anti-K-pop sentiments, especially the public backlash and outcries presented in Vietnamese online media. This in turn provides more evidences of cultural imperialism working as elicited through the incorporation of the discourse of nationalism into criticisms of K-pop's impacts on the thinking and behaviors of Vietnamese youths. A case study of K-pop reception in Vietnam thus calls forth a reassessment of the applicability of the cultural imperialism thesis along with the active audience model in today modern context. More broadly, it serves to address new complexities that become visible as a result of the changing global landscape of media and cultural flows.

A Brief Overview of Cultural imperialism

The theoretical framework of cultural imperialism has been adopted to portray a modern mode of imperialism that operates within a core-periphery relationship whereby dominant countries promote their culture at the expense of indigenous cultures in less powerful nations. This ideologically loaded concept (Salwen, 1991) which dominated intellectual thinking in the field of international political communication in the 1970s and early 1980s was most famously developed by Herbert Schiller in his influential work *Communication and Cultural Domination*.

> [T]he concept of cultural imperialism today best describes the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system (1976: 9).

Alternatively, it is worthwhile to mention Beltran's definition of cultural imperialism which described it as

> a verifiable process of social influence by which a nation imposes on other countries its sets of beliefs, values, knowledge and behavioral norms as well as its overall style of life (Beltran, 1978 cited in Salwen, 1991: 29).

Understood in either way, early theories of cultural imperialism were premised on the presence of a world system whose center is the United States and there exists a modern imperialist relationship which manifests in the one-way flow of media and cultural products from the rich, developed world into the markets of the poorer, underdeveloped world. Since early days, the cultural imperialism theory has been approached and conceptualized variously; however, methods that have been employed noticeably diverge into two most prominent orientations that differ in locus of investigation. Researchers taking the political-economic view see cultural imperialism as "a natural by-product of political and economic imperialism" (Salwen, 1991: 30) and thus study the strategies, motives and messages of core nations when exporting their media and cultural products. This school of thought was particularly well-suited for Latin American scholars to provide explanations for issues involved cultural imperialism in their region (Cardoso & Faleto, 1979; Reyes, 1979). On the other hand, cultural imperialism is also considered as an effect. A much larger number of scholars as well as policy-makers are interested in studying the effects of Western media exposure on foreign audience based on the hypothesis that countries on the receiving end absorb values, beliefs, ideologies, lifestyles and so on from the exporting nations through their consumption of media and cultural products such as film, radio and television (Tsai, 1970; Kang & Morgan, 1988; Salwen, 1991). However, few studies have adequately examined "the degree to which the hypothesized effects are actually occurring, or detailing the specific individual and social processes through which such effects occur" (Crabtree

and Malhotra, 2000: 366). Most significantly, Salwen (1991) and Burrowes (1992) criticized cultural imperialism theorists for presenting audiences in receiving nations as "passive, uncritical recipients of culture" (Burrowes, 1992: 7) under manipulation of Western media products. Thus, the existing body of research on transcultural media effects has often been faulted as inconclusive.

Starting from the late 1980s, researchers, especially those in the school of cultural studies, began to conduct more empirically oriented research on how audiences in the South consumed and reacted to Western media products. Most prominent are Liebes and Katz (1990) who compared how audiences in Israel, Japan and the U.S. used and reacted to the American television drama series *Dallas* (1978-1991) in the three countries respectively. The researchers discovered that television viewers interpreted the messages as well as absorbed the U.S.'s values portrayed in the series in radically different ways. Ang in his book *Watching Dallas* (1995) also came to a similar conclusion that audiences make active choices in their viewing behavior and that cultural texts are read differently by people with different cultural backgrounds. Such findings align with Tomlinson's critical argument that

> audiences are more active and critical, their responses more complex and reflective, and their cultural values more resistant to manipulation and "invasion" than was assumed by the original cultural imperialism theorists (1991: 50).

The conception of the active audience, which suggests Western media products may not have such direct and powerful effects on non-Western consumers, was thus an important corrective to the original thesis of cultural imperialism.

Nevertheless, the body of research on active audience in the context of cultural imperialism still focused mainly on the reception of Western media products in countries of the South as the global media was still Western or U.S.-centric. It was until the 1990s when the

global flow of cultural products grew increasingly complex that a number of scholars (Boyd-Barret, 1998; Curran and Park, 2000; Tunstall, 2008) markedly pointed to the decentralization of Western cultural force signified by a turn towards regional production of media artifacts. A global trend towards economic liberalization and deregulation of media and creative industries gave rise to a new global media landscape with multi-directional flows of media products and a much more complex structure of cultural exchanges. Regional media players such as Brazil and Mexico and later Japan and Korea have thus emerged out of what Boyd-Barret (1998) termed as "geo-cultural" media flows and gradually grown strong enough to compete with Western counterparts in their regional markets based upon the idea of cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 2003; 2007). Previous presumptions of a unilateral relationship between the West and the peripheral rest are being challenged today in light of this significant growth point of the world market for media and cultural artifacts.

Standing out as largely contributing to the rapid transformation of their regional media landscape is Asian media, but most prominently the South Korean media as manifested in a new flow of media and cultural products launched by Korea into its neighboring Asian countries. The recent boom of Korean popular culture in Asia, known as *Hallyu* or the Korean Wave, is a world-famous cultural phenomenon completely unimaginable several decades ago. It certainly has become “an impressive aspect of cultural production, cultural flow and cultural consumption” (Jeon and Yoon, 2005: 67) that is arguably symptomatic of cultural imperialism. The purpose of this thesis is thus to reconsider the legitimacy of the old cultural imperialism framework by positioning it in the Asian context with the ascendency of Korean Wave.

Korean Wave and Korean Cultural Imperialism

Much of the literature on the Korean Wave looks at this cultural phenomenon as the expansion of Korean cultural industry which entails the expansion of Korean culture, Korean economy and ultimately the empowerment of Korea as a nation. Jeon and Yoon, by locating the Korean Wave in what they call as the inter-Asian culture, critically pointed out that

> the Korean Wave is a desirable effect of a well-devised state-industrial strategy to export the Korean entertaining products abroad. Asia happens to appear as a key market for those venturing Korean cultural enterprises for money. They are direct; Economy is the fundamental of the phenomenon (2005: 76).

A key feature of the transnational flow of the Korean Wave is thus the active participation of the South Korean government in establishing and utilizing the cultural and creative industries as a vehicle of economic and political enhancement. The late 1990s marked a significant period when "the creative industries as a whole were designated as a key sector for the growth of the South Korean economy" (Choi and Maliangkay, 2015: 3). The total cultural sector budget has expanded greatly since the reign of the eighth President, Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003) who called himself the "President of Culture" (Shim, 2006). In his inaugural address, he emphasized that Korea needed to

> pour the nation's energy into globalizing Korean culture so as to keep expanding trade, investment, tourism and cultural exchanges in order to make [Korea's] way in the age of boundless competition, which will take place against backdrop of cooperation (Kim, 1997: 188).

Following this footstep, former minister of Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism Yu In Chon directed special attention to the Korean Wave for its being not only an asset for the export industry but also for the national branding of Korea and Korean culture (*Newsworld*, 2010). Kim Dae Jung's successor, President Roh Moo Hyun (2003-2008) did not depart from the venture of supporting culture-oriented policies by propagating a vision of the so-called "fifth strongest

cultural power country" with the message that "the 21st century will be the age of cultural in which cultural power becomes the economic power" (Lee, 2010: 128). The strong presence of state action and the expansion of Korean cultural industry as an explicit government affair can thus be seen as crucial evidence of cultural imperialism working.

To President Roh and many, culture goes hand in hand with economy and the phenomenon of the Korean Wave demonstrates how cultural imperialism develops as economic imperialism (Huang, 2009). Nevertheless, it is perhaps even more worthwhile to mention the cultural and political significance of using the Korean Wave as Korea's 'weapon' in the field of international cultural exchanges and foreign affairs. The *Munhwa Ilbo* (2001) highlighted a crucial observation that

> the Korean Wave is an event that "has changed Korean into a producer, exporter of culture away from the one-way consumer of invading mass cultures from the West, Japan and/or Hong Kong." In this way, it has "awaken us a pride that we are standing at cultural center of, at least, East Asia and that we are no longer a cultural periphery" (cited in Jeon and Yoon, 2005).

On the same topic, the *Financial Times* (2002) was even more straightforward in commenting that "the Korean creative industries are expanding into neighboring Asian market, realizing their own mode of cultural imperialism." Both reports not only indicate a new order where Korea 'has finally entered the Center' but also suggest a cultural invasion of Korean media into neighboring countries and henceforth once again call back the old framework of cultural imperialism. Jeon and Yoon went as far as asserting that

> Korean media produces and circulates nationalistic discourse regarding the Korean Wave, by accepting the logic of quasi-cultural imperialism thesis without any critique (2005: 77).

Cho (2003) also noticed a strong hegemonic and imperialist elements latent in Korea's desire to become the center and interpreted it as "not just a complex-laden nationalism but also a more aggressive cultural imperialism" (cited in Jeon and Yoon, 2005: 78). Significantly, in a

comprehensive literature review of how the Korean Wave is depicted in the media, Lee (2011) devoted one entire section to talk about the backlash of Korea's pursuit of cultural imperialism with key terms such as "cultural invasion," "not a bilateral relationship in terms of cultural exchange" and "one-way influx of Korean pop culture." If there is one thing in common in previous analyses of the Korean Wave and cultural imperialism, it is the contention that there exists a new cultural hegemony whereby Korea is now standing at the core of the media/cultural flow in Asia and the success of Korean Wave serves as an important driver of regional development.

Whether cautiously seeing the Korean Wave as merely another face of cultural imperialism or readily accepting the Korean Wave as Korea's overt mode of cultural imperialism, scholars have however only approached the subject from a theoretical standpoint and left out important issues regarding the socio-cultural significances that this new flow has on audiences of different cultural backgrounds who all fervently consume products of Korean popular culture. This asks us to revisit the line of research on effectivity and audience reception, turning our attention away from the policies and strategies of Korea in exporting media/cultural products through the dissemination of the Korean Wave. This thesis thus proposes a more in-depth investigation of the Korean Wave, now in its latest phase—the tidal wave of K-pop, with a specific focus on its fandom to examine the validity of the Korean Wave operating as cultural imperialism.

K-pop, K-pop culture and K-pop fandom

The term K-pop is an abbreviation of "Korean popular music" that appeared in the early 2000s when Korean popular music departed from earlier waves of Korean popular culture and started to

gauge enormous attention across East Asia, including Japan where the term first came into use (Kim, 2012: 8). What is noteworthy is that even though there is a prominent distinction between the dynamics of the K-pop phenomenon and that of the Korean Wave which will be discussed in subsequential parts, the K-pop craze is nonetheless in continuity with Hallyu for its success owes a great deal to the previously established popularity of Korean popular culture. Following the success of the first Wave which concentrated on the diffusion of Korean TV dramas, K-pop is the latest phase of Hallyu and the leading force of the second Wave, also called the Neo-Korean Wave, and has demonstrated much bigger success power as it has the potential to reach a much wider audience thanks to the rapid development of the Internet and social media. As widely observed, the K-pop tidal wave washed ashore in neighboring countries such as Japan, China, and Taiwan in the late 1990s; it gradually swept beyond Asian bounds to the Western lands of Europe and America. The term K-pop officially achieved global spotlight from the 2000s onward. In the year 2013 alone, K-pop concerts were held in a good number of major cities in the world such as Los Angeles, New York, Paris, London while K-pop flashmobs continue to take place in many metropolises as Singapore, Sao Paolo, Toronto, Dublin and Rome (Choi and Maliangkay, 2015: 2).

Considering the growing international interest in K-pop, certainly it cannot be simply regarded as Korean popular music. In a comprehensive study of the history of Korean popular music, Kim pointed out that K-pop is

> both a product of transnational practices and a global term referring comprehensively to not simply Korean popular music produced by the Korean music industry and consumed overseas, but to related cultural phenomenon as well (2012: 9).

Henceforth, from an analytical standpoint, K-pop has to be seen as a specific form of music and the term K-pop does not refer to all popular music originated from Korea. It is instead connected

to the idea of "idol music"—a sub-genre that represents a "teenager-oriented star entertainment industry closely related to television industry" (Ubonrat and Shin, 2007: 113) which is also one of the most commercially tailored cultural exports of Korea. Such genre possesses characteristics typical of "pop" such as attractive looks, dynamic choreography, fast and cheerful melodies that are catchy and easy to follow. On stage, the focal point of the performance is much less on the music itself, but on the powerful visual presentation which is combined of perfectly synchronized dance routines and identical, themed costumes. That being said, the most essential element that distinguishes K-pop from Korean popular music in its general sense is that it is performed by "idols"—groups or solo singers which a) are formed and operated by major entertainment agencies through their intricate training and star management systems, b) debut in the teens through early twenties and c) exclusively target the teen consumers who have occupied almost the entire Korean popular music market from the late 1990s onward (Kim, 2012: 85). Various groups such as H.O.T, Shinhwa, S.E.S, Fin.K.L. and Baby V.O.X set the standard style and appearance for K-pop idols as they made successful international debuts between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, which laid the premise for the rapid global expansion of K-pop afterwards. The wave of K-pop, led by idol groups, has emerged as the next epicenter for pop culture in Asia and is spearheading a brand new trend while expanding the borders of the Korean Wave well beyond Asia.

To account for the international success of K-pop, one cannot fail to mention the 'not so invisible hand' of the South Korean government that fosters the happy marriage between K-pop and other media/cultural industries. K-pop is overall not simply a cultural product that is deemed "South Korea's greatest export" (*TIME*, 7 March 2012); along with the promotion of the Korean Wave it has continuously been blessed with state power in the forms of capital investment, tax

benefits and support for overseas expansion (Choi and Maliangkay, 2015). Accordingly, various cultural policies have then been used to promote the Korean Wave in the global arena, many of which involve the showcase of K-pop idols in various domestic and international events commissioned by the South Korean government. Overtime, it is no longer uncommon to have K-pop idols enlisting as "promotional envoys" of major state affairs such as the 2010 G20 summit, 2012 Yeosu Expo and 2014 Incheon Asian Games (Ibid: 5). Recently, during her official state visit to China in June 2013, South Korea's incumbent President Park Geun Hye attended the Korea-China Friendship Concert and personally met and shook hands with some Korean performers backstage including famous idol groups Girls' Generation and Super Junior (Figure 1). The concert, with President Park's appearance, was clearly one of the strategic moves to stimulate cultural exchanges between Korea and China. However, President Park was certainly not the first to realize that the Korean Wave in general and K-pop in particular are presently "the only dependable antidote to the troubled post-Cold War politics in East Asia" (Ibid: 5-6). During July 2004, a sensitive time of political tension between Korean and Japan, first-generation K-pop idol BoA was also known to perform in front of Korea's former president Roh Moo-hyun and Japan's then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi at a formal dinner after Japan-Korea Summit Meeting. As these instances suggest, K-pop idols have given rise to an industry of "entertainment-diplomatic complex" (Ibid: 6). When being employed as a strategic cultural outreach, Korean popular culture, or K-pop as the focus of this thesis, has an enormous exploitative power in dealing with foreign relations and furthermore asserts a solid brand image that benefits the country both economically and politically. Its substantial impact on South Korea's foreign affairs as well as its use as a primary cultural export product of South Korea again stresses the significant participation of the Korean government and its collaboration with

private media and cultural industries that satisfy the necessary condition for K-pop to be qualified as cultural imperialism. While it is important to take into account Park Geun Hye government's agenda of economic democratization that turns to support small and medium-sized enterprises, the President is nonetheless mindful of the economic and political value of the Korean Wave and continues to boost creative and content industries under her cultural renaissance administrative policy (*Yonhap News*, 25 February 2013), most evidently in the government's vow to raise annual cultural budget to 2 percent of total government spending in 2017 (*Arirang*, 23 September 2014).

Figure 1: Backstage of the 2013 Korea-China Friendship Concert with President Park Geun Hye and idol groups Super Junior and SNSD. (Source: Korea.net)

The viral spread of K-pop has grown to unprecedented level in recent years and far surpassed prior phases of the Korean Wave in terms of intensity and geographical dispersion. Above all, a distinctive aspect of K-pop that makes it worthy of scholarly attention is the emergence of fan communities and the K-pop culture that they generate. It is undeniable that the prosperity and longevity of the K-pop industry have come to rely greatly on fans—the main

audience and most of all the massive, active consumers of K-pop and K-pop related products. But the K-pop fandom cannot be understood simply as that.

> Instead of being a buyer with no other power but purchasing end products, they are trailblazers, expanding the cultural breadth and depth of K-pop products. Their "cultural brickwork" brace global K-pop strongholds, as their labour of love furnishes the productive core with distributive momenta (Choi and Maliangkay, 2015: 10).

Furthermore, the fact that K-pop fandom is self-directed in the sense that it is governed by a community of people of different age, gender, ethnicity and nationality whose motivations, interests and expectations from K-pop may differ from one another shows that the formation and operation of K-pop fandom are somewhat autonomous from the entertainment and music industry that produces K-pop. As a matter of fact, fan activities and practices are not always relevant to music. In other words, K-pop fandom is "as much about fans themselves as about K-pop" (Ibid: 6) which complicates the nature of the popular culture created by K-pop international fan communities. As pointed out by Choi,

> [t]o distinguish K-pop from fan-made K-pop culture is to recognise the communicative and creative instincts of fans — the symbiosis between the culture industry and fandom, and also the bifocal imperative of scholarly research in popular cultures. Fan clubs of various kinds—local/national/transnational, on/offline, individual idol-based/band-based/genre-based, etc.—are front and centre of global K-pop culture (Ibid: 110).

Choi's statement together with above discussions calls attention to the need of investigating the reception of K-pop through a deep understanding of its fandom. K-pop has been the subject of observations, analyses and discussions; it has been praised and criticized; it appears on the news as well as on governmental documents; nonetheless studies on K-pop have not shed enough light on the multifactedness of K-pop fandom and the divergence that occurs within the fan communities. For a start, K-pop fans in Europe may like K-pop for different reasons from fans in Japan; or K-pop fandom in East Asia may be driven by different motives from those of K-pop fandom in, for example, North America. By all means, K-pop culture is made 'of the fan, for the

fan, and by the fan.' Thus, studying the consumptions of K-pop fan and its meaning to local culture would provide crucial referential points for discussions of the dynamics and impacts of K-pop and related phenomena. In this respect, this thesis aims to elicit the significance of K-pop culture being site-specific. That is, the reception of K-pop varies across diverse cultural milieus and that the meaning and impact of the K-pop wave are not the same for every fan or every locality—they are shaped by the cultural context that the fandom is located in.

As the Korean Wave and K-pop phenomenon have been going on for almost two decades, K-pop reception is not a subject area completely untouched. Nevertheless, much of scholarly attention has been paid to the reception of K-pop in East Asian countries, particularly Japan and China, and there is an inherent lack not only in quantity but also in depth in the studies of other K-pop fan communities across the world. Despite being the region where the popularity of K-pop is just as prominent, Southeast Asia is often looked at as one whole entity and only a small number of studies pertain to each individual country. Among the few, Ubonrat and Shin (2007) explores how Thai youths become consumers of K-pop and what role K-pop plays in their own cultural formation in changing socio-cultural contexts. Although concentrating on the Thai market, the article focused more on Thai-Korean cultural relations built upon K-pop music and related products and provided little insights on the reception of Thai fans per se. In a similar manner, the study of Jung and Shim (2014) on K-pop online fan practices in Indonesia had a broader aim of examining the consumption and distribution of K-pop in Indonesian as well as global context and only slightly touched upon the Indonesian youths who are the actors of the K-pop circulation. Studies that deal with non-Asian fandom are even more scarce, but some stand out as more closely zeroing on the psychology of local fandom and what K-pop culture signifies locally. Sung observed various participatory events organized by K-pop fans in Austria and

pinpointed that "the local situatedness of K-pop fan culture by arguing that local private and public sponsors and fans make the reception of K-pop different in each locality" (2013: 90). Equally interesting is the study of Nissim and Lyan that described how K-pop influences the life of fans in Israel and Palestine and how they turn to act as cultural mediators

> who create necessary bridges between the music industry and local consumers and thus play a decisive role in globalizing cultures (2013: 68).

The fascinating findings from these studies once again reinforce the importance of dissecting the site-specificity aspect of K-pop through a close examination of local K-pop fandom. There is a certain need for a continuity in researching the diverse reception of K-pop locally and cross-culturally to tackle many questions still left unanswered: How do we explain the cultural significance of fans' consumption of K-pop? How and why K-pop is appropriated into one's culture? And to what ends?

Vietnam as a Case Study

Vietnam is particularly an intriguing location to delve into the issues outlined above because of the following reasons. First and foremost, as Vietnam and Korea are two countries that are 'culturally not so proximate' despite relatively close geographical distant, the case of Vietnam deviates from existing discourses of K-pop and Korean Wave which often rely on the notion of cultural proximity. In a comparative analysis of four major recipient countries of Korean cultural products in Southeast Asian region, namely Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, Suh, Cho and Kwon (2006) pointed out that even though Korean cultural products entered Vietnam most successfully and the acceptance of the Korean Wave is the strongest here, the degree of proximity between Korea and Vietnam is not considerably high. In fact, it is still lower than that between Korea and Thailand. (It is significant to note that Ubonrat and Shin (2007)'s case study

of K-pop reception in Thailand departs from the premise that the popularity of K-pop in Thailand does not rely on the notion of cultural proximity either.) Complementing such findings, Nguyen (2014) identifies fundamental differences between the natures of Korean and Vietnamese cultures. In terms of social structure, Vietnam stands at intervals of horizontal (collectivistic democracy) and vertical (Confucianism-based hierarchy), while Korea develops as sharply vertical (social hierarchy). More notable among the differences is that of cultural typology, in which case Vietnamese culture derived from the paddy-rice economy whereas Korean culture is strongly associated with the nomadic-agricultural combination, which results in greatly different ways of thinking especially in the regard of cultural exchanges (Vietnam as sentimental and passive versus Korea as rational and active).

Furthermore, among the recipient countries of the Korean Wave, Vietnam is an interesting case in point. While it is rather skeptical to use cultural imperialism theory to explain the popularity of K-pop in China and Japan in which case cultural proximity and cultural affinity are clearly the decisive factors, for a country much less powerful and running behind Korea in every sector like Vietnam (Figure 2), the term 'peripheral' seems much more applicable. Compared to the capitalist Korea, Vietnam is a developing country whose agenda is primarily focused on economic development and where the issue of harmonizing the two tasks of modernization and preservation of cultural identities still remain unresolved. In this way, the relatively young, not systematically organized and indistinctive entertainment industry in Vietnam undoubtedly fails to satisfy the increasingly refined entertainment need of the young generations who now have more access and are more exposed to foreign influence especially after Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and opened its door to international businesses, officially integrating into the globalized market. As a result, Vietnamese culture,

particularly popular culture, is highly susceptible to the domination of foreign cultures. The Korean Wave would thus provide a pronounced example of how a one-way flow of foreign culture greatly influences the cultural consumption of young people in Vietnam. Arguably, Vietnam is the market where cultural imperialism is most likely to occur. Using the method of audience reception study to analyze the influences of K-pop in Vietnam, this thesis thus seeks to assess the applicability of the cultural imperialism framework in a new context of the global flow of media and cultural led by the Korean Wave.

	Korea	**Vietnam**
2010-2014 GDP per capita (US dollar)	27,970.5	2,052.3
Human Development Index	Very high human development Rank 15	Medium human development Rank 121
Global Competitiveness Index	Rank 26	Rank 68
Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index	Rank 29	Rank 75

Figure 2: A brief comparison of Korea and Vietnam. Data collected from latest reports of World Bank, UNDP and World Economic Forum.

K-pop reception, especially from the viewpoint of the audience, is thus worth investigating because it would shed light on the implications and impacts of the phenomenal dissemination of Korean popular culture. Furthermore, results yielded by such studies can add substantially to the understanding of current global flows of media and culture and to a reassessment of theories of cultural imperialism. This thesis explores how Vietnamese fans consume and react to the culture embedded in K-pop, as compared to their sentiments towards local popular culture.

Context and methodology

Vietnamese culture as seen nowadays stems from the long-standing traditional culture firmly grounded on a wet-rice civilization whereby people resided in close-knit agricultural

communities with primitive transportation and communication facilities. Throughout the history of fighting against foreign invaders, the most prominent traditional value of Vietnamese culture lies in nationalism and patriotism with a strong attachment to family ties and village-based culture. According to Do (2002), during the course of its pre-modern history, Vietnam had experienced three major cultural encounters that shaped the evolution of its traditional culture. The encounter with Chinese culture was the first challenge to the Vietnamese value system; yet Vietnamese nationalism began to take shape after a long period of resisting Han assimilation. The cultural encounter between Vietnam and Europe began in the 16th century when the port of Hoi An greeted trading vessels and later the Christianity missionaries who upon their arrival invented the Vietnamese latinized alphabet. This contact not only changed various age-old traits but also introduced new elements to Vietnamese culture especially in communication, clothing, music, and art—marking the dawn of cultural exchange between Vietnam and the West. However, after the country became unified under communist rule at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, all exchanges with Western countries were largely forbidden. The third cultural encounter is between anti-colonialism and socialism which resulted in the country's adoption of Marxism-Leninism. Such ideological formation thus guided an extensive transformation of Vietnamese traditional culture into the modern one that happened throughout the 20th century, with the turning point in 1986 when the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) launched the massive Reform (*Đổi Mới*) programme that marked the country's transition "from a mostly agricultural and closed society to an open one with a market economy" (Nguyen, 2015). The dissolution of the subsidy economy and the opening up to foreign and private investors signaled Vietnam's first steps towards modernization and globalization that brought profound changes to the Vietnamese society at large. After the first decade of reform, Vietnam officially recovered

from socio-economic crisis and gradually entered global economy and politics starting from 1996, later on launching itself into "the 'club' of rapidly globalizing developing countries" (Thoburn, 2004: 140) with the accession to the WTO in 2007. The integration into regional and world communities undoubtedly promises material prosperity to the country; nonetheless, it also brings another challenge to the preservation of Vietnam's traditional values. Talking to foreign press in 1998, the VCP declared that:

> Vietnam wants to develop an advanced culture with the population having a high standard of education and culture and a better community life while ensuring that the national traditional culture can absorb the essence of others' (*Vietnam News*, 1998).

The issue of how to retain its traditional culture and national characteristics (*bản sắc dân tộc*) with the question of "assimilation but not homogenization" (*hòa nhập nhưng không hòa tan*) still remains at the center of the official discourse of modernization and globalization in present-day Vietnam (*VOV*, 29 May 2015).

Economic liberalization and the open-door policy brought drastic changes not only to economic and political domains but also to the cultural life of Vietnamese people. Most significant is the government's loosened grip of its control over mass media, which resulted in a dramatic increase in the number as well as the content and quality of the print and television media after the reform (Thomas and Drummond, 2003). Even though Vietnamese publications and television broadcast are still subjected under the supervision of either the party, the state or the military, Vietnamese media has evolved "from a one-dimensional tool of party propaganda into a highly differentiated commodity" (Pettus, 2003: 22) that "aims to entertain as it regulates social norms" (Earl, 2003: 86). More media freedom provides multiple sources, both domestic and international, to a public whose demand for a diverse range of information has increased rapidly. The flood of illegal satellite dishes in the domestic market in the early 1990s also

allowed access to international channels in the U.S, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea (Thomas and Drummond, 2003: 4). Adding to greater media accessibility was the encroachment of the Internet into the country in 1997 followed by its boom in the early 2000s (Bui in Pertierra, 2007), which is perhaps the most startling change to the Vietnamese public culture in general and Vietnamese youth culture in particular.

One of the most drastic social transformations in post-reform Vietnam is the emergence of the urban middle class whose interests center on consumption, leisure and entertainment (Earl, 2013: 85). Constituting a significant part of this population is the urban middle class youth, a generation born in peacetime that grows alienated from the communist and collectivist ideals that their grandparents and parents hold dear. By studying post-totalitarian media, Nguyen pointed out the momentous shift in the conceptualization and representation of Vietnamese teenage youth from "an ideologically grounded youth under the VCP to market-oriented youth" (2015:5) which led to the ultimate formation of *teen Viet* (Vietnamese teenagers) as an entirely new social group accompanied by a distinct *teen culture* characterized as "marketized, consumption-based and individualistic" (Ibid:11). The dynamics of this shift are captured in the ways Vietnamese media constantly shapes and is shaped by the entertainment demand of the young people. Nguyen came to the important conclusion that

> [w]hereas the VCP deliberately and successfully set forth the ideologies that shaped youth experiences and behaviors between 1975 and 1986, power over constituting the youth experience, now understood as teen culture, has since shifted to the globalized media and its corporate sponsors (Ibid: 17).

In this way, the import of a market economy and decreased government control over the media gave rise to a youth culture that is fundamentally different from that of the years prior to the Reform era. Most remarkably, the advent of globalization has also ushered in "the notion and practice of pop culture with icons and cultural products" (Thomas and Drummond, 2003: 6) that

are fervently embraced by Vietnamese youths. From the late 1990s, as they listen to Western music, watch Hong Kong medieval dramas, devout Korean and Japanese soap operas and so on, youth's attraction to foreign celebrities and pop icons has grown significantly.

The Korean Wave entered Vietnam precisely at this moment of profound transformations in the life experiences of Vietnamese youths. It first enjoyed its success in Vietnam with the popularity of Korean TV dramas in the 1990s; but it was not until the next decades that the Korean Wave truly became a cultural phenomenon in Vietnam with the emergence of the K-pop craze. According to the most recent report on the Korean Wave status in Vietnam conducted by Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), K-pop and Korean TV shows are reckoned to be the most influential contents in Vietnam. Specifically, K-pop is most popular among Vietnamese aged from 15 to 25; statistics from Facebook fansites show that the number of K-pop fans in Vietnam even far exceeds the number of fans in Korea (Big Bang fans twice as big and T-ara five times as big) (KOTRA, 2015). What is interesting is that the existence of K-pop in Vietnam is overwhelmingly fan-driven. Unlike other markets where K-pop is disseminated through a network of promoters and agents, the popularity of K-pop in Vietnam started purely from the will of Vietnamese young consumers and their ability to access cultural content through social media. Long before K-pop entered Vietnam through official channels, K-pop fandom in Vietnam had already existed in small communities as dedicated fans formed fanclubs, organized informal, small-scale participatory events and engaged in online activities such as discussing about their idols, writing fan fiction and translating news and videos. The year of 2006 saw the beginning of a dramatic change in the K-pop scene in Vietnam as K-pop idols Bi Rain, Chae Yeon and Jewelry came to Vietnam for the first time in history to perform in a customer-tributary musical event organized by a telecommunication company in Vietnam. After

the first trigger, Vietnamese fans began to have more chances to breathe the same air with their idols. The year of 2012 witnessed the peak of K-pop idols' "invasion" into the Vietnamese market as there were 6 musical events in this year alone with the participation of various K-pop artists (*K-pop Festival 2012* with 13 singers and bands, *SoundFest* with Big Bang, *MTV Exit* with Super Junior, *Kim Jae Joong Exclusive Fanmeeting in Vietnam*, *M.O.A. Live in Vietnam* with 6 singers and bands and *Music Bank in Vietnam* with 7). Undoubtedly, Vietnamese K-pop fandom grows not only in terms of number but also in the level of affection they develop towards Korean idol singers. K-pop in Vietnam thus evolved from a subculture which deserved little attention to a booming phenomenon of what local media terms as "idol culture" with much more diverse activities such as concerts, flashmobs, cover-dance competition and singing auditions. What is even more remarkable that Vietnamese popular music, or V-pop, also rises as an imitation of the K-pop model, even as literal as copying the style of K-pop idols and plagiarizing K-pop songs, especially in the period of 2014 and 2015.

The overwhelming reception of Vietnamese K-pop fans has henceforth provoked a widespread concern with the uncontrollable fanaticalness of K-pop idols that echoes a preoccupation with the destructive effects of cultural imperialism. The consecutive appearances of K-pop idols in the year 2012 not only raised the alarm about a massive invasion of the Vietnamese music market, they were also accompanied by the unforeseen emergence of the so-called phenomenon of *fan cuồng K-pop* that can possibly be considered as an effect of the K-pop invasion. *Cuồng*, or fanatical, derives from the Chinese character 狂 (*kuáng*), an adjective that describes irrational, out-of-control obsession towards a particular thing. With such negative implications, describing all K-pop fans in Vietnam as fanatical certainly runs the risk of over-generalization; however, the ubiquitous use of the term, by both Vietnamese people and the

public media, gives rise to a specific local discourse of K-pop reception that is closely associated with the concern on the penetration of K-pop into Vietnamese popular culture.

It is difficult to track the origin of the term; nonetheless it became a highly topical issue starting from 2012 (the same year Psy's hit *Gangnam Style* became viral worldwide) when the media (including major online newspapers such as *VnExpress, Vietnamnet, Dan Tri, VOV, Kenh14*, etc.) began using the term *fan cuồng* excessively to describe local K-pop fans and their fanatical reactions towards the arrivals of the favorite K-pop idols. In the beginning, the fanaticalness only went as far as crowding the airport and showing overly enthusiastic welcome to Korean idol singers and bands. To public dismay, the so-called K-pop fans caused such a chaotic scene at the airport that had never happened before in Vietnam. Hundreds of Vietnamese youngsters screamed at the top of their lungs, hustled through the crowd to get a better glimpse of their *oppas* and *unnies* and later on hugged each other while shedding tears of happiness. Most prominently, a photograph of a group of young boys squirming in utmost joy when T-ara visited Vietnam in November 2012 (Figure 3) quickly got circulated on the Internet and sparked controversial debates on the shocking behaviors of the young people. Vietnam's famous poet, Do Trung Quan, even wrote a short poem that was especially dedicated to these *fan cuồng K-pop:*

> There are times when we men shed tears
> When we look at the bodies of our civilians, when we hold our countrymen in our arms
> Even rocks will sob
> But children
> We never shed tears
> For nonsense things
> We never shiver at night, scream at the airport to welcome random strangers that our parents don't even know where we are. . . . [my translation] (*VnExpress*, 29 November 2012)

The poem shared the same sentiment with many people who mostly concerned about the possibility of fanaticalness going overboard. Nonetheless, there were others, particularly K-pop

fans, who accused the writer of berating K-pop fans' genuine feelings by imposing a one-sided view on their ways of expressing admiration. Controversies that center on the discourse of *fan cuồng K-pop* only seem to accelerate as more K-pop idols visit Vietnam. The voicing of fanaticalness of Vietnamese fans was no longer confined in the narrow space of the airport arrival hall—camping overnight in front of the hotels that their idols stayed in, violating traffic laws to chase after their idols' car or venting on social media about how their parents stand in the way between them and their idols and so on are among the "demeritorious" behaviors of K-pop fans in Vietnam (*VnExpress*, 26 March 2014). One must not fail to mention the most prominent incident of "kissing the idol's seat" that happened when Bi Rain performed in a cultural exchange program between Korean and Vietnamese army in March 2012. According to a staff who posted on his Facebook, some young girls found out the seat number of Bi Rain and went into the venue early to sniff and kiss the particular seat (*Báo Lao Động*, 2 January 2013). The story was quickly spread, stirring numerous heated discussions on the Internet and eventually became one of the most classic anecdotes of *fan cuồng K-pop* that still gets mentioned nowadays when someone talks about the idol culture of Vietnamese youngsters.

Figure 3: Reactions of Vietnamese fanboys when T-ara visited Vietnam in 2012. (Source: ione.vnexpress.net)

The topicality of such fanatical behaviors has reached the national level when the Ministry of Education brought this issue into the national university's entrance exam of the same year. The three-point (out of ten) question that appeared on the official Literature exam was: Admiration for an idol is a beautiful trait of culture, but blind infatuation would be a disaster (*Ngưỡng mộ thần tượng là nét đẹp văn hóa, nhưng mê muội thần tượng sẽ là một thảm họa*). Many examiners were thrilled to respond to the question; but there were quite a few others who were definitely not happy. Immediately after the exam ended, a huge movement of angry opposition was initiated by (presumably) K-pop fans who felt offended that their love for K-pop idols became the target of criticism. Interestingly, the exam question mentioned nothing about K-pop or Korea; nonetheless, these examiners took it so personal that they even created a Facebook group to vent out their anger towards the government. As shared on this Facebook group, many of them chose to boycott the exam by either skipping the question or turning in a blank answer sheet (which could mean failing the overall exam) because they did not want to "betray [their] idols" (*Thanh Nien Daily*, 20 July 2012).

The concern regarding the impact of K-pop culture and fanatical idol worship on Vietnamese youths is also acknowledged by the exporter of Korean popular culture. KOTRA's 2015 report stated:

> The clear economic benefit of the Korean wave is that it promotes the image of Korea to locals by increasing their interests in Korean cultures. The Vietnamese preference to Korean products and services creates a favorable condition of the marketing and promotion of Korean products in Vietnam. However, it is better to be careful as the contents of the Korean wave penetrate deeply into many parts of the Vietnamese society, especially among teenagers, and create some negative influence in various aspects of the Vietnamese society.

Judging from this outset, the fact that the discourse of *fan cuồng K-pop* and their fanatical behaviors has seemingly risen to dominate other discourses surrounding K-pop and K-pop

culture in Vietnam brings to the foreground evidences of cultural imperialism working in the reception of K-pop in Vietnam.

In order to have a more comprehensive view of the applicability of the cultural imperialism framework as well as to understand the consumption of K-pop and its effects on local popular culture, I conducted an online research to collect a varied sample of responses to the dissemination of K-pop in Vietnam. I started out by performing a general keyword search with the term *fan cuồng K-pop* on the Internet so as to gain a substantial understanding of the Vietnamese audience and other agencies involved in the reception of K-pop. Afterwards, I engaged in a more systematic study to collect data from two dimensions: firstly, from Vietnamese online media, such as official news portals and publications; secondly and most primarily, from Vietnamese K-pop online fan communities such as Facebook groups, official fansites, message boards and fanblogs (see Appendix for a comprehensive list). I largely focused on the discussion board of the 360kpop forum as it is the longest standing online community of Vietnamese K-pop fans (established in 2006) and consists of the largest active fan population (403,848 members as of October 2015). Data was then hand-coded, systemized and thematized in order to discover prominent and recurring themes/narratives deemed relevant to the research. Data to be presented as examples was translated from Vietnamese to English.

Even though Vietnamese youths have already consumed various products of foreign cultures before the Korean Wave, there existed no other cultural phenomenon equal to the degree of fanaticalness of the K-pop craze, or at least in the public discourse. There have always been complaints about the Westernized and individualistic lifestyles of the youths, yet raging discussions of youth's demeanor only truly broke out at the advent of *fan cuồng K-pop*. To answer why, first we should not fail to take into account the timing of the K-pop wave: being a

latecomer it has greatly benefited from the explosion of Internet and social media usage in Vietnam. Furthermore, the strategic promotion of the Korean Wave and its idol culture especially in Asian markets ensures much higher exposure, with the crucial fact that in the years of 2000s more Korean idols visit Vietnam than celebrities from other countries combined. From another perspective, the fanaticalness of Vietnamese K-pop fans might as well be a result of the crowd effect; or there is also a possibility of *fan cuồng K-pop* being an abuse of the media—targeting a subgroup to generalize to the entire K-pop fan population. To compare the influence of K-pop and other foreign popular cultures in Vietnam requires a much wider research, thus the following analysis only serves as exploratory and suggestive of trends and problems to offer a valuable reference point for future research orientations. Taking the discourse of *fan cuồng K-pop* as departure point, this thesis draws on narratives collected in the online research to provide insights to the particular experiences of Vietnamese K-pop fans constituted by their interpretative formations and culturally constructed subjectivities as a result of actively consuming, internalizing and negotiating the K-pop/idol culture that they inhabit.

Self-reflexivity and domination of new meanings

There is certainly no exhaustive criterion to define who is fanatical and who is not. However, judging from a number of cases that the media has singled out to portray the image of a *fan cuồng K-pop*, we can draw a common behavioral pattern that these fans all share: they are young people who hold a deep infatuation with one (or possibly many) K-pop idol(s) and choose to express it in such unconventional ways that would often be considered as breaking traditional norms. Screaming and crying out loud in public, causing a chaotic scene on the street, overtly worshipping a figure who is not a war hero or the likes and above all showing disrespect to 'the

adults,' namely parents and the authority, in defending such figures are typical examples of the types of public manner and individual conduct that are likely to be frowned upon in a collectivist and hierarchical society like Vietnam. If we turn to look at the online writings of these K-pop fans, those so-called fanatical behaviors may have emerged and even accelerated as the result of a conflict between self-interest and the freedom to express it on the one hand and the importance of family ties and the respects for elders that might clash with their choice of individualized lifestyle on the other.

> Mom dad who do you think you are? How do you dare to talk about my oppa? You think giving me food every day and paying my tuition fee are everything? I'm sorry, no matter how hard it is for you to raise me it never equals 1/100 of my oppa. . . you're nothing to me, as soon as I graduate from college, I will find a job and earn money to go to Korea immediately. Vietnamese guys are old and ugly, I don't want to see their faces. Vietnam is full of sick people, oppa is the best! Oppa oppa oppa oppa oppa I love you!![1]

> . . . . They are my idols, so what!? They have names, they are not dogs, not psychos. They are educated, not stupid whores. . . . You don't have the right to ridicule them like that. If you don't want me to go [to their concert] then just say so in the first place. . . . "If you like those crazy guys then go, tomorrow I will give you 5 million and you can just go with whoever you like." Yes, that's the best mom, I'll go as you say. If it weren't for them I wouldn't be like this. . . .[2]

> Who the hell you are to force me to study, you just give births to me and that's all, how dare you tear apart my T-ara poster, stupid, do you know how precious it is? Go eat shit, if [T-ara] comes to Vietnam this year and you don't let me go, you watch out, do you know how important [T-ara] is to me, you stupid dogs. . . .[3]

The above examples of angry statements show implications of internal unrest experienced by K-pop fans who come to realize the love for their idols is not understood and appreciated the same way by their parents, and in general, the society. What is also significant is how K-pop and the

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[1] https://www.facebook.com/anti.fan.kpop/photos/pb.145306822317471.-2207520000.1444226963./460927304088753/?type=3&theater

[2] https://www.facebook.com/anti.fan.kpop/photos/pb.145306822317471.-2207520000.1444226976./401762410005243/?type=3&theater

[3] https://www.facebook.com/anti.fan.kpop/photos/a.146331915548295.1073741828.145306822317471/378317889016362/?type=3&theater

presence of K-pop idols mean a certain thing to each and every fan. Oftentimes, new meanings and values would arise from their consumption of K-pop and become contested as the fans start to make sense of their everyday lives. It seems obvious that upon its arrival K-pop has not only introduced a new type of music and entertainment but also it is the K-pop idols who carry with them embedded values of Korean popular culture that herald new standards and concepts for beauty, fashion and most significantly, ways of life. As Vietnamese become exposed to K-pop, these newly generated meanings will then either be negotiated and submerged or rise to dominance and construct the fans' subjectivities accordingly. Comparison is inevitable: K-pop provides the reference point from which Vietnam fans regard as "prettier," "flawless skin," "such beautiful hairstyles," "much more galant," etc. than Vietnamese counterparts. In some extreme cases, young fans consider their *oppas* and *unnies* as "the best," "number one in [their] hearts" and "more than anything else in the world" while it is not rare to find others who go as far as thinking K-pop idols "are the sunlight that awakens and supports us" and that "[they were] born to belong to them [the idols] and would die the same way."

Following this thread of reception, it is then not surprising when many Vietnamese fans see K-pop idols as their role models or become a fan of someone because "they have many precious traits to admire and learn from." It is precisely this distinguished feature that enables K-pop to have a much greater impact on Vietnamese young people than Korean dramas: K-pop offers real-life stories of real-life personas that open a whole new world of possibilities from which fans can identify with, make meanings of and connect to their own social experience. The fascination for K-pop that Vietnamese fans share thus lies mainly in the appeal of the K-pop idols, not only as music performers but also as the types of people that they would yearn to become.

> Being a fan of Suju [short for Super Junior] for 7 years, I have learned a lot from them. Not just from a single member but from all of the members. Without Suju, I wouldn't be who I am today. I'm stronger and have more confidence from myself, I dare to do what I want and I dare to assert my individuality. I dare to face the things that I was before scared of. More than anything, I love the people around me and I know how to love my own self.[4]

> I am a VIP [name of Big Bang's fanclub] and I'm very proud of being a VIP. It's not just us who live for Big Bang but oppas are also striving every minute with their music to live with us. . . . Especially GDragon oppa (whom I love the most), I learn from him the will to move forward, to confront, to challenge, to act, to love, to do what I want. . . . When oppa cries for fans I feel even more wonderful because besides my family and my mom there's only GDragon oppa who sheds such genuine tears for me and VIPs in general. . . .[5]

As these instances suggest, K-pop functions as a site for Vietnamese fans to reflect on the things that their idols do and to explore the new possibilities for the things that they can do in their own lives. The fact that they choose to learn from K-pop idols rather anyone else indicates that there must be a hegemonic formation of dominant meanings and values that triggers Vietnamese fans' capacity to re-evaluate and project themselves imaginatively as individuals in the society that they are living in. This process of self-reflexivity would not be made possible without the successful promotion of K-pop that allows Vietnamese fans to have access to this new flow of culture. However, looking at it from the other way around, it is through this voluntary embracing of a foreign culture and putting it in perspective with the fans' own culture that we find traces of cultural imperialism. In this way, cultural imperialism cannot simply be understood as the direct effect of the promotion of Korean popular culture, rather it is manifested in the reflexive awareness of the Vietnamese young people. In other words, the active audience can as well turn into the agency that stimulates the domination of foreign cultural influences.

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[4] http://forum.360kpop.com/threads/disc-ban-co-hoc-duoc-gi-tu-than-tuong-cua-minh.207407/#.VhZmIOyqqkq

[5] Ibid.

Pleasure-seeking and self-discovery

Being a well-crafted product of the entertainment industry in collaboration with the television industry, K-pop has an enormous appeal for global audiences because it offers a new experience of popular culture that works to satisfy the increasingly refined entertainment demands of especially the middle-class youths living in transitional societies. Vietnam is no exception: K-pop and its related cultural products have filled a niche in Vietnam's developing entertainment market where local productions largely fail to respond to the changing socio-economic status of urban youths and their constant search for new excitement that would liven up a somewhat colorless scene of local youth culture. Converted into a fan of K-pop or not, a great number of Vietnamese youngsters are drawn to actively consume K-pop for the appeal of high-quality pop music and well-designed music videos that feature attractive, clean-cut performers. There are certainly people who are rather critical of this new genre of music being focused too much on the visual aspects; notwithstanding that, many of them do admit that K-pop is their 'guilty pleasure' as "it is still very satisfying to watch beautiful people dancing and singing to catchy music." In modern time when standard of living and quality of life have been improved significantly, leisure has also become more important to the everyday life of the Vietnamese middle class and K-pop arrived just in time to provide a new mode of entertainment through which the young can seek pleasure and relaxation. No matter what kind of satisfaction they look for, K-pop appeals to Vietnamese audiences first and foremost because it caters to their satisfaction of needs.

One of the shortcomings of the cultural imperialism thesis that critics have pointed out is that as an explanatory tool for understanding the phenomenon of the Korean Wave "it is blind to the very elements of pleasure and popularity at the party of Wave viewers/consumers" (Jeon and Yoon, 2005: 80). With the case of K-pop in Vietnam, I would like to argue otherwise. While

there is no denying that pleasure is one of the essential reasons why Vietnamese young generations enjoy K-pop, how a pleasure-seeking activity can escalate to such an overwhelming degree of fanaticalness demonstrates that K-pop is something far beyond a mindless entertainment to Vietnamese fans. The mechanisms underlying this construction of pleasure yield further implications for the constitution and re-constitution of the fans' subjectivities and how active engagements with K-pop idol culture would remarkably influence their reception and consumption of not only K-pop but also other flows of foreign cultures already available at hand. It is perhaps most evidently reflected in the discussion of "what your life would be like without K-pop and K-pop idols" which attracted numerous responses from Vietnamese fans.

> Actually before I used to like C-pop, also I only listened to music during my free time, I don't think about it all the time. But then my life was too boring. Like a very disciplined and rigid student, nothing like a real teenager.
> But then after that, since I came to like Big Bang, my life totally changed.
> I listen to music and I feel good, I feel hyper even.
> I listen to music when I'm not happy and that helps me release stress, because I have to study very hard at school and my parents put a huge pressure on me to maintain my grades.
> And then I joined Big Bang fanclub, I can play, talk to people, I get to know a lot more friends. Ever since I like Big Bang, thanks to them I like many other bands as well.
> I have more emotions, I don't feel as dispirited and stressed as before.
> Until now, K-pop is like something inseparable from my life.[6]

> Without K-pop, I still like US-UK [music]!!
> Actually the songs of Westlife, Backstreet Boys, Tokio Hotel, Britney Spears... they really touch people's heart.
> I don't get bored of it after so many years.
> And K-pop, there are songs that you can listen to forever
> Loving K-pop makes people more passionate, we will have something in life that we care about!
> But to me if there was no K-pop, my life would've been the same, only more quiet![7]

[6] http://forum.360kpop.com/threads/disc-neu-khong-co-kpop-cung-nhu-than-tuong-kpop-cua-ban-cuoc-song-se-nhu-the-nao.213110/page-3
[7] http://forum.360kpop.com/threads/disc-neu-khong-co-kpop-cung-nhu-than-tuong-kpop-cua-ban-cuoc-song-se-nhu-the-nao.213110/page-6

> If I hadn't known about K-pop then I would've liked V-pop . . . one important thing is that I would never mature in such a boring life. Ever since I knew about K-pop, about Super Junior and other bands, I've learned so many things. . . .
> The excited feeling when a band debuts
> The feeling when you have to wait for the comeback of someone and you're worried if your idol can win.
> Now I have so many kinds of emotion in me. . . .
> K-pop is like a living organism of my life and the goal for me to strive towards my career path.[8]

These recurring narratives form an important discourse strand that displays another major thread of reception among Vietnamese fans. K-pop has become integrated into their lives, serving its therapeutic function of tackling their boredom and evoking different kinds of emotionality that enrich their daily experience. A great deal of the fans' gratification comes from their participation in fanclubs and enlivened engagement in fan activities which allow them to re-discover themselves and explore the possibilities of doing the things that they would never think they are capable of. Pleasure thus should not be conceived of simply as the automatic and natural result of the satisfying visual and musical experiences but rather as the effect of a certain productivity of K-pop participatory culture. As a virtual world created and governed by fans who share common interests and subjects of passion, K-pop fandom is a unique channel through which these young Vietnamese communicate and convey their dispositions, (dis)likings and aspirations, "not just reflective of the actual, present self but also formative of the desired, future self" (Choi and Maliangkay, 2015: 7).

Another important aspect in the construction of pleasure of K-pop fans is the transition from the pleasure of "satisfying my own needs" to the pleasure of "satisfying my idols' needs" that occurs at the point of their enlistment into a particular K-pop fandom. Membership of a fanclub is "granted to and maintained by only those demonstrating a sufficient level of

[8] http://forum.360kpop.com/threads/disc-neu-khong-co-kpop-cung-nhu-than-tuong-kpop-cua-ban-cuoc-song-se-nhu-the-nao.213110/page-10

enthusiasm" (Choi and Maliangkay, 2015: 8) towards the idol. Thus, being a "fangirl" or "fanboy" often entails a kind of shared mentality that "we need to show our love to our idols by supporting them." Mental support is, certainly, not enough. With either explicit or implicit "reminders" from their idols that they exist for the fans and because of the fans, fans are increasingly driven to engage in much larger support projects such as buying physical albums as well as online singles so that their idols can earn "No. 1" trophies, going to concerts and purchasing concert goods and sending (often expensive) presents to the idols. Absent in none of those activities, Vietnamese fans are even known for buying stars as a token of love for Lee Teuk from Super Junior, Jessica from Girls' Generation and Kris from EXO. Besides, even though Vietnamese fans have to go through a complicated process of ordering and delivery from overseas to purchase K-pop products and their efforts are often left unnoticed by the idols, it is still common to come across those who are willing to buy the idols' products by all means for the reason that "a little would go a long way and I just want to support them as much as I can because I'm their fan." The direct outcome of such supports is heightened popularity for the idols, but rather more immediately it is the fact that more money is flying into their pockets.

Furthermore, Vietnamese fans have not only created an emancipatory cultural space where their subjectivities are constituted and re-constituted, K-pop fandom has also become the very arena of contestation and mediation between K-pop and other popular cultural flows in Vietnam. Manga, anime, American music, British music, C-pop (Chinese pop music), and even the newly born V-pop (Vietnamese pop music), just to name a few, are examples of available cultural contents that may compete with K-pop's influence. Thereupon, it is highly significant how the accounts of Vietnamese fans pinpoint a cognitive process of filtering through a selection of pleasure-seeking activities which results in a preference towards K-pop. Without K-pop, there

are still other sources of entertainment that they can turn to, but the crucial point lies in the fact that K-pop did enter the domain of their popular culture experience and demonstrates a dominating capacity to influence the changing lives of Vietnamese youths. The preferential tendency of Vietnamese young audiences signifies a key cultural dynamic of the K-pop wave—K-pop has the effect of countering whichever dominant systems of mass cultural production in Vietnam. This also introduces a new analytical lens through which we may reconsider the active audience model as K-pop fans do things out of "pleasure" and without being forced to but at the same time without being cognizant of the influences on their thinking and behaviors.

Anti K-pop or anti K-pop fans?

With the phenomenon of *fan cuồng K-pop,* the K-pop wave undeniably provoked a greater backlash than ever before, as visibly depicted in Vietnamese online media's news coverage. The dissemination of K-pop in the local market made possible by the continuous visits of K-pop idols since the year 2006, with the massive arrivals in 2012 marking as the important transitional point of K-pop development in Vietnam, is constantly branded under two major themes of "cultural invasion" (*xâm thực văn hóa*) and "market attack and occupation" (*đánh chiếm thị trường*). Such outcries against Korea in the pursuit of cultural and economic expansion elicit claims of cultural imperialism and express the anxiety of having Vietnamese popular culture, with first and foremost Vietnamese music, falling under the domination of Korean counterparts.

The robust development of K-pop in Vietnam is the inevitable outcome of a long promotion process effectively executed by Korea during the last two decades. The K-pop wave nonetheless carries many positive aspects: Vietnamese fans are provided with more opportunities to meet their idols whom they could only admire through the screen; the diversity in style and

sound of K-pop satisfies the entertainment demands of Vietnamese young audience whereas Vietnamese local musicians and artists also get to learn from the professional working and performing styles of Korean colleagues. As a matter of fact, such desirable impacts were soon to get buried in the news. While the grand deployment of K-pop idols into Vietnam in 2012 gauged attention because it invoked a widespread concern on the high possibility of K-pop "invading" the Vietnamese music market, the majority of later media coverage of K-pop in Vietnam put a greater emphasis on building multiple narrative frames that point towards how the proliferation of K-pop is assembled in such a distorted way through the fanatical responses of Vietnamese youths, thus giving rise to the discourse of *fan cuồng K-pop.* Main discontentment presented in online news articles was then directed towards the fanatical responses of Vietnamese K-pop fans which are deemed as breaking social norms and violating Vietnamese "fine traditions and values" (*thuần phong mỹ tục*). As previously mentioned, bursting into tears when seeing K-pop idols, kissing the chair that the idol once sat in, or defying parents if they are not allowed to attend K-pop concerts are, among others, just a few commonly featured examples of Vietnamese fans' public display of affection that are often labeled as "going overboard." If we look back to the controversial examination question (Admiration for an idol is a beautiful trait of culture, but blind infatuation would be a disaster), what defines "blind infatuation" is eventually the formula of "admiration" plus "dissidence" and "deviance."

K-pop fans and their fanaticalness thus became the target of criticism, but precisely criticism by whom? It is significant to point out the tendency of Vietnamese online media to draw on accounts of the adults—scholars, government officials, experts, celebrities, and most particularly, parents, when scrutinizing the young Vietnamese's infatuation with K-pop. Featured on VnExpress, a mother whose daughter is a *fan cuồng K-pop* addressed her worries about "the

severe damage caused by adolescents' misguided idolization" to the minister of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. She wrote:

> Recently, a Korean girl-group named 2NE1 came to Hanoi to perform. My daughter pleaded with me so many times to get her a ticket. As the day came near, she became more stubborn and said that if she can't go to the concert she will not go to school anymore. . . . After several days, I finally managed to buy a ticket for my daughter. I was really curious so I went there to see what the show was like.
>
> I was so disappointed and felt sorry for my daughter and other kids. I met one girl who was there by herself. To get in she had to buy her ticket from the black market at the price of 2.5 million dong [around 120 US dollar]. But that's not a particular case. Another girl in 8th grade from Thai Binh went to Hanoi alone with a hand-drawn picture, hoping that they would let her in.
>
> . . . To be fair, except for appearance and nice choreography, those girls from Korea are just mediocre. That disappointed me a lot. A lot of kids threatened their parents to commit suicide just to see singers like this? I asked many of those who waited outside why they idolize Korean singers that much. They all replied because they like to. "If I can travel to Korea for once I will die with no regrets. To me Korea is a heaven. . . ." (VnExpress, 12 March 2012).

The mother here may as well be a fictional character, yet her sentiments nonetheless resonate with the kind of attitude that the media wants to represent. By tapping into the authority of the adult figure as the source of criticism, the coverage of K-pop thus portrays a well-intentioned gaze of the older generation towards the young one. What sets them apart is the inability of the former to understand the latter, which is very possibly the main reason behind the criticism of *fan cuồng K-pop*. What the above account of the mother essentially points to is the fact that she finds it difficult to comprehend why her daughter and peers can be so fanatical over singers whom she only considers as "mediocre" and would take such extreme measures just to get a glimpse of them. The poem by Do Trung Quan connotes the same problem, as he compared the tears of sacred lament of his generation to the tears of the K-pop fans which he sees as "for nonsense things." This generation gap in understanding the appeal of K-pop and appreciation of

its values provides conditions for the discursive formation of *fan cuồng K-pop* in the analysis of K-pop reception in Vietnam. More significantly, what it further implies is that increased exposure to K-pop triggers not only the self-reflexivity of Vietnamese youngsters but also the collective reflexivity of the public that Vietnamese online media sought to represent. The critical standpoint of the media towards K-pop may have emerged out of this reflexive awareness in the same manner that the youth's fanaticalness has arisen.

The public/media discourse of *fan cuồng K-pop* takes on a new level when it is juxtaposed with the discourse of nationalism. Even though the negative cries against K-pop and its impacts on Vietnamese youths have never escalated to widespread anti-Hallyu movements like in the case of Japan and China, there have been a number of heated "Internet wars" between K-pop fans and the antis in the name of nationalism. What is extractable from sentiments shared by people like the mother and poet Do Trung Quan is a sense of "national pride" and how they feel "it gets hurt" because the young, future generation of the country is idolizing and chasing after values and meanings of a foreign nation. The topic intensified in 2013 after celebrity Ngoc Trinh posted a status on her private Facebook explicitly criticizing K-pop fans.

> . . . to be honest, seeing those boys hug each other and cry hysterically and those girls sob when seeing the K-pop people, it's such a national disgrace. . . . All in all, in life you have to keep face. Don't bring shame to yourself and to your country just because of nonsense things (*Giáo dục Việt Nam*, 19 July 2013).

Despite having to withstand a throng of attack comments from fervent K-pop fans, Ngoc Trinh only put forward an antecedent argument. In one episode of the weekly documentary show "The Cultural Story" (*Câu chuyện văn hóa*) aired on Vietnamese national television (channel VTV1), a few famous figures were interviewed about the phenomenon of *fan cuồng K-pop*. Most remarkably, diva singer Thanh Lam commented:

> They [Vietnamese youths] don't listen to Vietnamese music anymore. They listen to Thai music, Chinese music, Korean music. What I worry the most is that they are losing the national characteristics (Vietnam Television, 9 June 2012).

In response, K-pop fans defended themselves on the basis that personal liking and national pride are two completely separate things and that in this peaceful era the adults should not cling too much to the glorified past and impose it on the modern mindset of the young generations (*VnExpress*, 29 November 2012). Interestingly, afterwards they started to make individual as well as collective efforts, either through online writings or community campaigns, to reinstate that "we are K-pop fans but we still love Vietnam very much."

Last but not least, I should not fail to bring up another heated debate between K-pop fans and soccer fans in Vietnam. Tension occurred in 2013 when the media gave prominence to a fan of Arsenal who ran for 5 kilometers to chase after the bus carrying the team when they visited Vietnam. The young man, nicknamed "Running man," even appeared on international news and was considered to have inspired a lot of people, including the players of the soccer team themselves (*MailOnline*, 16 July 2013). The issue in question was, why such a *fan cuồng* of soccer was praised but *fan cuồng* of K-pop were criticized. *VnExpress* pointed out that what made the "Running man" stand out was the fact that he was warmly welcomed by the Arsenal players to get on the bus for pictures and photographs. Later on he was even invited to go to the U.K. to watch a match of the team. Such gestures from Arsenal, or his idol, made him known to and appreciated by the public. In comparison, the K-pop idols appear to act quite nonchalant to their Vietnamese K-pop fans who cried and screamed upon their appearance (*VnExpress*, 19 July 2013). This signifies how K-pop is not a bilateral relationship in terms of cultural exchange, which further reinforces concern about the one-way flow of media and culture from the sending

nation to the receiving one. After all, "do Koreans idolize, or even know about Vietnamese artists, as much as we do to theirs?" (Vietnam Television, 9 June 2012)

In this way, discontentment and cautious attitudes towards K-pop are not only characterized by the tension between competing sets of values and reflexivities, one of the modern and young and one of the traditional and old. By bringing in the discourse of nationalism, the backlash against K-pop's effecitivity on Vietnamese youths elicits a strong concern for the issue of cultural imperialism.

Conclusion

As the country is moving rapidly towards modernization and globalization, a great number of Vietnamese youths find themselves being constantly bombarded with new information and knowledge that either conform or contrast with fixed sources of traditional values and meanings that are otherwise starting to diminish. Their everyday lives have thus become a site of negotiation, contestation and tension whereby they are compelled to actively engage in the intrinsic human activity of reflexivity which entails the reinvention and imaginative projection of themselves as a way to make sense of their life conditions. The confrontation with increased flows of foreign media and cultures thus gives rise to greater uncertainties which trigger and encourage heightened reflexive awareness of their surrounding world that necessarily involves "the routine incorporation of new information or knowledge into environments of actions that are thereby reconstituted and reorganized" (Kim, 2008: 9). In this way, the fanaticalness of K-pop fans in Vietnam can be seen as the extent to which reflexivity has taken place and affected the meaning-making process of their popular culture experience. Furthermore, when local productions fail to meet the increasingly refined demands for entertainment and popular cultural

products of Vietnamese younger generations, K-pop arrived just in time to open up a rare space—the fandom—for Vietnamese youths to take pleasure in and subsequently be driven to create new meanings and imagine new possibilities to change their life conditions. Impinging upon the process of self-reflexivity and construction of pleasure, K-pop thus materializes as a new form of cultural imperialism that is made possible through the voluntary embracing of its active audience. Backlash on its negative impacts on Vietnamese youths that involves the discourse of nationalism further attests claims of cultural imperialism working.

During 2014 and 2015 the phenomenon of *fan cuồng K-pop* seems to lose its sensation as the topic appears on news and headlines much less frequently than before. It may be due to the fact that the media has grown accustomed to the visits of K-pop idols, or also possibly because local K-pop fans have moderated their behaviors more carefully. But this by no means suggests the decline of the K-pop fever in Vietnam. On the contrary, it is the proof that K-pop has already become deeply intergrated into every corner of Vietnamese popular culture. What is remarkable in the case of Vietnam is that despite the heated frenzy in media coverage, Vietnamese authorities has not yet taken any official measure to remedy negative outcries against the influx of K-pop and Korean popular culture that carry threats of cultural imperialism. Besides the appreciation for everything "made in Korea"—Korean styles, Korean products, Korean cosmetics, etc., most visibly affected is probably the Vietnamese entertainment and music industry. Not only Vietnamese singers are looking more and more Korean, the process of recruiting and training new talents has also been modeled after K-pop. The introduction of a new competition series in 2014 is a case in point. The show is known in Vietnam as "Ngôi sao Việt"—"Superstar of Vietnam," but the official English name is "VK-pop Superstar"—a wordplay on V-pop and K-pop. Ironically, even though the aim of the competition is to find the

next potential pop star for Vietnam, contestants who passed the preliminary round in Vietnam were sent to Korea for a short period during which they were trained and assessed by Korean professionals. The style of music that they all chose to compete was, unsurprisingly, K-pop. This is just one example of how the "Korean dream" is being actively promoted in Vietnam. Perhaps I should end this paper with a brief mention of a recently (2015) popular television drama series named "Tuổi thanh xuân" (or "Forever Young" as official English name) which was a huge collaboration project between Vietnam National Television and CJ E&M Pictures of Korea. The drama tells the story of Linh, a very typical *fan cuồng K-pop*, who went to Korea to study in hopes of meeting her K-pop idols. On her very first day in Korea, Linh managed to sneak in a private showcase inside her idols' company and got into trouble with a soon-to-debut trainee, whom she fell in love with in the end. Aired on prime time, the drama especially appealed to young audience by tapping into the "Korean dream" and the fantasy of developing an intimate affair with K-pop stars. On a broader level, it is obviously an attempt to foster a bilateral relationship between Korea and Vietnam. Nevertheless, I cannot help but wonder what kinds of message that the filmmakers were trying to disseminate. Is it to motivate the young to follow the footsteps of the female protagonist? Are they saying that instead of resisting K-pop influence, we should embrace it and strive towards assimilation, or, for better (or for worse?) homogenization into this flow of culture?

APPENDIX: LIST OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Vietnamese online media:

Báo Lao Động (laodong.com.vn): Online newspaper of Vietnam General Confederation of Labor
Dân Trí (dantri.com.vn): Online newspaper of Vietnam Association for Promoting Education
Giáo dục Việt Nam (giaoduc.net.vn): Online newspaper of the Ministry of Education
Kênh 14 (kenh14.vn): Online news portal owned by VC Corporation
VietNamNet (vnn.vn) and *VOV* (vov.vn): Online newspapers of the Ministry of Information and Communications
VnExpress (vnexpress.net): Online newspaper owned by FPT Group
Tin Tức Thanh Niên Online (thanhnien.com.vn) and *Thanh Nien Daily* (English version) (thanhniennews.com): online newspapers of Vietnam Youth Federation
Tuổi Trẻ Online (tuoitre.vn) and *Hoa Học Trò* (hoahoctro.vn): Online publications of Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union
Zing News (zing.vn): Online news portal owned by VNG

Vietnamese online fan communities:

360kpop (360kpop.com): largest K-pop fan community in Vietnam. Activities included news translation, discussions, fan-subbing, fan fiction writing, sales of K-pop related products, etc.
Big Bang Family (bigbangfam.com): Fanclub of Big Bang
ELF Vietnam (s-u-j-u.net/saju): Fanclub of Super Junior
S-one (soshivn.com): Fanclub of Girls' Generation
Sunflowers (facebook.com/fanclub.tiaravn): Fanclub of T-ara

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