

3 Finding the K in K-Pop Musically

A Stylistic History

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Today's K-pop is a hybrid of cultural influences and musical styles. Popular music in Korea saw a definitive transformation in the 1990s, modernizing and internationalizing alongside South Korea's rapidly growing economy. Since then, K-pop as we know it – centering around idol stars trained by entertainment companies – has been guided by two main goals: to develop globally consumed cultural content and to satisfy domestic fans' taste for novelty and familiarity. This chapter explores how these goals have shaped K-pop's stylistic evolution, arguing that its musical styles are inseparable from the tension between the local and the global. To better explore this phenomenon, I use the term glocalization to capture the prevalent features and characteristics of K-pop. Glocalization refers to the considerations on both the local and global levels in developing a product or service, including the promotion of localized differences globally.¹ K-pop has transformed global musical influences into unique local features, one of which is the recent trend of incorporating aspects of traditional Korean culture. This chapter shows that such global-local intersections challenge the widespread notion of the unidirectional influence of Western popular music.

The focus of this chapter is on idol-driven K-pop music that emerged in the mid-1990s. This discussion must begin by considering the validity of using the term “K-pop” as a genre designation. The expression “K-pop” was first used by Chinese and Japanese media in the late 1990s to refer to popular music originating from South Korea. In this early context, the designation denoted place of origin. More recently, as of April 2021, *Billboard* lists K-pop as an independent category, alongside pop, hip hop/R&B, dance, country, Latin, and rock. This choice indicates two possible rationales: It may imply that the primary consideration for K-pop is its linguistic and geographic orientation, or that K-pop is deemed to display musical qualities that are unique and allow it to stand as a separate genre. The former rationale can be misleading because the particular strand of Korean popular music known globally as “K-pop” is by no means inclusive of all genres and styles of popular music in Korea, which is called *daejung gayo* (or simply *gayo*) in Korean. As ethnomusicologist Michael

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Fuhr notes, the discrepancy in the meaning of the term “K-pop” as used within and outside Korea reasserts “the significance of the nation as symbolic boundary market.”² At the same time, the fact that many K-pop songs fall under the established genres or even mix different genres in a single track renders the task of genre identification even more complicated.

These considerations prompt the question: Can K-pop be considered a genre? That is, what musical characteristics, if any, distinguish it from other genres? To begin to answer these questions, this chapter traces K-pop’s musical-stylistic development since its emergence in the 1990s. Fuhr has suggested, taking Adam Krims’s genre classification for rap music as a conceptual model, that K-pop’s mode of production, such as its casting and training systems and fan culture, is not only crucial but more relevant than musical features in understanding K-pop as a genre.³ Agreeing with the notion that the mode of production is one of its most distinguishing features, this chapter also considers how the K-pop industry’s global tendencies have had significant and direct influences on its musical and stylistic aesthetics – including the incorporation of traditional Korean music – which may hint at K-pop’s unique genre identity.

The first part of the chapter provides a bird’s-eye view of K-pop’s stylistic evolution in three phases, delineated according to the extent of its global reach. The initial phase (1996–2006) saw K-pop’s rise to popularity in Asia, and the second phase (2007–2017) was marked by K-pop’s isolated successes in the West. The third and current phase (2018 to the present) is witnessing K-pop’s consistent integration into global pop culture. The second part of the chapter discusses the incorporation of traditional Korean culture in K-pop, which began prominently around the late 2010s. More K-pop stars are now expressing their Korean heritage through music, music videos, and performances, as seen in the use of the Korean traditional clothing *hanbok* as the sartorial theme for BTS’s “Idol” (2018) and BLACKPINK’s “How You Like That” (2020), for instance. Thus, K-pop approaches globalization increasingly through local elements, which, given its current global popularity, may bring about changes in the traditional dynamics of influences between Western and Eastern popular culture.

Global Reach and Stylistic Evolutions

K-pop is a substantial component of *Hallyu*, or the “Korean Wave,” a term that emerged in the 1990s to describe the popularity of various Korean cultural forms, including TV drama, film, and popular music, in China,

Japan, and other Asian countries.⁴ *Hallyu* gained a new momentum around 2008 (sometimes called *Hallyu 2.0*), when Korean popular culture began spreading beyond Asia with the help of the digital infrastructure that the South Korean government had invested in since the 1990s and the burgeoning global social media platforms.⁵ Because K-pop and *Hallyu* inform each other, the three phases of K-pop outlined below coincide broadly with the *Hallyu* timeline, especially in terms of their global reach; however, the unique turns of events and stylistic trajectory of K-pop merit a separate discussion.⁶

Phase One (1996–2006)

Phase one saw the emergence of idol-driven popular music in Korea and its rise to popularity in other Asian countries. Some Korean music labels responded by building systems to further the music's global appeal, localizing K-pop acts to target markets while also embracing global musical trends. Genres such as R&B, hip hop, rap, and club dance music were integrated into Korean popular music that had been previously dominated by ballad, trot, and soft rock and formed the foundation of the sound of modern K-pop.⁷

K-pop's initial moment of global recognition was the explosive, unexpected popularity of the Korean boy band H.O.T. in China in the late 1990s. The band's first Chinese concert in Beijing in 2000 drew 13,000 fans, an unprecedented audience for a foreign group.⁸ Subsequent Korean idol groups such as NRG, S.E.S., Fin.K.L, Baby V.O.X, and Shinhwa rose to popularity in other Asian countries, confirming K-pop as a cultural phenomenon. Because the popularity of K-pop was felt primarily within Asia during these years, many scholars have interpreted the success within the context of trans-Asian cultural traffic, inter-Asian relations, and the expansion of Asianism.⁹ Others read the phenomenon through notions of cultural familiarity such as "geo-linguistic region" and "cultural proximity," both of which explain that consumers gravitate toward cultural products exhibiting linguistic or cultural similarities to their own.¹⁰ However, by the early 2000s K-pop attracted fans from Turkey, Mexico, Egypt, Iraq, Europe, and the United States, albeit in a scattered manner.¹¹ The growing global fandom prompted the K-pop industry to draw blueprints to reach audiences beyond Asia.

One such plan came from SM Entertainment (SM hereafter), H.O.T.'s management company. In 1997, the company's CEO, Lee Soo-man, announced "cultural technology," a total management system inspired by a similar approach of Maurice Starr, producer of New Kids on the Block, and that of the Japanese talent agency Johnny & Associates.¹² SM's cultural

technology system dictated every stage of artistic production, including casting, training, producing, marketing, and managing:

The manual, which all S.M. employees are instructed to learn, explains when to bring in foreign composers, producers, and choreographers; what chord progressions to use in what country; the precise color of eyeshadow a performer should wear in a particular country; the exact hand gestures he or she should make; and the camera angles to be used in the videos (a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree group shot to open the video, followed by a montage of individual closeups).¹³

Essentially, the cultural technology system was designed to promote the artists through glocalization, customizing the music, music videos, and artists to the tastes and demands of the target audiences.

A good example of an early application of this system is the female singer BoA. Prior to her Japanese debut in 2001, SM put BoA through intensive Japanese lessons for more than two years, in addition to the usual training in singing and dancing. The company also formed a partnership with the major Japanese record label Avex Trax, who produced and promoted BoA's Japanese album. BoA was carefully positioned as a teenage singer (she was fourteen then) who could sing while performing hip-hop dances, thereby distinguishing her from other female singers in Japanese, many of whom did not showcase such a combination of singing and dancing. Her Japanese debut album, *ID; Peace B*, addressed Japanese audiences exclusively. Its title track had been released in Korea a year prior, but its lyrics were rewritten in Japanese. "Dreams Come True," from the same album, was written by a Japanese composer and a Japanese lyricist. Her subsequent album, *Listen to My Heart*, comprised fourteen Japanese-language tracks, eleven of which were composed by Japanese composers. All of BoA's Japanese releases – more than sixty in total, encompassing singles, compilations, and studio and live recordings – have been produced primarily by Japanese producers, lyricists, and composers, although the executive producer remained SM (and later BoA herself). As three of her albums became million sellers – an unmatched record for a foreign artist in Japan – BoA was fully integrated into the Japanese popular music scene.

When album production and promotion were managed from Korea, K-pop companies found ways to create a sense of cultural affinity for foreign audiences. For instance, for the boy group TVXQ, created in 2003 with the goal of making it the largest boy band in Asia, SM chose a name that would resonate as familiar to Chinese-speaking audiences. "TVXQ" is derived from the stylized phonetic expression of its Chinese name, 東方神起 (read *Tong Vfang Xien Qi*; 동방신기 in Korean, read *Dong Bang Shin Ki* and translated "The Rising Gods of the East"). In addition, although all

members were Korean, some of them adopted more Chinese-sounding stage names (for example, Xia Junsu for Kim Junsu). By the end of the decade, it also became common for K-pop idol groups to comprise foreign-national members or members with foreign-language abilities.

Concurrent to these localization efforts, Korean popular music in the 1990s evolved as it embraced genres such as R&B, upbeat dance music, rap, and hip hop as part of its parlance. R&B was popularized foremost by the male-trio group Solid, active in 1993–1997. Emphasizing tuneful melody and rich harmony in their music, Solid appealed to Korean audiences' taste for melody-driven ballads. They added fluid rap or stylish dances to sentimental melodies, demonstrating genre mixing that is still an important aspect of K-pop.

Meanwhile, more energetic hip-hop music rose to popularity with SM's first act, Hyun Jin-young. His first full album, *New Dance 1* (1990), included tracks with raps, which he performed in baggy clothes and showcasing hip-hop (and the popular Roger Rabbit) dance. Lee Soo-man explained that with this album he wanted to create high-quality dance music in Korea: "People might think that the Rabbit dance and music came together, but I prioritized music."¹⁴ Lee, who had just returned from his study in the United States, focused his new music business on creating well-produced dance music that he had heard there but deemed absent in Korea. By debuting Hyun, a seasoned hip-hop dancer, Lee successfully popularized new jack swing-style dance music in Korea.

Shortly after Hyun's debut, the three-member male band Seo Taiji and Boys took the Korean popular music scene by storm with their rap-heavy single "I Know" (1992). A blend of hip hop, metal, and electronic dance music, this track was far more powerful than any other dance music previously released in Korea. Their next, even more experimental hit, "Hayeoga" (1993), not only mixed heavy metal and hip hop but also incorporated the traditional Korean woodwind instrument *taepyeongso*, whose piercing sound blended seamlessly with other synthesizer and drum-and-bass sounds. The track also featured an unusual song structure, departing from the standard song scheme of intro-verse-(pre-chorus)-chorus-verse-(pre-chorus)-chorus-bridge-verse-chorus-outro (see Table 3.1).

"Hayeoga" has a three-part interlude, the second part of which includes a dramatic, amplified electric guitar solo lasting over a minute, underscoring the rock element of this track. Also, instead of the bridge, which is usually placed toward the end of a song and offers a moment of contrast, this track maintains high energy and drive throughout and then pushes the tempo even further in the final twenty seconds. With such experimental approach, Seo Taiji and Boys became synonymous with musical revolution in late 1990s Korea. Their groundbreaking music,

Table 3.1 *Formal structure of Seo Taiji and Boys's "Hayeoga"*

Time	Formal section	Musical features
0:00–0:30	Intro	Heavy-metal drum-and-guitar sound, beatbox, scratch
0:30–0:57	Verse 1	Rap, E–F#–E
0:58–1:33	Pre-chorus	Vocal (melody), E → Am, fast harmonic rhythm
1:34–1:52	Chorus	Rap, <i>taepyeongso</i> (folk melody), Am → E
1:53–1:59	Interlude I	Heavy metal drum-and-guitar sound, C#–F#–G
2:00–2:59	Interlude II	Electric guitar solo
3:00–3:24	Interlude III	Voice sampling (“Did you enjoy that”), material from intro (except first 5”)
3:25–3:51	Verse 2	Rap, scratch effects, E–F#–E
3:52–4:26	Pre-chorus	Vocal (melody), E → Am
4:27–4:49	Chorus	Rap, <i>taepyeongso</i> (folk melody), Am → E
4:50–5:12	Postchorus	Fastest section of the track, E–(A–G–D)–E

along with their virtuosic dance and bold fashion, guided the K-pop scene in the years to follow.

After Seo Taiji and Boys's unexpected retirement in 1996, Korean music labels acted quickly to fill the void, producing similar single-gender idol groups one after another. These groups, equipped with striking visual appeal, targeted young audiences who were excited about dance music, hip hop, and rap. Idol music was thus often rhythm-driven, suitable for dynamic choreographed dances, and carried lyrics addressing issues such as the inner turmoil of youth or school culture, following the example of Seo Taiji and Boys's “Classroom Idea” (1995). Boy bands such as H.O.T., Sechs Kies, and Shinhwa (debuted in 1996, 1997, and 1998, respectively) made hits with such music and were subsequently regarded as the voices of teenagers. Girl groups such as S.E.S. (debuted in 1997) and Fin.K.L (debuted in 1998) similarly performed energetic choreographed dances, but their music tended to be more lighthearted and sentimental. For example, although S.E.S.'s dance pop hit “I'm Your Girl” (1997) gives a nod to hip hop with intense rap passages accompanied by scratch effects and heavy synth bass lines, the rest of the track is sprightly and light in texture, with R&B-style melodies, and the lyrics are about hope and promises of love.

Notably, the blending of dance, hip hop, and R&B exhibited in “I'm Your Girl” was comparable to new jack swing, which many Korean producers of the 1990s, including S.E.S.'s producer, Lee Soo-man, tried to bring to Korea. The dance and hip-hop elements of the genre fascinated Korean fans who were eager for new sounds and rhythms. At the same time, the use of soulful melodies also appealed to domestic listeners who already had a strong proclivity for the sumptuous melody and harmony that characterize ballad and trot songs, and the melodic and harmonic aspects of new jack swing were often further emphasized in K-pop songs to satisfy Korean consumers. Thus, the mix of dance beats, singable melodies,

and rich harmony, which became one of the key characteristics of K-pop music, can be seen as a musical feature that resulted from glocalization.

While idol groups were emerging as key players in the Korean popular music scene, previously popular genres such as trot, ballad, and rock remained popular throughout the 1990s and in the early 2000s.¹⁵ In fact, idol-driven K-pop experienced a relative lull in the early 2000s, when the first generation of idol groups retired with only a few new groups to fill the gap. Even so, the period was a pivotal moment in the history of Korean popular music, as everything surrounding idols – their music, performance style, production system, and fan culture – fundamentally changed the nature of popular music in Korea.

Phase Two (ca. 2007–ca. 2016)

If the first decade of K-pop was about recognizing its international potential and drawing the blueprint for further success, the second phase was the time of implementing that system in a fully fledged manner. The penetration into Japanese markets solidified with groups like BIGBANG and Kara, while the K-pop industry's reach expanded beyond Asia. Some general stylistic tendencies and approaches employed by SM, JYP, and YG – the top three K-pop management companies – included incorporating Western pop culture tropes while minimizing Korea-specific cultural references; using English words in song titles and lyrics, especially in song hooks; and collaborating with foreign, mostly European and American, composers and producers. These factors gave rise to two notable musical trends. One was extremely hook-driven music that became prominent in the mid- to late 2000s and continued to proliferate for almost a decade. The other was structurally complex, nearly modular music; this quality, which became noticeable around the mid-2010s, could be seen both as a development of the genre mixing witnessed in the first phase and as a reaction to the excessively repetitive hook music. As this section will show, both trends were closely tied to K-pop's globalizing tendencies.

Examples of strategic references to Western pop culture in K-pop of this phase are legion. In one such case, Wonder Girls's single hit "Tell Me" (2007) sampled parts of Stacey Q's "Two of Hearts" (1986), adapting the basic harmonic progressions and melodies of its verse, drumbeats, sound effects, and various filler phrases, such as "Oh no" and "No baby." The hook ("Tell me, tell me, te-te-te-te-tell me") of "Tell Me" is a twist on the opening words ("I-I-I-I-I-I need") of the older song. The music video of "Tell Me" similarly includes references to American popular culture. For instance, one member embodies the group's namesake fictional character Wonder Woman and protects other girls in various troublesome situations. More subtle references include high-five gestures (not a common

celebratory gesture in Korea then), posters with English words on the stage set, visual effects reminiscent of Roy Lichtenstein's pop art, and American-style yellow school buses and school lockers. Wonder Girls's next hit, the retro-inspired "Nobody" (2008), drew from American popular culture, too. The track's music video features the five members as chorus girls performing on a Motown-style stage, garbed in sheath dresses, long white gloves, and coiffed hair, conjuring up images of 1960s girl groups such as the Supremes, the Shirelles, and the Ronettes.

Musically, this "cultural odorlessness" – an expression used by the sociologist Koichi Iwabuchi to denote the absence, in a product, of cultural references to the country of production – was matched by the rise of electronic dance music in K-pop.¹⁶ The popularity of electronic dance music grew steadily in Korea throughout the 2000s. By the end of the decade, beat-driven music with tempos around 124–128 bpm, inundated with digital sound, dominated Korean charts. BIGBANG, whose members' musical identity is rooted in hip hop, debuted with an electronic dance track, "Lies" (2007), earning immediate mainstream popularity. Brown Eyed Girls, famous for their electronic dance "Abracadabra" (2009), originally debuted in 2006 as a R&B/ballad group but did not top Korean music charts until after releasing the electropop "L.O.V.E." (2007). Idol music of this time was inseparable from electronic dance music, giving rise to a somewhat homogenous sound world across K-pop in the 2000s.

The hook was another important feature of K-pop between the mid-2000s and early 2010s. Musicologist John Shepherd defines hooks as "musical and lyrical material through which the song remains in popular memory and is instantly recognizable in popular consciousness."¹⁷ Whether a short melodic idea, lyrics, or instrumental riffs, hooks allow listeners to anchor a song to their memory. When the K-pop industry was expanding its global fandom, it was important to maximize such anchoring moments and render songs memorable. One of the first songs to start the hook trend was Wonder Girls's "Tell Me," whose hook, "Tell me, tell me, te-te-te-te-tell me," went viral in Korea and was parodied and adapted in numerous TV shows and dramas. This hook, short and catchy with its fun stuttering effect, is also made effective by repetition. In addition to repeating thirteen times between the chorus and the postchorus, the hook appears in varied forms in the interlude and as a melodic filler in other parts of the song. Moreover, its melody and harmony are designed to please: the melodies before the hook seldom land on the tonic pitch (the "do" of a scale), F#, even when the chord returns to the home key of F# minor, and the melody's arrival on F# at the beginning of the hook after the leap to the dominant C# gives the listener aural satisfaction as built-up tension is resolved (Figure 3.1).

Bm9 F#m Bm7 C#
 Bm9 F#m E C#sus4 C#
 F#m Bm7 C#m7
 F#m Bm7 C#m7
 F#m Bm7 C#m7

tell- me tell- me te te te te te tell- me Nareul sarang han da go nal gidaryeo wat da go-
 Jakkuman deutgo sipeo gyesok naege malhae jwo-

Lines 3 and 4 repeated

tell- me tell- me te te te te te tell- me Naega pillyo hada malhae malhae jwoyo-
 Kkumi ani rago malhae malhae jwoyo-

Figure 3.1 Passage leading to the hook and the hook of Wonder Girls' "Tell Me," mm. 19–42.

One consequence of the sweeping success of "Tell Me" was K-pop songs being flooded with hooks with English words, which had several social and commercial advantages but not entirely favorable musical consequences. Linguist Jamie Shinhee Lee explains that in South Korea English references are generally associated with modernity, globality, and a new generation.¹⁸ English lyrics can also operate as a discourse of resistance and greater artistic freedom, as musicians can use English to express notions that are considered too explicit in Korean.¹⁹ Furthermore, mixing in English words can make K-pop songs more memorable to foreign listeners who do not understand Korean. For these reasons, simple hooks with English lyrics surfaced prominently in K-pop in the late 2000s and onward, often accompanied by English song titles (Table 3.2). The boy band Shinhwa's first album, released in 1998, had just one track with an English title, but nine out of fourteen tracks on their fifth album from 2004 had English titles (Korean titles were accompanied by English translations); by their tenth album of 2012, all eleven tracks had English titles. Although using English in titles and lyrics had apparent advantages for globally driven K-pop, English hooks were often rendered meaningless in efforts to maximize their phonetic or rhythmic effects, as in SHINee's "Ring Ding Dong" ("Ringdingdong, ringdingdong / Ringdiggy dingdiggy dingdingding") and Super Junior's "Sorry Sorry" ("Sorry sorry sorry sorry / Shawty shawty shawty shawty"). Such hooks certainly made K-pop songs catchy and memorable, but the repetitive music and the sometimes nearly nonsensical lyrics contributed to the reputation of idol music as being nonmusical or unsophisticated in these years.

Table 3.2 English-language hooks in select K-pop songs from 2007 to 2013

Release year	Artist	Song	Times hook repeats (variation)	Total hook time (including variations)/song length	Hook lyrics	Other hooklike materials
2007	Wonder Girls	“Tell Me”	13 (2)	55 seconds / 3:36	Tell me, tell me, te-te-te-te-tell me	None
2008	Wonder Girls	“Nobody”	7 (2)	42 seconds / 3:33	I want nobody nobody but you	None
2009	Girls’ Generation	“Gee”	8	16 seconds (1 minute 36 seconds) / 3:20	Gee gee gee gee baby, baby	Variations and secondary hooks; four-chord track (AM7-F#m7-G#m7-C#m7 or AM7-F#m7-C#m7-C#m7)
2009	Super Junior	“Sorry Sorry”	8	56 seconds / 3:52	Sorry, Shawty (each ×4), followed by <i>naega, nege / michyeo, ppajyeo</i>	Single instrumental riff throughout
2009	T-ARA	“Bo Peep Bo Peep”	“Bo Peep” repeated 110 times	64 seconds / 3:43	Bo Peep (×7) Oh!	“Bo Peep” melody used as instrumental riff throughout
2009	SHINee	“Ring Ding Dong”	12	45 seconds / 3:51	Ringdingdong (×2) Ring diggy ding diggy dingdingding	Secondary hook: “We wanna go rocka rocka rocka rocka rocka . . .”
2010	Super Junior	“Mr. Simple”	12	48 seconds / 4:00	<i>Bwara</i> Mr. (Miss) Simple, Simple	Instrumental riff throughout with minimal variations
2010	T-ARA	“Breaking Heart”	12	48 seconds / 3:14	Oh (×8) <i>Cheoreopge</i> (×7) <i>saldaga micheo</i> (Living foolishly makes me crazy)	Ostinato bass (Bb-Db-Gb-C-F(Cb, occasionally)) repetitive melody and lyrics throughout
2011	2NE1	“Naega jeil jal naga” (I am the best)	19	42 seconds / 3:29	<i>Naega jeil jal naga</i> (I am the best)	“Bam Ratatata Tatatatata Beat” (×8); single instrumental riff throughout
2011	T-ARA	“Roly Poly”	6	45 seconds / 3:34	Roly Poly Roly Roly Poly (plus two alternating Korean phrases)	Four-chord track (Am-F-C-G) except in the intro, interludes, and outro
2012	f(x)	“Electric Shock”	7 (1)	56 seconds / 3:15	Na – Electric (×3) E-E-E-Electric Shock	Part of the hook appears at 0:03; full hook at 0:50
2012	Secret	“Poison”	8	40 seconds / 3:25	You are my poison	“Crazy crazy crazy love listen listen crazy love” (×4)
2013	Crayon Pop	“Bar Bar Bar”	Hook 1: 6 Hook 2: 15	1 minute 14 seconds / 3:00	Barbarbarbar (×2) / Jumping ye (×2) (everbody, <i>da gachi ttwioettwio</i>)	Hook 1 first appears at 0:15; hook 2 first appears at 0:50
2013	EXO	“Growl”	12	30 seconds / 3:27	<i>Na eureureong</i> (×3) <i>dae</i> (I growl, growl, growl)	Instrumental riff (becomes chorus melody)

Global collaboration in music producing was another important aspect of this phase. In the early days of K-pop, when not many Korean composers were fluent in the vocabulary of dance pop music, Korean music labels often adapted and remade existing Western or Japanese pop songs (for instance, S.E.S.'s 1998 hit "Dreams Come True" was a remake of Nylon Beat's "Like a Fool"); this could be artistically limiting and legally complicated. Taking a step further with the glocalization efforts, around the mid-2000s, Korean management companies experimented with global collaboration, where foreign composers wrote original songs for K-pop idols and Korean composers mastered or arranged them according to the domestic listeners' tastes. In 2005, SM partnered with the Swedish producer Pelle Lidell, who had worked with pop stars such as Christina Aguilera, Madonna, and Celine Dion. Girls' Generation's iconic hit "Genie" (2009) was a result of this collaboration: Lidell and his roster of British and Scandinavian songwriters sent their original song to SM, to which the label's chief composer/producer Yoo Young-Jin added melodies that would appeal to Korean fans. By the early 2010s, SM also began collaborating with Teddy Riley, who brought back new jack swing through tracks such as Girls' Generation's "The Boys" (2011), Jay Park's "Demon" (2011), and EXO's "What Is Love" (2012). In addition, in 2013 SM established its own writer's camp and began inviting composers from around the world, completing its global music producing system. By the late 2010s, it became commonplace for K-pop albums to be produced by a team of Korean and foreign composers, an effective arrangement to create music that satisfies both domestic and international fans.

K-pop produced under the global system demonstrated a distinct set of musical characteristics, including memorable hooks, propulsive music conducive to dynamic dance, dense harmonies, richly melodic bridges, anthemic choruses, and the mixing of different musical styles. Because the market for K-pop was relatively young and responsive to external influences, it made an ideal place of experimentation for foreign composers. Moreover, K-pop's unique feature of having many members in one group required composers to write for many different vocal timbres, ranges of voice, and specializations (rap or singing), not only highlighting each member but also blending them into one cohesive ensemble. Taking all of these elements together, K-pop tracks became remarkably multifarious and maximalist, with frequent textual, timbral, and stylistic changes and constant aural stimulation matched by equally rich visual presentations.

Girls' Generation's "I Got a Boy" (2013) is a prime example of such experimental sound enabled by the global music-producing system. Composed by SM's Yoo Young-Jin and a team of composers from the Norway-based Dsign Music (Sarah Lundback, Anne Judith Wik, and Will

Simms), this five-minute track contains enough materials for at least three songs, cast in a complex and fragmented, yet tightly woven structure (Table 3.3).

The introduction alone has three parts, conveyed visually in the music video by three different sets. The song can be divided into two or three parts, depending on how the structural functions of the musical fragments are interpreted. The fragments include four verses (each with different music), two hooks, two interludes, and two bridges. There are also two tempo changes via short interludes, the first to shift to Broadway-style solo singing, announced with the words, “let me put it another way,” and the second to “bring it back to 140.” Notably, even in this kaleidoscopic music, hooks remain crucial: the track is held together by the two melodic hooks – the pre-chorus material (hook A; “Oh-oh-oh-oh”) and the chorus music (hook B; “I got a boy”) – that alternate throughout and come together in the postchorus. Finally, the track has elements from electropop, R&B, dubstep, rap, drum and bass, and bubblegum pop, like a potpourri of popular music genres. “I Got a Boy” takes K-pop’s multi-genre approach to a nearly experimental level, transporting the listeners to a culturally nonspecific yet wonderfully surreal place. This innovative and maximalist music heralded a new phase of K-pop, characterized by great stylistic diversity.

Phase Three (2017 to present)

During its most recent phase, K-pop has experienced a heightened level of global attention and popularity. The landmark incident ushering in this new phase was BTS’s winning the Billboard Social Artist Award in 2017, the first US mainstream recognition of any K-pop act. As the K-pop industry expanded, new players rose to prominence, including HYBE (previously Bit Hit Entertainment; BTS’s management) and Cube Entertainment (4minute, Apink, and CLC). Many midsized and smaller companies emerged, although the YG-SM-JYP triad, all established in the late 1990s, remains dominant. This diversification within the industry has translated into wider stylistic and musical variety in K-pop. Stylistic diversity also came from greater engagements of foreign composers, cultivation of new domestic composers and producers, and more idols taking charge as composers and producers of their own music.

The global music producing system introduced by SM in the previous phase has grown steadily, influencing the entire K-pop industry. SM’s system now consists of a network of over 500 producers, composers, and lyricists from around the world, as well as robust songwriting camps.²⁰ Other labels have adopted SM’s practice. For instance, Jellyfish Entertainment (management of VIXX), WM Entertainment (B1A4 and

Table 3.3 *Formal structure of Girls’ Generation’s “I Got a Boy”*

	Time	Function	Lyrics (starting phrase)	Musical features	Music video
Intro	0:00–0:30	Intro 1	(Diegetic sound: girls laughing, doorbell)	Instrumental music	Acting: Girls in a house, startled by a visit by a boy
	0:31–0:53	Intro 2	Ayo! GG! Yeah Yeah <i>Sijakae bolkka?</i>	Rap	Stage performance
	0:54–1:13	Intro 3	Ha Ha! Hey let me introduce myself! Here comes trouble o!	Introduces the pre-chorus hook: hook A (“Oh oh oh yeah oh”)	Street performance
Part I	1:13–1:42	Verse 1	<i>Jiga mwonde? Utgyeo.</i>	Rap 1	Street performance and acting
	1:43–2:02	Pre-chorus	Oh oh oh yeah oh	Hook A	Street performance
	2:03–2:10	Interlude 1	Ayo, stop, let me put it another way	Tempo change; electronic dance music	Stage performance
	2:11–2:25	Chorus	I got a boy <i>meotjin</i> , I got a boy <i>chakan</i> . . .	Hook B	Stage performance and acting
	2:26–2:38	Verse 2	<i>A~ Nae wangjanim!</i>	Vocal (melody 1)	Stage performance
	2:39–2:53	Verse 3	<i>Na kkamjjang menbungiya</i>	Rap 2	Stage performance and street performance
	2:53–3:07	Pre-chorus	Oh oh oh yeah oh	Hook A	Street performance and stage performance
Part II	3:07–3:20	Verse 4	<i>Nae mal deureobwa geu ai neone alji?</i>	Vocal (melody 2)	Stage performance
	3:21–3:35	Pre-chorus	Oh oh oh yeah oh	Hook A	Stage performance and acting
	3:37–4:00	Bridge 1	<i>Nan jeongmal hwagana jukgesseo</i>	Tempo change to 98 bpm; Broadway-style singing	Stage performance (new stage setting)
	4:01–4:03	Interlude 2	“Don’t stop! Let’s bring it back to 140”	Narration, no accompaniment	Stage performance
	4:04–4:17	Chorus	I got a boy <i>meotjin</i> , I got a boy <i>chakan</i> . . .	Hook B	Stage performance and acting
	4:18–4:31	Bridge 2	<i>Eonjena nae gyeoten</i>	Vocal (melody 3)	Stage performance and acting
	4:32–4:45	Chorus	I got a boy <i>meotjin</i> . . . plus A~ <i>Nae wangjanim!</i>	Hook B + melody 1	Street performance and acting
	4:45–5:01	Postchorus	I got a boy <i>meotjin</i> . . . plus Oh oh oh yeah oh	Hook A + hook B + variation of melody 1 (as chorus material)	Stage performance and street performance

Oh My Girl), and DR Music (Rania) have partnered with foreign composers. HighGRND, the sublabel of YG, and JYP now run their own song camps, inviting both foreign and Korean composers. With such collaboration having become common practice in K-pop, more foreign musicians are producing, not only composing, in contrast to the early days of global producing when the songs provided by foreign composers were arranged and mastered by Korean producers. A famous example is BTS's 2000 hit, "Dynamite," composed by the British composers David Steward and Jessica Agombar and produced by David Steward; it was also the first K-pop track composed as an English song and performed that way.

Meanwhile, more Korean composers have cultivated their own sound for dance music: Yoo Young-Jin has been credited since K-pop's early days with SM's metal-inspired, beat-driven music combining dance, rap, and ballad singing, a style continued by the company's younger producer, Kenzi, who tends to create harmonically and texturally dense tracks. Producer/composer Teddy Park has been responsible for YG artists' music since 2006. JYP has a roster of Korean composers, including Sim Eun-je and Hong Ji-sang; its composer audition programs help discover domestic composers. Black Eyed Pilseung, Hitchhiker, Monotree, Shinsadong Tiger, and Iggy/Youngbae are just some of the Korean composers active in K-pop.

Finally, more K-pop idols have been writing and producing their own music, adding to the stylistic diversity. BIGBANG's leader G-Dragon composed numerous hits for his band, including "Lies" (2007), "Heartbreaker" (2009), and "Fantastic Baby" (2012). Because K-pop management companies have traditionally exerted much control over their stars' artistic activities, and because the industry has long focused on the performance aspect of idol music, G-Dragon's producing his own music was a refreshing change. Moreover, he was among the first idols to refer to himself and his peer musicians as "artists," consciously rejecting their reputation as singing and dancing machines with only visual appeal and little artistic autonomy. Today, Mino of WINNER, Woozi of Seventeen, Hyunsik of BTOB, Soyeon of (G)I-DLE, and many others compose and produce their own music. The members of BTS also either compose or write lyrics for their songs; furthermore, RM, Suga, and J-Hope of BTS have released mixtapes as solo acts. Even established groups like Wonder Girls began producing later in their career, composing and producing nearly all of the tracks of their last two albums, *REBOOT* (2015) and *Why So Lonely* (2016).

With a greater number of competitive management companies, more robust global collaboration, a larger range of domestic composers, and increasing involvement of idols in the production of their own music, the stylistic spectrum of K-pop is now broader than ever. The following

section discusses one notable feature that arose in this stylistic diversity: the borrowing of traditional Korean music in K-pop.

Traditional Korean Music in K-Pop

Traditional Korean culture began surfacing prominently in K-pop toward the end of the 2010s, indicating a change in the industry's approach to globalization.²¹ In fact, throughout K-pop's history, musicians have experimented with incorporating traditional Korean music, through iconography, instrumentation, and lyrics, as shown in Table 3.4. However, only in recent years has it been happening in earnest and with notable frequency. The incorporation has thus not been monolithic, but rather involved diverse intentions and creative procedures, reflecting K-pop's evolving glocalization principles. The rest of this chapter examines three examples, TVXQ's "Maximum" (2011), Topp Dogg's "Arario" (2014), and Agust D's "Daechwita" (2020). They demonstrate different modes and extents of borrowing from traditional Korean culture, as well as their broader implications for listeners and musicians.

Table 3.4 *Select K-pop tracks released since the 1990s that borrow elements of traditional Korean music and/or culture*

Release year	Artist	Song title	Traditional elements
1993	Seo Taiji	"Hayeoga"	Title, sampling of <i>taepyeongso</i>
2000	1TYM	"Kwaejina chingching"*	Title, folk tune (<i>Kwaejina chingching</i>) in the chorus, <i>samul nori</i> performance, <i>Bukcheong saja</i>
2007	SG Wannabe	"Arirang"	Title, <i>gayageum</i> performance in the intro
2011	TVXQ	"Maximum"	Traditional drums, stage setup
2012	B.A.P	"No Mercy"	<i>Samul nori</i> (music only)
2012	Block B	"Nillili Mambo"	Title, samplings of traditional instruments and folk song in the intro
2013	G-Dragon	"Niliria"	Title, folk tune (<i>Niliria</i>)
2014	Topp Dogg	"Arario"*	Title, lyrics, costume, <i>samul nori</i> , <i>gayageum</i> performance, music video setting (props and background)
2017	VIXX	"Shangri-La"*	Title, <i>gayageum</i> (and <i>gayageum</i> -like electronic sound), props (fans), costume, MV setting
2018	BTS	"Ddaeng"	Lyrics, stage setting, costume
2018	BTS	"IDOL"	Lyrics, music video setting, costume
2018	Mino	"Financé"*	Lyrics, music video setting, costume (incorporation of trot)
2019	ONEUS	"LIT"*	Instruments, lyrics, costume, music video setting
2019	Sunmi	"Lalalay"	Sampling of <i>taepyeongso</i>
2020	Agust D (Suga)	"Daechwita"*	Title, sampling of <i>daechwita</i> , <i>taepyeongso</i> , costume, music video setting, narrative
2020	BLACKPINK	"How You Like That"	Costume

* Tracks adapting traditional Korean music or culture as primary visual or musical source.

TVXQ's "Maximum" (2011)

In TVXQ's "Maximum," references to traditional Korean music do not add up to a legible reading of Korean culture, but rather serve to create a vaguely East Asian feel. There are many borrowings from traditional Korean music in this idiosyncratically dense and beat- and synth-heavy song produced by SM. It opens with a brief solo passage by the traditional Korean zither instrument *gayageum*. The song's overall percussive sound intensifies as various traditional percussion instruments enter around mid-track, starting with the *jing* (gong) that bookends the interlude rap sections (1'23" and 1'45"). In the second half of the track, multiple electronic drum sounds are layered and culminate in the postchorus, when the jangling sound of the *kkwaenggwari* (small gong) is added (3'12"). This last section alludes to the traditional folk performance *pungmul* or *samul nori*, which includes drumming, dancing, and some singing. Also, throughout the song, the singers exclaim phrases like "urlssu" and "huh-ee," interjections used to express amusement and to encourage audience participation during traditional Korean performances.

However, these borrowed sounds from the traditional instruments are neither foregrounded nor instrumental in determining the narrative or structure of the song, but rather are subsumed into the layers of synthesizer drum sounds. Even the *gayageum* part of the opening is fleeting and atmospheric, serving as an incidental sound effect at best. Therefore, despite being a fresh case during a time when K-pop was generally preoccupied with hook-ridden dance music with the propensity to draw on Western culture, the referencing of traditional Korean music in "Maximum" achieves little beyond creating an exotic milieu in the context of Western musical procedures.

Topp Dogg's "Arario" (2014)

"Arario" by hip-hop band Topp Dogg (now Xeno-T) makes explicit and ubiquitous references to traditional Korean culture. The title is a variation of the word "Arirang," a famous Korean folk song. The lyrics of "Arario" are filled with direct quotations of words of folk songs and puns from Korean folklore. Furthermore, the words convey confidence about using Korean elements, a feature rarely seen in K-pop previously: "I don't know why people do such typical raps / I'll just say it, ours is the best."²² The turn to Korean culture is communicated visually in the music video as well. Starting with an image of a *gayageum* player's hands in performance, the music video constantly juxtaposes performances of traditional instruments, such as *gayageum*, *buk* (drum), *Bukcheong sajanoreum* (lion mask dance), and *samulnori* (traditional percussion quartet), and those of Topp Dogg, whose costumes alternate between the traditional *hanbok* and

clothes of hip-hop style. This conjoining of the two worlds culminates in the chorus, where all performers share the stage and take turns in displaying hybrid-style solo acts, as exemplified in one of the back dancers breakdancing while dressed in *hanbok*.

Ironically, the music itself does not match the extent of the expression of traditional Korean culture demonstrated in the music video and the lyrics. Except for at the very beginning and a brief moment in the final chorus, the traditional instruments are not actually heard, creating a disparity between the image and the sound whenever the music video shows performances of the instruments. Thus, despite the numerous references to traditional culture, there is little intermixing of traditional Korean music and hip-hop music. Even so, with both traditional Korean dance/music and hip hop and the lyrics filled with Korean idioms and references to Korean folklore, this track is an antithesis to the “culturally odorless” K-pop music commonly seen in the mid-2010s.

Agust D’s “Daechwita” (2020)

“Daechwita” by Agust D (BTS member Suga’s solo act name) stands as one of the boldest uses of traditional Korean culture and music in K-pop thus far. The track stylishly and effectively infuses elements of traditional Korean music, hip-hop and trap, reflecting the plot of the music video that weaves through Agust D’s dual persona in two different temporal spaces, one as a king in the historic Joseon period (1392–1897) and the other as the rapper himself, somehow appearing in the historic period, disguised as a peasant and facing the king persona.

The title “Daechwita” is taken from the eponymous traditional Korean band music originating in the early seventeenth-century Joseon, performed for royal and military processions. *Chwi* means to blow, and *ta* means to strike; together, *chwita* refers to music performed by woodwind and percussion instruments, and *dae* translates to “grand,” indicating the significance of the occasions where *daechwita* was performed. The instruments for traditional *daechwita* have changed over time, but the standard instrumentation in today’s performances includes the woodwinds *nabal* (brass horn), *nagak* (seashell horn), and *taebyeongso* (shawm), and the percussion instruments *yongo* (drum), *jing* (gong), and *jabara* (small cymbals). The traditional performance begins with the band leader’s command, “*myungeumilha daechwita harapshinda*” (“Hit the gong once and let *daechwita* begin”), to which the band responds by shouting, “Ye-I.” To that, a strike on the gong and three hits on the side of *yongo* (drum) announce the start of the music, and the entire band commences.

Agust D’s song borrows these iconic moments of *daechwita*, with modifications. Unlike the traditional performance, “Daechwita” begins

with the gong, followed by the *taepyeongso* and the leader's command, delivered as a sung melody and accompanied by the gong and other drums. This intro rounds off with the band's response, "Ye-I," as done in a traditional performance. Notably, these sounds are sampled from a performance by the Court Music Orchestra of the National Gugak Center. The voice is that of the *piri* virtuoso Cheong Jae-guk, whose vocalization uses the *shigimsae* technique, melodic decorations involving microtonal bending, grace notes, or vibrations. Fittingly, this introduction, which adopts numerous elements of traditional *daechwita*, is matched visually in the music video by the image of Agust D's king character arising from his throne, followed by a view of the courtyard of a historical palace.

As the music transitions into the main verse and the music video shows Agust D's peasant (modern) persona strolling in an old marketplace, the traditional gong sound is re-created by the synthesizer. These shifts symbolize the intermixing of the tradition and the modern, on both musical and narrative levels. The sound of the *kkwaeggwari* (small handheld gong) introduced in this scene (0'31") could symbolize Agust D's peasant identity, since the instrument is not used in traditional *daechwita*, but in farmer's music, *nongak*. Musically, its jangling timbre perfectly depicts the boisterousness of the marketplace, while its high-pitched, metallic quality blends seamlessly with hi-hat and snare drums. Likewise, the gong, with its lengthy reverberation, mixes well with larger drums. Thus, the track effectively exploits the timbral similarities between traditional and electronic instruments to blend the two genres, which in turn informs the song's narrative.

Recurring pitch materials also help the two different genres mix with each other. For instance, the pitches from the commander's vocalization, the *taepyeongso* melody, and the pitch clusters created by the various instruments in the introduction are rich in microtonal bending and semitone relationships. The vocal bending and semitones serve as cohesive melodic ideas later in the track, as in the vocal chorus melody ("Daechwita-a-a, Daechwaita-a-a") that oscillates between the pitches C# and D. Additionally, the vocalization and the *taepyeongso* melody comprise the pitches G#, C#, D, D#, and F (slightly off pitch), which become part of the main melodic riff (spanning the pitches G#, C#, B, F#, and D) played against the drone on C# (first played at the appearance of the peasant Agust D) throughout the track. Through the cohesive use of pitch materials in both styles of music, "Daechwita" integrates two vastly different genres – traditional Korean music and hip hop – on structural, sonic, and narrative levels.

Overall, the musical, visual, and symbolic integration of traditional Korean music and culture in this track is by far more seamless and

effective than in any other K-pop song. Such incorporation has had significant commercial implications, as illustrated by the popularity of “Daechwita” on YouTube (more than 318 million views as of July 2022, with 13 million likes). Given BTS’s influence in the Korean popular music industry, the musical and commercial success of their engagement with traditional Korean music and culture may encourage other K-pop artists and management companies to continue to explore in this direction.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, K-pop’s stylistic evolution has been guided largely by a search for a balance between the global and the local. Certain aspects of this dynamic have surfaced more prominently than others at different times. However, generally speaking, K-pop has progressed from a conscious resistance to Korea’s local elements to a more willing and enthusiastic expression of them. K-pop artists – not only composers and producers but also choreographers and costume designers – are increasingly looking toward traditional Korean culture for fresh inspiration. One implication of this change is that K-pop as a whole is becoming more confident and assertive about expressing its Koreanness. At the same time, greater consumption of K-pop globally might signify changing dynamics of influence within the popular culture industries. Finally, this trend is symptomatic of the overall widening of the cultural spectrum in K-pop, as the incorporation of Korean traditional culture is counterbalanced by songs like BTS’s “Dynamite” and “Butter,” sung entirely in English.

Whether more K-pop idol musicians will continue to incorporate traditional Korean culture and music in their works is a matter of pure conjecture. However, it is certain that a greater number of international consumers have grown familiar with K-pop and other aspects of Korean culture, which might enable them to embrace K-pop’s experimentation with traditional elements more readily. It will be worthwhile to investigate how this recent engagement with Korean tradition may impact the consumption of K-pop overseas, by Korean and non-Korean audiences, to understand the future direction of K-pop.

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