

# K-wave course for undergrads

Tertiary institutions here are offering formal lessons on how popular culture is produced, distributed and consumed

Gwendolyn Ng

Undergraduate David Kim, 24, openly watches Korean dramas in class. He is not being defiant. He is watching them for his studies - and he is South Korean.

The exchange student from Chung-ang University in Seoul is attending a course on the Korean Wave at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

"Though I'm from Korea, I want to understand the Korean wave from an objective, foreign perspective. The Koreans are very proud of Psy and BigBang, but this could be glorified back home. I am curious to know if the phenomenon is really that big," he says, referring to two of South Korea's biggest music stars.

With the meteoric rise of Korean pop culture, it was perhaps inevitable that the Hallyu, or Korean wave, would wash up on the shores of academia too.

This semester is the third time the Korean Wave course is being held at NTU since it started in 2014.

The Korean wave has also been covered as part of the Popular Culture In Asia course at Singapore Management University since 2013.

In 2014, National University of Singapore (NUS) students visited South Korea as part of a Korean pop culture summer programme. The 10-day trip to Seoul and Jeju Island included a visit to the film set of K-drama You Are All Surrounded and a talk by producer Lee Eun, known for the 2012 hit movie Architecture 101.

Dr Jung Sun, who led the NUS excursion, says: "Korean pop culture has become a significant part of cultural consumption and lifestyle in the region."

Students are keen to learn more about the Korean wave in formal lessons, says Dr Jung, 43, who left NUS earlier this year and is now a full-time writer.

NTU undergraduate Melissa Teo's interest in K-pop and K-indie music acts such as Girls' Generation and rapper Zion.T had her signing up for Korean language lessons and the Korean wave course.

Ms Teo, 22, says: "Lectures are not a bore. We get to watch Coffee Prince, a K-drama, as well as SM



Entertainment's concert documentary I Am.

"The course curriculum is no less demanding than others. We have to do academic readings and the past examination scripts that I have seen aren't easy to tackle. But I find the course less taxing because I have an interest in the topic."

Dr Brenda Chan, 42, who teaches the course at SMU, says her students are interested to understand the "historical, political, economic and social contexts in which popular culture is produced, distributed and consumed".

She adds: "I tell the students that my course is not a course on trivia. I am not interested in whether they can remember all the names of the

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NTU UNDERGRADUATE MELISSA TEO

members in K-pop boybands. In university, we study and analyse popular culture with academic theories and concepts."

Class discussions range from the global marketing strategies of Korean talent agencies to the evolution of the K-pop sound.

NTU assistant professor Liew Kai Khiun, 43, decided to dedicate an entire course to the Korean wave because he felt there was value in letting students contemplate the "soft power" radiating from the entertainment powerhouse.

He says that the development of a country's soft power is of particular importance to small countries such as Singapore, which "need to punch above its weight to survive".

Dr Liew, who watches the latest K-dramas Descendants Of The Sun and Signal for leisure and research purposes, says: "From an early age, Singaporean students have been taught that military and economic strength are measurements of a country's survival. As much as this is undeniable, would it not be healthier to be loved, as what the Koreans are feeling at the moment, rather than instilling an unhealthy fear and paranoia."

"I hope that through the Korean Wave, Singapore students can reflect on the types of cultural resources and ingredients to create and project such soft power."

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NTU assistant professor Liew Kai Khiun (extreme right) with his students who are taking a course dedicated to exploring the Korean Wave.  
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