

Introduction

Korea's Moment in the Limelight

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Vibrant colors, swaggering idols, and enthralled arena. Constellations of fans who exude transformative energy that buoys the brilliance of the moment. Jovial melodies on heart-racing tracks. Hooks that rush straight to your memory. A shining light has been illuminating the K-pop stage since the dawn of the millennium. What started out as a local craze has now become a truly global phenomenon. The interest in various K-pop bands and their prolific performances has only intensified over the years. What magnetic forces are at work to elate the worldwide fan community and heighten the splendor of the constantly evolving scene called K-pop?

The versatility of K-pop has always made it difficult to box the genre into one or a few categorical definitions. For those hoping to grasp this ever-morphing cultural scene, any single classification of it will be too constricting. For some Koreans, K-pop became an epicenter for rallying ethnocentric pride, touting the growing influence of Korean culture worldwide. For other Koreans, it is a symptomatic ailment of the media-saturated youth of today. For the Asian diasporic community, it carries the refreshing banner of Asian cool. For some critics in the West, K-pop idols have reconfirmed their long-standing prejudice against Asians as mechanical, machinelike disciplinarians devoid of humanity. For the dedicated fandom, K-pop has enabled an unprecedented degree of community building, whereas for the business community, it has presented a prime case of branding and marketing in the age of the metaverse.

The many faces of K-pop have invited scholarly scrutiny, often directed toward unpacking the manifold meanings of the “K” in K-pop. Elsewhere, I introduced the new phrase “keyboard/keypad” pop as a way to emphasize the centrality of digital consumerism in the K-pop world, as most of this music consumption takes place via digital platforms; “Kleenex pop” to emphasize the quick turnover of top songs and trends; and “ketchup pop” to indicate their manufactured taste and flavor. And never to be forgotten, Korea looms large behind “K,” sustaining the conversation on how K-pop can buoy a nation’s soft power beyond everyone’s wildest dreams.¹ Who would have imagined that it would take a glitzy pop music scene to

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transform one nation's public image from a war-torn country into a trendy hub of popular culture in less than half a century?

While many discussions have taken place around the range of meanings of "K," the "pop" side of K-pop has been given less critical treatment.² To be fair, "pop" holds an equal share with "K" in gauging the genre's supple soundscape. Dominating the sonic spread of K-pop are American pop (most notably teen pop, bubblegum pop) heavily infused with all sorts of global music trends of the twentieth century (hip hop, R&B, gospel, jazz, rock, swing). K-pop also harnesses a broader range of "pop," including Eurodance music and J-pop trends, among the increasing streak of traditional Korean musical themes.

But the most crucial ingredient in "pop" is ironically what is missing in rock music. For its rapacious adaptability, the "pop" in K-pop connotes passing trends at best, standing as a marker of triviality, which is often projected as the diametric opposite of "rock authenticity." The lack of awareness of K-pop's rising influence or, even worse, open prejudice against music from Asia often prompts critics of K-pop to label it as factory-manufactured music.

The rock/pop contrast is nothing new and existed long before K-pop entered the global music scene as a major force. Richard Middleton pointed to how the field of musicology has repeatedly confronted the tenuous relationship between rock authenticity and the suspicious validity of "pop" music:

Within popular music culture, the discourse of authenticity is familiar. Typically, it is taken to mark out the genuine from the counterfeit, the honest from the false, the original from the copy, roots from surface – oppositions which in turn often map on to further distinctions: feeling as against pretense, acoustic as against electric, subculture as against mainstream, people as against industry, and so on.³

The oppositions listed here characterize the dichotomization of rock versus pop. This bifurcation denotes the idea that pop music cannot stand the test of time. It sits on a pressurized time clock that will shortly announce that it is high time for this passing trend to pop. To this effect, John Lie likewise indicated that the term "popular" almost always signifies the less prestigious in a series of binary distinctions; elite, high, or refined against mass, low, or vulgar."⁴

But underneath such condescending discourse on "pop" lie much more complex dimensions. "Pop" accentuates the spectacularly performative aspect of today's pop music, in which K-pop finds no rivals: personality of idols; picturesqueness of dance, makeup, fashion, and music videos; but most importantly, a highly dedicated populace – fans – generating and

sustaining the heat. These various facades again hark back to the rooted condescension toward frivolous music that is enjoying temporary success, but they also explain the unique strength of pop music in the age of rapid digital transformation, where viral media exercise unprecedented power – so much so that they have the clout to topple the aforementioned music hierarchy.

The rapid leap forward into digital consumption truly has transformed the face of the global music industry. From sound mixing to music promotion, the way music interfaces with fans and critics alike has changed foundationally. Especially with the rise of music and video streaming platforms such as Spotify and YouTube, the amorphous concept of popularity has turned into easily quantifiable streaming and viewing counts. One could dismiss this transformation as a frivolous popularity contest, but like it or not, it is here, asking us to map the contours of the pop music industry in a fundamentally different way. K-pop's rise to global prominence merged precisely with this digital transformation; even more, K-pop was pioneering the process as the vanguard to showcase how digital platforms should catch up with the chimerically diversifying modes of expression. Digital platforms in the current ecosystem of the music industry are no longer just an arena to showcase popular music but a major stimulant expediting changes in the ways music is produced and consumed.

But to place our fingers only on the pulse of today is to miss out on the extensive genealogy of K-pop. To be sure, K-pop has many decades of history under its belt, and the genre's resilience is due in large part to its evolving survival strategy cultivated and refined through generations. The history of K-pop can be traced alongside Korea's national history at the turn of the millennium that influenced the nation's cultural industry and the broader development of the global popular music industry, with important considerations of the way music has been produced and consumed, locally and globally. To begin, how did Korea with a small-scale music industry come to create a vibrant pop culture scene that would enthrall not only generations of young Asian consumers but also global audiences from diverse racial and generational backgrounds? Who are the main players in the K-pop ecosystem? From idol training to fan engagement, from studio recording to mastering choreographic sequences, what are the steps that go into the actual production and promotion of K-pop? And how can we account for K-pop's global presence within the rapidly changing media environment and consumerist culture in the new millennium?

This book serves as an informed guide for finding answers to these questions by casting a double look at the synchronic and diachronic

development of the K-pop industry. It probes into multiple facets of K-pop as both a music industry and a transnational cultural scene while situating this performance genre in the historical context from late colonial Korea (1930–40) to today’s hyperdigitized world. It investigates the meteoric ascent of K-pop against the backdrop of increasing global connectivity, wherein a distinctive model of production and consumption is closely associated with creativity and futurity. Tracing these inquiries can be done meaningfully only when we closely consider the “technology paradigm,”⁵ which had a profound impact on the way music is produced and consumed. For example, the way we encounter K-pop has shifted not just along with the transition from vinyl records to CDs to mp3s but also along the trajectory of televisions to computers to cell phones. The technology paradigm extends the playing field of today’s K-pop from social media to the AI-driven metaverse, at times shifting the focus from music and performance to the limits of the tech industry itself.

While technological shifts have had a formative influence on the range of sound and visual production, what makes K-pop a truly unique cultural scene is its sticky human relationships – timeless networks that preceded the rise of technological wonders. A colossal energy builds among a dedicated fan community around their shared love for individual idols, bands, and social causes, but what also matters is the affective exchange between individual idols, between music artists from various generations, and among the adjacent labor force (production staff, volunteer translators in online fan communities). At the same time, the sweat-and-tear-stained training process of each idol implies much human labor and sacrifice, often rendered invisible under blinding limelight.

For the most part, the analysis in this volume concerns idol-centered pop music that has emerged since the 1990s, primarily featuring young performers for multimedia entertainment catering to the younger generation of fans and consumers. While the majority of the chapters work around this specific definition of K-pop, much broader forces in the Korean music world have nourished, contextualized, and influenced the idol music industry. Rock and jazz musicians, balladeers, and folk singers of the 1970s and ’80s make occasional appearances to help us envision the ins and outs of the idol music and entertainment of today.

Following these multiple threads of investigation, this book interweaves the historical, technological, and affective registers of K-pop by mapping first its genealogy and production models, then the ways K-pop travels in multiple directions across global networks woven by transmedia platforms and multiracial fan communities. It is organized first to impart an overarching understanding of K-pop as both an industry and a network of cultural practices, then to move on to the backstage reality of the industry,

ending with how K-pop is globally circulated. Individual chapters in each part collaborate to produce a cohesive vision of the industry, artistry, and human entanglements.

Part I, “Genealogies,” provides a broad contextualization of K-pop, from its roots in 1930s–1940s Korean popular music under Japanese colonial rule to South Korea’s burgeoning record industry of the 1980s and ’90s. This broad scope is balanced by the close-up exposition of K-pop’s musical traits to showcase an array of industry structures, which sheds light on its unique soundscape, role division, and transnational network of talents. Roald Maliangkay’s “Sticking It to the Man: Early Neoliberalism in Korean Pop Music” illustrates the deployment of the talent system in Korean music industry during the late colonial era. This chapter discusses case studies that predate the K-pop idol system by half a century, foreshadowing how talents are discovered and promoted in an increasingly commercializing music world. The chapter analogizes how the record companies of the 1930s–1940s worked as the precedents of today’s entertainment conglomerates. Hyunjoon Shin’s “Itaewon Class, Gangnam Style, and Yeouido Star: The Industrial Revolution of Korean Pop in the 1990s” brings the genealogy of K-pop closer to the immediate past – to the nascent moment of the present-day K-pop industry. By focusing on the transforming structures of entertainment companies and talents who moved around various networks in the music and dance scene, Shin provides a comprehensive view of how the Korean music industry evolved before the millennium – in conjunction with the changing sociopolitical environment – and created the conditions for the present-day K-pop to emerge on the global stage.

Part II, “Sounding Out K-Pop,” delves into the technicalities of the K-pop soundscape. The two complementary chapters give us a tour of the ins and outs of sound production and analysis. Jung-Min Mina Lee’s “Finding the K in K-Pop Musically: A Stylistic History” presents a structuralist analysis of how sound, rhythm, and cadence constructed K-pop’s unique sonic registers. The chapter reveals the stylistic versatility of K-pop seen through a valuable insight of a musicologist who closely listens and reads iconic K-pop songs from various eras. Hye Won Kim’s “Recording the Soundscape of K-Pop” treats us to a rare backstage view on how the recording process is crucial for paving a rich aural palette for diverse acoustic expressions of the K-pop world. Rich in its empirical evidence, the chapter illustrates the evolution of the soundscape of K-pop as the recording technology has evolved, the working relationship between a songwriter and performer, and the distinctive concepts of the temporal and spatial nature of sound.

Part III, “Dancing to K-Pop,” takes a similar structure as Part II, first offering a dance practitioner’s structuralist reading of various typologies of

K-pop choreography, which is followed by how they are practiced by various cover dance groups. The two chapters posit gender expression as a critical focus of analysis, which leads to contradicting effects of K-pop movements – sometimes liberating but at other times reaffirming the constricting gender norms. Chuyun Oh’s “K-Pop Dance Music Video Choreography” walks readers through various techniques of K-pop movement and video production, highlighting the diversity of bodily movements that go into the making of K-pop visual effects. The choreographic typologies as presented by Oh mostly observe binary gender expressions, leading her to identify various shades of femininity and masculinity in motion. CedarBough Saeiji’s “Embodying K-Pop Hits through Cover Dance Practices” unpacks the fan-driven cover dance practices that create affective communities whereby Korea becomes a global cultural hub that can bypass the dominance of American popular culture. This ethnographic chapter provides an insight into how the line between passive viewing and active practicing of K-pop dance is easily blurred, showing that the major fuel of K-pop fandom is creative movements that emerge out of communal choreographic practices.

Part IV, “The Making of Idols,” highlights the Korean idol production system and its transnational adaptation. The two chapters in this part excavate the emotive aspect of the K-pop world, including idols’ intimate labor and kinetic storytelling that are maximally commodified for profitability. They also ask foundational questions about who gets to do K-pop by presenting a case of idol production by nonethnic Koreans outside Korea. Stephanie Choi’s “K-Pop Idols: Media Commodities, Affective Laborers, and Cultural Capitalists” sheds light on the realities of the idols’ and trainees’ working conditions. By carefully engaging with the human toll the process has on young aspiring entertainers, Choi exposes what is often left out in the blinding success stories of top performers. Giving fairhanded treatment to both the K-pop industry and the Western pop music world in her critique of entertainers’ lack of agency, Choi ultimately projects the K-pop world as a “critical site in which diverse social relations are created, subverted, and negotiated.” So-Rim Lee’s “From K-Pop to Z-Pop: The Pan-Asian Production, Consumption, and Circulation of Idols” warns about techno/ethnocentric nationalism and minor-scale imperialism against less developed nations within ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), which often have been the first landing points of global K-pop bands. Now that some ASEAN nationals are forming their version of pop, the chapter investigates how “the South Korean corporatized monopoly of K-pop” may sustain itself in the age of deeper multinational entanglements of talent, capital, and fan communities.

Part V, “The Band That Surprised the World,” fully confronts the discursive routes of K-pop’s global circulation, with a particular focus on the group BTS as the K-pop phenomenon of the new millennium. Kyung Hyun Kim’s “BTS, Transmedia, and Hip Hop” presents a polemical appraisal of how hip hop and rap music have been embraced as a major tenet of K-pop. By examining BTS’s early career, Kim provides a critical assessment of how the group’s phenomenal success in large part owes to their engagement with hip hop and rap music.

Kim argues that the sense of “home” and “locality,” so central to the US hip hop tradition, lacks an authentic counterpart in the works of BTS. Instead, BTS and its fans found an alternative home and belonging in cyberspace, especially with the launching of Bangtan Universe. Suk-Young Kim and Youngdae Kim’s “The BTS Phenomenon” presents an alternate view on authenticity by exploring how BTS’s self-written lyrics, not shying away from the dialects of their hometowns, exude locality. The chapter suggests that the notion of authenticity itself might be a fraught convention articulated by a Western hegemony that constantly marginalizes newcomers to the established music scene. The chapter shows that BTS’s global aspirations present a compelling alternative to the US-driven pop music industry by analyzing the band’s viral storytelling technique, the significance of BTS’s winning major music awards, and the band’s presence on social media platforms. Candace Epps-Robertson’s “Transcultural Fandom: BTS and ARMY” provides a smooth segue into Part VI with a brief panoramic view of K-pop fandom conventions. Presenting the BTS fan community of ARMY as a case in point, the chapter highlights their activities, which go beyond supporting BTS: social and political activism and mutual support of ARMY members’ career needs. Epps-Robertson’s chapter shows why K-pop is much more than music and media products for consumption; it is also a rallying point for millennials and those of Generation Z who value participatory culture.

Part VI, “Circuits of K-Pop Flow,” traces the discursive routes of K-pop’s circulation and consumption, with particular focus on new media’s role, fans’ translation of K-pop content, fan fiction, and K-pop tourism akin to pilgrimage. Michelle Cho’s “K-Pop and the Participatory Condition: Vicarity, Serial Affect, and ‘Real-Life Contents’” is a theoretical reflection on the transforming modes of media consumption as they redefine the shape of liveness in today’s media ecosystem. By positing K-pop as one of the most conspicuous global media movements today, the chapter illustrates how K-pop had been forecasting the significance of contagion and virality all along before they became the key to success. Thomas Baudinette’s “Idol Shipping Culture: Exploring Queer Sexuality among Fans of K-Pop” presents multiple ways idols as floating symbols of

desire can unexpectedly galvanize queer reception and re-creation of the original K-pop content. By closing in on the parallels between the Japanese and the Korean shipping culture (a particular kind of fan culture where fans project an imagined relationship between two idols), Baudinette's work confirms the well-known thesis that culture is identified with the place of its circulation rather than with the place of its origin. Youjeong Oh's "Following the Footsteps of BTS: The Global Rise of K-Pop Tourism" illuminates how K-pop aficionados often transform ordinary places into extraordinary sites to visit. The chapter illustrates how the narratives emerging from K-pop storytelling – whether from promotional images for albums, from music videos, or from idols' Instagram photos – are able to authenticate any location, effectively elevating it into the holy land of K-pop pilgrimage.

With the mainstream success of Korean popular culture in recent years (think *Parasite*, *Squid Game*, BTS, and BLACKPINK), many still wonder how it all happened. Why Korea? Why now? Circling back to the beginning of this introduction will provide some insight: a high saturation of talented entertainers and fierce competition among them, a highly supportive but also critical fan base who constantly raise the bar for performers, the resilient hybridity of music styles, and Korea's rapid embrace of digital transformation, which enabled Korean content to reach a worldwide audience. These are just a few highlights, and the full answers will be found in the pages of this book.

Notes

- 1 Suk-Young Kim, *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).
- 2 I thank Ian Condry for having first suggested this idea.
- 3 Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subject of Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 2006), 200.
- 4 John Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 14.
- 5 Jeffrey Funk, *Technology Change and the Rise of New Industries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books, 2013), 5.