

Flying High: An Analysis of Cultural Essentialism in BTS' *Wings*

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BTS



Hallyu

Hallyu, or the rapid rise of Korean pop culture worldwide, began in 1997. With more freedom in media and advancements in communication technology such as satellite, cable, and the Internet, South Korea could more extensively promote their cultural products. After Hallyu 1.0, a second surge in South Korean popularity began in 2008: Hallyu 2.0. According to Jin Dal Yong, 4 factors differentiate the two eras:

- 1) South Korean exports > South Korean imports
- 2) South Korea exported nearly all cultural forms
- 3) The rise of social media allowed for fandom and universal access to such cultural products
- 4) The South Korean government implemented more "hands-on" policies regarding global trade.



Link to YouTube playlist



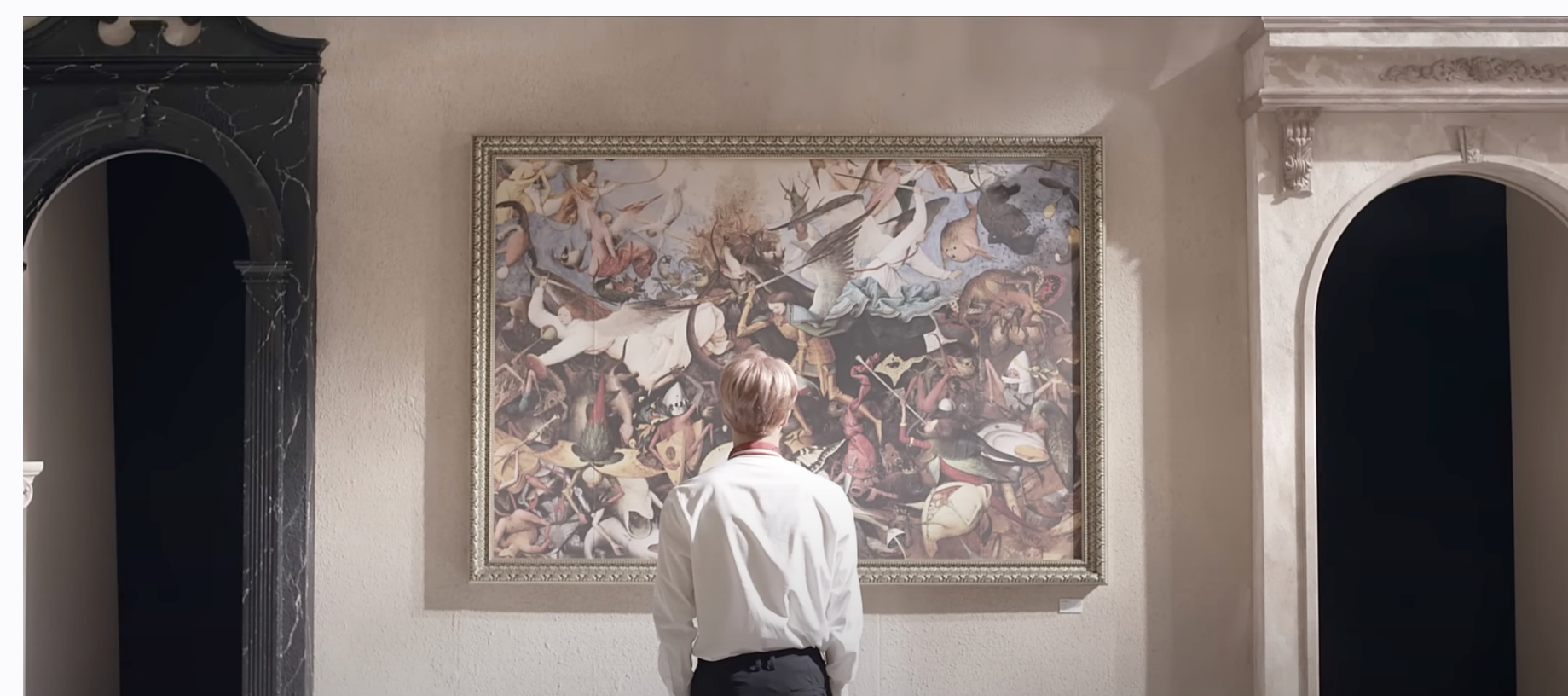
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Introduction

In 2016, South Korean K-Pop group **BTS** released their album *Wings*, which included their hit song "Blood Sweat and Tears." Shortly after, BTS became the first South Korean artist to win a Billboard Music Award, marking their official entry into the Western music industry. *Wings*, inspired by Western influences such as the novel *Demian* and Greek mythology, blends cultural references to illustrate BTS' successes and criticisms associated with crossing cultural boundaries. As a part of **Hallyu** (Korean Wave), BTS' success in the West highlights the exportation of South Korean culture as a form of **soft power**. The popularity and permanence of BTS' work thus questions how Hallyu influences Western society's perceptions of South Korea and their cultural relationship.



WINGS



Wings parallels BTS' transition from youthful innocence to good vs. evil with their rise from being a localized group to a global phenomenon. From this sudden rise comes their subsequent fear of falling: the consequences of crossing cultural boundaries.

Due to Western cultural references and their recent shift toward English lyrics, media outlets and fans have criticized BTS for being "less Korean" or for catering to Western expectations. Conversely, the reason often cited for why BTS does not get much radio play in America compared to other musicians is because they are "too Korean," suggesting that such music is perceived as inferior to Western pop music. This debate over being Korean enough calls into question:

What defines the 'K' in K-Pop?

Soft Power

South Korea exports its cultural forms as a means of promoting their cultural values and aesthetics. *Soft power*, coined by Joseph Nye, is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion, arising out of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies." When a country produces items that are attractive to foreign consumers, their culture becomes desirable. Through this understanding of South Korea's political and cultural significance within the U.S., K-Pop is viewed not just as a catchy genre of music but also as a bridge between Korean production and American consumerism.



Identity

BTS serves as the cultural ambassador of South Korea due to their influence on American pop culture. But how can the South Korean government market their cultural products as *authentic* if such exports blend Korean-ness with non-Korean influences? By making BTS the image of South Korean culture, BTS' artistic identity becomes a national identity, both of which are constantly changing. If this is how South Korea wants non-Koreans to view their culture, then what is Korean and what is not?

BTS challenges essentialism as an approach to understanding identity, and the global reach of their music and Hallyu demonstrates the deterritorialization of Korean culture and identity.

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