8 From K-Pop to Z-Pop

The Pan-Asian Production, Consumption, and Circulation of Idols

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Seven girls elegantly walk toward a large, magnificent door. Light pours onto their anticipating faces as the door opens to reveal a small box. A girl opens the small box and beholds a shiny, silver medallion in her bejeweled hands. Engraved in a futuristic font with the letter Z, this round object is revealed as the source of emanating light. Beats and colors roll in to the dynamic tempo of Z-Girls' debut song, "What You Waiting For"; the camera cuts to juxtaposition between two sequences – close-ups of each girl holding fresh flowers up to her face in bright light, and the girls dancing in a synchronized formation to sleek backdrops of an indoor set. They are the Z-Girls: Bell, Queen, Vanya, Priyanka, Carlyn, Mahiro, and Joanne, who won the first season of *Z-POP Dream*, a 2018 pan-Asian audition competition televised and held across seven countries from which each member respectively hails: Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, India, the Philippines, Japan, and Taiwan. Under the combined name "Z-Stars," the seven Z-Girls and seven Z-Boys – their equally transnational male counterparts – made their official South Korea debut in February 2019 with a sizable concert at Seoul's Jamsil Arena, featuring as guests the prominent K-pop stars A.Pink, Monsta X, Rain, and Chungha. While the South Korean media primarily took note of the Z-stars as curiosity K-pop acts "with no Korean members," more welcome awaited the groups in Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines in March 2019 showcases; Vietnam's POPS Worldwide even awarded them the "Best Idol Debut Award" for the year. Later that year, Zenith Media Contents (ZMC), their former management agency,[1] held the second season of *Z-POP Dream* auditions in Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and India.

The Z-Girls released their music video of "What You Waiting For" on February 21, 2019; it had garnered 8.1 million views on YouTube by March 2021, making it the most popular song by Z-stars.[2] The stylish up-tempo number is also a transnational endeavor, written by Japanese songwriter Kanata Okajima, English songwriter Abi F Jones, and Swedish producer Dejo. Its music video features the visual and auditory formula familiar to a

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trained K-pop audience – catchy riffs and hooks, organized choreography, sartorial style, elaborate camera work, and computer-generated graphics – with one major difference: the girls sing entirely in English. At a press show in Seoul's Gangnam district in August 2019, Jun Kang, the founder and executive producer of ZMC, revealed that the issue of language was indeed a major hurdle for Z-Girls and Z-Boys in trying to break into the K-pop industry. In an interview with *Korea JoongAng Daily*, Kang said that K-pop music shows refused to feature Z-Girls and Z-Boys on their programs: "I've been working in the industry for 30 years and have many connections, but music shows tell us that they want K-pop and Korean songs and that our groups don't fit in."[3] When asked about his vision for the two groups, Kang replied: "to create a K-pop project based on cultural exchanges with many countries."[4]

The 2010s saw K-pop's rapid globalization in the US-dominant international pop music industry; the World Economic Forum noted that K-pop's global revenue in 2016 reached $4.7 billion,[5] while the *New York Post* reported that BTS alone brought $3.6 billion a year to South Korea.[6] If the nascent era of *Hallyu* ("Korean Wave") of the early 2000s beckoned scholars and the general public alike to ask the ontological question, "What is K-pop?" by 2020, K-pop's transnational impact and niche within the global pop music industry had shifted the question to "What counts as K-pop?" or "*Who* gets to do K-pop?" An early controversial public debate on these questions came from the 2014 debut of EXP Edition, a "K-pop boy group" composed of four American men, three of them white-passing.[7] A most vehement criticism against EXP Edition came from American K-pop fans from the point of view of US racial politics, disappointed to witness "white men" take over yet another nonwhite, "niche" popular culture. And in April 2020, the first London-based K-pop girl group, KAACHI, debuted as an international, multiethnic group of four, managed by FrontRow Records, of the United Kingdom – generating perplexed reactions and debates about cultural appropriation from online K-pop fans on yet another K-pop act from the so-called First World. Such debate on "who gets to do K-pop," then, is more relevant now than ever. Alecsandra Tubiera of the *South China Morning Post* asks whether it is fair for anyone to determine the legitimacy of certain K-pop artists on the basis of their nationality.[8] I argue that the deeper issue underlying this debate has to do with complex tensions concerning inter-Asia politics, the rhetoric of technology (which is part and parcel of K-pop as a "Korean" cultural export), and the perceptions of a hierarchically racialized world ordered by the logic of global capitalism. This is evident in the anonymized comment section of Jun Kang's interview featured on the popular English-language K-pop blogs Allkpop and Kpopmap, where users questioned the

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fairness of how K-pop music shows seemed to allow only certain artists to be on K-pop music stages.

CHUCK_T: So they can have Christina Aguilera, Usher, Westlife on Inkigayo.. . . Lady Gaga on M Countdown . . . Ryan Reynolds on Masked Singer . . . Charlie Puth on Genie Music Awards and Janet Jackson on MAMA.. . . ALL these people "not Korean" but they have a problem with Z-Boys and Girls.

YEHN: Knetz [Korean internet users] are very ethnocentric. I wonder why they always use the term global girl/boy group but their mindset is not even global.[9]

"Chuck_T" on Allkpop pointed out how famous non-Korean-speaking Euro-American pop stars were invited to perform on numerous shows that rejected Z-Stars. Beyond the obvious fact that American media imperialism has considerable effect on the regional music markets in Asia, this comment allows us to rethink the exclusion of Z-Girls and Z-Boys from the shows as less about their foreignness per se than about their "minor" presence as South and Southeast Asians in the global hierarchy of racial capitalism, in which the export-oriented K-pop industry is imbricated. In other words, are Z-stars too "third world" for Korean television? "Yehn" on Kpopmap calls out the "ethnocentrism" of "Knetz," accusing domestic K-pop fans (rather than the industry personnel) for being proud of the "global" popularity of K-pop yet having a closed mindset in maintaining a purist definition of who counts as a K-pop artist in terms of race and ethnicity.

To be clear, the partial nature of anonymous online comment threads cautions us against assuming that such opinions are a majority voice of international K-pop fans; nor is there any substantial evidence that proves Korean internet users to be more "ethnocentric" than non-Korean ones. That said, these comments demonstrate that the K-pop industry's reluctance to accept Z-pop into its arena is an urgent yet underexplored subject, especially given that the K-pop industry famously touts globalization and transnationalism as signature qualities as it expands into the South and Southeast Asian markets. This strategy resonates with how Ingyu Oh redefines "glocalization" – from its original use as *dochakuka* (global localization), a buzzword in the 1980s Japanese business sector – as "high quality localization that is meant to be re-exported to other countries due to a small domestic market."[10] Lee Soo-man, the founding chair of one of K-pop's big companies, SM Entertainment, actively uses glocalization to make K-pop an international enterprise. SM Entertainment has been branding their K-pop enterprise as a system of cultural technology that combines recruiting idols across Asia and "re-localizing" them to the preferences of local consumers. This rhetoric of K-pop as technology has

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become their signature strategy to produce apparently multiethnic, multinational K-pop groups for markets in and beyond South Korea.

The prevalence of such glocalization, however, should not be mistakenly translated into a celebration of diversity. The K-pop music scene is a cutthroat neoliberal market, with far too many performers with far too short careers. Even those who become successful, Suk-Young Kim notes, have an "an extremely short life span, usually five years or so," due to the "high pressure of the industry that cultivates the insatiable appetite for newer and younger idols."[11] This, coupled with years of training and financial investment put into the idols-in-making, compels the industry to run on tested formulas of success in producing new idols. In other words, that an idol group has never been entirely non-Korean and primarily English-speaking and produced by a non-Korean management company is anomalous enough to make Z-stars instantly dubious as potential K-pop idols.

Z-pop fans' calling out what they perceive as the K-pop industry's hypocrisy, then, becomes a critical point of interrogation into where K-pop as well as K-pop studies stand in 2020, nearly a decade since PSY's "Gangnam Style" became a worldwide YouTube sensation in 2012. Globalization positions its subjects in a system of hierarchies, whose logic "materializes in a worldwide grid of strategic places" to form what Saskia Sassen called a new geography of centrality and marginality.[12] This geography certainly informs K-pop's relationship to American pop and U.S. media imperialism, as K-pop scholars have analyzed in the past decade, from PSY to BTS – most recently in the nuanced interrogations of K-pop's fraught relationship with Black American culture.[13] But it also informs K-pop's – and by proxy, South Korea's – status as a neo-imperial cultural hegemon in relation to the regional markets across Asia, often overlooked as "peripheral" to the "metropoles" in the globalization grid. Zooming in on the significance of South and Southeast Asian performers in K-pop thus aligns with François Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's argument[14] for the need to see beyond the homogenizing logic of globalization by focusing on "minor transnational" actors, who complicate these processes in the interstitial spaces of cultural clashes and transactions.

Using Z-pop as a case study, this chapter reconsiders the complex relationship among technology, globalization, and K-pop in inter-Asia contexts. First, I trace how the discourse of techno-nationalism undergirded South Korea's economic development and accelerated the globalization of the K-pop cultural industry. Next, I explore the significance of Z-pop's tapping into the South and Southeast Asian consumer base – specifically, how the management company (Divtone) and fans (GalaxZ) use the idealized rhetoric of a transnational "One Asia." Interpreting the GalaxZ's

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adoption of English as lingua franca and the Z-stars' resistance to what I call "K-pop visuality," I extend the question of "Who gets to do K-pop?" to the K-pop producers and consumers alike. In my discussion of Z-pop, I join Soo Ryon Yoon's call to rethink how we see and interpret the directions of cultural circulation in Asia to avoid situating the West as "the final destination of K-pop's ultimate arrival."[15] So doing also takes up Kuan-Hsing Chen's framework of "Asia as method,"[16] a self-reflexive intellectual movement that interrogates how we study Asia by addressing globalization with the aim of de-imperialization. As Koichi Iwabuchi noted, inter-Asia referencing as a process of de-Westernizing the interpretation of media cultures in Asia can make possible "hitherto under-explored intra-regional or inter-Asian" comparisons based on "shared experiences of 'forced' modernization and less hierarchical relationships than a prevailing West-Asia comparison that is based on assumed temporal distance between them."[17] Embracing such theorizations, I align with the vibrant research community that Chua Beng Huat calls transnational East Asia pop culture studies.[18]

Culture, Techno-Nationalism, and K-Pop

The Z-POP Dream project specifies its primary audience as Asia's Generation Z, the demographic cohort born into the most widespread use of digital technology in history. Born between roughly the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, these digital natives tend to spend "six hours or more a day on their phones," and "more time on social media than does any other age cohort in Asia."[19] Fittingly, the project has maintained an active web and social media presence through the formative three years since its launch in 2018 – so much so that it even had a now-defunct "start-up pitch" site for tech-industry collaborators and financial sponsors. This website included a freely downloadable twenty-seven-page white paper delineating the Z-pop project as a brand new model of technology venture and "the first global entertainment ecosystem" comprising three parts: audition competition show, idol training system, and fan-based digital community platform through a smartphone mobile app. This ecosystem, it stated, would employ Ethereum-based blockchain technology to let fans purchase "Z-pop coins" to vote for the idol trainee of their choice; blockchain ledgers were to create tamper-proof election returns integral to building a trustworthy digital community critical to its transnational business.[20] When the newly minted and Singapore-based Divtone Entertainment took over the Z-POP Dream project from ZMC in 2020, the company also wasted no time emphasizing the technological

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innovations it would bring; its fluorescent-colored website introduces itself as "the world's first Entertainment Technology ('Enter-Tech') enterprise, harnessing the latest technology to deliver electrifying, interactive experiences that transport fans into a breathtaking virtual world."[21] This rhetoric of a technology-driven futurism is what undergirds the Z-POP Dream project as a business venture akin to K-pop.

Significantly, the discourse of technology is what launched the globalization of K-pop. In the wake of the 1997 crisis, the Kim Dae-jung administration invested in information technology to resuscitate the nation through neoliberal economic reforms. Noting how the financial crisis thus led to a government-sponsored promotion of broadband and the birth of PC *bangs* (internet cafés) as "test beds for the high-speed Internet" around this time, Inkyu Kang argues that "it was the symbolic value [of new technologies] rather than the practical one that motivated young Koreans to learn to use them."[22] Engaging with digital technology soon became a cultural, if not neoliberal ethos, reinforced by "positive associations" of progress, innovation, ability to use English, savviness, youth, and upward mobility. Not coincidentally, "culture" itself – or more specifically, the culture industry – was also inducted into the realm of technology in 1994 by Kwangyun Wohn of the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), who used the term *munhwa gisul* (culture technology) to refer to the content-based, multimodal set of technologies involved in the industrial production of film, drama, animations, characters, music, performing arts, games, and theme parks. With the establishment of the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) within the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2001, *munhwa keontencheu gisul* (cultural content technology) became one of six official government-promoted technology initiatives alongside biotechnology, energy/environmental technology, information technology, nanotechnology, and space technology. Taking the 1997 financial crisis as a turning point, then, South Korea refashioned itself into a veritable technocultural superpower at the turn of the millennium.

In the world of K-pop, it was also around 1997 that SM Entertainment's Lee Soo-man trademarked the corporation's in-house idol-training system as Culture Technology™ to refer to the fourfold process of recruiting, training, producing, and marketing K-pop idols worldwide. In 2016, in a hologram-incorporated presentation, Lee performed his first large-scale "product launch" of what he called New Culture Technology, introducing the latest platforms, content, and eponymous idol group (NCT) developed by SM Entertainment. It was there that he introduced the plan to "glocalize" the K-pop industry by building a system to locally source (recruit) idol trainees from across the

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globe[23] and manufacture (train) them into K-pop idols, thus rhizomatically expanding the K-pop industry. Rendering K-pop as a technology thus redefines its idols as transnational biocapital embodying the formula of their own creation. Also apparent in this system is the symbiosis of the technocentric state and the culture industry embedded in the globalization of K-pop.

Lessening the gap between culture and technology also denotes a desire to bridge the core values that entail each notion – such as creativity and innovation – within the neoliberal nexus of individualism and nationalism: to quote Suk-Young Kim, "Creativity and innovation were now heralded simultaneously as both individual achievements and national virtues – the two pillars that sustain South Korea's brand of neoliberalism."[24] In other words, K-pop's success resonates from within and beyond the affective register of technonationalist, or the mechanism by which the developmental narrative of nation building, government sponsorship of technology, and nationalist pride amalgamate into a cultural ethos. Tae-Ho Kim points out that such nationalist rhetoric is "so subtle and abstract that it can be compared to the transparent and multi-colored cloak"[25] that the K-pop industry dexterously mobilizes to promote the excellence of idols in the global music market. This is closely related to what Doobo Shim observed: "Koreans heartily welcome the fruits of the Korean Wave in the midst of recovery from the 1997 economic crisis, and the subsequent International Monetary Fund (IMF)-directed economic restructuring, which they often refer to as 'national humiliation.'"[26] In other words, the *Hallyu* globalization echoes the affective cadence of a technonationalist victory embedded in South Korea's crisis management through a neoliberal turn.

The victory of technonationalism, then, celebrates not only the artistry of the idols' individual performances – perfectly symmetric choreography, flawless vocals, and an overall visual excellence – but also the artisanry that exemplifies the innovative technology behind their making. The idols are larger-than-life products and proud "faces" of South Korea's national exports – from soju, electronics, beauty products, and cars to the Korean Tourism Bureau and, by proxy, South Korea itself. As such, they renegotiate the relationship not only between the corporation and the state but also between culture and technology.

The Möbius strip of K-pop and technonationalism also informs how the Euro-American media often treat K-pop as a genre of music with Korea as the single site of origin. In August 2019, for instance, the MTV Video Music Awards gave BTS the first win in the Best K-Pop Group category, excluding them from the marquee awards like Video of the Year or Artist of the Year. Putting K-pop into its own basket – one that *Variety*'s Jae-Ha Kim quipped is an "exile" into a "nationality-based

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category"[27] – well illuminates what the American media sees as a threat to its long-standing global media empire. The threat is rapidly expanding, as the K-pop-contingent industries of K-dramas, K-beauty, K-food, and other cultural exports synergistically continue to amplify the total revenue generated by Culture Technology. In short, K-pop is very much a national venture that goes far beyond the category of music; it is a revenue-generating mode of "soft power" that the MTV VMAs decided to keep in check – perhaps reminiscent of how the Trump administration banned Huawei products and raised tariffs on imported washing machines in 2019.

If K-pop's technonationalist expansion poses a threat to the American media empire, it poses a different, perhaps more imminent threat in South and Southeast Asia, where South Korea has become a veritable cultural hegemon. In the late 1990s and early 2000s *Hallyu* first gained traction in Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines through the cultural products of Korean dramas and films. Chung-Sok Suh et al. trace this process through the analytical framework of "cultural proximity" – not only a measure of cultural similarities and differences in societal values, languages, and living standards but also a rubric for a more dynamic mapping of historical, political, economic, and sociocultural interactions between South Korea and the aforementioned regions.[28]

On using this explanation to draw out a broader "inter-Asia cultural affinity" across the region, however, Mary J. Ainslie astutely warns against reductively homogenizing Southeast Asia "in a similar way to that of the older European colonialist project," flattening the complexities of how each nation interacts with *Hallyu* in different ways.[29] She delineates how the relatively less developed ASEAN nations referred to as CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) experienced a concentrated South Korean investment, with Laos as a case study, where *Hallyu* as a project of "pan-Asian urban modernity" is frequently accompanied by exploitative representational rhetoric portraying the underdeveloped nation to Korean audiences as "uncivilized."[30]

While acknowledging such discourses of power carried out through South Korea's national branding and cultural diplomacy, Peichi Chung also reminds us to see the spread of *Hallyu* in Southeast Asia as a "regional cultural phenomenon that has a bottom-up, audience-centered approach connecting to pan-Asian consumerism and fan-based communities."[31] This, Chung notes, is keenly tied to the rapid digitalization of the region, resulting in skyrocketing consumption of global social media services like Facebook and Twitter having a direct impact on the region's market power for *Hallyu* producers by the early 2010s.

One instance of digitalization includes the widespread practice of "fansubbing" (online fan subtitling) Korean content into multiple languages,

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leading to the increased visibility of *Hallyu* content such as the South Korean variety television show *Running Man* (2010 to present).[32] Initially gaining a huge cult following in the Southeast Asian region through fansubs, *Running Man* began airing on local television networks in Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand. Often dubbed the most successful *Hallyu* television show in Southeast Asia, it has spawned a franchise industry with coproduced spin-offs with local television producers in China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Such online and on-air proliferation of *Hallyu* content, in turn, generated a steady increase in the consumption of "made in Korea" lifestyle products in urban city centers across the ASEAN nations. Lotte Shopping has been expanding the number of department stores and supermarkets in Hanoi and Jakarta since 2008, and in 2019, the BT21 Store – a global franchise from Line Friends selling lifestyle goods designed by the members of the K-pop group BTS – opened two offline locations in Manila.

Unsurprisingly, the ubiquitous presence of *Hallyu* soon generated antipathy toward it. Analyzing the emerging discourse of the *Hallyu* backlash from interviews with eighty consumers in Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, Ainslie et al. offer a nuanced analysis of varied reasons. A significant chunk of *Hallyu* criticism came from the explicit rhetoric of Korean technonationalism perceived to put on a "very naked show" of Korean superiority through echoes of cultural imperialism not lost on the consumers of the region so fraught with histories of colonialism:

> For some Southeast Asian consumers *hallyu* and its aggressive promotion reinforces a colonial mentality, and points to the usurping of local culture as well as the construction of Southeast Asia as a poorer Asian "Other" next to the superior Korea. Instead of challenging Western hegemony (as was a major source of attraction for Asian consumers in early years), the promotion of *hallyu* then actually functions to reinforce a colonial mentality in which it is positioned as usurping local culture.[33]

Ainslie et al. carefully delineate how the rhetoric of technonationalism embedded in the export industry of *Hallyu*/K-pop insinuates a colonial mentality, a term that social psychologists E. J. R. David and Sumie Okazaki apply to characterize how Filipino Americans internalized "a perception of ethnic or cultural inferiority that is . . . a specific consequence of centuries of colonization under Spain and the U.S."[34] This does applies not only to the obsolete West versus non-West binary; Kuan-Hsing Chen reminds us of the urgency of deimperialization amid inter-Asia imperial structures. Chen particularly illuminates the thin valence between

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globalization and neocolonial imperialism, "a form of structural domination in which a country with more global power uses political and economic interventions in other countries to influence policy and exercise control over markets."[35] South Korea, an ex-colony and "Tiger economy," has become a veritable subempire simultaneously dependent on the United States, while politically, economically, and culturally dominating the "third world" countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) (currently, ten member states: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam). Reports continually surface of the multinational South Korean conglomerate Samsung's violation of "minimum wage and probationary worker laws, forced labor, unfair termination, and verbal abuse" in its electronics factories in India, Vietnam, and Indonesia.[36] And in South Korea proper, ample documentation attests to how migrant workers (the majority from China, Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Cambodia, Nepal, and the Philippines) and foreign brides (the majority from Vietnam, China, Thailand, and the Philippines) face rampant racism and xenophobia on the basis of their economic status and darker skin.[37] Considering that the ASEAN region is K-pop's critical consumer base responsible for the highest number of K-pop streams on YouTube from 2018 to 2019,[38] the unidirectional flow of *Hallyu* products – which Ainslie et al. called "modern day mercantilism" – reinforces the hierarchical logic of capitalism.

How, then, can we interpret Z-pop's piggybacking on the K-pop industry's globalization model – especially when Divtone Entertainment, a non-Korean newcomer to the K-pop industry, fully takes up the fraught discourse of cultural technology used in K-pop's expansion into South and Southeast Asia? As I discuss in the next section, Divtone differentiates Z-pop from K-pop through a rhetoric of transnational community building across Asia. Yet the compound relationship among technology, technonationalism, and the inter-Asia dynamic complicate Divtone's motives as but another neo-imperialist enterprise tapping into the "underexplored" ASEAN region. This is even further complicated by Divtone's own corporate structure composed of transnational capitalists. CEO Norimitsu Kameshima is a Japanese entrepreneur based in Singapore; his team includes Euro-American private equity investors and Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs; and the company's parent corporation ("holding company"), Divtone Group, is located in Luxembourg. Our earlier question, "Who gets to do K-pop?," then, should be not solely about non-Korean individual performers but extended to the industry bigwigs with the financial stakes.

To be clear, the K-pop industry is always already situated in a curiously ambivalent space; on the one hand, it is a globalizing enterprise run by the

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logic of global capitalism; yet on the other hand, these globalizing processes of K-pop enable transnational interactions and hybrid popular cultures generated on the local and individual levels of interactions and frictions. How can we navigate the slippery and ill-defined labels of K-pop and Z-pop, not from the top-down perspective but from that of the fans?

"Welcome to Our GalaxZ"

Fans of Z-stars call themselves "GalaxZ," based on an apt visual metaphor of the world reimagined as a galaxy of Z-pop; this interstellar community consists of present and future Z-stars as well as constellations of fans strewn across the globe. Digital and social media are the gravitational attraction that holds this galaxy together – Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Line, WhatsApp, and Glitsy. As of August 2020, the GalaxZ remained an unofficial group rather than a coherently mobilized club with membership dues and benefits, their size and demographic hence largely unknown. Like most social media–based K-pop fandom, the members of GalaxZ organically coalesce on the platforms to share their love for the Z-stars; unlike most K-pop fandom, however, the GalaxZ is more than a community "stanning" their idols; it also empowers members to join the idols by becoming the next Z-star. In the world of Z-pop, fans aspiring to do so are called Dreamers. On Glitsy, a smartphone app designed exclusively for the Z-POP Dream project, Dreamers are actively encouraged to upload thirty-second videos of themselves singing, dancing, or playing musical instruments to pre-audition for the next season of *Z-POP Dream*. The more "likes" they receive from other users on the app, the more experience points they receive, and high-ranking Dreamers have a better chance at being selected for auditions. They are also encouraged to collect points by streaming Z-stars' reality TV features, past seasons of Z-pop auditions, and "how to" videos on K-pop dancing techniques taught by the Singaporean choreographer Alif Archo. Shortly after the launch of the Glitsy app in Apple Store and Google Play in June 2019, *Z-POP Dream*'s season 2 auditions took place; Dreamers pre-auditioned by uploading their thirty-second videos until July 15, and those selected were invited to in-person auditions held in Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and India for the final round.

For the Dreamers, the Z-Girls and Z-Boys serve as role models who actively remind their fans that dreams of becoming a K-pop idol can come true; these stars share their daily adventures in Seoul through reality television shows that chronicle their K-pop training ("Z-Pop School A to Z") and Korean culture education sessions ("Annyeong Korea"). As yet

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K-pop "underdogs," the Z-stars also share videos of themselves cover dancing famous K-pop groups as well as "busking" – performing unannounced in Seoul's various public spaces. Many of those who auditioned for *Z-POP Dream* in 2017 had been longtime K-pop fans dedicated to singing and cover dancing their favorite idols while active as pop starlets in the local music industries. For instance, Vanya, Carlyn, and Mahiro had debuted in girl groups in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan, respectively; Priyanka won the Excellent Vocals award by singing Park Bom's song "You and I" at the 2016 K-Pop World Festival organized by South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2018, as soon as fourteen Z-Girls and Z-Boys were selected, the producers flew them to Seoul to begin training in the K-pop trade: singing, dancing, grooming, language learning (English, Korean), interacting with fans, and learning to embody a level of intercultural competence by cohabiting with one another. Going from performing their favorite idols' repertoire to becoming a K-pop star, then, is the ultimate dream-come-true narrative at the heart of *Z-POP Dream*.

Hence, unlike in most K-pop fandoms, fans and idols alike are Dreamers who compose GalaxZ – a community that the idols simultaneously belong to and represent. In a memorable scene from a 2019 YouTube documentary on the Z-POP Dream project, Jun Kang of ZMC speaks heartily to the Z-stars ahead of their debut: "On the stage you will meet the best K-pop stars. When they're looking at you guys, I don't want them to look down [on you] like, 'Oh, they just want to cover dance for me.' No, you are our true artists."[39] This remark encapsulates the underdog sensibility shared by the GalaxZ, while also foreshadowing the dismissal of Z-stars by the K-pop music shows. Perhaps most critically, "you are our true artists" encapsulates a sense of upward mobility critical to the Z-POP Dream project, the sense that Z-pop is about telling future idol hopefuls who have not been noticed by the conventional K-pop system, "You too can be one of us."

To put things a little differently, the exclusion from the K-pop industry ironically informs Z-pop's transnational aim of "One Asia." Sid, an Indian member of the Z-Boys, told the *Philippine Star* during a 2019 Manila press conference: "We share a special bond with each other because we come from seven different countries. It's really innovative, a new feel of how people of different cultures come together and present [music]."[40] Z-Girls' Priyanka, who comes from Assam, India, told the *Indo-Asian News Service* in 2020: "Our goal is to unite Asia and be one Asia. We not only plan to sing in English but also in as many languages as possible. We can be the cultural bridge through music in the world."[41] Many of the Z-stars' YouTube and Glitsy videos also demonstrate their emphasis on intercultural adventures; besides learning Korean culture together through their

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reality TV show, the Z-stars chronicled their travels to Vietnam, India, and the Philippines. For many, it was a brand-new experience; they learned Hindi slang and Bollywood songs from Priyanka and Sid and tried Filipino, Indonesian, and Vietnamese snacks introduced by respective local members. Many YouTube comment threads show the GalaxZ's enthusiasm for representation, including a comment from "Sanchita Sahana" liked by 14,000 others: "Zstars teaches us 'Unity in Diversity.'"[42]

Critically, not only the Z-stars' intercultural adventures but also the GalaxZ's YouTube comments are exclusively in English. In fact, "GALAXZ," an active Z-pop Facebook group with 4,900 members, restricts posts to English to facilitate open communication among fans logging in from all over the world. Robert Philipson famously criticized the globalization of English as lingua franca as a form of linguistic imperialism "asserted and maintained through the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages."[43] This view was further complicated by the 2009 sanctioning of English as a common language by the ten ASEAN nations, with varying historical, postcolonial, politico-economic, and sociocultural contexts and relationships to multilingualism. Simply defining English as a form of linguistic hegemony does not adequately address its use as an intercultural method of communication among nonnative speakers coming from varying postcolonial contexts; nor does it address the diverse forms of English spoken by the Z-stars through their respective dialects and vocabularies – many come from countries with multiple languages that Andy Kirkpatrick calls "regional lingua franca" other than English.[44] Thus, if not using Korean was a major reason the Z-stars found themselves unwelcomed by South Korean music shows, and for their disrupting the K-pop industry in general, using English acknowledged their audience as less defined by nationalities and including any technology-savvy citizen from the digital "galaxy." In other words, if English carried within it a symbolic value of progress and innovation pivotal to the development of technonationalism in South Korea, English used by GalaxZ is a nod to the digital technology that undergirds the formation of this imagined community.

What perhaps ultimately redefines the Z-POP Dream project's identity from one of many "K-pop inspired" acts to "the first Z-pop" act is their unapologetic self-propulsion into the K-pop production as brown-skinned South and Southeast Asians from outside the industry. When asked about the negative comments she received online upon her debut in 2019, Priyanka answered, "There were a lot of people who said, 'She doesn't deserve to be an idol because she's brown, she doesn't look Korean.'"[45] The comment alludes to what Timothy Laurie described as the K-pop

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industry's enforcing of "a subtle code of racial belonging that places uneven burdens on performers relative to their (perceived) skin tone."[46] In other words, Priyanka's exotic appearance – marked by deep-set eyes, high cheekbones, and visibly darker complexion – accentuates the unspoken rule undergirding an imagined sense of physiognomic homogeneity of what I call "K-pop visuality." Although many non-Korean idols hail from different national, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, they are recruited, trained, and groomed according to K-pop's visual rubric to look and perform in a stylized way, "from vocalization to choreography, to even how to 'manage your gaze' when facing the cameras."[47] Maaike Bleeker defines the term "visuality" as an intersubjective experience arising from the relationship between the seeing and the seen, constructed according to social, cultural, and historical conventions.[48] K-pop visuality, then, is a theatrical situation co-constructed by the K-pop idol's performance rubric to be seen – attractive physical traits; makeup and sartorial choices; styles of gesture, air, and mien; charisma; and general likability characterized by a cadence of humility – and by the subjective identities and expectations of the fans who do the seeing.

Priyanka's minoritized image simultaneously disrupts and accentuates the K-pop visuality built on the values of unity and synchronicity (see Figure 8.1). Her perceived brownness among the Z-Girls, while perhaps too easily singled out as "Other," defiantly resists the symbolic value embedded into the K-pop idol's body as idealized capital that is made, rather than born. If anything, the Z-stars fully acknowledge their nonconformity to the "industry standard" of idols' physiognomies that John Seabrook of *The New Yorker* bitingly characterizes as "chiseled, sculpted, and tapering to a sharp point at the chin, Na'vi style," produced out of the "S.M.-style factory system."[49] When asked about the possibility of plastic

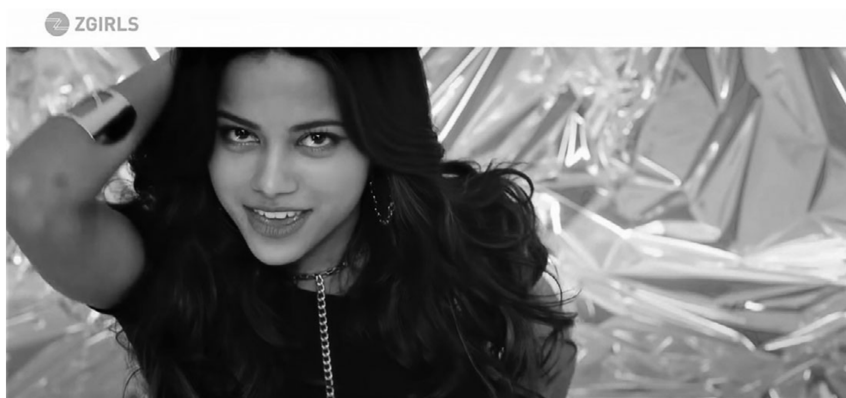

Figure 8.1 Priyanka's visual performance diverges from the perceived Korean physiognomy.

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surgery – yet another *Hallyu*-contingent industry in South Korea by way of state-sponsored medical tourism – Priyanka shook her head and stated in a reassured voice, "Grooming is also part of our training, and we are taught how to manage ourselves."[50] Priyanka's nonconventional presence, coupled with a quietly self-assured demeanor and skillful onstage performances, all pointedly renegotiate the norms of K-pop visuality. If anything, Priyanka's perfectly synchronized dance performances blending into the unity of the whole demonstrate a dexterous reappropriation of the K-pop visuality – channeled into a visual discourse of "One Asia" – while each close-up resists homogeneity.

Thus repurposing K-pop's cultural technology as only they can, the Z-stars and GalaxZ have just begun calling for more representational diversity in K-pop.

Coda: Looking Ahead

The Z-POP Dream project takes up K-pop's technonationalism and repurposes it to create a pan-Asian cultural community for a generation of digital nomads. Through their slogan "One Asia," Divtone Entertainment claims that Z-pop brings innovation to the K-pop industry by using cutting-edge information technology for more ethnically and culturally diverse representation in K-pop. However, this technocentric rhetoric based on global capitalism is perhaps the very thing that undermines its premise of innovation; if applying technology to "source" and to "bringing" underrepresented nationalities and ethnicities into an established cultural industry sounds ominously familiar, it is because of the apparent power imbalance and imperialistic rhetoric that Ainslie et al. argue have generated a *Hallyu* backlash in Southeast Asia.

That said, the fans and supporters of the Z-stars were quick to call out the foibles of the Z-POP Dream project. Pointing out the irony of Divtone's inclusion of but seven countries in "One Asia," many members of the GalaxZ took to social media in 2020 to criticize the exclusionist pre-audition rubric that specified rigid criteria of age, gender, height, language ability, and nationality (fifteen to twenty-three years old, female or male, over 160 cm [5′3″] for females and 170 cm [5′7″] for males, native or fluent English speakers, and citizens of the seven designated countries). Using technology to claim agency and mobilize their nascent digital community, the GalaxZ reminds us that the outdated mode of unidirectional K-pop circulation no longer has relevance. This became most evident when an unprecedented global pandemic hit the world in 2020 and made digital technology the sole mode of sustaining the K-pop community. The GalaxZ

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have been virtually mobilizing a monthly "Z-Stars Mention Party" on Twitter in order to keep the Z-stars visible in the public media, in addition to "Mass DM [direct messaging] and Email Party" to demand that Divtone provide more updates on the performers' suspended schedules.

But one year since the official debut of the first generation of Z-stars in 2019, the Z-POP Dream project as a whole leaves many questions for future research. What is at stake in the treatment of K-pop as a mode of technology that can be "applied" to non-Korean performers hailing from different cultures, ethnicities, and nations? How does the rhetoric of technology simultaneously legitimize and undermine the South Korean corporatized monopoly of K-pop? Last but not least, how can we expand upon the question of "Who gets to do K-pop" in the face of an industry rapidly being reshaped by an increasing number of non-Korean idols and corporate entities? The answers to these questions will contribute to further situating K-pop within a discourse of transnational pop culture studies interrogating the political economy of consumption, representation, and inclusion.

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