Hallyu and Strategic Interpretation of Malaysian Modernity among Young Malay Women

Md Azalanshah Md Syed
University of Malaya, Malaysia
Seung-Ho Kwon
University of New South Wales, Australia

Abstract

The growing popularity of South Korean popular culture, known as Hallyu (Korean Wave), among young Malay women since the early 2000s has become the latest focus of debate and discussion with respect to its impact on the development of modernity in Malaysia. In this context, there has been little qualitative inquiry into how Hallyu influences the development of modernity among its female supporters. Through in-depth interviews with 10 young female Hallyu fans in Malaysia, this study examines how increased transcultural competence through Hallyu shapes the construction and manifestation of modern femininity among Malay women. Findings show that young Malay women use strategies of negotiation in their interpretation of Malaysian modernity and transcultural influences, which allow them to not only strengthen their identity as Muslim women but also actively engage in the development of modern femininity. From these findings, the study suggests that Hallyu, as a mediated cultural force, may alter the implications of cultural globalization in Malaysia.

Key words

Malaysian modernity, Hallyu, modern femininity, Malay women, Tudung

Introduction

In Malaysia, popular culture is an important element in the context of everyday...
life. The establishment of the government-owned national television broadcasting station in 1963 pioneered the process of producing popular culture texts that complemented government efforts in developing and modernizing the country. Along with privatization policies implemented in a range of government sectors to boost economic growth, the introduction of private broadcasting stations was the first step in the materialization of profit-driven broadcast entertainment in Malaysia (Badarudin, 1997). Starting from the emergence of TV3 in 1983, it has successfully changed the country’s broadcasting landscape, whose primary mission was to deliver government messages regarding the country’s development and the process of modernization.

In particular, the government’s adoption of the Look East Policy in 1982 has allowed popular content from Asian countries to be widely aired on local television (Wahab, 2006). Launched by former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohammad, the Look East Policy has been an important Malaysian foreign policy initiative, embodying the country’s aim of becoming an industrialized country by emulating the economic success and work culture of East Asian countries, particularly Japan, whilst moving away from western dominance (Amarthalingam, 2018). During the 1990s, this policy then led to the rise of an “Asian values” discourse, which attributes Asian success to Asian cultural values (in contrast with “Western values”). Along with the growing maturity in dialogue on the Look East Policy and Asian values, Prime Minister Mahathir launched “Vision 2020” in 1991, a new national development plan, which contains a national aspiration to become a fully developed nation in Malaysia’s own way.

This national vision has exerted enormous influence over various fields, including popular culture. In a country whose population is over 60 percent Muslim, popular content imported from the West was criticized for damaging the moral system and behavior of the Malay, especially among local youth (Halim, 2007; Lin & Tong, 2008). Non-Western popular culture, in contrast, has been regarded by the government as being more appropriate and consistent with the national vision of achieving national modernity as well as having similarities with Malay society in terms of cultural and social backgrounds (Syed, 2011). In the 1990s and early 2000s, the government began to take active steps by encouraging private television stations to import more popular content from non-Western countries in order to create a balance with the inflow of American-dominated Western-cultural texts (John, Damis, & Chelvi, 2003). This move has had a profound effect on the inflow of popular cultural texts from non-Western countries, including Japan, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and South
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Biographical Note: Md Azalanshah Md Syed is an Associate Professor and the current Head of Media and Communication Studies Department, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University Malaya. His research interests are Asian popular culture, women studies and youth. His work has appeared in various high impacts academic journals including Asian Women, Gender Place and Culture, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Journal of Consumer Culture and Asian Journal of Communication. E-mail: azalan@um.edu.my

Biographical Note: Seung-Ho Kwon is the Executive Director of the Korea Research Institute (KRI) at the University of New South Wales. His research interests include state and economic development, cultural industry and public-sector reform. Seung-Ho has co-authored several monographs including The Chaebol and Labour in Korea: The Development of Management Strategy in Hyundai (Routledge) and The Global Korean Motor Industry (Routledge Curzon). E-mail: s.kwon@unsw.edu.au