


## [Oppenheim on Lee and Mehta and Ku, 'Pop Empires: Transnational and Diasporic Flows of India and Korea'](#)

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**S. Heijin Lee, Monika Mehta, Robert Ji-Song Ku, eds.** *Pop Empires: Transnational and Diasporic Flows of India and Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019. 360 pp. \$30.00 (paper), [ISBN](#)

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**Reviewed by** Robert Oppenheim (University of Texas at Austin) **Published on** H-Asia (July, 2021)  
**Commissioned by** Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

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### **Oppenheim on Lee, *Pop Empires: Transnational and Diasporic Flows of India and Korea***

The popularity and transnational reach of Indian popular media, most centrally Bollywood and regional Indian cinemas, have been subject to a great deal of academic attention. Somewhat more recently, Hallyu, or the “Korean Wave(s)” of film, drama, K-pop, and gaming has likewise drawn growing interest. Owing to the effects of area and linguistic specialization, however, the two transnational media formations have rarely been considered together within a single scholarly frame. *Pop Empires* sets out to correct this. In its introduction, its editors work through a slightly unnecessary meditation on India and (South) Korea’s apparent cultural-gastronomic distance, a straw thesis to which either Buddhism or curry rice might be sufficient response, before arriving at the far more salient point that the two share histories of “colonialism, independence, war, partition, nationhood, postcoloniality, modernity, democracy, transnationalism, diaspora, and neoliberalism” (p. 4). Neither Bollywood nor Hallyu simply mimic US popular media (p. 2); as they move throughout the globe, both articulate with the identities and desires of different groups in different national settings and often offer a resource for contrast to locally dominant forms of culture (p. 7). In foregrounding these sorts of transnational conjuncture, the editors ally their volume with perspectives in Asian American, transpacific, and Asian regional studies that are meant to overcome the methodological nationalism of area studies approaches.

Were it only so easy: the pull of area studies scholarship is not lightly denied. On its own implicit terms, one failure condition of a project such as that of *Pop Empires* occurs if readers initially invested in either South Korean or Indian media scholarship are not given sufficient incentive to read across the divide that the volume seeks to bridge, in which case the book risks devolving into two parallel collections of chapters, possibly excellent in themselves, assembled within the same covers. In other words, it is not enough to assert or even demonstrate that Indian and Korean transnational media are comparable—it is necessary also to show the profit in their comparison with enough vigor that even the most dyed-in-the-wool academic Bollywood and K-pop aficionados will see the value in venturing beyond their respective lanes. To their immense credit, the editors of *Pop Empires* grasp this challenge and mostly rise to it. They avoid the obvious pitfall of arranging the chapters into Indian and Korean sections, as well as somewhat less obvious hazards of, for instance, segregating

gender as a separable topic. Instead, the sixteen chapters of the volume, roughly evenly divided overall in their consideration of Korean and Indian phenomena, are arranged into four broadly thematic parts, each of which begins with a short section introduction that does integrative work. I especially appreciated the introduction to the second part of the volume, “Relocating Stardom,” which outlines semiotic and materialist approaches within “star studies” before posing the organizing question of how theorizations of stardom mostly derived through Hollywood examples are “both generative and limiting” for considering fame within Korean and Indian transnational media (p. 90). The introduction to the third section, “(Not) Crossing Over,” provides a useful synopsis of a complex landscape in which Bollywood and Hallyu aim for new global fans even as Hollywood attempts to expand its Asian audience, with various interventions by states and capital propelling these dynamics.

When it comes to the individual chapter contributions, however, the verdict is more mixed. Some, certainly, more or less explicitly address and contribute to the comparative aims of *Pop Empires* as a whole. Others, however fine their scholarship, leave rather more of the work of making connections or extracting portable analytics to readers, or in a few cases are so internal to Korean or Indian media developments that they offer few obvious affordances. Certainly among the positive standouts are those several chapters that directly link India and South Korea or consider processes in both locations. Samhita Sunya follows the shooting of portions of Anurag Basu’s film *Gangster* in Seoul, a development that owed much to South Korean policies inviting to external film producers and that in turn spurred some amount of Indian cine-tourism to the Korean metropolis. For Sunya, the “utopian” recounting of global cultural exchange embodied in narratives of *Gangster*’s making stands in ironic juxtaposition with the “dystopian vision of the global city” (p. 196) as interchangeable conrescence of faceless neoliberal capital that the film’s “global noir” (p. 202) plot implies. Jane Chi Hyun Park considers US and Indian remakes of the Korean gender comedy *Yeopgijeogin Geunyeo*, following the way in which its situationally specific “fantasy of rebellious young Korean femininity” (p. 241)—the “monstrous girlfriend” as Park puts it or the “sassy girl” with which the Korean title is usually translated (p. 227)—mostly failed to connect with other audiences. Park’s contribution is a call to attend to crossover failures and enthusiasms lost in translation as especially productive foci for transnational media research. Monika Mehta and Lisa Patti offer an important, if necessarily provisional, mapping of the distribution of video products in the digital age, examining how South Korean, Indian, and US films and shows are respectively positioned on the streaming sites Netflix, DramaFever, Eros Entertainment, and Viki. Roald Maliangkay, finally, closes the volume with a somewhat elegiac retrospective look at the “lost art of cinema billboards” in India and South Korea (p. 303), one which both draws on interviews with billboard artists and considers the past site-specificity of the viewing experience that the regime of billboards helped underscore.

Meanwhile, among the majority of the chapters that limit themselves either to Indian or to Korean material, some, like Erica Vogel’s on K-pop in Mexico, stand out as a demonstration of what is possible. Vogel makes the important point that for many Mexican fans, engagement with K-pop is in part about a Mexican youth project of being generically global rather than some specific Korean content; the question she raises is readily translatable to the consumption of other traveling media in other global contexts. S. Heijin Lee’s chapter on PSY as trickster figure and Praseeda Gopinath’s on the *chichora* (“vulgar, depraved, [or] over-the-top,” p. 123) masculinity of the star Ranveer Singh likewise virtually invite the reader to imagine comparisons. New pairings of chapters across the section divisions of the volume are also easy to discover. Dredge Byung’chu Kang-Nguyen’s chapter on the resonance of the “soft” masculinities of K-pop with female-bodied Thai *toms* (pp. 22-23), from

part 1, and Layoung Shin's on K-pop as a resource for the creation of "new female masculinity" in South Korea (p. 155), from part 2, present clear parallels, for example. If certain other chapters are locked into their phenomena to a degree that made me wish that the common injunction to write toward the project had been enforced a bit more vigorously, that is perhaps the price of the innovative move that the volume overall represents. In whole or in part, *Pop Empires* deserves wide use in the burgeoning field of transnational media studies.

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