

## Hybridism in the understanding of media “stories”

An analysis of the Romanian popularity of K-dramas<sup>1</sup>

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The present article uses as starting point Stuart Hall’s thesis (1990: 225) on cultural identity as an essential element in the construction of social (individual and group) identity:

‘Cultural identity, in this sense, is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power.’

The nation-wide exposure to “Hallyru” popular culture products is an extremely recent phenomenon for the Romanian society -- it started in the summer of 2009, when TVR1, the main station of the public television network broadcast the first Korean drama “Jewel in the Palace” (“Daejanggeum”). Four other Korean historical drama television series followed within a year (2009-2010), broadcast in “prime-time” by the same television station; one of the main reasons behind this editorial decision

was the respective station’s increase in ratings during the broadcast period.

The present article analyses the Romanians’ attitude towards this type of television series, including the reasons that led to the orientation of a segment of the public towards the consumption of cultural products relatively unknown until recently. The specific objectives of this research paper are the following:

1. What are the reasons that explain the popularity of this type of products with the Romanian viewers?
2. How did Korean historical drama series viewing influence Romanians’ perceptions in general and especially their perceptions of Asia?

In view of fulfilling these objectives, the research project consists in an analysis of a set of interviews of Romanian viewers of this type of television series. For reasons related to methodological validity, the data in the interviews is combined with a discourse analysis of discussions on these television series on three Romanian Internet forums dedicated to Asian films and culture.

### **The general theoretical framework**

“Hanryu” or “Hallyu” (in Romanian translation “Valul coreean,” or in English “Korean wave,” is a phenomenon particular to Asia and it refers to the current impact of the products specific to Korean popular culture (films, music, games, fashion) on this region of the world (Dator and Seo, 2004; Seo, 2005). In extra-Asian spaces, the impact of this type of cultural industry on consumers was linked in particular to the attitudes triggered by “Hallyu” in large Asian communities in America and, less in Western Europe (Chan, Ma, 1996; Keane, 2006; Cunningham, Jacka, 1996).

To a certain degree, the so-called “blockbuster” type Korean films and television series are subjected to pressure from the competition with other similar products (mainly Hollywood-originated) thus depending on stars, entertainment or “show.” However, specialized literature emphasizes the unique characteristics of Korean media products, meaning the employment of a “multiple-address strategy.” In order to attract an impressively numerous audience, this type of films have the script planned from the beginning so that it can address different specific audiences inside the general public; more precisely, the target-audiences of the final product are identi-

fied and taken into account. This type of “planned” films was illustrated by products that had record ratings not only on the domestic market, but also on foreign markets. An example in this sense is “The King and the Clown” about which Jeong Jin-Wan, the president of the company “Eagle Pictures” said it was created so as to be interpreted in multiple ways, just like a “Rorschach” test:

‘For adolescents and youth, the film was meant to be interpreted as a melodrama developing around the character Gong Gil (Lee Jun-Gi); for 30-50 year old viewers it was to be a film about Jang Sang’s (Kam Woo-Seong) fight against royal power, while for third age persons, it had to be a typical historical dynasty drama.’

In what concerns cultural products for television, one can differentiate between two big types of television series – the so-called “romantic comedy” (similar to “soap opera” and “telenovela”) and “historical drama” or “sageuk drama” (Chua B. H., 2006).

The Romanian Public Television broadcast so far only the second type of television series; for which reason we will summarize the distinctive features of this genre that the European public is less acquainted with.

The main characteristic of the “sageuk” television series is the mixture – at the narrative level (of the film script) – of real historical facts and legend and story elements without real basis. Starting from historical data and documents existent in the archives<sup>2</sup> the “mix” between reality and fiction ensures a greater adaptability of this type of story to the transposition in filmed material for television<sup>3</sup>. The “sageuks” in the 1980s and 1990s were based exclusively on historical data, for which reason that period was considered the “Golden Age” of the genre<sup>4</sup>. However, at the end of that period the genre as such entered a severe crisis, as proved by the extremely low ratings of this type of works in the producer country. Things changed in 1999, when director Lee Byung Hoon, together with script writer Choi Wan Gyu produced the television series that would change the genre forever – “Hur Jun.” In Lee’s opinion, at the time, the most significant problem of the sageuk genre was its inability to draw a significant percentage of the young audience (10-20 years old) which represented an increa-

singly high proportion of the Korean television stations’ audience<sup>5</sup>. For the “Hur Jun” television series, Lee focused not so much on the historical events, as on the characters, following the hero’s life from the humble beginning years until his period of success as the king’s physician during the Chosŏn dynasty.

This resulted in an over 60% national rating and in the emergence of a new sub-genre – the so-called “fusion-sageuk” – a narrative combination between historic elements attested by documents and elements sending to modern age emotions and sensitivities. The next success that impressed through rating was the television series “Daejanggeum”<sup>6</sup>. The story of the first woman physician in the Chosŏn dynasty combined the line of medical narrations (like in the “Hur Jun” television series) with the luxurious depiction of the royal cuisine of the times, turning into an Asian (the television series had spectacular ratings in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan) and even global “cultural phenomenon.”

What are the Korean products’ – in this particular case, the “sageuk” dramas – success ingredients? On first sight, one can say that despite the obvious disadvantage of Korea in terms of language but also cultural “visibility” (as compared in particular to North-American products), the advantages of its cultural products result from its polyvalent culture and their content. “Cultural value” is multidimensional, it is not strictly a matter of what language an audience or a public has knowledge of. This explains why -- despite its initial disadvantage caused by the inability to understand the language spoken and by the lack of “diasporic markets” -- the so-called “Korean wave” could be so successful, using the polyvalent Korean culture to its advantage (Cunningham and Sinclair, 2001).

As to content, the appeal to common values enables cultural assimilation by Asian audiences, thus reducing the danger of cultural unacceptability or rejection. Moreover, standardization and specialization are necessary for these products in order to reach global audiences. Of course, in what concerns Asian markets, economic considerations can be added to these aspects. Thus, in Japan, the cost of the distribution of American films is rather high although there is a high request for successful films (“blockbusters”) similar to those produced in Hollywood.

Summarizing, we can say that, according to the research studies of the phenomenon (Cho Hae-Joang, 2005) the key ingredients of the

Korean cultural products’ success are cultural assimilation and economic opportunism. As to industrial infrastructure, the marketing strategies based on the communication industry and an increasing request for new products connected to communication technologies favoured the Korean cultural industry’s economic advance.

Currently, there are rather few specialized literature articles about the impact of popular culture products on East-European consumers. Most of the studies on the impact of this type of cultural products on foreign audiences were conducted in societies located in the geographical proximity of Korea (Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, and China) or focused on diaspora populations located in more varied geographical areas (the United States of America, Western Europe).

For these reasons, we considered that a study exploring this topic can offer a series of answers concerning the reasons for the consumption and impact of this type of cultural products on a society that is spatially and culturally more “distant” from the environment in which they were initially imagined and produced.

### Statistical data

In the case of Romania, statistically speaking, the “sageuk” television series’ reach used to and still considerably exceeds the general reach of the television station that broadcast them – TVR1<sup>7</sup>. Thus, between November 11, 2009 and April 4, 2010, the general reach of the public television station was 1.37. In the same time interval, the reach of the two Korean television series broadcast by the main station of the public television were 3.70 (“Storm at the palace”) and 3.21 (“The secrets at the palace”).

Moreover, on a closer analysis, taking into consideration only the urban reach we noticed a constant increase in the number of persons viewing this type of television series:

Figure 1  
The reach of the television series “Storm at the palace” (November 2009-February 2010) – Urban reach

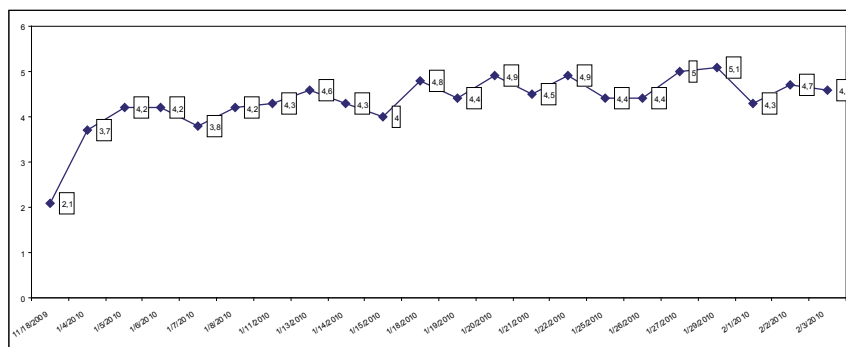
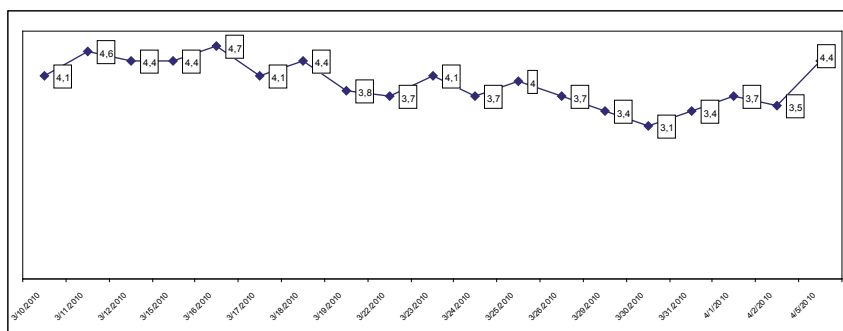


Figure 2  
The reach of the television series “The secrets at the palace” (March 2010-April 2010) – Urban reach



Thus we notice that the statistical data concerning the general urban reach of these television series in Romania indicated an average urban reach of 4.2 over the interval November 11, 2009-April 4, 2010 with a “peak” of 5.1 and a minimum of 2.1 of this general rating indicator.

### The data set, the variables and the research hypotheses

The methodology used in this article consists in aggregation of the research methods applied to the same set of data. From a strictly methodological point of view, we chose the interview, discourse analysis and virtual ethnography. Thus, we started from the fundamental presupposition that discourse analysis is a method that helped us identify how social identity is reconstructed through language – in the direction indicated by Sweeney (2003) and Sancho (2003). We chose the method of interview, in communication the definition of this research method being that of (Asa Berger, 2000: 111):

‘...a conversation – interaction between a researcher (someone/a person that wishes to have information) and an informant (someone/a person that probably has the important and necessary information in order to find the answer to the issue being researched).’

From the variety of types of interviews, we opted for the semi-structured interview (Asa Berger, 2000: 111-112), in which case we considered that there might be an average level of control of the interviewing situation. The reason for this choice derived from the fundamental characteristic associated with this type of interview: the researcher is interested in gaining a deeper knowledge of a par-

ticular field or in identifying the development stages of an already known field, through a “list of questions.” On this list, the general topics of the interview are determined beforehand, but the order in which they can be approached is free and the categories inside these topics are not fixed. What matters in this case is the much higher level of structuring of the sequences of answers to the questions. This time, the role of the researcher is that of proposing specific topics of discussion which are not approached freely, spontaneously but directionally, following a pre-established logic.

The sample projected and obtained as a part of the research project is one of “inductive type” (Crabtree, Miller 1992: 41). More precisely, the sampling schema used in our research project was “purpose-based,” its main characteristic – according to specialized literature (Black, 1999: 118) – being that of enabling the choice of subjects based on “specific characteristics”. In our particular case, “the criterion” used in the selection of subjects being their appurtenance to a specific social group – the viewers of the Korean television series broadcast by station of the Romanian public television (TVR1). The analysed sample consisted of twenty interviews concluded on the basis of a semi-structured interview guide.

The second method of analysis used was discourse analysis of discussions related to these television series on three Romanian Internet forums on Asian films and culture<sup>8</sup>. Thus, we started from Fairclough’s thesis (2001) which linked the employment of language to power and ideology and we considered that language is both a social product and an evolutionary process (Fairclough, 2001).

### **Data analysis**

The fundamental presupposition of the research project was the existence of a set of values transmitted through Korean “sageuk” television series, values which can be found among the viewers of this type of products of “Hallyu” culture.

The analysis of the interviews we carried revealed the predominance -- in the interviewees -- of a set of “spiritual” values, opposed to “material” values.



**Box 1 The explanation of personal choices of values**

- S10 The values that best represent me are those at the end of the list, meaning those related to the way in which I perceive the world around me – a world full of beauty, a wide and varied perspective of the world – but also the way in which one relates to others in society daily – politely, etc. As to my inner state – it is just as important; thus, since I am a person who believes in God and in eternal life, the world peace and national security topics are less important to me.
- S4 The values that best represent me are those who respond to some needs, inner needs. The awareness of a spiritual purpose draws the need of spiritual fulfilment; the man-woman love is important because it is identified with happiness in the concrete level of existence.

(Source: the set of interviews we conducted)

The analysed Internet forums also revealed the identification of the participants with a “spiritualist” set of values opposed to the daily “materialism” commiserated over by the participants in the online debates.

**Box 2 Personal values expressed online**

- mi Love is when you would give up your honour, your prestige, your fortune and your life for the person you love. Love is when you make your life an altar for the loved one. L means to die for every tear and come to life again with every smile of your loved one. Love means to go to the hell and come back for his/her sake. Under no circumstance does it mean pride-driven subjugation. Love gives but never asks.

(Source: Discussions about television series on Forum “1”)

At the same time, in the case of self-definition, most of the interviewed subjects placed first hierarchically “the harmony of the self,” “wisdom,” the existence of a feeling of security both at the micro-group (family) and general level (nation) and the belief in “eternal life.”

The “decoding” of general values of the viewed television series indicated that subjects identified in the Korean series “axiological” elements close or similar to personal values.



**Box 3 The identification of the main values transmitted through Korean television series**

S16 First of all I like most the moral values it promotes – courage, virtue, honesty, strength of character.

S8 The script is commercial, but profound values and views are diffused through it. Eternal values: generosity, honour, justice, profound love, refinement, desire of knowledge.

(Source: the set of interviews we conducted)

Thus, the interviewees indicated the existence of values from a common spiritual “family” – “virtue,” “honesty,” “the feeling of love,” “integrity,” “respect,” “loyalty” – in the Korean television series’ script etc.

**Box 4 Correspondence between personal values and the valued decoded in the Korean television series**

S3 Integrity, honour and truth are the values that I care most about, and the characters’ struggle to prove the truth is similar to what I would do in a similar situation.

S15 Yes, because truth and justice predominate in these television series.

S7 In every television series I find some value that defines or is characteristic to me. It is a bit more difficult to identify the similarities and differences; it is just that the Korean television series’ topics attract me more than the others.

S20 Certainly there is a correspondence between some themes I identified and the values that are most important to me – loyalty, respect for the others, wisdom are values that matter just as much to me as to the main characters in these television series, although these values are presented at a much higher spiritual level than in my own case.

(Source: the set of interviews we conducted)

This similarity is present also in the analysed online discussions, the participants in the virtual dialogues placing an emphasis on the identification of values and themes of interest for themselves in the viewed historical television series.

**Box 5 Values that are common with those presented by Korean television series**

Al S I viewed the tvr television series from the half onwards and I was so captivated that I searched the first episodes on YT in order to better understand the action. I can say that it is a marvellous series, very well directed and played by the actors. But my heart was conquered by Bidam (an exceptional play, a delightful performance). Why? Out of the numerous reasons, I can only say that.... perhaps because he is the most humane character. Each of us wants in life a little bit of affection, a little bit of attention and appreciation from others. Who of us did not make also less inspired decisions? Who did not invest feelings and trust in people who then disappointed him?

mi The wish of Jangeum, the little girl in the television series “Jewel in the Palace” to learn to write and her power to continue to learn as much as possible helped her many times in life, even saving her from death many times. This nuance in the series should be a message to follow for many Romanian youth not to abandon school, because only by learning as much as possible will they be able to make a better life for themselves.

(Source: Discussions related to television series on Forum “1” and Forum “2”)

The information dimension was the most important axis which represented the core reason for viewing the sageuk series broadcast by the Romanian national television. More precisely, the set of interviews we conducted indicated the existence of a share of knowledge about this cultural-geographic space. The overwhelming majority of the interviewees stated that when they started viewing the first episode of these television dramas they had minimum knowledge about Asian culture, history and civilization.

**Box 6 General knowledge about Asia and Korea**

- S6 In general I do not know too many things about the culture or history of Asian peoples. In faculty, we had our courses in the Korean language room and there they had a few magazines in English about their culture. I know that Japan, just like South Korea is a very powerful state from an economic point of view, a state that was literally reborn from the ashes after World War II and that in less than a century became a country that is extremely developed from all points of view. I don't know much about North Korea's history other than the fact that it separated itself from South Korea, being under Communist regime; from an economic point of view, they are completely different. So, I believe that these two countries are prototypes for what is happening on the Asian continent – on the one hand there are very developed countries such as Japan, but also China, and on the other, there are countries that have an anachronous development, where the poverty and unemployment rates are very high. I also know that in Thailand, trafficking in persons is a very widespread practice. From the point of view of culture and civilization, Asian countries do not lack anything – they have specific architecture, sculpture, gastronomy, etc.; but which are increasingly more influenced by modernization.
- S15 What I know is that the country has a long history and an almost identical culture with the Chinese and Japanese cultures; South Korea occupies the southern part of the Korea Peninsula in Eastern Asia and in particular landscapes are impressive.
- S18 Although I like their culture, I know very little. I know that they are pretty developed financially, Japan being among the first three world economic powers. Korea, a small country, but full of values, traditions; they have a pretty attractive history in the sense that they left many teachings, monuments, landscape attractions, etc.

(Source: the set of interviews we conducted)

The general informative function and the educational function exercised by media with Korean historical television series is obvious also in the case of the participants in the discussions on the Internet forums on these series:

**Box 7** **Television series as a source of new information about Korea and Asia**

- sa It is an extraordinary series. Thanks to the two Korean television series broadcast by tvr, my interest for this area of the world suddenly increased.
- mi Korean historical television series – besides presenting us an unknown world of the stormy history of the Korean people in the Middle Ages – it offers us a detailed image of the various occupations such as culinary art, painting, various crafts, the army’s organization, education and others.
- a81 “Yi San” was the first Korean series I viewed, although not from the first episode. I can say that it was the foundation on which my new passion for Korean television series, films and OST [original soundtracks] was based. Even their language seems interesting to me so I started looking for some materials on the Internet and so far I have learned most of the alphabet, I can count, I know the days of the week, the months of the year and a few ordinary phrases, anyway, something for beginners. “kamsahamnida” (Thank You).
- flor sca An extraordinary film with wonderful actors who not only gained my heart, but also entered my soul and opened my heart to Korean films and to Asian culture about which I did not know too many things (to my shame).

(Source: Discussions about television series on Forum “1” and Forum “3”)

According to the answers received as part of the set of interviews we conducted and to the online discussions on the forums about these television series, the defining traits of the Korean popular culture products broadcast by the Romanian Public Television are the “historical” character, “the complexity” but also “the surprise” in the sense of “unexpected,” different from what was presupposed initially.

**Box 8 Defining the characteristics specific to Korean television series**

- S12 American television series – materialism; South-American – telenovela; Romanian – autochthonous; European – strange; Turkish – semi-exotic; Korean – history;
- S14 American television series – money; South-American, Turkish, Romanian television series – love; Korean television series – popular culture (historical);
- S6 American television series – silly; South-American television series – ridiculous; Romanian – embarrassing; European – it depends; Turkish – imitations; Korean – surprising;
- S9 American television series – endless; South-American television series – exaggerated; Romanian television series – kitsch; European television series – boring; Turkish series – unrealistic; Korean series – complex;

(Source: the set of interviews we conducted)

Obviously, the combination between the “exotic” (“unexpected,” “surprising”) nature and the appeal to perennial cultural elements (such as specific history) is the main characteristic emphasized by the participants in the analysed online dialogues.

**Box 9 The characteristics specific to the viewed Korean television series**

mi the Romanian television hit us in the head with these series. after the American inflation – of films – after the deluge of “telemenele” (i.e. telenovelas) it showed us that there is also something else. I discovered Korean series by accident.

kam15 I view the TVR1 series and it is fascinating, we can see something other than the films across the ocean (films which are practically suffocating us), which are full of negative influences and lies.

(Source: Discussions about television series on Forum “1” and Forum “2”)

**Conclusions**

Following an extremely general analysis of the collected data, the empirical data analysed demonstrated that the main element motivating the Romanian public’s viewing of Korean television series is value. Thus, both the interviewees in our sample and the discourse analysis of the discussions forums about these se-

ries revealed a common set of personal values in the axiological and thematic “constellation” of the viewed Sageuk dramas. Belonging especially to a spiritual register, they group these series’ viewers in a specific typology that we can call “balanced- normative.”

In terms of narration, Korean series viewed tell a unique story, their script being interpreted by the viewers as a mixture of “exoticism” (“unexpected,” “surprising” for the public) and the insertion of values belonging to a general human cultural fund. Thus, we witness an illustration of the “glocalism” of these cultural products, evidenced also by other analyses of the phenomenon (Chan, J. M., Ma, E. K. w., 1996; Cho H. J., 2005; Dator, J., Y. Seo, 2004).

“The stories” told by the script of “Sageuk” dramas were “read” by the Romanian viewers as a narration combining the unique Korean cultural values with a set of universal values, which ensured their global, world success. Thus, we witnessed the confirmation of the theory of “uses and gratifications associated to the consumption of media messages” (McQuail, 1993: 73).

Given the absence of information “background” about consumed cultural products (Korean television series) we can state that in this specific case we are witnessing the practical confirmation of Liebes and Katz’s theories (Katz, Liebes 1985: 188) concerning the cultural reasons involved in media consumption.

If we agree with St. Hall (1996: 617) that “modern narrations are all cultural hybrids,” we can conclude that the success of Korean cultural products is based on their “glocalization.” Accepting the hybridism of this type of cultural products can thus help us understand more precisely the term of “authenticity” and the term of cultural and social “purity.”

## Notes

- 1 The research was possible with the financial support of the Academy of Korean Studies – AKS – that granted me a senior research fellowship for the academic year 2011.
- 2 In this case, we are speaking of the so-called “Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty” covering 500 years of Korean history. Currently, efforts are being made for the digitization of the archive, available at <http://sillok.history.go.kr/main/main.jsp>.

- 3 Another reason for this change is the enormous work necessary for a close study of the official historical documents existing in Korea. The so-called “Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty” – on which most of the Korean historical dramas are based – included hundreds of volumes wrote mainly in Chinese characters (“Hanja”) which would have necessitated a titanic work to translate and adapt into modern Korean.
- 4 This is the period when extremely long series of hundreds of episodes are produced and broadcast in Korea, for instance: “500 years of Chosŏn (a series of over 800 episodes split into 11 distinct series), “Han Myung Hwi,” “Jang Nok Soo,” “Tears of the Dragon,” “King of the Wind,” “Im Ggeok Jung.”
- 5 Korean television stations that produced and broadcast historical series faced at the end of the 1990s unexpected competition from “romantic” dramas, which laid an emphasis on a script adapted to youth and whose cast included many attractive actors.
- 6 “Daejanggeum” was the first Sageuk drama broadcast in Romania, in 2009.
- 7 The television series broadcast up to now by the Romanian television were the following – in chronological order – “Jewel in the Palace,” “Storm at the Palace – Yi San,” “Damo – the History of the Beautiful Warrior,” “Secrets at the Palace” and “The Legends of the Palace – Physician Hur Jun.”
- 8 The three forums analyzed were: the forum “Asia Cinema Lover” (<http://seriale-coreene.forumgratuit.ro/index.htm>); the forum “Korean television series” (<http://seriale-coreene.forumgratuit.ro/index.htm>) and the forum “Septokcoreea” (<http://septokorea.webs.com/>). For reasons related to reasearch deontology, the forums will be refered to in the text by codes, as follows: code “1” – the “Asia Cinema Lover” forum; code “2” – the “Korean television series”; code “3” - “Septokcoreea” forum.



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