



# The "Korean Turn" in Philippine Popular Culture: The Story So Far\*

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## [ *Abstract* ]

In this paper, I will pursue initial ideas I formulated in 2012 about the permeation of Korean influences in Philippine popular culture, particularly in the production of serialized TV drama/soap operas or the “teleserye” [tele for television + “serye” or series; thus, TV drama series]. I called the phenomenon the “Korean Turn” as I observed the emulation of Korean televisual drama (nowadays called K-Drama) modes and practices by local production through various means of cultural appropriation. This time, I will expand my exploration to other aspects of Philippine entertainment and other cultural practices. I will also update my observations on the continuing “Korean turn” in the teleserye. I will argue, on the one hand, about the success and soft power of hallyu or the “Korean wave” in the Philippines; and on the other, about Philippine culture’s enduring ingenuity in its reception and repurposing of hallyu. Ideas to be yielded here will form part of a potential framework in understanding the dynamics of the interface between Korean and Philippine cultures, in the context of globalization. I

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assert that popular culture remains to be an undervalued field of inquiry, as far as these contexts are concerned.

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## I . Introduction

In 2012, I formally began to engage what was back then an emerging field of studies on *hallyu* or the Korean wave in the Philippines. There were already interesting discussions taking place that involved both the broadcasting and academic sectors. There was even talk about where the phenomenon was headed, aside from what it was all about (Jimenez-David 2012). There were analyses about reception coming from broadcast networks' marketing research departments, as well as interventions offered by scholars, many of which were presented in "Hallyu sa Pinas" (Hallyu in the Philippines) fora by the Korean Cultural Center (KCC) in Manila. Some of the more formative discourses were by Fanny Garcia (2012), who conducted an audience study on a hit Korean TV drama and applied an assortment of approaches to reading her selected text; Ma. Crisanta Flores (2012), who assessed the Korean wave's "great splash on Philippine popular culture and life"; Florinda Mateo (2012), who explored the "magnet" of Korean TV dramas among local culture industry practitioners; and Michelle Camille Correa (2012), who also presented a reception study of strong women in Korean TV dramas. In the regional front, the latter study of Mary Ainsle, Sarah Lipura, and Joanne Lim (2017) on the hallyu backlash in Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines is also notable. By that time, it had already been almost a decade since hallyu and its many forms had permeated Philippine society in general, and popular culture in particular. Its most familiar and fondest form is the Korean TV drama popularly labelled by Filipino broadcast giant Global Media Arts (GMA) Network as "Koreanovela" (Korean Culture and Information Service 2011). The concept is a neologistic compounding of "Korea," after the serial drama's country of origin; and "telenovela," after the massive form of serialized TV drama

comparable to the novel, and of Latin American origin. Like Latin American telenovelas, these Koreanovelas were dubbed into the Filipino language, and since 2003, have been staple in broadcasting during that time. Upon the invitation of the KCC in Manila, I delivered a panel paper which sketched my initial ideas on the phenomenal popularity of Koreanovelas in the country. Trained in Literary and Cultural Studies, I was mostly interested in how it reshaped local soap opera productions. I also inquired about why Filipinos could not get enough of these global drama products. Looking back, I consider both paper and occasion as having propelled my eventual writing of a cultural history of the TV serial drama or soap operas locally called "teleserye" [another neologism, this time of "tele" or television and "serye" or series], spanning eight decades, which also covered, of course, the rise of Koreanovelas. The cultural history has an altogether different story, though, in a way, it was the logic of my earlier forays into Koreanovelas. Koreanovelas started me out with the gargantuan task. The paper I delivered, "After Hallyu: A Critico-Personal Explication of Philippine Soap Opera Culture," remains unpublished, but it brought about the writing of the essay "Koreanovelas, Teleseryes, and the "Diasporization" of the Filipino/the Philippines" (Sánchez 2014). The said work saw the light of print in 2014 through the Media and Diaspora issue of *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* of the College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines Diliman. This time, I will contemplate further on my interventions 10 years ago and offer expansions to the critical narrative of what I called the "Korean turn" in local teleseryes. As I do this, and consequently also explore the other manifestations of the "Korean turn" in the larger Philippine media and society, I will assert the importance of popular culture as a site of complementarity or cultural reciprocity between the Philippines and South Korea. Popular culture, often discursively unexplored and untapped, has so much to elucidate on "cooperative relationships" that take place in contemporary times. In the end, I will use the "Korean turn" as both illustration and framework of the productive discourse and dynamics between two cultures in the past two decades with hallyu as platform and intermediary.

## II. “Koreanovelas”/“K-Drama” and the “Korean Turn”

“After Hallyu” was my attempt to explicate, in a “critico-personal” manner, the phenomenon of Koreanovelas. I problematized my own act of viewing as a meaning-making exercise and contextualized it with the then on-going popular viewership of TV serial drama from Korea. It was very clear to me from the beginning that any vigorous discussion of Koreanovelas must consider the contentiousness of popular culture, easily dismissed in elitist conversations and discourses. Its denigration as a televisual product warranted a critical inquiry. From my perspective, popular Koreanovela viewership was symptomatic of what was then a “national desire, a national fantasy, not only for [Korea] but to be [Korea],” on the part of Philippine viewers. It was also another high point in what was in my head a working timeline of a cultural history of teleserye and viewership. From this articulation, I started to distinguish the teleserye, outlining its form and traditions, as well as its contemporary evolution, another high point of which is the popularization of Latin American telenovelas in the mid-1990s. It is important to mention telenovelas as far as this history is concerned, because it preceded the wave of Koreanovelas in the Philippines. The undercurrent of my discussions was that the emergence of these local global dramas was vital in the recent developments and innovations of the teleserye. If a history of the teleserye were to be written at all, both Latin American telenovelas and Koreanovelas should be prominently mentioned as key to its contemporary formation. From this argument, I offered speculations on the process of Koreanovela concept and cultural adaptation carried out in local productions. I pointed out what then appeared to be two important phases of the adaptation process that took place after the initial purchase, dubbing, and distribution of Koreanovelas—the transformative and acculturative. The transformative process refers to the purchase of Koreanovela franchises for local adaptation [either partially in concept or in its entirety—story and brand bible of the format], which led to a closer study of the Koreanovela form and aesthetic by producers. Meanwhile, the acculturative process refers to local productions’ conscious deployment of Korenovela influences into the local format of the teleserye. Obviously, this was carried out to maintain the

viability of teleseryes in the local market saturated by Koreanovelas. It must also be mentioned that aside from locating the Koreanovela phenomenon in the cultural history of the teleserye, I was also responding to the observable non-inclusion of the Philippines in then on-going hallyu scholarship in Southeast Asia carried out by Chua Being Huat and his colleagues (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Chua 2012). I found it curious that most of their work were silent about the Philippines, even if hallyu was burgeoning in the country. It was as if the Philippines was never part of Southeast Asia and couldn't possibly be located in the map of hallyu network these scholars have drawn, stretching up from Singapore to the Indochinese Peninsula, and farther up to the Asian mainland of China, Japan and Korea. I wanted to make a point by offering a Filipino perspective, by attempting to include the Filipino experience of hallyu in that incomplete Southeast Asian picture in regional Cultural Studies.

That point was more thoroughly articulated in "Koreanovelas, Teleseryes," where I sampled on three teleseryes I considered to be largely shaped by the Koreanovela—*Princess and I* (2012); *A Beautiful Affair* (2012), and *Kailangan Ko'y Ikaw* [I Need You] (2012). I observed three hallyu influences, one in each of the series, as I illustrated what for me was the "diasporization of the Filipino/the Philippines" brought about by the Korean TV serial form: "the "spectacularization" of the first world imaginary in foreign dramatic/fictional spaces as new "spectre of comparisons" alluding to Benedict Anderson"; "the crafting of the Filipino character as postcolonially/neocolonially dispossessed"; and "the continued perpetuation of the imagination of the Filipino location as archipelagically—and consequently, nationally—incoherent" (Sánchez 2014: 66). Before closely reading the teleserye texts, I wrote a more comprehensive accounting of the history of the teleserye. Clarifying further the process of dubbing/translation, transformation, and acculturation, I was eventually led to lay down arguments for an observable "Korean turn" in the local teleseryes. That there was a "Korean turn" or a reshaping of the local soap opera form in the likeness of the Koreanovelas was exhaustively shown in the teleseryes I mentioned—both adapted from Koreanovelas and locally

conceptualized—was something evident, and the time has come for it to be productively examined and explained. That the “Korean turn” had a defamiliarizing effect on serial Filipino stories and viewership also had to be explicated, for it to be critically reflected upon and explored beyond entertainment and fantasies for mobility. There was however more to that “Korean turn,” since in hindsight, it was not only occurring in teleseryes but in the wider Philippine—and even global—popular culture. Back in 2012, as mentioned, some lamented the waning of hallyu, the ebbing of the Korean wave that is, and this was also what motivated me to intervene, by way of Koreanovelas. Fast forward to the pandemic era, hallyu is still very much around the globe in its many forms and has quite “institutionalized” itself even as far as Hollywood. Perhaps, the framers of discussions a decade ago were aware of that to keep it alive, it was imperative to announce, prematurely and preemptively, its death. And they were right. It never died. We all witnessed BTS, perhaps the most popular K-Pop group in the world, dancing their hit single “Permission to Dance” in the august but empty halls of the United Nations in New York, during the global lockdowns of 2021. Before them, there was acclaimed South Korean director Bong Joon-ho and his scathing social critique *Parasite*, the 2019 Palme d’Or winner at the Cannes Film Festival, bagging major awards at the Oscars, including Best Picture, the first that is not in English.

My formulation of the "Korean Turn" is by no means complete. It certainly needs an expansion after a decade. This is especially warranted by the continuing popularity of many other forms of hallyu, not only in the Philippines but also around the world. I will explore the reception of these forms in the succeeding sections. Meanwhile, Koreanovelas are still patronized in Philippine television's mainstream free TV, as well as emerging digital platforms, like the subscription-based streaming service Netflix. Koreanovelas are referred to nowadays as “K-Drama,” perhaps globally aligning with the form’s branding as it is circulated and distributed around the world. Pre-COVID 19 pandemic, broadcast networks GMA and its archival Alto Broadcasting System-Chronicle Broadcasting Network (ABS-CBN) offered at least three to five K-Dramas daily and featured at least two local adaptations each in

a year. In the local front, producers continued to explore certain themes and stories usually reminiscent of K-Drama hits. This meant the complication of, or at times, turning away from conventional romance and melodrama of maudlin tears and happy endings familiar to Filipino audiences. Thus, the past 10 years found local producers offering a merry mix of formats—romance-comedy, scandal, action, science fiction, magic realism, fantasy, gothic, period drama, and dystopia, among others, in daily teleserye fare—and oftentimes in a manner that appears to be kitschy yet edgy.

It may be said that K-Drama and the “Korean turn” that it brought were very crucial in preparing audiences for these novel serial ideas to be popularized. It appears now that viewers had to experience and see these concepts first in Korean form before local productions ventured into innovating the teleserye. Patronage proved to be helpful in convincing producers to invest in these types of K-Drama-inspired drama serials. Their ventures led to the production of many TV series, among them two exemplary cases: ABS-CBN’s *Wildflower* (2017-2018) and GMA’s *The Lost Recipe* (2021). *Wildflower* follows the story of a young woman named Lily Cruz (Maja Salvador) who returns to a corruption-ridden provincial town to avenge the dissolution of her family brought about by the political Ardiente family dynasty. She single-handedly brings down. Her characterization and story are noticeably shaped by K-Drama vengeance tropes, often found in excessive and scandalous South Korean *makjang* or drama plots, which literally took stories and scenes to the hilt (Asia Society 2021). In hindsight, it provided a parallel narrative to the country’s distressful political climate of impunity and repression, where many of the outspoken critics and opposition leaders fighting the Rodrigo Duterte regime were women. Meanwhile, *The Lost Recipe*, which aired during the pandemic, and followed by audiences on both free television and YouTube streaming, recounts the adventure of Harvey Napoleon (Kelvin Miranda), a young male chef inspired to create the best version of *adobo*, a popular pork and chicken sour stew which is arguably the country’s representative national cuisine. In the process, he finds himself time traveling to the Spanish colonial period to steal the written recipe from a culinary master. Reminiscent of many

speculative Korean [and even Japanese] series where past meets the present, as well as culinary dramas that pulled at the heartstrings as they transported men into the kitchen, often considered a female space, *The Lost Recipe* afforded audiences with an unconventional concept that attempted to reinvent the Filipino hero's journey.

Also, in these two texts, the qualities of the "Korean turn" in teleseryes became more pronounced: (1) a much more compact serial storytelling that need not run for years [*The Lost Recipe* only ran daily for three months, more or less; *Wildflower*, which lorded over the afternoon timeslot, ran for over a year]; (2) a coalescence of various formats [*The Lost Recipe* is clearly magic realist; while *Wildflower* is allegorical in its socio-political commentary; however, both were still very much structured in typical romance and melodrama]; (3) and a highly-improved production value that oftentimes deployed technology to enhance the look and packaging of the show. These also represent teleserye formation currently exported globally and consumed both by Filipinos in the diaspora and other international audiences around the world. This is very important to mention as the Philippines is about to mark its 25th year in the contemporary global TV drama market in 2025. In 2000, ABS-CBN's benchmarking teleserye *Pangako Sa 'Yo* (The Promise), a two-generation story of star-crossed lovers, paved the way for Filipino serial TV drama to be followed by audiences from around the Southeast Asian and Asian regions to as far as the African continent. Today, many Filipino soaps have been either dubbed or subtitled in various languages, with a good number even adapted in other countries by local producers. During the pandemic, some of them have also dropped into Netflix streaming which serves a subscription market. The teleserye has reached a significant stage of development, thanks to K-Drama. It continues to innovate in both form and content as it also looks out for potential global reception and even collaboration with leading players in the international televisual arena. After all, it maintains a sure market advantage with Filipino migrant audiences around the world seeking in television, both in paid as well as internet-reliant platforms, a means to touch base with the culture and their families back in the mainland. All producers need to do is expand viewership. Admittedly, a decade



after, there are already many things to account for as regards the innovations in local production after the "Korean turn" and considering the teleserye's participation in the global market. However, this must be done more comprehensively in another paper.

### **III. From the Perspective of Cultural Appropriation and Transnational Media Flows**

The processes of dubbing/translation, transformation, and acculturation that characterize the "Korean turn" in the Philippines through K-Drama may all be typified as instances of cultural appropriation. Richard Rogers (2006) broadly defines cultural appropriation "as the use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture," and is in fact, "inescapable when cultures come into contact, including virtual or representational contact" (474). What Philippine local production had been carrying out for the past two decades, as far as K-Drama is concerned, has been transporting its qualities onto the local format of the teleserye, to make it new and enduring to Filipino audiences. What has been bridged first through dubbing/translation into Filipino were not only sound and sense but an entire ethos of a culture that has been conquering the world through soft power. And in this sense, the cultural appropriation taking place in the "Korean turn" makes for an interesting case as it is the culture at the receiving end, Philippine culture, that is aggressively undertaking the reproduction of Korean drama in various formats and forms. Considering this, whatever "degree(s) and relevance of (in)voluntariness, (in)equality, (im)balance, and (im)purity" (Rogers 2006: 499) are consequently reconfigured. What we see in this case is Philippine broadcasting, and Philippine culture in general, asserting adeptness in responding to the Korean soft power approach. While there is no forcefulness but only strategic global inculcation of Korean cultural forms such as K-Drama, the cultural politics involved is subverted to favor the Philippines. The supposed "marginalized" and "colonized" party has been belaboring to study and internalize the foreign cultural form to master it, and in a way possess its distinctive qualities to be used

“for its own purposes,” to borrow from the Filipino critic Lucilla Hosillos (1984: 137). There is assimilation in the experience indeed, but not much of the presumed exploitation of the “dominated.” The culture at the receiving end asserts its agency and potential in creating not simply a copy of the cultural form but instead a re-innovated form of the teleserye. The re-innovation embodies what may be said to be the two-fold purposes of cultural appropriation: the localization of useful characteristics of K-Drama to serve Filipino audiences [some use the term “glocalization,” which I am not very keen to use]; and persistent product improvement of the teleserye as it participates in the global drama market since the early 2000s. Compact storytelling, the effective coalescence of various formats, and the elevation of production value all establish the teleserye’s readiness to compete in the world stage, following its Latin American and Korean counterparts. The teleserye has learned—and continues to learn—from K-Drama to this day, and the Korean dramatic form continues to expand the horizons of possibilities of the local form with surprising, yet to be explored ideas.

One notable aspect I wish to focus on, as far as teleserye cultural appropriation of K-Drama is concerned, is on story settings. Conventionally speaking, the Filipino TV soap opera has never been particular with setting since most shows were shot within studios and were really confined by limited production budgets. That was until Filipinos were able to view the more realistic and most times affluent settings used on Latin American telenovelas. This compelled for a rethinking of local productions and even programming. Serial dramas were gradually brought out of the studio and into slums or mansions, providing verisimilitude and compelling characterization in real spaces, usually with serious implications to conventional TV network spending. With K-Drama coming into the fore, the idea of setting was pushed further as local productions explored the utilization of specific places that often created characters out of the location’s terrain and culture. For Filipinos who consumed K-Dramas back in the early days, the serial drama’s setting became an education into the Korean landscape, enticing eventual tourism for Filipinos who can afford to travel. For instance, *Endless Love 2: Winter Sonata* (2002), the landmark Korean drama that started the

Korean wave, introduced audiences to the scenic destination Namiseom or Nami Island, a celebrated landmark that K-Drama fans always visited with televisual nostalgia. In picturesque Nami, tourists were able to relive the romantic moments of the star-crossed lovers Joon-Sang (Bae Yong-Joon) and Yoo-jin (Choi Ji Woo). K-Drama settings also educated audiences about various aspects of Korean culture, like Korean food and cooking. For instance, *Dae Jang Geum* or *Jewel in the Palace* (2003), a period drama that narrates the story of a court cook and doctor, Jang Geum (Lee Young-ae), introduced not only royal and day-to-day cuisine, but also native cooking techniques. The show appeared to have displayed the entirety of Korean cooking, as Jang Geum can only do, proving to Filipino audiences that there was more to Korean cuisine other than kimchi and soju.

With local destinations and locations as story settings, productions created fictional worlds out of places and cultures familiar to us. Baguio City, around 250 kilometers north of Manila, and the country's summer destination because of its mountain-cold climate, has been a favorite location for recent teleseryes. In 2014, the romance-comedy *Forevermore* brought audiences to the mountainous strawberry fields of a fictional community called La Presa, located in Tuba, Benguet, at the outskirts of Baguio City. It narrates the fortuitous encounter of a young rich man trying to find his place in the corporate life of his hotelier family; and a country lass, who has big dreams for the future. They fall for each other and brave all odds brought about by their class differences. The pilot episode also features a trope straight from K-Drama: the male protagonist paraglides and accidentally lands in the female beloved's truck. The popularity of the soap eventually brought hordes of fans to Baguio City, and more importantly to the series location in Tuba, which unfortunately brought traffic congestion and the accumulation of garbage in the area. This eventually led to the issuance of an environmental protection order which set the site as off limits to people (Cruz 2015). Quite recently, another teleserye, *The Broken Marriage Vow* (2022), set its narrative of vengeance, the story of a woman scorned in a fictional Baguio City. The series was a franchise of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)'s *Dr. Foster*, which

also happens to be a franchise of the K-Drama hit *The World of the Married*. People raved about the impeccable acting of the ensemble cast, as well as the native designs integrated in the wardrobe of the characters, representing the work of indigenous weavers. *The Broken Marriage Vow* is a testament to what local producers have learned so far about sense of place as taught by K-Drama. It appears that conjuring culture does not necessarily mean merely showcasing sites and eventually turning them into teleserye tourist attractions. It may also and simply be the distillation of culture for Filipino audiences, and for all the world to see.

Finally, we must assert that this complex process of cultural appropriation is clearly enabled by the "transnational and transcultural contexts" (Ju 2020: 1) of our current globalized media landscape. Transnational and transcultural television make for "quantity, quality, and diversity of audio-visual content," as well as "(bring) up new patterns to receive and entertain with different kinds of TV stories" (ibid). In the local front, cultural appropriation was necessary so that Filipino productions may be made to catch up with the audiences' sustained patronage of K-Drama. Local productions had to assert their place in the broadcasting grid and the only way to compete was to be at par with K-Drama, to which it is often compared particularly by critics and elitists. It later proved to be a long and productive process of acculturation so that productions may also carry on with efforts to internationalize and participate in the global market alongside K-Dramas, among others. By "internationalize," I mean two things: the modification and elevation of local production to make it at par with global standards and suitable for international templates like streaming; and of course, global distribution, which is very much connected with the earlier. The process is still on going. Transnational and transcultural television afforded Philippine TV with flow, that is not only "the mobility of both finished TV programs and TV formats in international media marketplaces," pace Ju (2020: 1-2), but more importantly, the impulse to reinvent the TV serial drama to what it has become today: a bolder and compact format encompassing concepts and genres, and more palatable to both local and foreign audiences.

#### IV. The "Korean Turn" in the Larger Philippine Entertainment

As mentioned, the "Korean turn" was not only confined to K-Dramas and K-Drama-influenced teleseryes. It was an expansive phenomenon in Philippine popular culture that also permeated at the same time as Korean novels were starting to make waves on television. How and why did this happen? Speculation brings me back to the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, when hallyu was making waves in Asian countries including the Philippines. In our own shores, what came before K-Dramas and other hallyu products were droves of Koreans visiting short term or moving into the country. A substantial number of them were young people intending to study or practice conversational and written English. I was myself a witness to this back in 2002, when I worked for one of the many English schools for Koreans that sprouted in the Philippine capital. Many of my more mature students told me they chose to study here because it was cheaper. They also wanted to study with Filipino teachers because of their aptitude in imparting the American accent. Add to this the promising socio-economic climate in the country, as well as the aggressive marketing of the Philippines as a retirement destination for expatriates. A tentative conclusion which needs to be validated in the future is that the arrival and stay of Koreans necessitated a circulation of hallyu, first among the Korean community, and later, an expanded dissemination into Philippine localities where they resided. This might be its curious, little history.

Korean popular music—what we know today as K-Pop culture consisting of Korean singers as well as girl and boy bands—first hit the Philippine airwaves sometime in the 2000s by way of Korean singer Shim Mina's "Answer the Phone" (Esteban 2020). If memory serves me right, people at first didn't really recognize that it was Korean. It was however perky enough to launch a dance craze on television, which made the song linger in the local ear for years on end. Meanwhile, sometime in 2004, as the influx of Koreans to the Philippines steadily increased, there came a watershed moment in Korean representation in Philippine popular culture. Sandara Park, whose screen name eventually became "Dara" when she became a member of the popular Korean girl group 2NE1, rose to stardom

(Nitura 2021). She won a local reality star search hosted by ABS-CBN, besting local applicants with her charm as a naïve Korean girl. Her popularity yielded for her the unforgettable monicker “Pambansang Krung-Krung” [National Crazy Loony Person] because of her adorable confidence despite the obvious awkwardness as a foreigner. She starred in TV shows and a film, and recorded an album which received a platinum award. In 2009, she left the country and joined 2NE1. The group disbanded in 2016, and she embarked on an equally successful career as a solo act, returning to the Philippines occasionally for vacation and projects. She released *Sandara Park* (2023), an extended play under the Korean label Abyss Company. It has five tracks showcasing her versatility as a singer. When she announced the album release via social media, her Filipino followers were quick to throw their support. In video appearances, and in interestingly fluent Tagalog, she constantly expresses her amazement and gratitude for the enduring fondness of her Filipino followers. She has essentially cleared the path for many other Korean celebrities (ibid).

Some others decided to make the Philippines their homebase, prominently appearing on TV and the public sphere. Among them are lifestyle newspaper and magazine columnist and TV host Sam Oh; radio and TV host Grace Lee; model and cosplayer Jinri Park; and comedian and TV host Ryan Bang, perhaps the most popular among them, probably next to Sandara Park. Bang, who first arrived in the Philippines sometime in 2005 for studies (Cruz 2021), achieved longevity for being a mainstay in the decade old ABS-CBN noontime musical variety show *It's Showtime*. Having stayed in the country for a long while, most of these individuals speak the Filipino language very well, making them very endearing to the public. They also perpetuate the Korean presence, and thus the Korean turn. Bang is exemplary with his daily appearance in his noontime show, aside from occasional TV and film cameos. The figures of Bang and company also illustrate how Korea has become one of our own in an ethos of global mobility—cultural appropriation at its best. In the Korean front, Filipinos also strived to make their presence felt, mesmerizing Korean studio and social media audiences with their prowess in performance and acting and foraying into the Korean

popular culture scene—a clear and interesting expansion of our conception of the "Korean turn." This means that aside from cultural appropriation in the home front, others explored penetrating the Korean cultural industry more directly. For instance, in 2007, the young Filipino belter Charice Pempengco [now Jake Zyrus after he began identifying as a transgender male] first trended in social media when she sang in the Korean TV talent show *Star King*; she even had a duet with boyband Super Junior's Kyuhyun. Her Korean stint catapulted her career which peaked with US invitations to guest in *The Ellen Degeneres Show* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. For one who historicizes the "Korean turn," Zyrus may be considered a forerunner to Filipino actors and artists who tried and found their luck in the Korean entertainment industry. Most notable among them are Noreen Joyce Esguerra, who starred in over 60 K-Dramas in her career doing minor acting roles; Lester Avan Andrada, who played an itinerant Filipino immigrant in the 2013 dystopic film *The Flu*; and Christian Lagahit, who has played minor roles in hit K-Dramas *Descendants of The Sun* (2016), *Crash Landing On You* (2019), *Squid Game* (2021), *Vincenzo* (2021), and the space opera *Space Sweepers* (2021) (Alumno 2021).

Meanwhile, the "Korean turn" also begs to be revalued as having been augmented by K-Pop. As an enduring industry, particularly during the pandemic, K-Pop was seen as one that "only keeps expanding, despite unprecedented challenges," as it is undeniably "a total experience that encompasses fashion, makeup, choreography...and 'a visual and auditory content package'" (Morin 2020a: 5). Being both "global obsessions" (ibid), K-Drama and K-Pop complemented in furthering each other's popularity and reach. We may surmise that such is the case in the Philippines where substantial K-Pop fandoms are also K-Drama fans. The so-called "modern idol system" (De Luna 2020: 6) of K-Pop may be said to be an important contributor to the enduring presence of K-Drama across the world. Fandoms may be seen as sustaining and even growing viewership, perhaps initiating more people into the "K-hole" of hallyu, to borrow from Natalie Morin (2020b: 62). Proof of this is the not-so-few K-Pop girl and boyband stars occasionally headlining serial drama, boosting their popularity and star power, and showing

their versatility for more audiences to adore. A Netflix listicle showcases the extensive participation of K-Pop stars in K-Drama: Jun of UKISS in the military drama *D.P.* (2021); Eunji of Apink in *That Winter, The Wind Blows* (2013), a story of a con-artist; Yeo One of Pentagon in *Spark* (2016), a K-Pop idol story; Lee Min-hyuk of BtoB in the mystery series *Nightmare High* (2016); Krystal Jung of f(x) in *Prison Playbook* (2017), a sports and prison story; Lee Jung-shin of CNBLUE and Son Na-eun of Apink in *Cinderella and the Four Knights* (2016), a contemporary fairy tale; Jung Chae-yeon of DIA and I.O.I, Jung Jin-young of B1A4, and Kang Tae-oh of Surprise in the love and friendship story *My First First Love* (2019); Siwan of ZE:A and Sooyoung of Girls' Generation in the love story *Run On* (2020); Seohyun of Girls' Generation in *Private Lives* (2020), another con-artist-themed story; Rowoon of SF9, Byungchan of Victon, and Jung Chae-yeon of DIA and I.O.I in the period romance *The King's Affection* (2021); Bae Suzy of Miss A in the business-themed series *Start-Up* (2020); Yoon Kye-sang of g.o.d and Yubin of Wonder Girls in the medical and culinary drama *Chocolate* (2019); Cha Eun-woo of Astro in another period romance *Rookie Historian Goo Hae-ryung* (2019); D.O. of EXO in *100 Days My Prince* (2018), a period drama about a prince and his peasant love; Hyeri of Girl's Day in the nostalgic series *Reply 1988* (2015); Eric Mun of Shinhwa and Seo Hyun-jin of M.I.L.K. in the doppelgänger drama *Another Miss Oh* (2016); IU and the late Sulli of f(x) in the ghost drama *Hotel Del Luna* (2019); Choi Si-won of Super Junior in the *chaebol* [rich family story] *Revolutionary Love* (2017); Han Seung-yeon of Kara and Ryu Hwa-young of T-ara in the college drama *Hello, My Twenties!* (2016); Rowoon of SF9 in the modern gothic-themed *Tomorrow* (2022); and Kim Se-jeong of I.O.I and Gugudan, Ahn Hyo-seop of One O One, Choi Byung-chan of Victon, and Bae Woo-hee of Dal Shabet in the romance-comedy *Business Proposal* (2022) (Kim 2022). In being deployed to act in K-Dramas, these selected K-Pop girl and boyband members, among others, ensured their lasting currency amidst intense competition, and in an equally popular and hallyu format at that. Perhaps, even if they decide to seek respite from the limelight for a brief period, like the global sensation BTS [of the seven-man BTS, only V starred in a K-Drama, the hit period series *Hwarang* (2016)] in June of 2022,



after a busy pandemic stint, they are usually assured to continue drawing fans, as K-Pop is built on sustained idol-making and fandom.

The cultural appropriation of K-Pop in the Philippines flourished in the recent emergence of local girl and boybands popularly labelled P-Pop, standing for "Pinoy" [shorthand for Filipino] popular music. Early forms of P-Pop appeared in the 2000s to the early 2010s in song and dance groups like Pop Girls, XLR8, 1:43, Down to Mars, and RPM. Like their K-Pop and even J-Pop [Japanese] counterparts, these groups were created and marketed as versatile musical and dance superstars followed by hordes of fans and sustained by organized fandoms that utilize social media to congregate and interact, and on occasion, even participate in various social causes. 2018 saw the launching of the first girl idol group, MNL48 [MNL stands for Manila], which was more J-Pop, being a sister of the Japanese girl group AKB48 [AKB stands for the Tokyo district of Akihabara]. Also making a debut that year was the five-member boyband SB19.<sup>1</sup> The boyband boasts of making waves in the Billboard Music Awards, being the first from the Philippines and Southeast Asia to be nominated in the award's Top Social Artist category, competing alongside American pop star Ariana Grande and Korean acts BTS, Blackpink, and Seventeen; as well as entering the 2020 Billboard Social 50 list. In 2020, two other P-Pop acts entered the scene—the eight-member girl band BINI [shorthand for the Filipino "binibini" or young lady] and the five-man group BGYO,<sup>2</sup> both products of an intensive ABS-CBN star search and training. Both groups had extensive exposure and promotion, being part of the local network system. They also engaged in advocacy

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<sup>1</sup> The name is a curious neologism. It reportedly stands for the melding of Filipino and Korean cultures in the group, being that it is trained and managed by ShowBT Philippines, "an entertainment and media contents company that branched out from South Korea to various countries" (When in Manila 2019). "SB" pays homage to the group's management, while 19 is the sum of the digits of South Korean and Philippine area codes, 82 and 63 (8+2+6+3).

<sup>2</sup> It is quite easy to assume that "BGYO" is a shorthand for the Filipino "bagyo" or storm. A 2021 Kapamilya World Online report says otherwise. It stands for "Be the Change, Go Further, You and I, Originally Filipino." BGYO is also trained and managed by Filipino-Korean collaborators.

work that spoke to their young “woke” audiences who are active in social media and often referred to themselves as “stans” or overzealous fans. In 2021, BGYO dropped its debut single “The Light,” which garnered a million views on YouTube. Perhaps the most notable among the acts is Alamat [in Filipino, “legend”], a six-member boyband also formed by way of a nationwide star search. While still being true to its K-Pop mold, Alamat packaged itself as a Filipino multiethnic group representing the major Philippine languages, singing lyrics in their respective vernaculars, and at times performing in ethnic-inspired costumes. Most of these bands underwent formal training by or are co-managed with Korean entertainment agencies. Their snappy and synchronized choreography and youthful sound are very reminiscent of K-Pop, but of course come with a distinct Filipino flavor. All have grown respective fandoms, particularly in the concert scene as well as in social media. While we are yet to see P-Pop stars being bannered in teleseryes, opportunities might come sooner or later. For instance, SB19’s Stell starred in a regional Disney special and much recently joined a franchise reality singing search as a regular coach and judge. All things considered, it is quite easy to get lost, to be rendered invisible by the power of spectacle in K-Pop. In spite of this, by way of mimicry, once described by Homi Bhabha (1994) as a “metonymy of presence” (128) the local realm through P-Pop is able to reiterate itself by doubling the images, in this case of spectacular K-Pop groups and practices, and coming up with its own impressions or versions of the spectacle, and even of fandom, which curiously cuts across national boundaries and goes global. A more comprehensive explication of P-Pop vis-a-vis the “Korean turn” is in order. I will do this on another occasion.

## V. The Story so Far and Some Conclusions

Further extending this critical narrative may find us throwing light on other equally interesting facets of Philippine popular culture where the “Korean turn” has also been taking place. For instance, in the culinary scene, the interest in *hansik* [Korean cuisine] first sampled in the K-Drama *Dae Jang Geum* may have been

synthesized in the current Filipino romance for *samgyeopsal-gi*, barbecued meat with *banchan* or side dishes such as fermented vegetables. In the past three to five years, the samgyeopsal restaurant business has flourished in the country, virtually establishing Korean enclaves, "Koreatowns" at every corner, usually packed with people willing to line up for meals (Tupas and Lee 2020). The vicissitudes of the pandemic have also never prevented people from bringing samgyeopsal even into their homes. I am inclined to say that it was so easy to culturally appropriate samgyeopsal because of the hefty, familial eating experience it offered, almost comparable to local family celebrations and fiestas. One does not eat samgyeopsal alone in these quarters—it is a meal to be shared with others. In this manner, "samgyeopsal" may have already replaced the American inherited "barbecue" in the local vocabulary, finally providing meat-grilling an Asian flair and flavor and reconnecting this culinary culture to Asian roots. In another front, the massive Korean skin care industry has also been transforming the Filipino sense of beauty that is known to be conservative and Western-oriented. The perceived Korean promotion of cosmetic procedures to self-improvement instills tolerance to a culture that has long valorized unadulterated, natural beauty. It must be talk of K-Pop stars and their facial enhancements that is changing the minds of many in this place where being "retokado"/"retokada" [having undergone cosmetic procedures] still bears a cultural stigma. On the other hand, the surge of skin care brands and products that usually promise blemish-free, "glass skin" also upholds the cultural aspiration for, and the glorification of skin whiteness, now Asianized by "brightening" agents more compatible to Asian skin pigments and are as accessible as many other Korean consumer goods on display in a growing number of Korean groceries around the country. Additionally, this aesthetic may also be promoted by the growing deployment by Philippine brands, from retail to real estate, of Korean celebrity endorsers, the most prominent of which is Lee Min Ho. At first glance, the "Korean turn" in food and skin care may be simply seen as a phenomenon of global consumption. However, consumption here must be considered as a complex partaking, not just a utilization of these supposed "K-products" peddled by hallyu. Consumption consists of

various facets of avid enjoyment. Enjoyment is absorbing and blissful. It absorbs not just utility but the entirety of the products, including the foreign cultures from which they originated. Consumption transforms the product. Its usage, through culinary sustenance or cosmetic application, is possessed not just by the consumer but by the entire complex of culture which contextualizes utility. In short, it is also acculturated.

How do we make sense of the story so far, of the story-in-progress that is the “Korean turn” in Philippine popular culture? An obvious opinion would have to do with the pivotal role of Korean novels/K-Drama in the wider dissemination and iterations of hallyu in Philippine soil. Korean serial drama not only educated Filipinos about South Korea, but also sustained interest in Korean culture. While it fed Filipino viewers with fresh story concepts and ideas, it also promoted both Korean cultural sites and practices that maybe aspired for. Aspiration has motivated cultural appropriation, thus the various instances I have narrated above. Aspiration may at first positioned the Filipino culture at a marginalized, receiving end of a soft power encroachment. Considering the issue more deeply however, it may be asserted that the continued circulation of hallyu not only shows the success of the Korean soft power in “conquering” Philippine culture, but also of Philippine culture’s aptitude to repurpose foreign culture as it permeates its realm. Repurposing offers the possibility of coming up with something original on the part of the receiving culture. For example, in instances of imitation, stylization, or borrowing—from teleseryes to skin care, possibly—elements of the foreign have already been “transmuted...into works [or artifacts that become] original in form [and are informed by our] own personal experiences and realities,” once again, to borrow from Hosillos (1984: 137). All in all, 10 years after I first explored the phenomenon of the “Korean turn,” I am very certain that in the Philippine-Korean encounter through hallyu, “original” artifacts and practices have been created, new pieces of culture that must be competently studied. The conquering Korean culture has been itself conquered, as it probably intends to do in its sustained global campaign. Regardless of hallyu’s orchestrated, and virtually state-funded endeavors, the local still wins, and reiterates itself.

The subject of Philippine-Korean complementarity itself still requires to be studied vigorously, and the critical history of the "Korean turn" promises a useful framework in expounding it. A productive path, as may be seen in this paper, is the path of popular culture, which almost always offers opportunities for a glimpse into intercultural dialogue and interface. Popular culture, being generally frowned upon, is unexplored and untapped, as far as complementarity is concerned. However, as a site of encounter between contesting forces, like different cultures coming together, it demonstrates the interrogations and negotiations undertaken, as well as that which were produced in these encounters. The "Korean turn" in Philippine popular culture is the story of more than two decades of cultural interface where the local and foreign engage each other in discourse and dynamics that bridge both commonality and difference, familiarity and strangeness. As a useful framework it locates hallyu as a platform and intermediary, where popular culture thrives as two cultures manifest the push and pull of encounter, as well as the conflicts and resolutions that ensue. As in the Koreanovela/K-Drama where everything coheres towards the end of the story, the "Korean turn" lays down a critical narrative, a narrative-in-progress, of a cultural encounter that proves to be exciting as it goes on and on. It may be asked at this point: Where is it headed? Nothing is set in stone at the moment. However, my gut feel tells me that we are up for an exciting part. Here is to hoping that the Philippines may also find both a place and a voice in the global arena, where South Korea has successfully demonstrated its being a cultural force to reckon with.

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