

Leila Senegri (HSPS) – Seoul and Tokyo (December 2016-January 2017)

I have always had an interest in Korean and Japanese history and culture. More recently, I have become engrossed by Korean popular culture, particularly 'k-pop' music and television programmes. The purpose of my travel was to try to see why and how, reflecting a global peak in interest in Korean culture, people around the world are now engrossed by Korean media, 'Hallyu' (or, the 'Korean Wave'). Some key ideas I am interested in observing and exploring for use in my third-year dissertation are digital media, television, the Internet, race/ethnicity, language, tradition, history, advertising, and beauty. While travelling, I looked at how this growing obsession roots itself in contemporary Korean society, and how this continues to dominate despite domestic political problems.

I also travelled to Japan to see how the influence of Korean popular culture is distinct. Korean artists experience mass popularity in Japan (and China), and it was interesting to see how popular Korean pop stars are used in advertising campaigns for Japanese brands and companies. It is interesting to think about how global ideas about East Asian identity have changed with this growth in fascination about Korea. Korean culture has been bolstered, now globally recognised as unique and enchanting, cosmopolitan and consumable, not simply a comparison to North Korea, and more than just Samsung. It is also now seen as distinct from other East Asian cultures, which is interesting. My main observations were that Hallyu plays a huge part in Korean culture, for Koreans and foreigners. A key example of this was seen a special duty-free mall in Dongdaemun, targeted at tourists. The mall advertised popular actor Song Joong-Ki, who appeared in promotions on every floor, such as with life-size cut outs. The 2016 K-drama 'Descendants of the Sun' was a massive pan-Asian hit, and an entire floor had reconstructions of scenes, and a shop with merchandise, targeted at fans.

I am also fascinated by how the growth in interest of Korean culture intersects with race, ethnicity, language and gender. Ranging from Korean cultural exhibitions in Tunisia, to the largest Korean music convention being held in Abu-Dhabi, Korean culture is incredibly popular in the Middle East and North Africa, with music concerts waiting until after Muslim fans broke their fasts during Ramadan to begin, and many fans reading and writing homo-erotic fiction about their favourite stars, against socio-cultural ideas in the region. Additionally, hip-hop and rap music is growing in Korea, and there is great cross-over with American and Korean hip-hop artists. Language is important here, as Korean rappers often use American slang in their music. As well as this, performativity is important – streetwear is incredibly popular in Korea, with artists playing a key role in performing identities that, in the West, are considered 'urban', and intersect with class, race and region. The intersection I observed regarding gender is the use of male stars to advertise products targeted at women, such as makeup and skincare. The use of popular band EXO by Nature Republic has been a success, with many foreign fans flocking to the stores to purchase hand creams and blotting papers with the artists' faces on them.

Overall, this trip allowed me to, from a sociological and digital/media anthropology perspective, look at the formation of the Korean Wave, and how its place in contemporary Korean society is important, and how it has become an international phenomenon.