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The Pursuit of Modernity: The Evolution of Korean Popular Music in the Age of Globalization

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation examines the various meanings of modernity in the history of Korean pop music, focusing on several crucial turning points in the development of K-pop. Since the late 1980s, Korean pop music has aspired to be a more advanced industry and establish an international presence, based on the economic leap and democratization as a springboard. Contemporary K-pop, originating from the underground dance scene in the 1980s, succeeded in transforming Korean pop music into a modern and youth-oriented genre with a new style dubbed "rap/dance music." The rise of dance music changed the landscape of Korean popular music and became the cornerstone of the K-pop idol music. In the era of globalization, K-pop's unique aesthetics and strategy, later termed "Cultural Technology," achieved substantial returns in the international market. Throughout this evolution, Korean Americans were vital players who

brought K-pop closer to its mission of modern and international pop music. In the age of globalization, K-pop's modernity and identity are evolving in a new way. BTS' unprecedented success indicates that K-pop's modernity can be achieved through authentic narratives and Koreanness, not merely through cosmopolitan sounds and visual aesthetics that have eliminated nationality and locality.

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## INTRODUCTION

In May 2019, K-pop group BTS presented their new song Boy with Luv in "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," a late-night talk show hosted by famous American comedian Stephen Colbert.<sup>1</sup> It is no longer a strange sight for a K-pop band to appear on a mainstream entertainment show in the United States, but what makes the stage unique is not merely the fact that the most popular K-pop group has appeared on a famous American talk show. The particularity of this stage was the way CBS, the mainstream U.S. broadcaster, dealt with BTS's phenomenal popularity. In directing BTS's performance, CBS attempted to evoke the stage production style of "Ed Sullivan Show," CBS's most successful variety show from the 1950s to the 1970s, especially the legendary 1964 performance by The Beatles.<sup>2</sup> Boy with Luv's performance by BTS was entirely shot in black-and-white, and Stephen Colbert brought BTS up to the stage, clearly impersonating Ed Sullivan. All elements of the stage were designed precisely the same as those of The Beatles, and BTS, dressed in suits similar to the Beatles, premiered their new song Boy with Luv with their lively dance performance. Cameras were busy capturing the passionate screaming and cheering of their enthusiastic fans called A.R.M.Y and local audience, evoking an image of the Beatlemania. The only difference between the performances of The Beatles and BTS was the genres performed, rock 'n roll and bubble gum dance-pop. At first glance, this homage to the Beatles may not seem rare. It is not new for teams that have gained phenomenal popularity that are hard to explain in the history of pop to be awarded the title 'the next Beatles.' However, the implication of the concert may be more than that for it is not an artist from the United States or

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1 BTS "BTS Performs 'Boy With Luv'". The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. 15 May 2019. CBS. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtLD72Uro8U>

2 The Beatles. "The Beatles - Twist & Shout - Performed Live On The Ed Sullivan Show 2/23/64." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-VAxGJdJeQ>

Britain, but a musician in Korea, which has been far from the mainstream of the global pop industry. Korean pop music, which launched a modern music industry back in the 1960s, by imitating American and British pop music including the Beatles, is now successfully reproducing the image of British Invasion and Beatlemania, with a rise of BTS, in the heart of American pop scene.

BTS is arguably the biggest star the K-pop industry had ever have since 2012 when Psy created a world-wide viral hit with Gangnam style. BTS's global success has become a new subject in academia and journalism that often attributed it to their musical uniqueness and aesthetic qualities. It is closely related to the structural changes that are taking place gradually in the global music industry, and the changing aspects of music spreading in the social media era and the aspect of media convergence (Yoon, 2019; Jin 2019; Lee 2019). In the historical perspective of Korean pop music, however, this needs to be examined as an extension of Korean pop music's pursuit of modernity in the era of globalization. Korea, once a nameless country in the East that faced and survived the war, terrible poverty, and brutal dictatorship, has finally emerged as the most promising powerhouse in popular music around the world in the 21st century.

BTS is indeed incomparable to other contemporary K-pop acts in terms of its popularity and commercial and musical achievements. Still, K-pop's overall reputation has also been rapidly rising beyond what it used to be. For instance, in the Social 50 Artists compiled by Billboard Magazine at the end of 2019, 20 teams of K-pop singers made to the list, as the only foreign artists on the list.<sup>3</sup> On Billboard 200, Billboard's most prominent mainstream album chart, along with Hot 100, over 15 Korean artists albums have reached the top spot since 2009, and 28 of

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<sup>3</sup> Year-end charts: Social 50 Artists. Billboards. 2019 <https://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end/2019/social-50-artists>

which was from the past five years. The aspiration of Korean popular music toward the global success that has been pursuing for the past few decades has finally begun to bear successful fruit, at least in a commercial sense.

Table 1 List of K-pop albums on Billboard 200

Date	Artist	Album Title	Peak Position
2009-04-04	BoA	BoA	127
2012-03-17	Big Bang	Alive	150
2012-05-12	Girls' Generation-TTS	Twinkle	126
2012-09-29	G-Dragon	One of a Kind	161
2013-09-21	G-Dragon	Coup d'Etat Pt.1	182
2014-03-15	2NE1	Crush	61
2014-03-15	Girls' Generation	Mr.Mr.	110
2014-05-24	Exo-K	Overdose	129
2014-06-21	Taeyang	Rise	112
2015-04-18	Exo	Exodus	95
2015-12-19	BTS	The Most Beautiful Moment In Life, Part 2	171
2016-05-21	BTS	The Most Beautiful Moment In Life: Young Forever	107
2016-10-29	BTS	Wings	26
2016-12-31	Big Bang	Made	172
2017-03-04	BTS	You Never Walk Alone	61
2017-06-24	G-Dragon	Kwon Ji Yong	192
2017-08-05	Exo	The War	87
2017-10-07	BTS	Love Yourself: Her	7
2018-02-03	Jonghyun	Poet   Artist	177
2018-03-10	J-Hope	Hope World	38
2018-04-14	BTS	Face Yourself	43
2018-06-02	BTS	Love Yourself: Tear	1
2018-06-30	Blackpink	Square Up	40
2018-09-08	BTS	Love Yourself: Answer	1
2018-10-27	NCT 127	Regular-Irregular	86
2018-11-03	RM	mono.	26
2018-11-17	Exo	Don't Mess Up My Tempo	23
2019-03-16	TXT	The Dream Chapter: Star	140
2019-04-20	Blackpink	Kill This Love	24

Date	Artist	Album Title	Peak Position
2019-04-27	BTS	Map of the Soul: Persona	1
2019-06-08	NCT 127	We Are Superhuman	11
2019-07-13	BTS	BTS World: Original Soundtrack	26
2019-10-19	SuperM	SuperM	1
2019-12-14	Exo	Obsession	182
2020-02-29	Monsta X	All About Luv	5
2020-03-07	BTS	Map of the Soul: 7	1
2020-03-21	NCT 127	Neo Zone	5
2020-06-06	Suga (Agust D)	D-2	11
2020-06-13	Twice	More & More	200

The phenomenal popularity of K-pop over the past decade has been documented and analyzed in various ways, from academia to journalism. Still, I think from a historical perspective, BTS' success, and the subsequent success of other K-pop, should all be understood as a result of the know-how that K-pop has accumulated and as an inevitable evolution of Korean popular music and the industry. I consider the success of K-pop as an outcome of Korea's consistent pursuit of modernity for the past 30 years. And the various factors believed to be characteristics of K-pop today have also been developed and revised within the K-pop industry in multiple ways over the years. On top of that, BTS' unprecedented success would exemplify that K-pop is moving beyond its limits to a new level.

Before further discussion, I would like to clarify my position on the subject of K-pop in writing this dissertation. In conducting this research, I take a somewhat ambivalent position as both a journalist and an academic researcher. And rather than hiding my ambivalent identity, I am revealing it in several places in this research. I have been a music journalist and critic since the late 1990s. I have been consistently interested in music from the 1990s, often referred to as the golden age of Korean pop music or the dawn of K-pop. My interest in this era, in particular, was documented in the book I co-authored, "The 50 Greatest Albums of the 1990s." Since the

2000s, I have mainly devoted my attention to the history and culture of Korean hip-hop, which was still an underground phenomenon by the time. "Korean Hip Hop: Footsteps of Passion," which I co-authored in 2006, has been recognized as the first substantial account on Korean hip-hop in academia and music journalism. When I came to the United States to study Ethnomusicology in 2007, I had an opportunity to look at Korean pop music and industry from an entirely new perspective. First of all, I instantly noticed that the Korean Wave, which began to spread around the world, including Japan and the United States in the 2000s, started to raise new interest in the US. K-pop had already become global music before I even noticed it, and this new trend stimulated my intellectual curiosity as a student studying ethnomusicology. In 2012, Psy's viral hit "Gangnam Style" made a historic success in the U.S. and around the world, bringing about a significant shift in perception of K-pop, especially in academia. It was from this time that I seriously took K-pop as my research topic in earnest as a graduate student. I began to delve into the new possibilities of K-pop in the age of globalization, to investigate its aesthetic features and strategies. The first thing that caught my attention was its non-national, hybrid nature of the music and its visual presentation. Drawing upon the work of Koichi Iwabuchi, Japanese media scholar, I suggested an idea of "non-nationality" as an aesthetic feature and strategy of K-pop, which was similarly discussed in the researches of Sun Jung and Michael Fuhr. Following up on this, I came to pay particular attention to the process and evolution of how the music and concept were conceived and produced by musicians and record companies, to explain the unique aesthetics and hybridity of Korean pop music. Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation reflected my interest in these themes.

Around 2015, many changes were being made in the K-pop scene. K-pop has fully established itself as a global industry and has achieved remarkable growth around the globe,

including the biggest pop market, the U.S. Shortly after, the BTS phenomenon that I mentioned earlier has exploded in earnest. BTS went beyond K-pop's most successful group and began to receive attention as a global superstar. I became interested in their success as a music critic, especially their success in the United States, and began to analyze their music in earnest. And my efforts were summed up in my book, "BTS The Review: A Comprehensive Look at the Music of BTS," published in 2019. The insights gained from writing this book are partly reflected in the last chapter of this dissertation.

The ambivalent position that I have as a researcher and critic conflicts in many ways. Often there was some confusion between academic discussion and shared knowledge as a journalist. Some of the analyses and conclusions in this dissertation are based on the experience and knowledge gained as journalist rather than the logical reasoning of a scholar. Also, some information or perspectives are based on “common sense” observations or insights that I have as a Korean. Each chapter in this dissertation is loosely woven from different themes and various topics of interest in K-pop that I had as a journalist at different times. And it ultimately reflects my interest in the "modernity" and the evolution of Korean pop music, which has long been pursued by modern Korea.

#### TERMS AND IDEAS

In this dissertation, I explore several theories and ideas surrounding the modernity, globalization, and authenticity that characterize the trajectory of Korean popular music. Globalization, especially in relation to the nature of modernity, is the most critical area. Sociologist Anthony Giddens established some of the modern definitions of globalization. As seeing the globalization is a “consequence of modernity” and a process of “intensification of worldwide social relations,” he argues that local situations are constantly constructed by the



distant events through globalization (1990: 64). Appadurai, on the other hand, has explored cultural dimensions of globalization. He argued that modernity is “irregularly self-conscious and unevenly experienced” event which involves a disjuncture between past and present (Appadurai 1996). This notion of disjuncture is a pivotal concept to understand the theory of global cultural flow that he theorized. In *Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy*, he emphasized that globalization is an interactive, not dominated project. As introducing the idea of “imaginary landscape,” he differentiates five dimensions of global "scapes," flowing across cultural boundaries: 1) ethnoscaples, the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which people live, 2) technoscapes, the global configuration of technologies moving at high speeds across previously impermeable borders, 3) financescapes, the global grid of currency speculation and capital transfer, 4) mediascapes, the distribution of the capabilities to produce and disseminate information and the large complex repertoire of images and narratives generated by these capabilities, and 5) ideoscapes, ideologies of states and counter-ideologies of movements, around which nation-states have organized their political cultures. Due to a technological explosion, mainly in the domain of transportation and information through media, he suggests, we live in a rootless and alienated world in which there is “no sense of place.” These imaginary dimensions and their disjunctive relationships with each other is the primary practice that shaped the complexity of the contemporary world. I’ve drawn upon his notion of globalization in this dissertation regarding the transnational nature of K-pop.

Another essential theoretical background that I have drawn upon is “glocalization” as a revisionary idea of globalization. Many scholars have pointed out the limitation of the view that finds globalization to be a result of western domination over local cultures. They believe that globalization is not just a plural but also a historical, uneven, localizing process. Stuart Hall, in

*The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity*, claimed that globalization was characterized by “global mass culture,” but it is more decentralized than unified. He expected two possible outcomes in the response of the previous phase of globalism: the re-emergence of nationalism and “returning to local” (1991). Roland Robertson saw globalization as “the compression of the world” and “the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” rather than just a unification of system (1992: 2). Based on these notions of a plurality of globalization, scholars have developed a theory of glocalization or “localized globalization.” Roland Robertson, in *Glocalization*, introduced the term as a replacement of the term globalization and underscored “simultaneity and the interpenetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local, or – in more abstract vein – the universal and the particular” (1995: 30). In regard to the relationship to modernity, Pieterse argued, one could avoid this “Americanization/westernization” modernity model by adopting the notion of “multiple paths of modernization” or “plural approach toward modernity” (1995). Several anthropologists have already made an observation of cultural hybridization in different fields. Ulf Hannerz, for example, has considered creole (hybrid) cultures to be “those that draws two or more historical sources, often originally widely different” (1987: 552). Some argue that glocalization or “multiple paths” becomes possible through cultural hybridization or *mélange* of culture (Pieterse 2005). Pieterse considers that, by challenging the essentialist dichotomy of pure culture and hybrid culture, a process of globalization is eventually globalization of hybridity, and hybridity would serve as a critique of cultural essentialism.

Academic studies of Asian popular culture, East Asian culture, in particular, have emerged around the 1990s, and they actively embraced the idea of glocalization and hybridity against the discourse of cultural imperialism. Although it is difficult to make a distinct

periodization, I have generally observed a particular transition of interests in the scholarship of Asian popular music, mostly in East Asia: 1) Asian popular music as an appropriation and hybridization of western pop and local music, 2) The rise of Japanese popular culture and the transnational hegemony of Japanese pop culture as an Asian cultural center, 3) The success of the Korean wave and the popularity of K-pop worldwide. A significant new direction in the study of Asian popular culture occurred on the threshold of the new millennium with the worldwide popularity of Japanese popular music. This shift was not limited to the domain of contemporary pop music, however, but it stretched over the diverse landscape of Japanese modern music. Scholars began to pay attention to the hegemony of J-culture since the 1990s, especially in regard to the transnational cultural traffic newly reported from East and Southeast Asian countries, namely China, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, etc. Japanese media scholar Koichi Iwabuchi illustrated how Asian modernity was realized through embracing the Japanese model, not directly through the American model due to several circumstances. In observing how Asian countries consume and emulate Japanese pop culture, he argues that the process of East Asian modernity is better understood using an intra-regional cultural flow model, in which modernity could be explored by consuming other neighboring Asian countries' culture in a local level. As Iwabuchi puts by adopting Tsunoyama's idea, "now some non-Western 'modern' countries are facing each other to find neighbors experiencing and feeling similar things and temporality of East Asian vernacular modernity via America-dominated cultural globalization" (Iwabuchi 2001; Tsunoyama 1995: 189). Particularly in music, Iwabuchi suggested the idea of "leap" modernization of East Asian countries. The basic premise is to consider Japan as a successful role model of cultural hybridization: embracing western pop elements yet embodying the western ideas into its own existing cultural form. He argued that Asian countries had accomplished

“leap” success in modernization by emulating the Japanese model, whereas Japan had accomplished it gradually. As he writes, Asian countries “effortlessly appropriate the fruit of Japan’s long indigenization of Western pop” (2002: 117). In attempting to underscore the international success of the Japanese model in popular culture, Iwabuchi has introduced a new concept called “Non-nationality.” The idea derives from the Japanese word *mukokuseki*, which was first coined by a Japanese scholar Tsunoyama who considered ambiguity in ethnic or racial identity (such as in Janimation) to be distinguishing features showing Japanese syncretic (hybrid) culture (Iwabuchi 2001; Tsunoyama 1995: 191). I have drawn upon the idea of “mukokuseki” in talking about K-pop’s global presence, especially regarding the non-national hybridity of K-pop and its strategy for the global market using the local sub-units in Ch. 2 and Ch.3 in particular.

Lastly, my dissertation explores several different notions of authenticity. In the scholarship of K-pop, the idea of authenticity has never been considered seriously due to the fact that K-pop has been known to be manufactured by the record labels using its highly systematic methodology. Because K-pop has been criticized for that manufactured nature, the artistic quality of the music has been dismissed by scholars and critics. At the same time, authenticity in popular music has always been a subject of debate, and it is often a very uncertain area in terms of the definition and scope. In contemporary popular music, especially since the birth of rock n roll, there have been many discussions about authenticity and music, especially in the areas of rock (Grossberg, 1993), punk (Middleton, 2002; Williams, 2006), and hip-hop (Armstrong, 2004; Hess, 2005; McLeod, 1999). Nevertheless, the standard of authenticity demanded by each genre and its audience was as different as its resemblance. In this dissertation, I draw upon concepts of

authenticity associated specifically with hip-hop, to contrast with the idea of "manufactured / factory music," which has been discussed as the essence of K-pop production.

Another problem with the relationship between modernity and authenticity of Korean pop music is its relationship with foreign pop music, especially American pop music, which has influenced African American-style Korean pop music. In particular, in the early 1990s, when Korean pop music actively borrowed from R&B and hip-hop, issues about the authenticity and uniqueness of pop music emerged. Genres such as R&B and hip-hop were profoundly related to the identity of blacks, and the Korean public, an aspect of the culture that native Korean musicians could not acquire by learning. These genres have become deeply related to blackness and Americanness, laying the foundation for Korean Americans born and raised in the United States to claim a kind of ownership and authenticity of such music. For instance, the use of English in Korean pop music in the African American music genre would be a mark of the authenticity of the genre (Song, 2019). These ideas are more deeply explored in different ways in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF K-POP AND THE PERIODIZATION

The dissertation traces K-pop's journey from the rise of K-pop industry and the unprecedented success of BTS from various perspectives. A substantial number of researches on K-pop, its essence, nature, and technical characteristics have been written over the past decade. Based on these academic achievements, I examine some of the significant attributes that helped to define K-pop as a global genre in the following chapters. The word K-pop is an abbreviation for Korean pop music, but there have been various views and interpretations of its essence and character. Many of the K-pop scholarships regards its hybrid nature as the most prominent feature of K-pop, with media scholar Doobo Sim ultimately considering it as part of Korea's

modernity project. I draw upon his views as one of the essential theoretical backgrounds, especially concerning my analysis of the formation and the production technology of K-pop.

It is characterized by a mixture of modern Western sounds and African-American influences (including sounds from Hip-hop, R&B, Jazz, black pop, soul, funk, techno, disco, house, and Afrobeats) with a Korean aspect of performance (including synchronized dance moves, formation changes and the so-called "point choreography" consisting of hooking and repetitive key movements). It has been remarked that there is a "vision of modernization" inherent in Korean pop culture (Shim, 2005).

Michael Fuhr further defines it as a hybrid cultural practice as a postmodern "pastiche." This includes not only musical hybridity, but also the nature of a product that combines visual, lyric, dance, and fashion, which makes K-pop to be a hybridized cultural product as a whole.

K-pop is a thoroughly hybridized product, a unique coalescence of music, visuals, lyrics, dance, and fashion, a postmodern product of pastiche and parody, a carnivalesque celebration of difference, a shiny world of escapism, and a highly participatory cultural practice enacted through digital media (Fuhr, 2016).

Eun-young Jung and many other ethnomusicologists repeatedly point out the transnational nature of music and industry as the most crucial feature of K-pop. According to these views, K-pop is located in the context of transnational flow beyond a national or an institutional boundary or category. Fuhr also considers it a state-led national branding or strategic project supported by the government.

K-pop is a result of strategic planning and a fostering of the domestic entertainment sector by state-national bodies; on the other hand, it is utilized by the government to increase the nation's cultural capital in ways variously described as nation branding, soft power, or cultural diplomacy (Fuhr, 2016).

Much of their definition and categorization of K-pop are all precursors to the arguments discussed in this dissertation. But there are some limitations to this. First of all, K-pop's characteristics, which most scholars commonly point out, are not a common feature of Korean pop music itself, but rather a common feature of mainstream pop music known as "K-pop" in the international market, especially "idol" music, which has often been identified with Korean pop music since the 2000s.

One of the things that were often pointed out as a feature of modern K-pop is its highly visual-oriented value accompanied by a group dance performance. And in this sense, scholars and journalism commonly point to the debut of Seo Tai-ji and Boys, who debuted in the early 90s as a practical departure for K-pop, and H.O.T., the first real idol group to succeed them. Among them, the status of Seo Taiji and Boys is undoubtedly absolute. A substantial amount of work has already been written about them, regarding the rise of the modern music industry and globalization of K-pop since the arrival of Seo Tai-ji. However, not many scholars paid attention to the change that gradually established during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, even before the arrival of Seo Tai-ji. While academic studies analyzing the formation of modern K-pop tend to pay less attention to the situation and changes of Korean pop music in the 1980s than in the 1990s, Keith Howards' writings are some of the most pioneering efforts. He paid particular attention to the rise of Korean modern popular music during the 80s and 90s, considering it a critical and transitional period for the contemporary K-pop. He describes the change during this period as the time when "ballad" declined while more youth-oriented American influenced pop music has risen in the mainstream. Another critical scholarly work is Michael Fuhr's *Global and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-pop*. Based on existing media studies and those studied in Korean studies, he is closely examining the nature of K-pop in the era of globalization.

His view of the 1980s and 1990s is not much different from that of Keith Howard. He regards Korean pop music from the 1980s as the era of ballads and trot, and considers the 1990s as the full-fledged beginning of K-pop triggered by the achievement of democracy and the explosion of rap music. This view is similar to that of most scholars who have studied K-pop over the past decade. Early research on Korean hip-hop and rap, including papers written by Morelli and Jung, likewise clearly distinguishes the 1980s and 1990s, mainly focusing on the achievements of rap musicians Seo Tai-ji and Boys as pioneers of new trends in the 1990s.

Although I am not opposed to this framework or periodization, I find the limitations of analysis centered on Seo Tai-ji and Boys or "rap" music. Seo Tai-ji and Boys were undoubtedly the most influential musicians to lead the innovation of K-pop in the 1990s. Still, at the same time, they were the group that exploded it commercially based on changes already taking place in the Korean pop music scene in the late 80s. For this reason, I argue that rather than the success of a single group of Seo Taiji and Boys, we should consider the changes in the entire music scene and the commonalities found in contemporary Korean artists. Also, the discourse that centers Seo Tai-ji and Boys can inevitably define K-pop as a mere 1990s phenomenon. So, I would like to focus on aspects in this chapter that the existing studies did not pay much attention to. First of all, I would like to explain the significance of the changes in the 1980s and 1990s, which played a crucial role in the establishment of K-pop, from the perspective of the "emergence of the dance music scene." One of the most important reasons why I adopt this framework of "dance music" instead of "hip-hop" or "rap" is that it is highly difficult to define or categorize Korean as solely based on genre themselves. For example, although the rise of Seo Tai-ji and Boys led to the popularization of rap music, it did not mean that the era of hip-hop had substantially begun. Rap or hip-hop was closer to musical idioms rather than a single



independent genre at the time, and the element of rap was also actively introduced by various musicians, often divided into ballad singers and rockers. Furthermore, Ballads, which Howard and Fuhr said were the mainstream genre of the 80s, were still mainstream until the early 2000s. Trot, commonly known as the genre of the '80s, not only competed on the mainstream charts with rap groups like Seo Tai-ji and Boys in the early '90s but also maintained its influence on the music chart until the mid-'90s. Thus, the periodization purely based on the genre, such as ballads and dance music in the 80s and hip-hop in the 90s, would not be completely useful in describing a shift in the music scene more accurately.

For this reason, I regard the generational shift in Korean pop music, which has been outstanding since the mid-80s, and the subsequent introduction of a new style of pop music, as more important than the period distinction centered on genres. In particular, I would like to see the series of trends that sprouted from the mid-80s and emerged before and after the 1988 Olympics and consumed as youth culture by young people, such as rap, hip-hop, and techno in the 1990s, as a mainstreaming of "dance music" scene and the reestablishment of dancers as a significant figure in music.

#### AN OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

In this dissertation, I discuss the meaning of modernity in Korean popular music and how K-pop has transformed and renovated itself over the past 30 years. I examined some of the critical changes that have shaped modern K-pop and how the evolution of its methodology and strategy contributed to the modern and transnational nature of the industry.

In Chapter 1, I discuss the renovation of K-pop as the mainstreaming of "dance music," which emerged as a new trend distinct from the past in the Korean pop music scene against the backdrop of modernization and industrialization of Korea. In particular, I discussed the decisive

role of underground dancers and DJs who emerged as new influential players in mainstream pop music, explaining how these new types of musicians helped lay the foundation for the style and performance of contemporary K-pop. The fundamental changes in Korean pop music from the late 1980s to the early 1990s have been discussed in various ways, including the growth of the domestic market, the rise of rap and hip hop, and the development of modern music production techniques. Among them, I considered the mainstreaming of dance music, performed by both dancer and DJs, as one of the most crucial factors in changing the style of music and performance. Dancers and DJs from an underground club scene who emerged as the mainstay of the music industry have significantly transformed Korean pop music into a more danceable and visually oriented genre, in which group dance performances are as important as singing. Dancers and DJ-turned-musicians also emerged as the most important producers of Korean pop music. They successfully implanted the musical gene of the underground dance scene into the mainstream by taking advantage of the innovative arrangement techniques and aesthetics they forged in the club scene. Their activities as underground musicians eventually served as a direct background for the birth of a new industry called K-pop since the late 90s.

In chapters 2 and 3, I explore two essential components of "Cultural Technology," which has been a strategic and aesthetic foundation for the modern K-pop industry: "Localization" (in which the members are different depending on the national market that is being targeted), and the "songwriting camp" approach to creating songs. In Chapter 2, I pay particular attention to the emergence and development of various localized units of K-pop idol groups as part of its localization strategy, which contributed to a unique aspect of K-pop and one of the crucial reasons for its global success. Through this, I observed how the K-pop industry actively responds to the market in the process of globalization, and by doing this, how they were able to evolve

their system in producing music into elaborate “modular” technology. The evolution of the localization group proves that the modernity of K-pop is not only confined to the genre or style of music it adopts but ultimately to the success of overseas markets and the expansion of the scope of K-pop.

In Chapter 3, I look at how K-pop's strategic, yet artistic approach is reflected in the methods and various musical choices of composition and production process, and also how this kind of method strengthens the characteristics of K-pop as a modern and transnational industry. I focus on a unique production system called songwriting camp. Songwriting camp is an essential foundation for K-pop to efficiently produce a large number of songs while quickly responding to trends in the global market. Moreover, it contributes to K-pop's distinctive musical character, distinguished from the American and Japanese pop music, which have been the aesthetic foundation and the role models of K-pop. While the primary purpose of the song camp is to achieve a cosmopolitan product using foreign talents, K-pop also devised a collaborative system to make music more locally relevant. Korean songwriters and lyricists are still playing crucial roles in composing and producing music, engaging their understanding of the industry as Korean musicians. Through the participation of foreign composers and the transnational collaborative work between international and Korean musicians, K-pop can create highly cosmopolitan, but at the same time, uniquely Korean sound.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the diverse and shifting roles of Korean Americans in the historical context of Korean pop music, which has taken a large yet often overlooked role in the modernization and globalization of Korean pop music. Having dual identities as Americans and Koreans, Korean Americans are a unique combination of cultural bearers or mediators and innovators who have consistently contributed to the modernization of Korean pop music since

the late 1980s. With their sophisticated western image as Americans and their fluent English, they were able to provide Korean pop music with a unique sense of modernity distinct from native Korean or American musicians. With the K-pop industry becoming global, they have taken a more practical role in the success of K-pop in the international music market. At the same time, as K-pop's global status has increased, Korean Americans increasingly chose the Korean market for a foothold in their success. Korean Americans became an essential component of the localization strategy of Korean pop music, known as Cultural Technology. The role of Korean Americans in the K-pop industry shows that K-pop's modernity has also built upon Koreans' diasporic identity.

In the last chapter, I discussed the latest incarnation of the global K-pop phenomenon, BTS. I approached BTS' success and music, from the perspective of a new evolution of K-pop idol music. BTS is a group that inherited the legacy of K-pop's modernity and advanced technology in many ways. But at the same time, BTS pioneered several new areas that had not previously been considered an essential feature of K-pop. I noted the compelling narratives of their messages as an essential part of BTS' global popularity in particular, which I tried to interpret as the emergence of "hip-hop idols." The messages and attitudes that are truthful to their origins and backgrounds are closely associated with the idea of authenticity of hip-hop. BTS has devised a new model that distinguishes them from the existing K-pop idols, successfully incorporating such authentic narratives in the cosmopolitan aesthetic of music. Concerning their musical authenticity, I note that BTS's music actively expresses Koreanness, traditionally shunned in K-pop. In regard to globalization, they show alternative ways that K-pop can appeal to audiences around the world with music that reflects Korean aesthetics and messages, instead of music that eliminates nationality and locality.

## Chapter 1. THE RISE OF DANCE MUSIC

### 1.1 THE RISE OF DANCE SCENE

Psy's "Gangnam Style," released in 2012, remains arguably the most sensational global hit that K-pop ever made. While the track is titled after a specific geographic location, it does not tell anything about Gangnam, a district in Seoul, as it only talks about his ideal type of woman and how he is qualified for that type. Still, it is symbolic that K-pop's greatest hit song in the 21st century refers to "Gangnam," the town that has emerged as a new downtown and a center of entertainment and nightlife since the late 1980s. Korean modern dance music, the basis of current K-pop, was established since the mid-1980s. And the development of Korean dance scene is closely related to the emergence of dance clubs in Gangnam that functioned as a new scene, cradle, and powerhouse of dance music and rap music in South Korea.



Figure 1.1. Gangnam Style by PSY

The rapid change in the music industry that took place in the late 1980s was primarily a transition to young music demanded by young consumers in their teens and twenties, called shinsaedae (new generation). Since the early 1990s, this new group of young consumers has

emerged as enthusiastic supporters of domestic popular music (Jin, 2016). The emergence of new musical styles such as rap and hip-hop made a significant contribution, but more generally, it was not just a genre of music, but a new trend of “dance music.” It was closely related to the changes in Korean society as a whole.

The rise of dance music was an outcome of the continuing process of Korean urbanization and industrialization after the Korean War. By the 1950s, when Korea has just experienced the Korean War, Korea did not have enough economic power to develop entertainment industries such as night clubs. Entering the 1960s, Korea gradually began to recover its economic capacity from its worst poverty. Night clubs were built around the downtown Seoul area, and modern Western pop music such as rock and roll was introduced into the music scene and began to be localized by aspiring young musicians. The rise of domestic dance music was also associated with the establishment of a new dance music scene and culture, which reflected the radical shift in Korean socio-geographical change. During the 1970s and 1980s, the axis of Korean commerce, including the entertainment business, gradually shifted from *Gangbuk* (north of Han river), the old downtown of Seoul, to *Gangnam* (south of Han river), the new city center of southern Seoul. Gangnam, previously known as an undeveloped neighborhood filled with fields and paddies, started to be developed as a part of an economic plan throughout Park and Chun administrations (Joo, 2018). Although most of the social and political institutions were constructed in Gangbuk downtown, Gangnam had increasingly become a new center of Seoul, equipped with freshly built public and government offices, as well as new residential and business areas. One direct consequence of the development and urbanization of Gangnam was the establishment of Gangnam night club scene. As more middle-class and younger families chose to live in Gangnam area over the old downtown, commerce

also grew based on their needs that consequently established its own entertainment culture, including nightlife. Numerous night clubs (or often called *discotheque*) were open around Gangnam downtown by the 1980s that attracted much younger, hip, and urbanized young adults. These young consumers were enthusiastic about disco sounds from the U.S. or Europe, instead of Korean popular music, which was dominated by adult-style ballads or folk music. Discotheque has emerged as the core of Gangnam's entertainment culture with unprecedented popularity, and famous DJs around these clubs have slowly begun to build their reputation.

Although the axis of the dance club scene has shifted to Gangnam province, Gangbuk remained a powerhouse in club culture but with a completely different venue. An innovation in Korean pop music, centered on young and hip music that is different from adult-oriented nightclubs, began to take shapes in the “foreigner district” of Itaewon. Located near the Yongsan Garrison for the US Army, Itaewon was the home to many clubs catered to American soldiers and other foreigners. Among these clubs, arguably, the most significant one for the development of Korean dance music was the club Moon Night, a new hub of Korean dancers who specialize in urban dance and b-boying. At Moon Night, Korean amateur dancers who learned their moves from imported videos as well as from US GIs and their families gathered for citywide dance competitions almost every week. Just as much as the USFK clubs of the 1960s in the 8th Army were the cradle from which Korea’s first rock stars like Shin Jung-hyeon emerged, many of the progenitors of modern K-pop dance musicians were born in Moon Night.<sup>4</sup> While Korean pop music is still a domestic industry, the formation of this unique club culture by US GIs and local dancers in Korea demonstrated K-pop’s global character and essence even before the era of K-pop began.

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<sup>4</sup> Quarterly Literature. Winter Issue (89). Munhakdongnae. 2016



Figure 1.2. Club “Moon Night” at Itaewon district

### 1.1.1 Dancers and DJs go to mainstream

The newly formed dance music scene centered around Gangnam and Itaewon gave birth to two new types of musicians who had not received much attention in Korean pop music before, and it was DJ and dancer. The Gangnam night club continued its rapid growth through the 1980s, and DJs were the key to the growth of such businesses. The music at night clubs was predominantly selected by DJ, as they choose what to play in sequence night after night. A successful night club always had DJs with outstanding musical sensibilities and understanding of trends, and they were the ones who had to do it.<sup>5</sup> These disc jockeys, who newly earned a substantial recognition playing disco and other modern dance genres in downtown during the late 1980s, started to aspire for even more commercial success beyond the underground club music scene. Kim Chang-hwan, for example, built his reputation as a star DJ at a Gangnam night club in the 1980s, and in the late 1980s, he turned into a producer and successfully incorporated his know-how in the underground into the mainstream music scene (Yi, 2003; Kim, 2015). After the success as

<sup>5</sup> Stayin alive: Sarainne diseuko (2013). TV documentary. MBC  
(<http://playvod.imbc.com/Vod/VodPlay?broadcastId=1000833100710100000>)



DJ, he founded his music label in 1989 and made a series of phenomenal success through the records he produced for singers he recruited. Kim discovered some of the most successful dance music artists of the early 1990s, including Kim Gun-mo, Noise, and Clon. More importantly, he produced the albums using his experience as a DJ as he actively incorporated the genres that were popularized in the club scene in the mainstream production, such as house or techno.<sup>6</sup> His appearance also meant the emergence of a new kind of talent in the music scene. Unlike many established performers and producers at the time, which were rooted in underground rock or folk music scene, or experienced studio performers, or classically trained musicians, he did not have regular musical training. Instead, straight out of the dance club, he paved the way for the influx of DJs and dancers in the underground to make substantial success, especially with music that never went mainstream up until that time. The establishment of a unique dance sound, centered on the agencies and producers he created, became the blueprint for the upcoming modern K-pop industry.

Kim Chang-hwan and other underground DJs' entry into the mainstream music scene has fundamentally changed the way music is produced and performed. The changes are evident in the arrangement and performance style of dance singer Nami's song "Indieon inhyeongcheoreom (Like an Indian Doll)" (DJ Re-mix version) released in 1990. The song illustrated two significant changes in the development of the Korean dance music scene in particular. First, the song contained a new type of musical practice originated in the club scene, called re-mix. She released the original song on her full-length album a year ago, which had already been a success. However, she decides to introduce the song in a new way to a new audience amid a sudden change in trends that took place in the late 1980s. She commissioned this song to a famous

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<sup>6</sup> Quarterly Literature. Winter Issue (89). Munhakdongnae. 2016

downtown DJ named Shin Cheol (as a member of DJ duo BoomBoom) to re-mix the song that would suit a younger audience who prefers urban club sound. Re-mix, literally meaning re-doing the mixing process of recording, has become an innovative way of re-arranging previously known materials, a widely accepted format in western house music and hip-hop tradition. This song is clearly showing the arrangement of the re-mix that was popular at the time in the club scene. "Like an Indian Doll" was released separately as an EP album with only re-mixed tracks, a very unusual move for the Korean pop music scene at the time. The song was newly mixed with as many as five different versions, and the work was performed by Shin Cheol and Yoo Dae-young, the best downtown DJ in Korea. The album marks one of the earliest attempts by an underground DJ to make inroads into the mainstream music scene using the musical technique of re-mix. The re-mixed version of "Like an Indian Doll," which added rap performances by DJ Shin Cheol and Lee Jung-hyo, has been widely used for Nami's broadcast performance, featuring instrumental parts that extended the original version, and DJ techniques such as scratching.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1.3. DJ remix album by Nami and BoomBoom

<sup>7</sup> Nami. Indieon Inhyeongcheoreom (Remix version). On *Indieon Inhyeongcheoreom (DJ Remix)*. 1991. Seoul. Seoureumban.

Shin Cheol was not only involved in arranging songs. He formed Nami's back-up dance duo BoomBoom with his colleague DJ Lee Jung-hyo and performed with her on numerous stages. In the hip-hop culture, MC (Master of Ceremony) is the traditional role that dominates the atmosphere of the performance and enhances the mood while rapping or dancing. Nami and Boom Boom's "Like an Indian Doll" combined the role of a club DJ, which was already popularized in the downtown clubs of Gangnam at that time, with the role of the traditional hip-hop DJs and put them together in a simple and catchy tune on the mainstream stage (Yi, 2003; Kim 2012, Kim 2015). This feat cannot be limited to her personal transformation or achievement. Nami's pioneering musical change as an established artist also symbolized the trend of Korean popular music. She debuted in the late 1970s and was one of the trendsetters who released various dance music such as new wave and disco throughout the 1980s. At the same time, Nami was an artist who also served adult-oriented music that could appeal to the mainstream public. For fans who remember her as a traditional pop music vocalist in the ballad or trot genres, the combination of rap, urban dance, and re-mix in "Like an Indian Doll" may have been strange, but this is an evolution of Korean dance music that has continued through the 1980s. It was the result of naturally reflecting the latest changes in and development of Korean popular music.

As demonstrated from Nami's case, the most prominent change in Korean popular music in the late 1980s is the appearance of a large number of visual-oriented singers specializing in dance music, who already forged their skills and styles in disco and other club dance music. One of the most decisive factors to encourage this change was the emergence of television as a primary medium for distributing popular music to the mass. The distribution of color TV has changed a landscape of the music industry of the 1980s, similar to how MTV has turned

American pop music into a more visual-oriented industry. As dance clubs replaced live music café in the underground scene, TV gradually replaced FM radio that monopolized the dissemination of popular music. As TV emerged as a more powerful medium, music producers started to be interested in producing more performance-oriented singers that could instantly take advantage of new media. At the same time, young music consumers who have become accustomed to American dance-pop music have begun to demand more dance singers with outstanding choreography and dynamic performances than radio-friendly folk and ballad singers.

The popularization of dance music and the dissemination of TV led to the transformation of the nature of “pop stars.” And it completely changed the trend of the domestic pop music industry. Since the 1960s, Korean popular music has always been a singer-oriented industry. The musicians representing each era were singers who emphasized their outstanding singing ability, which is why pop artists are still called *gasu*, which means singers. However, as the dance music originating from Itaewon and Gangnam dance club became popular among young listeners in the mid-1980s, the nature of “singer has changed. For the first time in the history of Korean pop music, artists who identified themselves as “dancer-singer” appeared as a new dominant force in the music scene. Artists such as Park Nam-jung, Kim Wan-sun, and Sobangcha, who primarily relied upon dance skills, has become the most significant precursors to the modern K-pop industry (Yi, 2003).<sup>8</sup> Emulating the dance style and music of the American dance-pop stars in the 80s, such as Michael Jackson and Madonna, as well as other Japanese pop artists, they successfully created a new image of modern K-pop star that can sing and dance.

Instead of being singers who stood out as vocalists, they were visual-oriented performers with acrobatic dance skills and a young and attractive image. Also, the fact that they had a

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<sup>8</sup> Quarterly Literature. Winter Issue (89). Munhakdongnae. 2016.

background as dancers before debuting as singers signified the new aspect of the Korean pop music industry at the time. Their emergence and success are directly related to the upcoming changes in the K-pop scene in many ways. First, their success further reinforced the trend of dance music and accelerated the trend of underground dancers' entry to mainstream music. There are some similarities in their career, especially their career as dancers. Kim Wan-sun, one of the prominent female dance music artists, started her musical career as a back-up dancer of the famous R&B singer In Sooni. Park Nam-jung, on the other hand, first earned a reputation as the most prominent urban dancer in the Moon Night. Similar to Kim Wan-sun, Park's most important career before the debut is his experience as a back-up dancer for many established singers, including In Sooni. Sobangcha, the first K-pop group that has a clear identity as a dance group in Korean popular music, had a somewhat similar career. The members of Sobangcha, a former dance crew of a broadcasting station, are finally selected by producers after activities such as underground stages and night clubs, leading to the birth of the first full-fledged dance group in Korean pop music history. The emergence and success of these dance artists symbolically attest to the changes in Korean pop music that took place in the late 1980s. While these performers had no substantial experience as an underground club or band singers, unlike other mainstream singers until the 1980s, they were still able to succeed by presenting their music with a focus on their dance performance, not their vocal abilities. The success of a new model signaled the change in the industry toward more dance-oriented music in the 1990s. Inspired by the success of Kim Wan-sun and Park Nam-jung, numerous producers began to recruit singers with the quality of dance stars. The success of Sobangcha, in particular, was also a sign of the craze for dance groups and boy bands that would hit the Korean pop music scene.

### 1.1.2 The birth of rap dance group

Following the footsteps of the likes of Park Nam-jung and Sobangcha, in the early 1990s, several other artists who equipped with dynamic dance rhythms and a new type of musical approach appeared in the scene. They were not only singers accompanied by dance but were technically excellent performers, and they were also musicians who explicitly identified themselves as dance artists than any of their precursors. Among them, Hyun Jin-young and Seo Taiji and Boys are both leading acts that pioneering a new model of K-pop dance music. Hyun Jin-young, Korea's first full-fledged rap-dance artist, was one of the earlier stars from the underground dance club scene who followed the footstep of Park Nam-jung. After several early years at Itaewon club Moon Night and a back-up dancer as a semi-pro, he was discovered by a visionary producer Lee Soo-man, who later became the most successful K-pop mogul (Lie, 2014; Kim, 2018).<sup>9</sup>

On the one hand, the debut of Hyun Jin-young illustrates the continuous trend that Korean pop music reconsiders the potentials of underground dancers as individual recording artists. More importantly, producer Lee Soo-man intended obvious black music genres such as New Jack Swing and Hip-hop while producing Hyun Jin-young's music.<sup>10</sup> Producer Lee Soo-man actively benchmarked the music of American R&B artist Bobby Brown while preparing for the debut album of dancer Hyun Jin-young. He selected two dancers to act as Hyun Jin-young's sidekicks to create a dynamic performance that matches the unique danceable sound of the contemporary black music genre called New Jack Swing. Hyun Jin-young's debut was not entirely planned in the form of a solo artist but in the form of a trio act called "Hyun Jin-young and Wawa," which reflects the importance of dance in the music Lee envisioned. Compared to the previous generation of artists who regarded dancing as a kind of decoration in music, Hyun's

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<sup>9</sup> Quarterly Literature. Winter Issue (89). Munhakdongnae. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

ability as a dancer was more critical as an artist, as his dance was always an integral part of group performance. In other words, dance and choreography are not secondary or additional elements in Hyun's music and performance, and the boundaries between singers and dancers, or between singers and back-up dancers, are not entirely distinguished.

As a recording artist and a performer, Hyun's approach, masterminded by Lee Soo-man, was distinguished from the earlier dance singers in the 80s. His first album, recorded with Wawa, clearly showcased a new format based on the clear identity of dancers' group. On the album cover, the name of the dance crew "Wawa" was featured along with Hyun, which was an unusual way for a solo recording artist to make a debut. The distinction he made was even more evident in his stage performance with Wawa. On *Sad Mannequin*, his first single, Hyun made a perfectly synchronized choreography with Wawa from the introduction of the performance. Hyun rarely stops dancing while singing, and the majority of his dance moves are tightly interwoven as a trio, rather than independently performed.

Furthermore, the performance seemingly does not emphasize his individuality as a dancer in particular but focuses more on the technicality and overall presence of the trio. Although Wawa was officially a back-up dance crew exclusively organized for Hyun, Wawa's performance can be seen as an extension of Hyun, the leading performer, rather than merely accompanying him.<sup>11</sup> The group performance of Hyun Jin-young and Wawa was a pioneering attempt in the history of K-pop in that they showed the potential of a dancer group as a recording artist who performed a complete performance. The performance of Hyun Jin-young and Wawa was a pioneering attempt in the history of K-pop in that it showed the new potential of the dancer

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11 Hyeonjinyeonggwawawa. *seulpeun maneking*. KBS t'oyodaehaengjin. KBS. 1991. retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFbwe0m\\_EVo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFbwe0m_EVo)

group as an independent recording artist, presenting a complete performance that does not separate the dancers from the singers.



Figure 1.4. Hyun Jin-young and Wawa

In terms of the change of Korean popular music and the advancement of dance music into the mainstream scene, Seo Taiji and Boys is arguably the most influential and commercially successful artist. However, its fundamental characteristics as a dance group indebted primarily to the precursors such as Park Nam-jung, Hyun Jin-young, and other underground dancers and DJs. Scholars and journalists commonly consider Seo Tai-ji as the progenitor of modern K-pop, not only for his immense commercial success that overtook the music industry but also for his incorporation of rap music that defined a new wave (Howard, 2006, Fuhr, 2016). Seo Taiji and Boys recorded several songs that contain discourse on the new generation and rebellion against the older generation, which at the same time was also characterized by a distinctively new genre and arrangement at the time incorporating hip-hop, techno, and even alternative rock (Shin and Yi, 2016).

But Seo Tai-ji embodies a significant leap in terms of not only his ambitious musical experiment but the unique form of the group itself. Preparing his solo work, Seo Taiji came up



with the concept of a group with three members that simultaneously rap and dance, presumably inspired by the way producer Lee Soo-man conceived Hyun Jin-young and Wawa as a trio. However, unlike Hyun Jin-young and Wawa, who still considered dancers as temporary members, Seo Tai-ji made a group with two underground dancers as regular members of the team right from the onset. Although these dancers were given a limited musical role, they were still directly involved in the recording work and served as singers and rappers. Even with the innovative aspect of the group, they share the essential features with Hyun Jin-young and Wawa: they were the team that succeeded in the trend derived from the 1980s' dance scene. The mainstream advancement of Korean underground dancers represented by Itaewon and Gangnam and its heavy incorporation of urban black dance sound were all embodied in Seo Tai-ji and Boys. Lee Juno and Yang Hyun-suk, who are members of "Boys," were former break-dancers from the Itaewon club scene, just like Hyun Jin-young and Wawa. While Lee and Yang were never influential figures like Seo, the roles they took were still decisive in their musical identity as a dance group, as their dynamic dance choreography contributed to the monumental success of Seo Taiji and Boys. While Seo Taiji and Boys experimented with various music until the end with the group's disbandment in 1994, they primarily maintained their identity as a dance group thoroughly on recordings as well as stage performances. Their success has become a crucial steppingstone for many dancers in the underground who aspired to be successful in the mainstream music scene. The rap-dance craze that they brought following Hyun Jin-young contributed to the transformation of Korean popular music into a youth- and dance-oriented genre. The K-pop revolution created by Seo Tai-ji and Boys was not a genre rap or hip-hop trend, but rather a new scene in which "dancing" became the center of music, which was closely related to the rise of the underground dance scene since the 1980s.



Figure 1.5. Seo Tai-ji and Boys

## 1.2 CONCLUSION: RISE OF DANCE MUSIC AS A PRELUDE TO “K-POP”

In this chapter, I observed a new trend in the Korean pop music scene formed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I looked at it from the perspective of the rise of dance music in this period and tried to understand it as the framework of underground dancers entering the mainstream. I have examined these changes in the context of the changes in Korean pop music scene as a whole, especially the replacement of agents in the mainstream industry, rather than merely viewing it as a revolutionary achievement of some artists. The Korean underground dance industry, which saw rapid growth through the 1980s, created two new types of musicians who had not been the mainstream of Korean pop music before, and they were DJs and dancers. Underground DJ emerged as an innovative producer leading the new crop of the 1990s, with underground dancers and B-boys emerging as influential recording artists and performers, driving the new trend of "dance groups. “Ultimately, this created a new trend in Korean popular music with a focus on dance performance and became the basis of modern K-pop as a global phenomenon.

## Chapter 2. HYBRIDITY AND TRANSNATIONALISM OF K-POP IDOL MUSIC

John Seabrook, a journalist/critic of *The New Yorker*, wrote an article titled "Factory Girls" in 2012. This historic article highlighted the K-pop industry and its system, especially K-pop's unique manufacturing know-how called "Cultural Technology," centering on his research on K-pop labels. Although an investigation into K-pop had existed in academia and journalism even before his article, Seabrook's work has a monumental status as the first English article to focus on K-pop's elaborate strategy, especially the training system, concerning K-pop's globalization tactics. Seabrook's article devotes the most considerable attention to the training and management tactic, which can be said to be the core of the K-pop industry, among the various elements of Cultural Technology (CT). At the same time, he outlines another aspect of CT: the global "subgroup."

Lee Soo-man, S.M.'s founder—people in the company refer to him as Chairman Lee—is K-pop's master architect. Lee retired as the agency's C.E.O. in 2010, but he still takes a hand in forming the trainees into idol groups, including S.M.'s newest one, EXO. The group has twelve boys, six of them Korean speakers who live in Seoul (EXO-K) and six Mandarin speakers, who live in China (EXO-M). The two "subgroups" release songs at the same time in their respective countries and languages, and promote them simultaneously, thereby achieving "perfect localization," as Lee calls it. "It may be a Chinese artist or a Chinese company, but what matters in the end is the fact that it was made by our cultural technology," he has said. "We are preparing for the next biggest market in the world, and the goal is to produce the biggest stars in the world. (Seabrook, 2012)"

Most K-pop scholarships after Seabrook's article expand or reproduce his view that K-pop is a product of a kind of artificial and strategic process, or a product through a process of non-organic "factory," as he implies in the article's title "factory girls." And this is based on the idea of

recognizing K-pop more as a genre or format called "K-pop idol," rather than the concept of Korean pop music, as I pointed out earlier. Most of these studies, like Seabrook, thus pay special attention to the training systems and management of K-pop idol agencies that needed to nurture artists rather than how music is actually made. Therefore, while successfully revealing some of K-pop's most prominent commercial nature, it offers only a limited perspective on understanding musical features and methodology. To examine the characteristics of modern K-pop more closely, one must look at the process of music production more closely.

Through the next two chapters, I pay special attention to two crucial aspects of the know-how related to K-pop production that existing research has not discussed in detail. It is about K-pop's global unit and K-pop music composition techniques. I will look at how K-pop standardizes and systemizes music production, and how K-pop's modernity and globality have been constructed in the age of K-pop. In the following sections, I would like to discuss the localization strategy that K-pop has devised and developed for success in the global market over the years. I would like to explain this from the perspective of the evolution of K-pop as a global genre, more specifically, the revision of Cultural Technology proposed by the entertainment company SM.

## 2.1 CULTURAL TECHNOLOGY: GLOBALIZATION TACTICS OF K-IDOLS

### 2.1.1 Localizing K-pop

K-pop's aspirations as a global genre date back to the mid-1990s. In the year of 2000, Korean boyband H.O.T., coined as the first full-fledged K-pop idol group, performed for the first time in China. H.O.T. became a cultural phenomenon among Chinese teenagers, and their success led to the introduction of the word "Korean Wave" through Chinese media for the first time (Kim, 2011). Moreover, their success inspired SM Entertainment and other South Korean entertainment

companies to promote their artists overseas, especially in China, potentially one of the most lucrative markets. Since the success of H.O.T., SM has begun to knock on the doors of overseas markets more aggressively and systematically. S.E.S, a female trio idol group debuted in 1997, is the earliest example that illustrates SM's clear intent of producing a global K-pop star from the inception. The composition of the group reveals its characteristics as a global act. All three members of the group represent a particular country, culture, or language. Bada(Sea) is a Korean native, while Eugene is a Korean American who is fluent both in English, and Shu is a Japanese-born Korean who can speak both Korean and Japanese. Given that such ethnic and linguistic diversity cannot be a decisive factor as long as they operate at home, what SM intended through S.E.S. was ultimately the overseas market. Their intention to target overseas markets is evident in S.E.S.'s various moves since their debut. SM had prepared S.E.S' Japanese debut even before its official debut and released Japanese singles shortly after they earned a domestic success, through Japan's entertainment company VAP in collaboration with some prominent local producers such as Shimano Satoshi. In 1999, with their second Japanese language single, they made their first significant success in Japan, marking K-pop's first substantial international success based on their systematic training and business tactics. S.E.S.'s success in the Japanese market can be attributed to several reasons. Intimacy based on "cultural proximity" provided by Japanese member Shu, and local customized music production through Japanese producers may be an apparent reason. In particular, the idea of cultural proximity is a relatively easy part of Cultural Technology for SM, especially in Japan, the same East Asian market where racial differences are not a significant obstacle compared to Western markets. Despite these efforts, S.E.S's Japanese career was not as successful as their Korean career. It was partly because the

group was associated with the indie label, VAP, not a major distributor (Choi and Malingkay, 2015).

The model of localization strategy based on local members and agency/distributor was further refined and expanded in a bolder way through SM's first global pop star, BoA. Similar to the case of S.E.S., BoA was a new type of solo artist originally planned and nurtured by SM with the global market in mind. SM Entertainment recruited and trained a 13-year-old girl BoA for two years under the code name "Sinbi Project," a three-million-dollar investment that included language training of Japanese and English, as well as vocal lessons and professional dance training. This type of systematic and holistic training, where the company prepares both music and language instructions, would later become an essential element of "Cultural Technology" conceptualized by Producer of SM, Lee Soo-man.

BoA exemplified that it is a much more advanced model of Cultural Technology not only in music but also in business terms. A year after the Korean debut, BoA released her first Japanese studio album, *Listen to My Heart* (2002), which became a No.1 album on the Oricon, the mainstream chart of J-pop. The concept of 'local' in BoA's success is evident from the onset, but at the same time, it is variable depending on the context. Through one artist named BoA, SM wanted to make it two different artists, each acceptable as a local artist in two different markets. BoA has activities that will be thoroughly separated from the Korean and Japanese markets, and in each market, her recording process is carried by a completely different production team to suit the market's slightly different musical tastes. In other words, SM has completely separated BoA's career as an artist optimized for each market. However, the localization of K-pop in BoA's case is still valid only within the grammar of Western contemporary pop music shared by Japan and Korea. In other words, BoA's success in Japan is related to language and preferred

arrangements regardless of Japanese tradition or history, and the common denominator between the two is Western pop music, where their modern pop music is commonly rooted. Ultimately, this is closely linked to the common modernity in pop music shared by the two countries, with Western modernity and aesthetic embodied in both Korea and Japan.

SM's strategy to localize Japan through BoA is based on the premise that sophisticated training and production can create universal and cosmopolitan pop music that overcomes cultural differences. This is distinct from the cases of other Korean singers who settled in the Japanese market by singing Enka, a traditional Japanese vocal music, over the 70s and 80s. Singers such as Cho Yong-pil and Nami have succeeded in turning themselves into Enka singers who can evoke Japanese nostalgia among the older generation, abandoning the modern genre and singing they pursued in the Korean music scene (Shin, 2009). Although this is undoubtedly a localization aimed at the Japanese market of Korean singers, it cannot be strictly distinguished as K-pop's entry into Japan or localization in Japan. As a Japanese singer, BoA's localization relies more on language and musical details than on the genre of music. S.E.S's localization model, which utilizes foreign members to bring familiarity to the market, evolved into the BoA's localization model to act as a local singer simultaneously in Korea and abroad through elaborate training.

#### 2.1.2 Regional sub-units

The partial localization strategies introduced by S.E.S. utilizing foreign members and indie distributor, and BoA's method of nurturing singers as local artists with the help of a major local label, from the design of the group to the music production, evolved into the birth of a new idol group capable of variable and flexible localization. SM's sub-unit system for the local market is a new form of Cultural Technology designed for substantial success in the Asian market. The concept of 'unit' in an idol group originated in the J-pop industry. Since the 2000s, a new concept

has emerged in the J-pop industry, in which some members work as separate teams in existing groups, which also appeared as a "sister group" in a girl group project called AKB48. Produced by agency AKS and producer Yasushi Akimoto, AKB48 is a group that uses a private theater in an area called Akihabara in Tokyo.<sup>12</sup> The most distinctive aspect of AKB48 is the additional "sister group" formed in each city in Japan, which serves as a kind of local idol who targets local audiences through members from the region. AKS's strategy of locality and the customized group is similarly observed in SM's idol production strategy. The sub-unit system devised by SM is similar to the method introduced by AKS in that it uses members of existing groups to create new ones. The most crucial difference, however, is that SM is developing this into a strategy for the global market, not only for the domestic market.

The earliest example of K-pop's sub-unit tailored to the global market was Super Junior-M (SJ-M), which was designed as a sub-unit of the 9-member idol boy band Super Junior. Here, M stands for Mandarin, which means Chinese, but the use of M, not C, would indicate that the group aims at not only mainland China but the greater Sinosphere, including Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. One of the most critical features of SJ-M is the fact that it newly added three members who were not in the existing main group. These are all non-Korean members, who are strategically recruited and trained by SM Entertainment for the Chinese market. Among them, Han Geng and Zhou Mi are both Chinese-born members who are recruited and trained through SM's global casting and training programs. Henry is a second-generation Chinese-Canadian, fluent in both Chinese and English. They are both key members of SJ-M in terms of their ethnicity and language fluency, and their role and popularity are major factors for their success in Chinese. From a musical standpoint, their roles do not have much distinction from

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<sup>12</sup> The girl group project, which has even emerged as a social and cultural phenomenon in Japan, later became a direct reference to the Korean idol group reality TV show "Produce 101."



other existing Korean members. And that's because, as in the previous cases of localization, localization through these Chinese members is about the language or ethnicity, not a matter of fundamental musical change.

SJ-M's tailored localization efforts utilizing the local members and language are also reflected in the way they produce and manufacture music for each group. Apart from Super Junior's domestic activities in Korea, SM produced Chinese language albums for the pan-Chinese market and audience separately. SJ-M's Chinese language album included several original songs written exclusively in Chinese, as well as Chinese translation versions of Korean originals. It is not an adventurous effort using some of the previous materials and uses them with a different language. Still, it is a commercially safe option to use a proven SJ-M's Korean members help them maintain their identity as a K-pop group, simultaneously targeting Chinese fans who are familiar with K-pop or Super Junior.

On the other hand, the Chinese members of SJ-M serve to make the sound and visual aspects of K-pop, Korean music, feel more "local" to foreign fans. From the standpoint of Chinese fans who support SJ-M's Chinese members, Super Junior can provide similar relationships and experiences as they have with Chinese artists. SJ-M takes a strategy to increase intimacy with them through frequent fan meetings in China and Taiwan and puts Chinese members at the forefront of the process to clarify their character as a different group from Super Junior. This process allows SM to perform efficient localization process based solely on the resources they already have. SM's localization strategy through the SJ-M unit is partial and tentative in several ways. SJ-M still include Korean members from the original Super Junior, who would be easily identified as Koreans. In that sense, SJ-M is a strategic model that can more effectively target the Chinese market than SJ, but it still maintains an identity as a Korean group.

However, this localization strategy of SM through the sub-unit system ultimately presents the possibility of K-pop being recognized as a variable and applicable technology, not just as a product being exported.



Figure 2.1. Super Junior-M

The localization formula presented thorough SJ-M was expanded more elaborately in another SM's group EXO, a 12-member boyband. Unlike SJ, which created a unit by having additional Chinese members to an existing group, EXO was formally launched as a group exclusively for the Chinese market based on a revised sub-unit concept. EXO is a 12-member group, but there are two independently functioning units for different national markets, respectively: EXO-K for Korea and EXO-M for China. The six-member group, EXO-M, includes three Chinese-born members and one Chinese Canadian member, who were expected to play critical roles in EXO-M's international activities, especially in China. As in the case of SJ-M, these Chinese members were recruited and prepared as members of EXO through SM's global audition and in-house training program. Although EXO-M is a subunit for China, they share all of SM's know-how and resources, just like EXO-K, and are produced and manufactured in precisely the same way as a regular K-pop group that SM previously launched, except for language differences. EXO-M and

SJ-M have similarities in that they share the same brand and form a group of Chinese and Korean members. However, EXO-M is a group created by a much more sophisticated localization strategy in many ways. Most important in this strategy is the premise that these two groups provide the same content to both markets without any substantial modification. The gist of this strategy is that these two groups would give the same content to both markets. And this is based on the idea that K-pop established cosmopolitan aesthetics that can easily be accepted in any market despite the lingual and cultural differences.



Figure 2.2. Album covers of *MAMA* (EXO-K / EXO-M)



Figure 2.3. Album covers of *XOXO* (EXO-K / EXO-M)

Two different versions of EXO's album cover apparently reveal the relationship between the two local units. The Korean and Chinese versions of *MAMA*, released at the same time, show no

significant difference in the details of style and design. The only difference between the two versions is the language used in the title and the members featured in the photos. The concept of two units utilizing the same content is also evident in the music and music videos of the two groups. First, the songs in EXO-K and EXO-M are the same except for the differences in the languages used. More precisely, the instrumental tracks used in these two albums are identical, all composed in the same session through SM's songwriting camp. Except for differences in language, no significant differences are found in the lyrics. In most cases, the Chinese title is only a translation of the Korean title, and the lyrics do not exceed the level of variation based on the same content. This modular process for each version allows Chinese and Korean audiences to enjoy the content of the same nature, despite language differences.

Table 2 Korean and Chinese lyrics of *Overdose*

Korean	Eng. Trans.	Chinese	Eng. Trans.
모든 걸 걸고 널 들이킨 나 이젠 돌이킬 수도 없다 이건 분명 위험한 중독 So bad, no one can stop her	I drank you up with all I had Now I can't turn it back This is clearly a dangerous addiction So bad, no one to stop her	我赌上一切 而喝下了你 时间倒转也无法收回 就算冒着上瘾的危险 So bad, no one can stop her	I wagered everything and drank you down Even if time turned back there's no way to take it back Even taking the risk of addiction So bad, no one can stop her

In *Overdose*, the first single of the third EP of EXO-K and EXO-M, the idea of making two versions of the same song precisely translated to the production of the music video. Both versions of the music video have the same plot and choreography sequences, and the cinematography and the effects are practically identical with few minor details that would not change the mood or story. Despite the slight difference between the background and the

camerawork in some sequences, the difference is almost negligible. In this regard, localization strategy is strictly limited to language and members, not the music or performance itself.

Through this, SM successfully transformed their K-pop into Mando-Pop or C-Pop without changing the genre or essence of music, using their modular technology that can be easily applied.

The fundamental reason for this rather easy conversion is that there is no national, regional, or racial specificity found in this music and visuals. Overdose, an urban dance genre based on hip-hop and R&B, is a piece of music with a cosmopolitan hybrid that does not require an elaborate translation that takes into account regional specificity. The music video also reflects the cosmopolitan nature of the song. As Fuhr pointed out, K-pop's visuals are often based on non-temporal and non-spatial aesthetics (Fuhr, 2016). Overdose, like many other K-pop, relies heavily on indoor sets and artificial special effects that are hard to feel the specificity of time and space. This is the reason that the same platform, even the same content, can be shared without any additional cultural conversion, as in the case of EXO-K and EXO-M.



Figure 2.4. Korean and Chinese music video clips of “Overdose” (EXO-K / EXO-M)

### 2.1.3 Variable unit system

The global sub-unit system, represented by Chinese units of EXO and Super Junior, was an important step forward to suggest a possibility that K-pop could be a kind of technology having a variable platform to be adopted by different market or industry. In this regard, the new boy band project called NCT, which was announced in 2016 by SM Entertainment, was another substantial breakthrough. NCT, an abbreviation of Neo Culture Technology, illustrates how Cultural Technology that SM has previously developed through SJ and EXO has been revised with a more ambitious localization tactic. The basic premise of NCT is the concept of "openness" and "expandability." According to Lee, NCT would not be a fixed single group or unit, but rather a transformable concept. In other words, NCT is not an artist by itself, but it is a kind of prototype that can be diversified into various units.<sup>13</sup> Theoretically, NCT can have an infinite number of members from the trainees of SM, which can subsequently be transformed into multiple groups to suit the purpose, such as the geographic region they are targeting. However, the concept of NCT is not limited to just local units. For example, their unit, NCT U, can be a five-member hip-hop group in their debut song "7th Sense," a male duo in "Baby Don't Stop," and a vocal trio in "Timeless." SM can combine individual NCT members in a free and variable manner through a unit called NCT U for the production of a particular genre or style they pursue. However, this is a strictly temporary project, in which SM can increase efficiency in production by controlling only the pool called NCT without having to manage multiple different units at the same time.

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<sup>13</sup> SMTOWN "SMTOWN: New Culture Technology, 2016." 1 Feb 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky5NvWsXnn8>

Table 3 Members of various NCT U recordings

Name	“The 7th Sense“	“Without You“	“Timeless“	“Boss“	“Baby Don’t Stop“	“Yestoday“
Taeil		O	O			
Taeyong	O			O	O	O
Doyoung	O	O	O	O		O
Ten	O				O	
Jaehyun	O	O	O	O		
Winwin				O		
Jungwoo				O		
Lucas				O		O
Mark	O			O		O

While NCT U is more a functionally organized custom unit, NCT 127 is a semi-fixed unit focused on the global market and localization. The nature of NCT 127 for global markets is very evident in the composition of its members. NCT 127 has Japanese member Yuta, Chinese member WinWin, Korean American member Johnny, and Mark, a Canadian Korean member who has previously debuted with U units. Although the initial target must be East Asian market, with the addition of Mark and Johnny, North American members who can speak English fluently, NCT 127 has an advantage in entering the U.S. market, which has faithfully been embodied in its intention through their successful settlement in the U.S. market. According to Lee, individual teams that are based on each city in the world will debut in order in the future.<sup>14</sup>

The most ambitious project that illustrates SM’s global market strategy based on NCT is WayV, NCT’s pan-China sub-unit. WayV, the latest installment of the NCT project, is the most

<sup>14</sup> SMTOWN “SMTOWN: New Culture Technology, 2016.” 1 Feb 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky5NvWsXnn8>

explicit statement about how SM could respond to the needs of the global market and its political situations. WayV is a seven-member Mandopop group that SM has been prepared exclusively for the Chinese market. From the composition of their members, their intentions are revealed rather clearly. WayV consists of three mainland Chinese, one Macanese, one Hong Kong (Chinese Thai), one Taiwanese (German Chinese), and one Thai (third-generation Chinese). All of them are former trainees of SM Entertainment, of which three have already debuted as NCT U and NCT 127. Unlike the local version of the group that SM created previously, WayV does not officially use the category K-pop group but acts as a group of mandopop or Chinese pop in the international market. But from a thoroughly industrial perspective, their identity is very variable, which is also closely related to the concept of K-pop. WayV is a group formed by a joint venture between Chinese group Label V and Korean company SM. While SM has been responsible for both training and music production, Label V exclusively manages local activities of WayV in China. WayV was not formally introduced as a sub-unit of the NCT, largely reflecting the sensitive political situation in Korea and China over the past few years.

(...) That's why, as well as pursuing promising markets in Southeast Asia, Latin America, the United States, and Europe, SM has doubled down on its China strategy despite the blow struck by THAAD. When it comes to China, SM's future hopes rest squarely on WayV, the China-based subunit of SM's new concept "boy brand" NCT. Unlike the other three subunits of the group (NCT 127, NCT Dream, and NCT U), WayV makes no explicit connection to SM Entertainment or NCT in its name or promotional materials, and the group is managed by a China-based subsidiary called Label V.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike other sub-units of the NCT, they do not share the brand NCT, nor do they participate in official events for the NCT brand. When looking at K-pop from the standpoint of a single market

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<sup>15</sup> Teixeira, Lauren. 2019. K-pop's Big China Problem. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/30/k-pops-big-china-problem/>



or industry that belongs exclusively to Korea, WayV is a group that does not belong to K-pop. However, if K-pop can be considered as technology or methodology, WayV is a product of K-pop that does not officially belong to K-pop scene. From this point of view, WayV is also an export created by technology in the K-pop industry or a local product that utilizes K-pop's technology and know-how. The case of NCT and WayV illustrates how K-pop idol industry responds flexibly to a variety of markets and consumers from share single talent pool and system but with different marketing strategies. K-pop idol is an industry that maximizes efficiency and commercial profit more than any other music genre in Korea. In the idol industry, which has to spend a lot of production costs on recruiting, training, and production, a tremendous amount of capital should be invested in manufacturing a new group. In this situation, the success or failure of a group poses a significant industrial risk. NCT is not just a new idol group itself but a revised production system that can minimize the risk and increase the efficiency by using modular technology.

WayV makes a compelling case to understand the nature of K-pop in the phase of glocalization. Without a doubt, they are a group created by SM's planning and a system called NCT they own exclusively, but their success and their relationship with fans are strictly tied to the market called C-pop or Mando-pop. But their musical ability and trendy charm of their music are distinct from other Chinese groups, which they were able to achieve by being subordinate to the system of K-pop. They were raised by SM's unique recruiting and training system, and WayV's trendy music style, no less than other K-pop groups or other units of NCT, is also a product of SM's global songwriting camp system. In this context, Mandopop, played by WayV, is not Chinese pop music but a sub-genre of K-pop that has been transformed into other nationalities and ethnicities.

#### 2.1.4 K-pop supergroup

The emergence of a new K-pop project group, SuperM, announced in 2019 is a unique hybrid based on the existing unit model that testifies current status yet reinforcing the localization strategy. SuperM, the first K-pop group dedicated to the US market, was co-produced by Capitol Records and SM Entertainment. While SM makes music and video with their songwriters and producers, Capitol Music Group and its promotion partner Caroline are exclusively responsible for its major distribution and promotion of the group to support their activity in the United States. In this new experiment of SM, there are two major points to note regarding the evolution of K-pop's strategy in the international market, especially the most significant market, the US. First, the group is the first major K-pop group in the United States that distributed directly in the US. Previously, the way K-pop entered Western markets, including the United States, was based on the idea of exporting goods. In other words, when K-pop came to the US market, Korea was responsible for all parts of the production while simply delegating the promotion and distribution to the US promoters. However, from the beginning of the planning stage, SM has closely worked with Capitol to conceive the idea of SuperM, the first K-pop supergroup project. As an official member of Capitol, SuperM would perform and promote in virtually the same way as other mainstream artists that Capitol manages, such as live concerts, TV show appearances, or radio promotion. SuperM's debut events and press conferences were symbolically held in the headquarter of Capitol Records in Los Angeles, USA, exclusively for their American fans and media outlets. Besides, SM released the album only in the U.S. market, and as soon as it was released, it topped the Billboard 200, America's most prominent mainstream album chart.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Caulfield, Keith. SuperM Debuts at No. 1 on Billboard 200 Albums Chart With 'The 1st Mini Album.' *Billboard*. 13 Oct 19. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/chart-beat/8532879/superm-the-1st-mini-album-billboard-200-no-1>

As much as SuperM has common elements as a K-pop group, they also have many features necessary for its success in the US market, especially in its form. SuperM, as a self-claimed supergroup, consists of members from several different groups that have already been successful in the K-pop market. Two of them are members of WayV, an NCT unit for the Chinese market created by SM, targeting Chinese and Thai fans who are also an essential niche consumer of the US market. By including Canadian Korean Mark and Thai-born Ten, from existing NCT groups, SM would intend to try to appeal to local North American fans, especially utilizing their fluent English speaking. Still, SuperM makes it clear that they are a K-pop artist that would entice the audience who is familiar with the style and format of music, or at least who would recognize them from their previous activity.

In western pop music, a supergroup is never an unfamiliar or new concept. However, the way SM and Capitol planned SuperM is fundamentally different from the existing concept of supergroups. First of all, each talent of SuperM is thoroughly subordinate to a single agency called SM. They were all selected and trained through SM's Cultural Technology training system, and the music of their original group was produced through the same music production system SM devised. In other words, as a supergroup, SuperM is more of the result of thoroughly agency-oriented planning and a byproduct of the long-standing standardization process. In that sense, their catchphrase "The Avengers of K-pop" would be an apt description for the fact that each of the members, or characters, are from the same brand. More strictly, however, SuperM could be said to be "SM's All-Star" or "SM Idol's Sampler." It's a clever commercial tactic similar to Marvel Comics' creation of a universe based on their superhero characters and narratives and numerous sub-stories.

Lee Soo-Man (music producer and founder of SM Entertainment): “Through SuperM, we are planning to show a maximized SMP, a unique content I created which stands for SM Music Performance... We will also show you a new level of SMP, which represents the intense music and awe-inspiring performances that the current global K-pop fans love and enjoy... SuperM will give the global music fans an ultimate feeling of catharsis through the synergy and spectacular performance of the seven members.”<sup>17</sup>

In Lee's interview, the word SMP was a somewhat unexpected reference in light of their past moves. He used SMP, which refers to the music of their labels, instead of the general term K-pop. His statement implies that their localization strategy is to export their brand and that SuperM's role is also a step in that strategy. The formation and success of SuperM in the U.S. market, which has been considered the highest barrier to K-pop, symbolize K-pop's changed status. If the participation of Capitol, one of the largest labels in the American music industry, proves the commercial value of K-pop, SM's planning and production will imply SM's know-how and ownership of K-pop as a genre. SM applies the music production know-how and localization strategy that they have developed so far to SuperM similarly. Still, their music, coined as SMP, is hardly localized to suit the tastes or sentiments of consumers in the United States. K-pop's globalization strategy in the U.S. market is not merely selling Americanized music to the general public but instead based on a niche market strategy for the core public who are familiar with K-pop. K-pop idol music is an industry closely related to fandom culture. For that reason, K-pop is planned and produced for audiences who are thoroughly familiar with their music, not the general public. SuperM's audience will likewise be not the general public of the United States, but a loyal fandom who already enjoys K-pop and is familiar with K-pop aesthetics, especially SM's production style. In other words, SuperM's success is closely

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<sup>17</sup> Stassen, Murray. 2019. Capitol Music Group and Caroline partner with SM Entertainment to launch new K-pop supergroup SuperM. Music Business Worldwide. <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/capitol-music-group-and-caroline-partner-with-sm-entertainment-to-launch-new-k-pop-supergroup-superm/>

associated with the achievements of SM's soft-power, which is not due to the completeness or commercial appeal of individual songs, but the trust of Capitol and American audiences in the technology of K-pop production developed by SM.

#### 2.1.5 Summary

SM Entertainment's Cultural Technology is a great example illustrating how K-pop's strategy in the international music market has been evolving lately. SM's Cultural Technology, represented by its systematic localization and sub-unit system, is currently changing the essence of manufacturing K-pop. With an improved model of the global unit system, K-pop is no longer tied with a national brand or a particular scene, or even a specific group. It is becoming a type of technology or talent pool that can adjust in different markets, which possibly reshapes the identity of K-pop as a modular technology.

### 2.2 CONCLUSION

Since the turn of the 21st century, K-pop has entered the global market in earnest, and their strategies and tactics to succeed have evolved and developed in various ways. Among them, Cultural Technology, developed by SM Entertainment, is one of the most elaborate and ambitious efforts specifically designed for the global success of K-pop. In this chapter, I examined some of the essential parts of the localization strategy that Cultural Technology suggests, in terms of the evolution of local unit and its variations, based on the idea of glocalization and cultural proximity. SME's unique and elaborate unit system has been evolving from providing their music in different languages and fostering global artists. Lately, it has evolved into a more elaborate system that can produce a more globally compatible group using local members and eventually to make a complete local group consisting of all foreign members.

The unit system of Cultural Technology is simply a smart tactic for Korean music industry to maximize the inherent nature of K-pop as global pop music.

Moreover, it also suggests a possibility that K-pop would eventually evolve into technology or module, beyond merely finished musical products or genre. In this regard, Korean music industry would become a central hub that owns and sell its technology as well as the product. And this is the embodiment of the transformation of K-pop into the ultimate model of "universal" pop that Korean popular music has long aspired ever since the first Korean Wave.

### Chapter 3. WHATEVER GOES: THE ART OF SONG CAMP

Around the 2000s, K-pop started to expand on a considerable scale, and it turned its eyes toward the outside world, looking for a bigger market to sell music. Aiming at the world music market meant that K-pop had to catch up with even more trendy sounds for foreign audiences. It meant they had to make global standard songs even faster and more consistently. They required more resources to do the job. Composing songs became a crucial task they had to face. Traditionally, K-pop has relied only on a small number of expensive, proven Korean composers, known as “hitmakers.” It was an obvious choice in a way, but the intent did not always pan out perfectly. The problem is that the songs of the hitmakers are usually expensive, so the higher risk remained when the company would rely too much on a limited number of composers, especially when the songs would not eventually be a hit. K-pop devised its own safeguard for this problem. Most of K-pop agencies would also have their in-house composers and producers for maintaining quality control. These musicians would often exclusively offer songs to the labels, and through their ongoing work with them, the recording labels could get the specific type of song more systematically. Still, the problem remains. With the expansion of the K-pop market, agencies have had to manage more artists' music that will be active in both domestic and overseas markets at the same time. To respond to the rapidly changing market trends, they needed a system of music production that can produce music systematically and steadily. One way they could think of was to buy songs directly from foreign composers. K-pop was not a prominent market for international composers and producers initially. But as K-pop emerged as a pop music powerhouse around the 2010s, more foreign musicians began joining the K-pop scene in search of a large market where they could introduce their songs.

It was in the early 2010s that the majority of songs on the newly released album had a substantial

number of collaborations with foreign composers. And this is the time when K-pop's globalization has progressed rapidly beyond Asia to North America and Europe since the launch of YouTube. By the first half of the 2010s, K-pop production had an increasing number of albums with a repertoire entirely written by foreign composers. Records released through SM, the largest K-pop label, at this time of year, show that the new system of producing albums through the songwriting camp has just begun to establish. The new trend is evident from the album credits of *I Got a Boy* (2013) by Girls' Generation, and *Chapter 1. The Dream Girl - The Misconceptions of You* by SHINee, two of the most successful albums produced by SM Entertainment at the time. Foreign songwriters composed the majority of these albums collaborated with other Korean producers and lyricists.

Table 4 SHINee *Chapter 1. Dream Girl – The Misconceptions of You* (2013)

Title	Lyricist	Composer
Spoiler	종현	Pegasus, Thomas Troelsen
Dream Girl	전간디	신혁, Jordan Kyle, Ross Lara, Dave Cook, DK, Anthony “TC.” Crawford
히치하이킹 (Hitchhiking)	김부민	Anne Judith Wik, Will Simms, Hitchhiker
Punch Drunk Love	전간디	Crichlow, Thomas Troelsen, Herbert St. Clair
Girls, Girls, Girls	전간디	Lucas Secon, Thomas Troelsen, Mikkel Remee Sigvardt
방백 (Aside)	황현	황현
아름다워 (Beautiful)	김태성	Teddy Riley, Dominique Rodriguez, Richard Garcia, 김태성, 앤드류 최
다이너마이트 (Dynamite)	김부민	Hitchhiker



Runaway                      김영후              김영후, Dennis White, Jovan Rangel

Table 5 Girls' Generation *I Got A Boy* (2013)

Title	Lyricist	Composer	Arranger
I Got a Boy	유영진	Will Simms, Anne Judith Wik, Sarah Lundback, 유영진	Will Simms, Anne Judith Wik, Sarah Lundback, 유영진
Dancing Queen	윤효상, 티파니, 제시카	Stephen Andrew Booker, Aimee Ann Duffy	켄지
Baby Maybe	수영, 유리, 서현	Mich Hansen, Jonas Jeberg, Ruth Anne Cunningham, Victoria louise Lott	임광욱
말해봐 (Talk Talk)	김태성	Mason Charlie, Oscar Michael G Rres, Danny Saucedo	Mason Charlie, Oscar Michael G Rres, Danny Saucedo
Promise	모을	Joseph Belmaati	Joseph Belmaati
Express 999	김정배	켄지	켄지
유리아이 (Lost in Love)	박창현	박창현	박창현
Look at Me	전간디	Johan Gustafson, Fredrik Haggstam, Sebastian Lundberg, Louis Schoorl	Johan Gustafson, Fredrik Haggstam, Sebastian Lundberg, Louis Schoorl
XYZ.	서현, 유리	Jonathan Yip, Jeremy L Reeves, Ray Romulus, Victoria Horn	김태성, 김용신
낭만길 (Romantic St.)	이신성, 이찬미, 김수미	신혁, Matthew Heath, Hailey Collier, DK, Jordan Kyle, 유재윤	신혁, Matthew Heath, Hailey Collier, DK, Jordan Kyle, 유재윤

As K-pop began to interact directly with foreign composers, K-pop's Western cosmopolitan charm and trendy aspect could be further strengthened. It was another new leap forward in the context of K-pop's globalization. And this is closely linked to the characteristics of K-pop, which

many scholars have pointed out, such as hybridity, rootless-ness, de-contextualization, non-spatiality and non-temporality, and retro. I will focus mainly on my interviews with composers, producers, and others to examine the role of foreign composers in K-pop production to see how the composing system works, and how the process and the product would contribute to the distinctive aesthetics of K-pop as a highly modern and hybrid genre.

### 3.1 SONG CAMP: THE ART OF COLLABORATING SONGWRITING PROCESS

#### 3.1.1 Lead

In the latest K-pop production, the most common way of producing songs is a group composition system called a ‘song camp’ (or a ‘songwriting camp’). The first full-fledged song camp in K-pop production was established around the late 2000s and early 2010s. There are several different types of song camps. Most commonly, an international publishing company would organize a session at the request of K-pop company like SM. The song camp is mainly conducted through communication between the A&R (Artist and Repertoire) of the record label and composers. Each song camp would have a unique name, which may reflect the artist's name, the composer's name, or any particular theme or genre.

Last year, Lidell organized an SME writing camp in Sweden called Camp Fantasia, which housed six studios and included some of Universal’s best writers. One of SME’s most senior bosses and the head of A&R joined the writers for a week, going into the studios and making suggestions like “skip the pre-chorus,” says Lidell.<sup>18</sup>

Once the publishing company convenes the camp, usually at the request of a Korean label, it usually takes place in a large studio building with several sub-studios and workplaces.

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<sup>18</sup> Lindvall, Helienne. “Behind the music: What is K-pop and why are the Swedish getting involved?” The Guardian. 20 Apr 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2011/apr/20/k-pop-sweden-pelle-lidell>

Composers from publishing companies often gather in one place to meet with A&R on Korean labels, mainly through remote conferences such as Skype. There are various places where the song camp is held. Occasionally, overseas composers are invited by Korean record labels to go directly to Korea and collaborate with local composers in person. The most critical factor in the song camp's work is the collaboration between the “trackmaker” and the “top-liner.”

Trackmakers would create the most vital elements of the song: the skeleton of the beat and rhythm, and the basic chord progression of the song. The trackmaker's beat is the most decisive factor that defines the nature of the song, which is why Korean labels would want to open song camps in order to work with foreign composers. In many cases, record labels would use the tracks that are newly composed materials directly through the song camp works but often utilize existing tracks completed via other previous camps.

Kim Youngdae: What is your typical work process?

Hyo-won Chung (the general manager of EKKO Music Rights): It is difficult to define the process as one, but it is usually based on a combination of a trackmaker (a beatmaker) and a top liner (a maker of a melody) We would select a group of artists once we get a request from A&R department of the label or publisher to invite them to the song camp, and within each day, we find the optimal combination and construct each group. When a trackmaker prepares a few tracks, A&R and top liners would listen to them and select the appropriate track for the project, and then make the overall composition and melody based on the track. When the rhythm and melody come out, after working on the demo lyrics, they would proceed to the demo recording. After recording the main vocal line, background vocals, harmonies, and ad-libs, the trackmaker would continue with the post-production to complete the demo. Although this kind of process would be one of the most common ways in a song camp, it is not always like that. Sometimes, according to the preference or tendency of writers, there are many cases that they would start from scratch altogether and to complete the song together.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Personal interview. Hyo-won Chung. 11/30/2017. Email.

In the song camp system, most of the details of composition would strictly be managed. The most critical decisions were made by Korean labels that initially commissioned the work. Record labels would already know what specific genre or style they want, and they would send highly detailed requests with useful, often very trivial, information to composers.

This request is called a "lead," and it exists in various forms depending on the situation. It may be a simple description to indicate a name of genre or style, or a more abstract description of an atmosphere they want for the music. In some cases, a request would be made for the music of a particular artist or an album, whereas they would typically make a song not knowing who would perform it or which album it would be featured. Based on the lead that was handed out by the label and agency, the foreign composers who are involved in the song camp would start to develop ideas and compose songs, which would eventually be modified by Korean producers later. "Lead" further enhances the sophistication of K-pop as a system and is often the integral system of K-pop itself. At the same time, it also implies that the Korean industry maintains the initiative and ownership of K-pop production involving foreign composers of various nationalities.

Lindskog: Several composers would gather together to compose and produce songs. Typically, publishing companies take the lead. Usually, a "lead" is given, from either A&R or the publishers, including the specific details of the song that they want. Then we would discuss head to head together and work on it. Sometimes they would provide a very particular lead. We may be asked to revise or improve more what we have already worked on and submitted to them to match the style of a specific artist better.<sup>20</sup>

Will Simms: They're quite specific when they ask for hooks. They say, "We want a hook

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<sup>20</sup> Personal interview. Olof Lindskog. 5/19/2014. Email.

that's a little bit rap-y," or "We want a hook that's chant-y," or "a hook that's really melodic."<sup>21</sup>

The initial lead is usually specific and detailed enough, but the record labels would go further by referring to a particular song as an exact reference they want composers to emulate, which is often precisely similar to other artists' well-known materials. This kind of detailed lead is a unique feature of K-pop and the critical factor that contributes to making the song camp's work to be dynamic and complementary. However, while K-pop controls the entire plan, it would also guarantee a certain amount of freedom in the composting process, creating an environment where the composers could come up with new ideas at any point of the process. This specific request, which would allow creative freedom, makes the work of foreign composers participating in K-pop's song camp more effective and convenient.

Sebastian Lundberg: We're told how they want (something like) Eurythmics, what song they want the lyrics to resemble. They always have a bunch of different songs that they want it to resemble. A western brief (they would receive) can be like "send hits!" or something. So this way is more comfortable.<sup>22</sup>

Sarah Lundback-Bell: Their leads(briefs) are so wonderful. They tell you 70 different things they want, and they go "if you can think of something better, we'd be happy to take it."<sup>23</sup>

Foreign composers working with K-pop labels try to accurately reflect what K-pop wants in their compositions based on their frequent communications with the A&R department of the Korean record label. In other words, they can become more successful composers

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<sup>21</sup> Amy. Simms, Will. Seoul Beats. 11 Jun 2013. <https://seoulbeats.com/2013/06/speaking-with-will-simms-composer-of-exos-wolf-and-snsds-i-got-a-boy/>

<sup>22</sup> Lundström, Kristofer. "Koreansk popkultur." Kobra. SVT. 05 Dec 2012

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

in this industry by understanding clients' tastes more accurately. Therefore, even without any special request, they would often understand what kind of approach the K-pop label prefers and would reflect it in their track or composition process. These composers would utilize more complex harmonies and chord progressions favored by K-pop labels in their songs, especially devising sections needed to showcase the intense dance move of idol groups, one of the essential elements of K-pop music nowadays. All of these creative decisions are thoroughly based on a lead from the labels, yet the composers would elaborate it through continuous communication with A&R department throughout the process.

Sebastian Lundberg: We always put in really sharp harmonies, cause it seems like they always like it.<sup>24</sup>

Lindskog: I think it's a crucial part of creating K-pop songs. And the way that music and performance are connected cohesively would be my favorite part of composing K-pop. While writing or producing songs, I would always try to visualize the music with that aspect in mind.<sup>25</sup>

Simms: Of course, I do that (dance break) for K-pop. In the case of the music for SME, I want to make sure to make that part to showcase the talent of the group as much as possible.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.1.2 Foreign yet Korean

The role of foreign composers in the song camp process is thoroughly multifaceted, spanning a variety of tasks. Once commissioned, the composers would often complete a demo version of the song from the scratch to the nearly complete, ready-to-record status, which includes a rough

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<sup>24</sup> Lundström, Kristofer. "Koreansk popkultur." Kobra. SVT. 05 Dec 2012

<sup>25</sup> Personal interview. Olof Lindskog. 5/19/2014. Email.

<sup>26</sup> Personal interview. Will Simms. 05/19/2014. Email.

version of the lyrics, complete melodies, detailed arrangements, and even lead and background vocals. However, it would be a rare case for a demo version made by a foreign composer to get a final approval without any further change. Instead, the songs are bound to go through an additional process of modification and supplementation from Korean labels. This last revision is an undoubtedly crucial step to characterize K-pop as Korean pop music, most of which depend on the competence of Korean writers and producers. This process is to localize songs made by foreign composers into Korean music again, optimizing the trends and genres interpreted from a foreigner's perspective to the Korean market and fans.

### **Top-lining**

In the song camp system, the beats completed by the songwriters become the final version with an additional work called top-lining. As mentioned earlier, when a record company or publishing company organizes a camp, it usually consists of a combination of multiple trackmakers and top liners as a team. They complete various songs over some time at the request of A&R from the recording label. The most common way is for top-liners to work closely with trackmakers to produce music with completed beats and melodies. Another standard method is for top-liners to complete a song by adding tunes to the music that exists as a separate track-only version, without directly participating in the camp with the trackmaker. Due to the nature of the top lining, which creates melodies based on Western pop genres, Korean writers would not necessarily need to take charge of the work. Nevertheless, Koreans are still preferred in top-lining positions as many believe that they can enhance the perfection of their songs. The most significant benefit from the participation of Korean top-liners would be the efficiency and convenience of work. By dividing the songwriting process between two, foreign trackmakers could focus more on their

role as trackmakers by leaving top lining to Korean composers. By establishing this system, they can produce more songs faster and more effectively.

BrotherSu: In the case of foreign writers whom I worked with, it was common for them to leave the top lining work to Korean artists and to be working only in the area of the trackmaker throughout the session/camp. It is presumed that there is a definite division of labor, so I can concentrate more in each area and it seems that I can work more songs because it is more efficient and technical convenience.<sup>27</sup>

The implication here is the importance of the division of labor as a condition for producing a successful song at the song camp. This division of labor has become a critical process in the business, especially considering the characteristics of the industry with a lot of workload due to the high demand for orders within a short period. Still, the form of the trackmaker-topliner division should not necessarily be divided on a cultural basis. There are still many foreign top liners, and many Korean writers could play the role of trackmakers, or vice versa. The important thing is, however, that foreign and Korean composers should reflect both Korean and foreign sentiments on both sides of the work properly. And a successful K-pop song can be completed when such a complementary effort is achieved through division of labor.

Jeong Hyo-won: In the division of labor, whether a writer is a Korean or a foreigner might not always be a serious consideration. Of course, there are distinctive features among them, but both track and melody seem to require a combination of foreign and Korean sentiment...It seems that good results would come out when collaborative work is carried out based on their understanding and study of their respective areas.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Personal interview. BrotherSu. 02/05/2019. Email.

<sup>28</sup> Personal interview. Hyo-won Chung. 11/30/2017. Email.



Still, there are more artistic reasons for this seemingly artificial transnational collaborative effort. The most important of them is the ability of Korean composers to contribute to the realization of Korean sentiments. The labels understand that one of the most critical parts of the success is in rich melody as much as catchy beats. Therefore, the company and the publishers keep trying to find the best combination of foreign and Korean writers. And the top-lining work of the most influential songs of the albums, such as the lead single or title song of the album, is usually commissioned to Korean composers and producers. Another reason is that foreign composers, usually trackmakers, recognize the talent of Korean composers and prefer them as competent partners. Mutual trust in such musical abilities is an essential factor in producing K-pop as an aesthetically cohesive piece despite the complicated process involving various subjects. It should be noted that the collaboration between Korean composers and foreign composers is not always based on the dichotomous idea of global-local. Although Korean composers have certain trends or exclusive emotions that they can possess as Korean musicians, their success is rather due to their outstanding musical abilities and musical sensibilities as top-liners.

BrotherSu: I believe foreign writers are very fond of a top-lining work of Korean artists like me. I feel they are fully supportive. I think that the songs that Korean artists participated in the top lining often turn out to be unexpectedly fabulous even in the stage of the draft. Although K-pop is getting more and more songs from foreign composers, it is still possible to create different kinds of works that have not been done because of the inspiration that resulted from the unique situation of ‘a combination of domestic and foreign writers.’ I think another factor is the emotional aspect that Korean writers would have. I mean, they write more emotionally Korean melodies.<sup>29</sup>

Concerning the role of Korean writers in the song camp system, another important process of K-pop recording is the final stage of recording, called vocal directing. Vocal directing refers to the

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<sup>29</sup> Personal interview. BrotherSu. 02/05/2019. Email.

act of directing the process of recording the song after all the composing processes, including lyrics, have been completed. For the usual music production, vocal directing is part of the producer's role in the recording process. In the case of K-pop, where the transnational song camp system has become common, the role of the producer is played mostly by Korean vocal directors. The existence of a vocal director who plays the role of a producer and the situation in which a Korean musician plays the role exemplifies some of the transnational attributes of K-pop.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, K-pop's production system is evolving into a stage of modularization. The song camp is also designed as one of the technologies to increase the efficiency of music production in the system. Music created through the song camp is rarely customized for a particular artist, leaving room for the songs to be used in a variety of ways according to the label's plans. For a specific artist, they may require additional arrangements, updates to lyrics, and other mixing or dubbing process. And these works are often carried out with the final vocal recording process. Among them, the vocal recording is one of the essential parts in which the final version is created for the public to appreciate. In K-pop, vocal directing is exclusively conducted by Korean musicians. They may be established composers, lyricists, capable producers, or arrangers. The most crucial task of vocal directing is to reinterpret songs completed by foreign composers as Korean music and apply them to the recording of artists. Vocal directors are often not directly involved in composing or arranging songs, so this process must be accompanied by a high level of sensitivity and understanding of music in general. And it would require a role as an interpreter to help singers who might not understand the context of the song's composition.

DEEZ (producer/vocal director): The demo's language is mostly English, so the vocal director must understand the song first. Analyze as if you are back to the stage when the demo was written and do it again, and make it a 'first-person point of view' after analyzing the key points of the song such as vocal lines' distinct characteristics or expression of nuance, then go into recording. That way, you can lead and direct artists properly. And when recording, after discussing with the A&R team, I think of the members as musical instruments and work quite closely with them with the mindset that I should maintain or surpass the quality of the demo version. You can think of it as if you were singing in a booth with the members. I think vocal directing itself is the completion of composing song.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, the vocal director interprets the demo recorded in English and tries to ensure that the final recording version has a sense of unity and sensibility as K-pop music. During the process, the vocal director shares the role of the producer who directs the recording scene, most importantly setting up close relationships with the singers who record the song. They contribute to K-pop's sophisticated results through shrewd instructions but also encourage singers to interpret the song naturally, adding an organic character to the song. This is the best use of their position as a Korean who can naturally establish and communicate musical and human relationships with artists in the field. Due to the role of a Korean vocal director, K-pop is given the personality and characteristics of Korean music.

## **Lyrics**

While writing lyrics is an essential task for converting K-pop created by foreigners back to Korean music, it also is the most critical process in the overall songwriting process, which helps to characterize K-pop as Korean music. In most cases, finished Korean lyrics would come to the final stage in the music production. Except for a few examples, the majority of the lyrical contents of K-pop recording is written and sung in Korean. Still, the use of English in contemporary K-pop is a common phenomenon, and the mixture of English and Korean in K-

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<sup>30</sup> Personal interview. DEEZ. 03/15/20. Email.

pop has been pointed as one of the characteristic features of hybridized K-pop. Some scholars attribute this tendency to the influence of Korean Americans or Koreans who have studied in the United States (Jin, 2012). To support this, they point out the fact that English in K-pop lyrics has been remarkably increasing since the 2000s when Korean Americans started to become prominent figures in the scene. Another reason is the evolving nature of K-pop as a global genre, which has increasingly transformed into the genre serving to international fans. Especially since the 2010s, as the center of K-pop has shifted rapidly from the domestic market to the global market, English has become one of the means to facilitate overseas expansion. Most contemporary K-pop commonly has short English words or phrases titled, with choruses or hooks also written in English.

The increase in English lyrics in K-pop is partly due to the label's sophisticated strategy of seeking globalization and localization. But it is also an outcome of the song camp system itself. The following example illustrates how the lyrics on the demo version written by foreign composers would be revised in the final Korean version depending on different purposes. This process would show how the method of localization and optimization of Korean labels to make them K-pop, based on demo versions made by foreign composers, is being established as part of the system.

Table 6 Lyrics of "Ice Cream Cake" and "Ice Cream Truck"

Korean "Ice Cream Cake"	Translation	English demo "Ice Cream Truck" <sup>31</sup>
주세요 달콤한 그 맛 ice cream cake 특별해질 오늘에 어울리는 맛으로	Please give me that sweet taste, ice cream cake With a flavor that fits this special day The ice cream that's on my mouth	Oh when I come come come with my ice cream truck Rolling thru your neighborhood, go and get your flavor good

<sup>31</sup> The English demo was played during the show, "Koreansk popkultur." Lundström, Kristofer. "Koreansk popkultur." Kobra. SVT. 05 Dec 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcNseoQTEP8>

입가에 묻은 ice cream 에 네 가슴 두근거리려 내게 다가 오겠쥬 It's so tasty, come and chase me I scream you scream gimme that gimme that ice cream	Makes your heart pound and you'll come to me It's so tasty come and chase me I scream you scream gimme that gimme that ice cream	Come come come into my ice cream truck I got what you had in mind, everybody stand in line It's so tasty, come and chase me I scream you scream gimme that gimme that ice cream
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Co-written by six different multi-national composers and lyricists, “Ice Cream Cake,” recorded by Red Velvet in 2015, illustrates a gist of songwriting camp in terms of how K-pop lyrics are written based on the demo version. The demo version of the song, created by Swedish production team Trinity Music, was completed independently without the help of a Korean lyricist, just like many other demo versions of K-pop created via song camp system. As shown on the table, these two versions of “Ice Cream Cake” seemingly contain similar subject but have entirely different narratives and details. The English lyrics used for the demo was thoroughly replaced with newly written Korean words, except for the central motif of ‘ice cream.’ The title of the original English demo, for instance, is changed from “Ice Cream Truck” to “Ice Cream Cake.” And the final Korean version of “Ice Cream Cake” is not about ice cream, but more about a romantic relationship with a mild sexual suggestion.

It is common in K-pop production that the lyrics in the demo version are not merely translated but are rephrased or replaced for telling a different narrative, while maintaining similar theme. There can be many reasons. The most important thing is the characteristic of the song camp work. As mentioned earlier, songs made at song camp are often not written for a particular artist. Songs are often categorized in a generic manner, such as "girl groups" or "boy bands," or genres such as "hip-hop" or "R&B." Therefore, once the songs are decided to be recorded for a particular artist, the lyrics of the songs must be adapted to the artist's images or the concept of the

album. However, the completed lyrics of the demo version are a convenient reference. The Korean record label would simply translate the lyrics, or they can keep a particular fragment. Or, as with *Ice Cream Cake*, new narratives can be built using similar themes and materials. This is entirely up to the label's judgment, following close consultation between A&R and the Korean lyricist.

### 3.1.3 Pastiche

As discusses so far, the process of producing K-pop, especially in the collaborative works involving many composers, foreign and local, is systematic rather than organic, and it is also a transnational process at the same time. And the nature of this ‘process’ would be embodied in the outcome of the music. There are many characteristics of contemporary K-pop, but one of the most prominent features is its complexity and hybridity. K-pop often incorporates various genres simultaneously in one song, breaking the genre’s convention and formulas. I examine a few of the contemporary K-pop hits to investigate how the complex and collaborative composing process and ensuing revision process would result in hybrid aesthetics that characterize K-pop.

“I Got a Boy,” a single released in 2013 by Girls’ Generation, was co-written by French composer Will Simms, Swedish composer Sarah Lundbäck Bell and Anne Judith Wik based on the song camp system. Based on the demo, Korean producer Yoo Young-jin arranged and produced the song to finalize the process. This song has many similar attributes to other contemporary K-pop songs, having several disjointed and contrasting sections. According to the media reviews, the song is categorized as many different genres, including electro-pop, dubstep, R&B, bubblegum pop, pop-rap, or “high-bpm” dance. This genre description itself does not provide any substantial idea about this song, but it would fit perfectly to the inconsistent and

disjointed nature of the song as one listens to it. By comparing the demo and final versions of this song, I illustrate the characteristics and complexity of today's K-pop composition.<sup>32</sup>

The structure of the original demo shows that it was intended a series of contrasting sections, even from the early stage of composition. It consists of three large parts, including the pre-chorus, verse, and chorus that also serves as an intro. Both the pre-chorus and chorus play critical roles that contributed to the catchiness of the song. In addition to this overall configuration, there are two more interludes and one break in between, which connects each different section smoothly. The segmental and disconnected characteristic of the song seems to be due to the fact that the song was not designed as one organic piece but was mix-matched with various random ideas conceived by different composers at different points of time.

Will Simms: That was a funny one. That was done in Sweden. One night I started playing with a little idea for a beat and I didn't think much of it. The next day, I was working with some other folks, and I just played it to them, and they were excited about it. We had the whole first part, the bit before the "Let me put it down another way," and we had the whole rap part. The intro of the song right now as it is was originally the outro. We only had the beat for the second verse. We wrote the whole first verse, and we spent a couple of hours on it. Then we listened to it and said, "This is not good enough." The beat is really strong, but let's put it the bin and start another verse again. Then it all fell into place. I said, "What do we do now? Let's do something crazy, let's try to change the tempo, and do something completely random." That's when the "I Got a Boy 멋진! I Got a Boy 착한!" verse came up. And that was it! It just went on from that.<sup>33</sup>

In the commentary of Will Simms, the word "random" should be noted in particular. To put it differently, the nature of this piece is random as opposed to logical or coherent, as each section co-written by different composers would have independent ideas and musical approaches that do

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<sup>32</sup> The demo version of "I Got a Boy" I referenced is a leaked version available on YouTube: "Shine on You," sung by Katy Tiz. 03/19/2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJBqenH35Gs>

<sup>33</sup> Simms, Will. Seoul Beats. 11 Jun 2013. <https://seoulbeats.com/2013/06/speaking-with-will-simms-composer-of-exos-wolf-and-snsds-i-got-a-boy/>

not always have a unified musical idea. Moreover, each of these sections sounds like several individual songs were interwoven as if it is a kind of musical collage or patchwork. This discontinuous overlap in the composition method would allow composers the opportunity to experiment with musical ideas and elements in a more disorderly manner. And the K-pop industry is relatively tolerant of this experimental approach. Composers would be free to play with ideas, and even if it feels complicated or segmental, or even unnatural initially, K-pop labels believe that it would still turn out to be an interesting piece. Foreign composers are fully aware of the random, disjunctive, and complex nature of K-pop. And they are often taking advantage of this situation to use their creativity and imagination to implement what K-pop wants from them.

Will Simms: Because usually, you can try to do that with the sound and it can come out very disjointed, but for some reason, this didn't sound disjointed in a way where you didn't want to listen to it. The disjointedness in this is almost asking you to listen to it...With K-pop, it's much more, "Whatever goes." You can be really creative. For a producer or a songwriter, you can just really let go. You don't have to think about structure too much. You can try to invent something new. Every producer would like to come up with a sound that's not been done before, and I think K-pop allows for that to be experimented with.<sup>34</sup>

The demo version of I Got a Boy already has a level of disjointed aspect that makes it sound intriguing to the audience. However, the song was reborn as a song with a much more complex and experimental character than the original through additional work by K-pop producers. Often these decisions are made independently by Korean producers to optimize the song for the artist's desired style or performance, as in previous cases. Comparing the demo version shown in the following chart with the final version of "I Got a Boy," I explain the complex yet logical post-revision process.

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<sup>34</sup> Amy. Simms, Will. Seoul Beats. 11 Jun 2013. <https://seoulbeats.com/2013/06/speaking-with-will-simms-composer-of-exos-wolf-and-snsds-i-got-a-boy/>



Will Simms: Once we had all the parts, we sent the track over to Korea for SM's producers. They added a couple of things, like the bass, and they arranged it in a slightly different way. Originally it was just three parts: it was the start of the verse, the fast part, and the part I call the "Missy Elliott part" [which begins with the "Ayo, GG!"]. They rearranged it in Korea to be what you hear it as now.<sup>35</sup>

The demo version of I Got a Boy consists mainly of three verses, a pre-chorus, and choruses. The final version, on the other hand, is significantly more extended and complex, with three more verses and a bridge which together lasts a minute longer than the demo. This additional work has changed the character of the song to a considerable extent, beyond just adding a few sections. The Verse 3, 5, 6 and bridge parts, which are not found in the demo, are the most significant changes, and the new progress and melody that this part creates are entirely disconnected from each other, making the song look more like a colorful patchwork rather than a single piece. Still, some logic for this revision process can be noticed. For instance, verse 3 would add more catchiness of the song by adding an Arabian-style melody as opposed to a repeatable structure that the demo version originally had. Verse 5 would make the song more intriguing with an entirely different feel from the previous pre-chorus. The most dramatically new section might be verse 6, which adds a melody that seems almost irrelevant within the song's entire structure. This newly added section emphasizes a "diva" type of performance, based on the beat that was previously used for the pre-chorus. This part may have been designed to showcase the vital charm of the idol group Girls Generation, especially the powerful vocal skills of its member Tiffany. The addition of these new elements, including the abrupt changes in a composition provided a drastically original charm to the song. Compared to the demo in which different ideas

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

are tied more cohesively, the final version appears to be intermittently shifting with different elements, stitching many patches up. Then it goes back and forth a series of unusual elements in the unexpected place, creating contrasting sections.

Table 7 The song structure of "I Got a Boy" (Demo / Final ver.)

Demo ver.			Final ver.		
Time	Lyrics (bar)	section	Time	Lyrics (bar)	section
00:00-00:20	"let me introduce my self" / "Oh, oh, oh, eh, oh" (8)	Intro	00:00-00:23	Rap verse (8)	Intro rap 1
00:21-00:38	Verse 1 (8)	Verse 1	00:24-00:42	"Let me introduce my self" / "Oh, oh, oh, eh, oh" (8)	Pre-chorus
00:39-00:58	Verse 2 (8)	Verse 2	00:43-01:02	Verse (8)	Verse 1
00:59-01:18	"Oh, oh, oh, eh, oh" (8)	Pre-chorus	01:03-01:12	Verse (4)	Verse 2
01:19-01:20	"Let me put it down another way"	Interlude	01:13-01:32	"Oh, oh, oh, eh, oh" (8)	Pre-chorus
01:21-01:39	"shine on ya" (4+8)	Chorus	01:33-01:34	"Let me put it down another way"	Interlude
01:40	"Hey yo Miss E"	Interlude	01:35-01:54	"I Got a Boy" (4+8)	Chorus
01:41-01:55	No lyrics inst. (8)	Verse 3	01:55-02:08	Verse 3 (8) / "아 내 왕자님"	Verse 3
01:55-02:07	"Oh, oh, oh, eh, oh 2" (8)	Pre-chorus	02:09-02:22	Verse 4 (8) / "나 깜짝 멘붕이야"	Verse 4
02:08-02:22	"Shine on ya" (8)	Chorus	02:23-02:36	Pre-chorus - "Oh, oh, oh, eh, oh 2" (8)	Pre-chorus
02:23-02:36	"na na na na" (8)	Break (possible for dance)	02:37-02:49	Verse 5 (8) / "내 팔 들어 봐"	Verse 5
02:37-02:48	"Oh, oh, oh, eh, oh 2" (8)	Pre-chorus	02:50-03:04	Pre-chorus - "Oh, oh, oh, eh, oh 2" (8)	Pre-chorus
02:49-03:02	"Shine on ya" (8)	Chorus	03:06-03:30	Verse 6 (2+8) / 난 정말 화가 나 죽겠어	Verse 6
03:03-03:18	"Shine on ya" (8)	Chorus	03:31-03:32	"Don't stop! Let's bring it back to 1:40"	Interlude
			03:33-03:45	"I Got a Boy" (8)	Chorus
			03:46-04:00	Bridge	Bridge
			04:01-04:13	Chorus: I Got a Boy (8) / 아 내 왕자님	Chorus
			04:14-04:31	Chorus: I Got a Boy (8) / oh oh oh eh oh	Chorus

The complexity of composition seems to be inevitable, based on song camps and the collaboration system that SM has devised, fulfilling the musical and commercial appeal that they wanted. However, from the standpoint of popular music, where commerciality should be a top priority, this may seem like an adventurous choice. One possible explanation is that idol music in the K-pop market is often targeted at very loyal core fans, not the general public. These core fans are not just those who consume the artist's music, but those who support both their unique charms, performances, and visual aspects. This is why K-pop idol music can try different and adventurous music beyond 'bubble gum pop' unlike in the Western teen pop industry. Fans would be enthusiastic about the uniqueness that make the music 'different' from others, just as loyal rock or hip-hop music fans are enthusiastic about their favorite acts for their unique artistry. K-pop companies that produced idol music seems to understand these desires and reflect them in the direction of their label's musical approach and strategy. Most importantly, they always pursue music that would best suit the performances of idol groups, not merely as recorded music. K-pop's unique characteristics are the result of the combination of local and global public tastes and efforts of Korean labels aimed at the audience. And K-pop's complex composition and hybrid approach are the results of such strategies and attitudes.

#### 3.1.4 Why Scandinavian?

Although song camps would include a variety of foreign composers from everywhere with different nationalities, the impact of composers from Sweden, Denmark, and Norway have been the most distinguished. They have been active in K-pop since the mid-2000s, often cited the renaissance of K-pop idol music, especially since the 2010s. Collaboration with European composers, especially Scandinavian, provides an insight to understand the nature of K-pop.

The relationship between K-pop and Scandinavian composers dates back to the late 1990s. When SM Entertainment launched its first K-pop girl group in the Japanese market, producer Lee Soo-man bought a song from Norwegian composer Risto Ashikainen and used it on SES' Japanese debut album. Lee met Ashikainen at MIDEM, the acronym for *Marché International du Disque et de l'Edition Musicale*, which is billed as the leading international business event for the music ecosystem. During the showcase of composers all around the world, Lee was instantly fascinated with the superior quality of Scandinavian pop. Instead of commissioning a new song, he purchased a song that Ashikainen wrote for Finnish girl group Nylon Beat. Lee and his producing team then re-worked this song with Ashikainen to record it with SES. The title of the song became "Dreams come true" (the original title, "Like a Fool"), which marked the first time in the history of modern K-pop idol industry that the songs of foreign composers through an international collaboration hit the domestic market.

In the history of contemporary K-pop, the presence of European composers are as noticeable as Japanese and American music. Since the first international success with Finnish composer, SM and other K-pop agencies have been recruiting European talents consistently. In particular, the composers from Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland have made the most noticeable outcomes. Since 2010, when the pop idol industry started to flourish in Korea, many of the hit records made and released by SM are works of composers from Scandinavian countries. Their overall share of the entire album has increased each year dramatically.

Table 8 Selected list of K-pop composed by Scandinavian composers around 2010s

Year	Song title	Artist	Composer (Producer)	Nationality
2015	Ice Cream Cake	Red Velvet	Hayley Aitken, Sebastian Lundberg, Fredrik Haggstam, Johan Gustafson a.k.a. Trinity Music	Australia, Sweden
2015	Love Me Right	EXO.	Denzil "D.R." Remedios, Nermin Harambasic, Courtney Woolsey, Peter Tambakis, Ryan S. Jhun, Jarah Lafayette Gibson	Norway, Korea
2013	I Got a Boy	Girls' Generation	Will Simms, Anne Judith Wik, Sarah Lundbäck Bell	France, Norway, Sweden
2013	Rum Pum Pum Pum	F(x)	Erik Lewander, Iggy Strange Dahl, Ylva Anna Birgitta Dimberg, Anne Judith Wik	Sweden
2013	Everybody	SHINee	Thomas Troelsen	Denmark
2008	Mirotic	TVXQ	Mikkel Remee, Sigvardt, Lucas Secon	Denmark
2008	Eat You Up	Boa	Mikkel Remee, Thomas Troelsen / Henrik Jonbak (producer)	Denmark / Sweden

Typically, these foreign composers belong to an international publishing company such as Universal Music Publishing Group. If the agency such as SM contacted the publishing company through an agency, the publishing company would summon their top composers for the camp. SM initially worked independently with composers, but they have built a more systematic relationship with the publishing company, such as with songwriting camp. One of the most prominent European workforces in K-pop for the last decade would be the Norwegian production team, Dsign Music. Dsign Music was founded in 2005 by Robin Jenssen, Anne Judith Stokke Wik, Nermin Harambašić, and Ronny Vidar Svendsen. Design Music was signed to the Universal Music Publishing Group from 2008 to 2016 and eventually became a member of SM's subsidiary publishing company EKKO music, which was co-founded by SM and Universal Music strategically managed for global K-pop industry.

Swedish composers are most favored by the K-pop industry, especially the idol pop labels such as SM. SM's interest in Scandinavian pop, among them, is due to the Swedish pop

industry's establishment of a "factory" production style that was similar to what SM had been pursuing.

Universal Music Publishing's European A&R executive, Pelle Lidell, started working with SM Entertainment (SME), one of the larger Korean indie labels, three years ago. He says pretty much every song he's delivered to the company – usually one or two a month – has become a hit. Lidell, who supervised the rise of Swedish pop factory Merlin in the 90s and early-00s, and has masterminded hits for Britney Spears, J-Lo and Jessica Simpson, says SME has taken the pop-factory concept to a whole new level.<sup>36</sup>

The Swedish pop industry already has the most influential composers and producers in the world beyond Europe. Based on this system and abundant human resources, they have a strong influence in the U.S., Japan, and now the K-pop market. For SM, that consistently pursued cutting-edge sound since the onset, Scandinavian composers, including Swedish composers, have been the most useful talents to help them to achieve renovating K-pop. In particular, their success in the Asian, J-pop and K-pop markets is closely related to the melody-oriented tendencies Asian pop music pursues. Compared to American composers who emphasize rhythm and beat, Swedish composers tend to emphasize melodies and harmonies, which is an essential reason for them to exert considerable influence in the Asian pop market as well.

Youngdae Kim: What are the factors that make this Swedish pop thing a success? Especially in K-pop and J-pop?

Öberg: Of course, the Swedish pop style has been a great success in America too. What about Max Martin? From a musical point of view, Swedish musicians are concerned about the melody. For example, if American musicians make music, they would usually say, "Let's make a beat, and put a verse on it." The Swedish composers would say, 'Let's make a hook first.' I think making good music is a good beat or a verse, but I think it depends on how they write good chorus parts too. Swedish musicians are always focused on creating a memorable and charming

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<sup>36</sup> Lindvall, Helienne. "Behind the music: What is K-pop and why are the Swedish getting involved?" The Guardian. 20 Apr 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2011/apr/20/k-pop-sweden-pelle-lidell>

refrain that has been a tradition since the old Swedish folk music to the pop music era such as ABBA, Ace of Base, Roxette, and Max Martin. I personally prefer and enjoy black music, but I am very similar to other Swedish composers in making good melodies and hooks.<sup>37</sup>

Scandinavian composers working in the K-pop scene are already aware of the similarities between European and Asian pop music. While I believe it needs more careful investigation considering a lot of factors, it may be the result of the long-term and indirect influence of advanced European pop music on Asian culture.

Youngdae Kim: It was J-pop that first recognize the talent and value of Scandinavian composers. It is also noteworthy that in Japan, they prefer European composers like you, Swedish composers.

Öberg: There is one interesting story. There is an annual music contest called “Eurovision Song Contest.” The music style of this contest has changed, of course, but the music of Eurovision, especially popular in the 80s and 90s, had a lot of similarity with today’s J-pop’s boy band music. I heard from Japanese record labels about how the music of Eurovision is similar to the music of Japanese label, Johnny’s. It is interesting to note that the music of Japan and Europe, which have different languages and cultures, have similarities in aesthetics.<sup>38</sup>

Since the birth of the K-pop industry, the relationship between European pop music and J-pop has gradually applied to K-pop that modeled on J-pop industry. Accordingly, it became a common case for musicians who have been active in J-pop to jump into the K-pop market.

Andreas Öberg is a jazz guitarist and composer, currently one of the most prolific Swedish composers in K-pop. Before he started to work with Korean labels, he already had a substantial amount of work in the J-pop scene, composing and producing numerous songs for major artists, including those at Johnny & Associates. His comments reveal a critical context for the reason

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<sup>37</sup> Personal interview. Andreas Öberg. 09/22/2016. Skype.

<sup>38</sup> Personal interview. Andreas Öberg. 09/22/2016. Skype.

that Scandinavian composers are eager to work in K-pop. Like himself, some of the best European composers who had experience in J-pop were successfully able to bring their musical style to K-pop scene because of certain musical similarities shared between K-pop and J-pop. Despite the difference in language differences and the environment in the industry, K-pop would blend well with the music of European composers, especially Scandinavian composers who have a great talent composing sweet melodies, as well as ample hands-on experience in both countries.

Although the J-pop industry as a whole has heavily influenced k-pop, differences in musical tastes still exist nonetheless. And by understanding this difference, European composers can continue their careers as successful composers on both sides. One of the tactics of Scandinavian composers have is to understand each scene and customize their style by recognizing the musical and industrial differences between K-pop and J-pop. Their success in both scenes is based on their flexible work style as they are conscious of this difference. According to European composers who have worked both in Korea and Japan, K-pop prefers more strong rhythms than J-pop. Because of its emphasis on strong syncopation, they say it feels close to American pop, especially African American music. It is also closely related to the Korean public's preference for black music such as hip hop and R&B compared to the Japanese audience who would prefer 'poppy' dance tune. It is also related to the linguistic characteristics of Korean, which is based on the opinion that Korean pronunciation and phrasing are better suited to the rhythm of African American music such as R&B and hip hop.

Öberg: The difference between phrasing is crucial. In the case of K-pop, there is a tendency that they want a little bit more rhythm-oriented music, like, more 16th notes, and a strong sense of syncopation, like "hot" music. I would advise my fellow composers to listen to and refer to 90s American R&B if there are interested in working for K-pop. Because, in terms of phrasing, those black genres are the best reference for making K-pop. When you listen to J-pop, on the other hand, you can see that they prefer a more straight line, straightforward phrase. Most of the traditional J-pop boy bands and idol music are like that.



Youngdae Kim: I think that a different phrasing would provide different feelings, especially with a different language. Do you believe that the difference between Korean and Japanese language makes such musical differences and preferences too?

Öberg: Of course. The pronunciation of Korean is much more naturally suited for black music, such as syncopated music, like funk or hip hop. As a composer, I am definitely aware of that aspect.<sup>39</sup>

Although the musical traits of K-pop might not necessarily be bound to a specific type of genre, Scandinavian composers often adopt their European or Scandinavian identity in their composition, as their musical fingerprints. Often this influence is introduced into K-pop by directly referring to the Scandinavian pop style, which is consistent with K-pop's philosophy of always combining various new musical elements regardless of country or genre. This Scandinavian influence is exemplified in *Windy Day* (2016), sung by Korean girl group Oh My Girl, which is composed and arranged by native Swedish composer Maria Marcus and Andreas Öberg. According to the composer, this song was initially intended as a musical homage to ABBA, the legendary Swedish pop act in the 1970s. The influence is evident, as the instrumental and vocal arrangements are reminiscent of ABBA's catchy electro-pop sound and lush harmony. For Marcus and Öberg, Scandinavian composers, references to ABBA music might provide an opportunity to reveal their cultural identity as composers. But more importantly, by summoning features similar to ABBA's music, which are already familiar to listeners of various generations, the song fits well with K-pop's philosophy of pursuing universal charm without being bound by time and genre.<sup>40</sup> One of the clear examples for their effort is the eight-bar section in the middle of the song. This section has a sort of "middle eastern" feel to it, which sounds entirely different

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<sup>39</sup> Personal interview. Andreas Öberg. 09/22/2016. Skype.

<sup>40</sup> Fuhr, Michael. *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-pop*. United States, Taylor & Francis, 2015.

from the atmosphere of the other parts that resemble the music of ABBA or other Swedish pop. These two Swedish composers use this brief yet memorable section to create a kind of ‘oriental’ moment that gives the song a unique character as K-pop, as it creates a sharp contrast with the Scandinavian sound they intended.

Öberg: What we intended to do with the song was to create Swedish-style pop music from the seventies, including ABBA. The song borrows the element of ABBA in the vocal arrangement.

Youngdae Kim: Sudden shift of music in the middle section seems to have a completely different scale. What’s the idea? Is it for adding Asian-ness?

Öberg: Well, it’s more like an Arabic sounding scale called Mixolydian b2 b6 or Spanish Phrygian. I think it sounds a little Bollywood-ish. The idea was to have a section that can be a big contrast to the “happy” chorus. The way the guitar is played is very Django Reinhardt-ish, like gypsy jazz. I just wanted it to be interesting.<sup>41</sup>

Öberg and Marcus make good use of their ability as Swedish composers through ABBA's references. Still, the music fits with the tastes of Korean pop music fans who prefer refined, modern, but at the same time, melodically elaborate tune. They are able to borrow Swedish pop melodies effortlessly as Swedish musicians while introducing exotic harmonic progression and scales to meet the needs of the K-pop industry. The versatility and sensitivity of Swedish composers may be the most crucial reason K-pop wants to continue working with Swedish and other Scandinavian composers.

### 3.1.5 “Whatever goes”

Collaboration with Scandinavian composers and other foreign composers has become an essential element for K-pop’s modernization. With the rapid growth of the K-pop market, K-pop

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<sup>41</sup> Personal interview. Andreas Öberg. 09/22/2016. Skype.

wants more composers to involve in the system. They believe the chance of making hit songs would increase by relying upon a large number of composers (Fuhr, 2015). The K-pop industry, which has grown into a global music market, started to be recognized as an excellent field for achieving success by providing relatively abundant opportunities for foreign composers.

However, K-pop's appeal as a field is not just from a financial aspect. One of the things that the composer often points out as both charm and advantage of K-pop is about artistic freedom. K-pop would not usually impose any restrictions on genre or style when it comes to new music, and as a result, it would accept anything that would be appealing and refreshing to the audience. For creators, it is a vital advantage that they can exert various creative energies without any restrictions. In other words, K-pop is like a new canvas for them to explore a variety of things in their artistic mind.

Will Simms (composer/producer): With K-pop, it's much more, "Whatever goes." You can be really creative. For a producer or a songwriter, you can just really let go. You don't have to think about structure too much. You can try to invent something new. Every producer would like to come up with a sound that's not been done before, and I think K-pop allows for that to be experimented with.<sup>42</sup>

"Whatever goes" would be a word that best represents what K-pop production, especially in the collaborative producing system such as song camp of SM entertainment. The most important motivation is the willingness to create modern and experimental pop music without putting limits on creativity. This is what would make room for foreign composers with diverse musical backgrounds. One of the aspects to illustrate the creative freedom in K-pop, or the philosophy of "Whatever goes," is the retrospective nature of K-pop. K-pop, especially idol music, willingly

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<sup>42</sup> Amy, Simms, Will. Seoul Beats. 11 Jun 2013. <https://seoulbeats.com/2013/06/speaking-with-will-simms-composer-of-exos-wolf-and-snsds-i-got-a-boy/>

borrowing varieties of elements that were in the past and use them in modern construction. The choice of genres and arrangements can also be random and varied. Genres that are hard to find in the current American Top 40 charts, such as Synthpop, Chicago house, New Jack Swing, G-funk, Miami Bass, or Swedish dance-pop, are some of the popular styles that can be found in the last decade of K-pop.

Moreover, there seems to be no consistent artistic reasoning or logic found in this case. It could sometimes be the genre that K-pop agencies would want, or it could be an idea that composers would suggest, or what audiences would expect. And the outcome is always very flexible and varied. A concept of each album would vary from one work to another abruptly without any visible artistic cohesiveness, and many genres and arrangement styles would coexist in the same record without substantial context, which was a consistent nature of mainstream K-pop since the 1990s. However, as long as it would turn out a modern and trendy output, such randomness and diversity in Korean music could still be an effective way of showcasing its uniqueness, rather than their shortcomings or limitations.

Red Velvet's *Bad Boy* (2018), composed and produced by The Stereotypes, is an excellent example of how K-pop's tolerant attitude toward retro or passed fashions stimulates creative ideas from foreign composers. For the Stereotypes, who has become a worldwide producer for their production with Bruno Mars, Justin Bieber, Fifth Harmony, and Chris Brown, *Bad Boy* is a unique piece compared to American pop in dealing with trends. Although the overall track was based on the latest trap beat, the song also heavily borrows the sensibility and melodic vibe from the 90s R&B, which makes this song a rare combination that is far from the dominating sound of American pop trends or K-pop in 2018. And this is related to the ambivalent way K-pop deals with trends.

Jeremy Reeves: I went back to 90s R&B.

Ray Romulus: It's just fun. Especially when they're allowing you to do that. It was pretty tough just being in the states playing music like that or music that we grew up listening to and elements that we loved. And would love to incorporate but it wasn't, you know, received well.

Jeremy Reeves: In the states, it's not always accepted, you know? And aside from artists like, for instance, Bruno (Mars). You know, but even still, that was taking a chance. It would be difficult to hear this song on the radio in the states.

Ray Romulus: It felt like we were kids again, allowed to play things we grew up listening to. And now we're allowed to do it. That's what made that fun. That was the inspiration behind that.<sup>43</sup>

As mentioned in the interviews, it seemed 90's R&B was a clear inspiration for these American producers to write this particular piece and overall production. It also suggests that the song reflects a unique advantage of K-pop that they believe is difficult to find in the contemporary American pop scene. These American composers are conscious of K-pop's interest in R&B music in the 90s and are pleased to incorporate it into the song. It means that the range of musical sources they could choose from is broader. Of course, this is not limited to a specific genre of R&B music in the 90s. Instead, it is associated with some musical tendencies or with the musical taste of the Korean public.

Öberg: I advise my fellow composers who want to make to K-pop that they should listen to and refer to 90s R&B music. Because, in terms of phrasing, the closest thing to the current K-pop is 90s R&B.<sup>44</sup>

In other words, in the K-pop, the 90's R&B is not merely a music genre as it is, but a musical element that would fit into the overall musical taste of the key listeners who listen to K-pop. It is

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<sup>43</sup> Genius. The Making Of Red Velvet 레드벨벳 "Bad Boy" With The Stereotypes | Deconstructed. 7 Jun 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Personal interview. Andreas Öberg. 09/22/2016. Skype.

also a music that matches the direction pursued by the record companies that have carefully studied the market and the tastes of the public.

The motivation for the K-pop industry to continue to use foreign composers is also closely associated with the demand of the K-pop audience. In other words, it means that the record companies are trying to meet the musical level that the public expects from K-pop. Foreign composers commonly point out the fact that K-pop industry and its audience is very demanding in music but has a diverse musical taste embracing a variety of musical styles. And K-pop agencies would challenge the composers to make more elaborate music that would meet the audiences' needs.

Jeremy Reeves: ...It's very musical and it has a lot of changes which in the Korean culture, they thrive off of that. They love musicality.<sup>45</sup>

Öberg: (describing his song "Starlight" by VIXX.) Listeners may not explain what it is, but I think it is very musically complete. There are a lot of complicated chord changes, and the progression is not cluttered. When I saw this kind of difficult style of music getting a good response, I got the idea that 'Oh, I can bring my style to K-pop.' This is a different story from the current North American pop music market, which produces repeatable music with just about three or four chords each time.<sup>46</sup>

Kim Youngdae: Do you think K-pop is more demanding than American pop music?

Öberg: I think that the music fans in Korea as well as Japan respond well to more sophisticated music in my personal opinion. And the demanding tastes of Korean listeners inspire composers like me to refine and develop our composing skills and arrangement techniques. Especially, the variety of genres and perfectionist attitude of K-pop is always very impressive. The effort they put into making the final product, including vocal practice, is great. Given the money and time spent on the music industry, there is nothing strange about the completeness of K-pop today. At the same time, I think it is possible because there are fans who invest a lot of money in music. I feel it is going in the right direction.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Genius. The Making Of Red Velvet 레드벨벳 "Bad Boy" With The Stereotypes | Deconstructed. 7 Jun 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Personal interview. Andreas Öberg. 09/22/2016. Skype.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

The words mentioned in this interview - complexity, musicality, diversity, demanding, concrete - are what would define the nature of K-pop industry and the audience. K-pop requires a highly controlled musical process, finely organizing and crafting each song. The public invests a lot of money in music and has a high standard for the music they listen to. K-pop prefers overseas composers with diverse musical abilities and experiences to meet their high standards and requirements. Foreign composers make the most of their freedom as creators and use it to create various and experimental forms of music demanded by the K-pop industry and fans. K-pop's unique modernity, hybridity, and globalization are the products of constant pursuit of such a high level and transnational collaboration.

### 3.2 CONCLUSION

K-pop's transnational music production through songwriting camp suggests an interesting example to illustrate that K-pop's status as global music has been highly systematized through sophisticated technology. Cultural Technology of SM ultimately aims to create universal music that is compatible with the global market beyond the local Korean scene. The songwriting camp, which they introduced to the K-pop industry for the first time, is an important measure to realize their ambition. The music production method based on the songwriting camp embodies the most inherent properties of K-pop as a global product and simultaneously strengthens them further. Instead of pursuing music based on a strict sense of musical genres, songwriting camp adopts a more hybrid approach using varieties of musical elements that would characterize K-pop, especially as performance-oriented music. In this methodology, composers and producers are allowed to use various musical features that do not commonly coexist, without any restrictions or consideration of the authenticity of genres they try to incorporate. This non-organic or rootless

method of music-making resembles how K-pop pursues its modernity for the last couple of decades, that is, if it can lead to successful results, any kind of musical attempt is possible. The songwriting camp not only makes music that meets the global standards that K-pop wants systematically and efficiently but also gives K-pop its own individuality in the process. SM provides an opportunity for composers and guarantees their artistic freedom to take advantage of musical imagination they have rarely attempted in other music scenes. The intent is not always commercial, but it is closely associated with how SM has managed to distinguish their music and make it more appealing in the global pop scene. The disconnected and complicated kind of avant-garde aesthetic pursued by SM is only meaningful when it could serve to maximize the appeal of music as a comprehensive performance pursued by them, not just as a sound itself. And this is the way Korean pop music has pursued modernity. The disconnected and complex sound pursued by SM is meaningful when it serves to maximize the appeal of music as a comprehensive performance pursued by them, not just as a sound. And this resembles the way Korean pop music has pursued modernity: abandoning its unique national identity and building a new brand by mixing all possible modern elements.



## Chapter 4. DIASPORA KOREANS AND THE MODERNITY OF K-POP

Korean popular music has long been regarded as "Korean" music, which is written and performed by "Korean people." Also, Korean music has always been considered to be a 'singular' genre/scene compared to American music, which has had a racial, cultural, and national diversity since the birth of popular music. However, the presence of Korean Americans in Korean pop music requires a new way of perception of the music and the industry, and most importantly, the idea of "Korean-ness" in K-pop. The role and contribution of Korean diaspora artists have been increasingly visible since the late 1980s when Korean pop music began to modernize itself in earnest. And they have become an integral part of the scene. This chapter explores the role of Korean Americans, or *gyopo*, in the development of Korean contemporary popular music, and discusses how Korean pop modernity has been closely intertwined with diaspora Koreans and their cultural identity. In particular, this chapter examines 1) how the Korean music industry has made a consistent effort to innovate it by incorporating the talent and the image of Korean American musicians and 2) how Korean American musicians have constantly negotiated their liminal identities to pioneer new territory and secure their space in K-pop industry.

### 4.1 BACKGROUNDS AND TERMINOLOGY

Before discussing the activity of Korean American musicians, I clarify some of the terms and the context that I draw here, explaining in what context these definitions and categorizations should be meaningful to use.

#### 4.1.1 Context of the research

Korean Americans in American culture had rarely been documented as the main theme in academia until the early 1990s, more accurately until the Rodney King trial and the ensuing riot in Los Angeles Korean town. The chains of the event had provided a chance for many people to finally reconsider the presence and problem of Asian minorities, especially the Korean American community (Espiritu, 1996; Abelman, 2013). Still, most of these scholarships dealing with an issue about Korean American identity are primarily focused on school activities to see how the second (or in some cases, 1.5) generation high school and college students have constructed their ethnic identities in negotiating the duality of Korean American-ness. The framework was thus drawn a lot from the pre-existing minority discourse that underscores the racial struggles and the marginal status in American mainstream society. Popular culture, especially in regard to the trajectory of Korean American people, is a relatively uncharted field until now. Only a few attempts to uncover the relationships between popular culture and the identity of Korean American youths were made. Pop music scholar Oliver Wang introduced an earlier example of Korean American hip-hop that was active during the late 1980s but did not provide further accounts on the more recent development of other streams (Wang, 2001). Jung Eun-young, an ethnomusicologist, provided maybe the most updated writing to consult, yet she still briefly surveys a few examples of Korean American musicians as a new media cultural movement (Jung, 2014). The recent global success of K-pop drew international attention in the academic field, but the presence of Korean Americans was treated only by peripheral effect in scholarly works.

I attempt, instead, to provide more historical scope on Korean American music within the context of Korean popular music. First of all, while I do consider Korean Americans as a

marginal entity that has been primarily associated with minority discourse including racial struggles and identity negotiation in American social system, I want to rather focus on the dynamics between Korean Americans and their ancestral "homelands," evoking the situation where they are given more diverse role and status. To elaborate this, I have to expand my perspective on Korean Americans and their identity issue to transnational context to reveal the process how Korean music scene could potentially be an "a land of opportunity" for new generation Korean American, similar to the way in which America has been an opportunity for their parents' generations. In other words, I observe how different sense of "Korean American" could be constructed through negotiating an empowering yet liminal cultural identity to claim their spaces in the emerging K-pop industry.

#### 4.1.2 Generation categorization

Koreans' emigration to the United States has begun as early as the early 1900s. Still, the Korean American community has been grown on a large scale after the Immigration Reform Act of 1965. Throughout this period, the first and second-generation communities were established and developed mostly in larger metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco. Along with these legitimate divisions, 1.5 generation has been suggested as a new category by several scholars, while it is still loosely defined term: it generally refers to a group of Korean youth who were born in Korea, who are roughly pre-teen aged group, who emigrated to the U.S. along with their parents (Danico, 2004). It is, however, less meaningful in a demographical sense than in a cultural one. Nevertheless, I consider it is still necessary to examine the division to understand the more complex landscape of the Korean American community in terms of how this generation features distinctive identity from the other two generations, and the difference causes different ways of cultural positioning (Danico, 2004). In

this research, I pay attention to how a number of 1.5 generation Korean Americans perform an important role in the modernization of Korean popular music, especially during the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

Still, the categorization would not sufficiently uncover the complexity of Korean diasporic identities. First of all, Korea American communities often encompass a wide range of pan-Korean people, including permanent resident Koreans in the U.S., who are not technically a U.S. citizen. Although these Koreans would maintain legally Korean citizenship, a number of them are often skin to the Korean American community having a cultural identity as American rather than Korean and considered to be a part of the Korean American community. Also, the Korean American community often involves a considerable number of Korean overseas students who attend a college or high school system in the U.S. These students, called *yuhaksaeng* (student studying abroad), whose purpose of stay is predominantly academic than migrational, would often end up getting residency or citizenship. The problem is, in many cases, the actual identity of these Korean Americans (or Korean living in the states) can be either ambiguous or concealed, and the distinction tends to be neglected by the public. Also, there can be an issue of self-identification. That is, Korean American musicians or entertainers would mostly introduce themselves as Koreans "from" America without an implication of hyphenated identity. Since my analysis concerns both American and Korean contexts in a transnational sense, "Korean American" would not be a perfect category to tell the subtle differences and ironies in the dynamics between them. For these reasons, it might be useful to adopt an umbrella term in describing Korean Americans in the both legal and cultural sense, and "*gyopo*" or "*dongpo*" could be a proper alternative in this particular research.

*Gyopo* (lit: countrymen; *Hangul*: 僑民; Chinese: 僑胞) is a term that broadly embraces people with Korean descent who lives abroad, with or without a foreign nationality of which they chose to live. It is also common to add a prefix indicating the actual nationality or location. For example, Korean term "*jaemi gyopo*" literally means Korean people locating in the U.S but often also includes Korean people who hold Korean citizenship and have a permanent residency in the U.S. at the same time. The English term, Korean American, thus roughly falls into this definition, although *gyopo* is only meaningful when circulated among the Korean community. On the other hand, the term *dongpo* (lit: people of the same ancestry, compatriot; *Hangul*: 동포; Chinese: 同胞) might be a more eclectic substitution that would prioritize ethnicity over nationality, emphasizing common 'root.' However, *dongpo* tends to have more nationalist sentiment undertone in the usage, while *gyopo* could be more widely used in a variety of situations (Kim, 1999; Joo, 2018). I primarily use *gyopo* rather than *dongpo* in this particular dissertation because, regardless of contexts, *gyopo* is a more commonly circulated term in the contemporary Korean language. Also, through using this term, it might be useful for me to uncover an ambivalent role of Korean Americans in the Korean pop music scene.

#### 4.2 "INVERSE IMMIGRATION": *GYOPO* AND MUSICAL AUTHENTICITY

I first examine an earlier phase of K-pop, or what I consider a "pre- K-pop" era, extending from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, the period when the market dominance of domestic Korean pop music was tremendously shifting. This phase is as significant as the following phase of K-pop in understanding how the role given to *gyopo* musicians and performers was formulated in certain conditions in Korean pop industry. I observe how *gyopo* musicians had been emerged as a signifier of modernity and an innovator by appropriating trendy African American pop music

style into Korean pop scene. I pay attention, in particular, to the process that *gyopo* tries to claim their 'authenticity' of the western-oriented musical genres to fulfill the expectation given to them and, at the same time, differentiate themselves from other 'Korean' artists.

Since the 1980s, Korean pop music scene has been increasingly diversified in terms of cultural backgrounds of musicians, as *gyopo* performers of different countries were flowing into Korea to seize an opportunity as a recording career. Although they had occasionally appeared in the Korean entertainment industry throughout the modern period, the presence became much more visible through this period.<sup>48</sup> Some of the *gyopo* singers were noticeably popular in the 1980s making some mainstream hits, including Bolivian Korean singer Byung-Soo Leem ((Korean: 임병수, Bolivian: Hernan Im), who recorded multiple hit singles including "Ice Cream Love," and a female pop singer, Su-Sie Kang, probably the most noted female *gyopo* in 1990s' Korean pop scene.<sup>49</sup> Especially Kang, cited as one of the earliest examples of modern female idols, maintained her success throughout the 1990s with perennial hit records, working with famous local composers and producers. Although these performers were commonly introduced as *gyopo* with a reference of their origins, the music they recorded was usually localized, which does not have a considerable "gyopo" quality. As for Kang, in particular, her main styles were mellow pop/ballad music that was not significantly different from other female artists at the time, and her discography was mostly in accordance with other Korean local contemporaries at the time in terms of her vocal styles, messages, and arrangement. At this earlier stage of *gyopo*

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<sup>48</sup> During the earlier period, "mixed-blood" musicians were more visible than *gyopo* having the images of novelty and foreignness in music. The three most popular figures at this period are Il-Joon Park and Sooni In, who were both African American / Korean mix, and Soo-Il Yoon, who was born to Caucasian American father and Korean mother. Their unique physical appearance and distinctive musical feature such as a powerful voice were considered as strong racial marks.

<sup>49</sup> The recording was a translated version of *Directo Al Corazon*, originally recorded by Latin American pop star Luis Miguel in 1982. However, a remade or an adaptation in pop music like Leem's was not a peculiar practice in 60s, 70s and even 80s in South Korea.

influx, it was their images, rather than musical qualities, that were much more critical attributes that differentiate themselves from other domestic Korean musicians.

By the early 1990s, a series of new artists from the U.S. have made their debut and changed the landscape of Korean pop culture and industry to a considerable degree, initiated mainly by a group of young dance-pop musicians and producers. Accordingly, this new trend has also affected how *gyopo* musicians perform as well as the way people expect toward those performers. Hyun-woo Lee, a 1.5 generation Korean American who moved to the United States when he was a teenager, was one of the earliest examples of a new generation *gyopo* pop singer. His intent using his image and *gyopo* was more noticeable compared to the predecessors, in the predominant use of computer-generated slick dance sounds with the incorporation of rap, which was still a novelty factor at the time. The pioneering approach was possible by the effort of another *gyopo* musician and producer Danny Kim (Hong-soon Kim; Korean: 김홍순), who had lived in the U.S. studying American popular music. Unlike Kang, whose style mostly borrowed Japanese-inspired pop/ballad style and grammar, Lee incorporated more authentic American flavor, and express this sensibility using a visible mark of '*gyopo*.' Most prominently, he has conveyed his *gyopo* qualities with the genre he adopted, and the language he used: English lyrics and American style house music arrangement. His debut and the biggest hit in Korea, "Dream (1992)" is the representing example that captures a refined 'chic appeal' of *gyopo* performance, embodied in English rap and the elaborate dance arrangement called 'remix,' which only a few other Korean contemporary performers successfully adopted in the mainstream scene.

I was down and out when you came into my life / Cause, right from the start, I knew you were the one / who would stay around and fill my heart with joy / and happiness that I never ever felt before (The opening "rap" section of "Dream": released in 1991)

As the song initially kicks in, Lee starts to rap over the synthesized funky rhythm with sampled effects, a style of arrangement that would instantly remind the contemporary Korean audience of American rap and house music at the time. Although the section was relatively short (lasts less than 20 seconds), it has become a charm of the song that would allow audiences to remember it unique and fashionable. Moreover, for young audiences who were already familiar with American pop music, it was one of the crucial devices to confirm the trendiness of music and the performer.<sup>50</sup> Given that rap was a new movement in Korea, Lee's somewhat incomplete attempt to rap itself was sufficient enough to be considered ahead of time. Heavily borrowing the most updated arrangement style from American hip-hop and house music, his *gyopo* identity in the song was also more immediate than that of Kang Su-sie. Not only his *gyopo* identity of him helped to propel his own popularity, but Lee has also successfully proven the commercial potential of *gyopo* in the business.

The influx of *gyopo* performers was, to some extent, observed to be a unique cultural phenomenon, as the Korean media paid particular attention to this unprecedented movement. Press described the surge of *gyopo* singers under the tiles "inverse immigration," treating these performers as an individual category, which was distinctive from local Korean musicians. However, the term "immigration" here was used rather in a figurative sense because the actual immigration status seemed not to be clear enough.

"Gyopo singers," Korean descent singers who made a return and domestic debut in Korea, are in the limelight recently. Although it used to be a more common situation that those who had a domestic fame advanced to foreign countries, now it is kind of a new fashion that these dongpo singers were re-imported [into Korea]...they are all the second-generation gyopo and commonly in the age of 20s. According to the [music] experts, 'the musical taste they have learned at the

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<sup>50</sup> While written rather in plain English, it is still doubtful that the actual messages were meaningful to average Korean audiences, given that English was not used for a casual conversation.



home of pop music has allowed them to lead and set the domestic Korean youth's sensitivity.' (Kyunghyang Shinmun, July 24, 1992)

Although the article did not tell what "musical taste" they brought would be, one of the most important elements in the new *gyopo* practice was incorporation of contemporary African American, or more commonly called "black," sound. African American musical genres such as jazz and soul had been incorporated in Korean pop music since the 1960s during "the 8<sup>th</sup> army" era, the impact remains negligible until the late 1980s, when a new generation of Korean pop musicians tried to claim their modernity through exploring varieties of African American traditions such as Disco (House), R&B and Hip-hop, both aesthetically and strategically. African American music, represented by R&B, hip-hop and New Jack Swing, was the most 'hot' and current musical genre that had already surpassed the echelon of rock and pop in the early 1990s in the American market. *Gyopo* performers have utilized these African American genres to establish themselves as a kind of 'cultural originator' in the domestic Korean pop market.

The most significant shift has been made around the early 1990s, pioneered by two different R&B/Hip-hop groups, Solid and Uptown. Primarily consisting of *gyopo* members (including both 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans and *yuhaksaeng*), these two *gyopo* bands opened up an entirely new phase of Korean popular music with a unique combination of music, image, and language. They also changed how *gyopo* performers utilized their talents and images in K-pop. Most importantly, the approach is primarily based on the idea of cultural authenticity.

Solid, the first R&B act in K-pop era consisting of three *gyopo* (Jay Chung 정재윤, John Lee 이준, George Kim 김조한) formed in Los Angeles, has pioneered the genre through incorporating their unique *gyopo* identity in contemporary R&B arrangement and unique singing

style inspired by African American R&B singers. Their first two albums, released in 1992 and 1994 respectively, have shown varieties of urban black sounds including Pop/R&B, New Jack Swing and Hip-hop packed with an arrangement of what was then perceived a highly "authentic" American or 'black' flavor. At a superficial level, the most distinctive feature of the music was the way it was presented than the actual music sounds. For example, the records provided information on a specific sub-category of each song with English subtitles that are either a translation of the Korean title or the name of genres they represent.<sup>51</sup> The "genre labeling" strategy was getting even more elaborated as their career advanced, including more specific yet ambiguous juxtapositions such as "R&B Ballad," "70s Ballad", "P-Funk," and "Latin House." Although the musical details of these genres were not always justified in the actual arrangement, the department-store-like display of genres/sub-categories, also one of the distinctive features of K-pop, was intended to emphasize the specialty of the group for American music genres as well as their authenticity in those genres.

Another distinctive strategy was the way in which English and Korean are applied in the lyrics. Primarily sung in Korean, most of the album's promotional tracks that were sung by Korean were well matched with rather "toned-down" R&B ballad and hip-hop style. Also, they often introduced more "authentic" tracks that were heavily sung in English, served as a mark of their origin and capability of delivering messages in English. Along with musical factors, they provided their distinctive *gyopo* images with an emphasis on their cultural and even educational backgrounds as *gyopo*.<sup>52</sup> By arranging these practices, they could provide a fully comprehensible

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<sup>51</sup> For example, a song called "kurisumasu iyagi (trans. Christmas Story)" has "acapella" as a subtitle, instead of English translation of the song, presumably implying that the term, or the name of the genre, "A cappella" must have been considered to be unique, or more importantly "hip" practice.

<sup>52</sup> The booklet of a debut album of Solid has some details such as the name of the college they attended, even including detailed majors, which was nothing to do with their music. But this might be a good strategic component to provide credibility and fantasy about Korean American's life. This, in part, resonated with the surge of college-educated musicians into Korean pop music scene at the time.

and still exotic experience to domestic Korean audiences while effectively displaying their skills and images aside.

The success of Solid further inspired Korean American communities in the U.S. and Korean domestic producers. Most importantly, from forming the band to the specific production technique, Solid has suggested a new model for *gyopo* musicians who want to build a career in Korea, incorporating musical talent with smart image-making, especially with an adoption of a "well-bred" *gyopo* youth images. To be sure, the most important reasons for their success was not only for the updated musical features, but also for the common belief that the techniques and sensibility of *gyopo* were distinctive and authentic, and to some extent superior to Korean-born local musicians. Explaining the nature of these differences, some attributes this sensibility and technique mainly to the different "experience" and "environment" they have had.

Although they [Solid] have Korean descent, their music has hardly contained any "Korean" elements in it. Rather, Solid has African American "feel" deeply in their music as those who either born or raised in the United States. They are not simply imitating black music, but it seems like they perform the genre with an authentic black sensibility. Especially, Chung [Jay Chung] emphasized that he has learned the [African American] music rather naturally, than merely "studied" it (Hankyoreh, 07/07/1997).

In this particular article, the author repeatedly emphasized the fact that Solid is from "bon t' o 본토," a Korean word meaning "the mainland," suggesting that the band was from the U.S., the home of American pop. The way a particular genre was associated with a country of origin and authenticity in Korean pop music is not a peculiar phenomenon in R&B and Hip-hop. Also, as described in the article, it has been emphasized that the authentic sensibility is not achieved from merely studying the culture, but from an unforced, natural experience. It was critical to define the sensibility of *gyopo* as something fundamentally different from local Koreans and to know that

the quality could only be acquired from the experiences in 'bon t' o.' This awareness is also more strongly manifested in the advent of another 'black' music genre, hip-hop.

The success of Solid and other predecessors such as Lee Hyun-woo inspired other Korean American 'would-be' musicians located in the U.S. and also for the producers who would recruit these talents for replicating the success of Solid. One of the direct outcomes was the four-member hip-hop/R&B act, Uptown. The complex building of *gyopo* identity around modernity, authenticity, and blackness has been much more controversially witnessed in this case of this group. To be most distinctive, the band consisted of three *gyopo* performers coupled with Korean member, Jung Yeon-Jun (Chris Jung), the mastermind of the band. Jung had reportedly studied music in the U.S. before recruiting Korean American members to introduce a "more authentic" black style without any attempt to compromise with Korean local taste.

"Uptown never claims "Koreanization" of American pop music. Instead, as the leader Jung emphasized, they "focus on the original sensibility of American music, rather than attempt to incorporate a clumsy "soybean paste (*doenjang*)" flavor. Upon conceptualizing the new band, he considered all but new generation Korean Americans who were born and raised in America. Yoon Mi-rae, who moved to the United States with her parents when she was seven, insists, "Rhythm and blues is a genre that is impossible to be digested in Korean style" and "Only those who have learned the feel and the instinct of African American vibe could sing the genre [right]." (Dong-A Ilbo, 11/26/1997)

While the primary form of the group seemed not to be considerably different from their predecessor, such as Solid, the intent of Uptown as a *gyopo* group was explicitly manifested in the interview. By deliberately contrasting the image of *doenjang* to an authentic American flavor, they clarified that African American music such as R&B could only be performed properly through an uncompromising effort. In other words, the authentic taste is properly realized *through* them, that is, the sensibility of *gyopo* who have spent most of their lives and

learned music in the 'the mainland,' America. Moreover, this claim was reinforced by the formation of the group itself, especially the racial identity that the members possessed. And they never hesitated to utilize their different racial and ethnic identities. Uptown had two "mixed-blood" Korean *gyopo* members from the onset. The female lead singer, Yoon Mi-rae (Tasha), was born in Fort Hood, Texas, to a Korean mother and an African American father. And Carlos, one of the two male rappers, is a Korean/Mexican mix, as suggested in his first name. Tasha's rather apparent racial traits, such as her 'darker' skin and rich 'soulful' timbre, directly contributed to provide the most direct sense of foreignness yet authentic appeal to Korean audiences. On the other hand, Carlos, along with another *gyopo* rapper Steve, attempted to introduce their American 'feel' in a more musical manner, using fluent 'street' type ghetto rapping spoken in English, which would confirm their regional – or often racial as well – identity and originality as American-born *gyopo* performers.



Figure 4.1. Uptown's first album: Represent [repre|zent] (1997)

As discussed in numerous articles on Hip-hop and authenticity, the Hip-hop community highly values cultural and racial authenticity, and the concept has been directly associated with race, local, ghetto, and region (McLeod, 1999). In terms of racial and regional identity, Uptown was

the first *gyopo* band that incorporated and openly claimed their hip hop authenticity in the origin of the group members as well as a racial diversity of the band. To be ironic, while the idea of racial and cultural authenticity in hip-hop has traditionally marginalized other races and ethnic communities, especially Asian or Asian American musicians in the realm of American hip-hop, the same kind of perception was cited to claim the legitimacy of the genre to local Korean audiences who would highly respect their U.S. and African American origins. In other words, Asian American 'black music' musicians could become a legitimate center in Korea, not a peripheral agent, by using their 'in-between' racial and cultural backgrounds. This inversion of the perception toward marginality and race were often as significant as actual musical talent. In other words, the association *gyopo* identity with the authenticity of music was both tangible and imaginable.

Korean American rappers and singers, such as Solid and Uptown, have shown how the talent and the identity of *gyopo* have been closely associated with ideas of "modern" and "black" and adopted as a kind of mediator to confirm that "Korean" could transplant American (or African-American) pop music modernity with transnational diasporic background and identity.

#### 4.3 KOREAN AMERICANS IN K-POP PRODUCTION SYSTEM

In this section, I examine how the successful establishment of *gyopo* performers has been expanded to a mainstream pop music domain, especially as an integral component in the modernization of Korean popular music, and even the globalization of K-pop in the later period. In particular, I focus on how these performers are challenged to negotiate their unique cultural identities to achieve and maintain their success in the Korean pop industry. After the great success of Solid and Uptown, the presence of *gyopo* in the mainstream field has never been more apparent. As in the past, their performances have been outstanding in black music such as hip-

hop and R&B. Two California-born *gyopo* musicians accomplished an unprecedented success in this context: Tiger J.K. and Yoo Seung Joon. However, as K-pop mainstream turns into more "idol" pop, more and more *gyopo* talents have been brought directly into the idol industry. The newly emerging "K-pop era" saw some considerable changes in utilizing and managing the talent of *gyopo*, which is deeply based on systemized and elaborate industry know-how. In this situation, *gyopo* came to face a different type of challenge and dilemma from their predecessors.

#### 4.3.1 *Gyopo* as Culture Technology

One of the most fundamental practices in K-pop industry is quality control to produce a consistent level of music product through a kind of 'spartan' training (Kim, 2013). This new way of thinking has also brought profound changes in perception in terms of understanding the role of *gyopo* and the music they are associated with. The most distinctive transition is that *gyopo* musicians in this period started to be incorporated into a carefully designed entertainment system of K-pop idol, as a part of their fostering system under the philosophy of "culture technology."

Some of the essential values of *gyopo*, including the exotic images and authentic quality, remained the same. But the industry began to require them to be functioning as an integral *component* of the whole pop manufacturing system to perform more specific roles. In other words, they are considered to be a part to be assembled, not a complete unit. This change is rather obvious in the way they are recruited and trained in the industry. The recruiting process also illustrates the idea of digging out the 'potential' talent and processing it. The agencies often dispatch scouts to the major cities in the U.S. via their local office to discover talented *gyopo* youth. It includes Korean American churches, gospel choirs, local talent shows, and prominent music schools. In most cases, the agencies do not assume the genre that *gyopo* needs to perform. Instead, they simply collect talents in diverse styles to build a large talent pool by which they

could place a member with the right style in the best position. They are not merely recruiting and packaging the talent, but fostering them for a globalizing market as well as a domestic context. This is an entirely new way of producing music, especially utilizing *gyopo* musicians. Once treated as pioneers in the black music genre, they now face a situation in which they have to perform the new roles required by agencies within the sophisticated industry of K-pop, while still in the ways they could display the uniqueness of Korean American-ness. Especially in the international venue, these *gyopo* members would be expected to perform more diverse role beyond singing and dancing, such as a representing interviewee or a translator.

But the dual identity that enables Korean Americans to find stardom in Korea also comes with explosive potential. Unaccustomed to the local sensibilities and the unspoken codes of conduct built around them, Korean American K-pop stars would sometimes cause unintended rows. In a society that holds a strong undercurrent of suspicion against outsiders, even a minor faux pas by Korean Americans would be magnified into a major controversy. Tiffany Young caused a stir during SM Town's 2016 Japan tour when her Instagram displayed a picture of the "Rising Sun" emoji--the symbol of Imperial Japan that colonized Korea.<sup>53</sup> This small mistake, made in an unguarded moment, made network news in Korea, and Tiffany had to issue two separate letters of apology publicly.<sup>54</sup> In 2009, Jay Park was ousted from the group 2PM when it was revealed that three years before he debuted, he wrote on his MySpace page that "I hate Koreans ... I wanna come back" as he complained about the difficulty of being an idol trainee. Singer Yoo Seung-joon<sup>55</sup> indisputably experienced the worst version of this. At his peak, which

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<sup>53</sup> The picture was posted on August 15, namely the Liberation Day in Korea.

<sup>54</sup> Jin, Min-ji. Tiffany leaves 'Unnies' after flag controversy. 08/19/2016. Korean JoongAng Daily. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3022851>

<sup>55</sup> Yoo Seung-Jun, also known as Steve Yoo, is a Korean American pop singer and actor, often cited as one of the biggest selling K-pop artists in the Korean pop music history, by selling over 5 million records in the domestic market. Having 5 years of commercial success from 1997 to 2001, Yoo's career in South Korea shockingly came to



spanned from around 1997 to 2001, Yoo was arguably the most successful Korean American artist in the K-pop scene. An excellent dancer and good rapper, Yoo dominated the K-pop charts with a string of number one hits. The music video of his 1998 hit “Na Na Na” is an early example of displaying masculinity in K-pop and is unmistakably influenced by the display of African American masculinity in the American hip hop music videos. This would serve as a template of presenting Asian style masculinity to be followed by the successive male K-pop stars like Rain, Se7en and EXO. Yet all this success did not protect Yoo Seung-joon from the cardinal sin of Korean males: draft-dodging. As virtually all Korean men serve the mandatory military service, Korean American men who are able to opt-out of the military service by virtue of their U.S. citizenship can be a target of hostility and resentment. Initially, Yoo sounded all the right notes, saying he intended to serve in the Korean military and going so far as to take the physical examination required for the mandatory draft. Then in 2002, Yoo formally became a U.S. citizen, became exempt from the military service. The Korean internet howled with rage; Ministry of Justice declared Yoo was a draft-dodging criminal who is not eligible for a visa to stay in Korea. Yoo was pushed out of Korea and was allowed into Korea only once since then-- in 2003, to attend his father-in-law's funeral. The Seoul High Court denied Yoo's appeal of the Justice Ministry's decision in 2017, 15 years after the fact. This series of events also revealed how the consumption of K-pop and support to the *gyopo* star would be under the strong influence of the nationalistic ideas shared among the public.

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an end in 2002 due to the unprecedented controversies around a suspicion that he was dodging his military draft. He was also famous for a diligent, well-mannered, upbeat yet humble personality, which might take for granted for *gyopo* performers.

#### 4.3.2 American Idols as K-pop stars

As an extension of the diversification and negotiation in the roles of Korean Americans previously discussed, I analyze the implication of frequent appearances of Korean Americans in the Korean T.V. talent show. The televised T.V. competition, primarily modeled on American T.V. audition programs such as *American Idol* franchise, has become the most popular form of an open audition in the last decade for those who want to pursue a singing career. Moreover, I consider the shows from both countries themselves and the continuum are emblematic cases that uncovers the complex dimension of negotiation and popularization of Korean American performers in the music industry, in terms of what kind of strategies they have to adapt to meet the variety of expectation that has been given to them for each different venues and markets, and in what context they opt for K-pop as a promising career.

#### 4.3.3 American Idol: Facing the limitation as Asian performers

Before examining the presence of Korean Americans in the K-pop competition, I first examine the American Idol, which has been established the most popular vocal competition since 2001, to provide a broader perspective in understanding how racial and ethnic stereotypes are challenged, reinforced, and often utilized for different context and expectation. Since the first installation, the American Idol has been primarily dominated by Caucasian and African American performers, with only a few Asian or other ethnic minorities in the final rounds. The racial threshold seemed to be evident in the voting system itself, which could quickly eliminate less-dominant ethnic or racial groups such as Asians and Latino even in the case where the talent of those participants was unquestionably superior. Among other Asian descent groups, Korean American (or *gyopo*) contestants have shown relatively noticeable presence. The first success was a Korean American Paul Kim, who made it to the top 24 in the 6<sup>th</sup> season of the franchise. Praised for his smoky

R&B voice by the judges, he was one of the favorites in the earlier stage of the competition yet eliminated at the semi-finals shortly afterward. John Park, an Illinois native, was another Korean American singer who appeared in the show. During the preliminary rounds in the 9<sup>th</sup> season, Park was selected and acclaimed by the judges for his soulful lower register and unique timbre, which was what judges then regarded as a "pleasant surprise" for an Asian singer. He had cruised through the preliminary rounds and the first round until he's eventually got voted off in the second week of the show. The most successful result of *gyopo* in American Idol was Hee-jun Han, who is a 1.5 generation *gyopo* and had been located in Flushing, New York City, since he was 12 years old. He has reached the highest position ever among Asian male artists at the time in the show by finishing in the ninth place and drew his first recording contract with an American record company.

The recursive appearances and success of *gyopo* singers in the competition despite the apparent racial barrier could be seen from several different angles. The most important motivation for these performers was to challenge racial stereotypes that had been prevalent in American popular culture, most recently represented by William Hung's comic performances in the show. Especially in Paul's case, to participate in the competition is usually more than a personal achievement. Instead, it can be a kind of process of proving the existence of legitimate Asian singers with serious musicianship, rather than a corny entertainer. Paul Kim made a clear statement regarding this situation. He openly declared that he would want to be the "anti-William Hung," according to Paul's first broadcasted interview with Fox network.



Figure 4.2. William Hung, American Idol, 2004

"It kind of bothers me that when people think about 'Asian singer,' they think William Hung. And I'm not hating on William Hung, but I mean, come on... There are many talented Asian people out there. You just don't see them. They don't get an opportunity in the entertainment industry... at all." (from Paul Kim's interview with American Idol) (Maizel, 2011)

While he was initially positioning himself as an "anti-Hung" character, Paul's intent was not to criticize Hung himself, but to underscore the lack of understanding about Asian singers in the mainstream media and to criticize the way in which the media treats Asian participants by not allowing the "proper" Asian talents to be exposed on the screen. Therefore, his attempt to win the next American Idol was not only for completing his personal mission to prove his musical talent but also for proving that the racial stereotypes of Asian singers are only a promotional media gimmick. What exactly is the William Hung stereotype in the media after all? Some points out the fact that Hung was able to reproduce and exaggerate the pre-existing archetype and stereotypes of Asian people projected in the American media for his commercial motivation. He was portrayed as an odd, carefree, absurd, asexual, and untalented person, yet highly smart enough to pursue an engineering major at UC Berkeley. He was able to achieve unprecedented

success, including a few minor record contracts, and it has been believed that his level of performance caused severe damage to the images of Asian pop music performers in general.

To overcome Hung stereotypes and display the competency as legitimate musicianship, Korean performers came up with a strikingly similar musical choice to each other in participating in the contest. Most prominently, they tried out the audition presenting them to be an R&B singer. First of all, unlike other pop genres such as rock or electronic, African American contemporary musical styles have been exclusively associated with the particularity of African American history, social context, and regional identity. Moreover, contemporary African American musical genres, such as Hip-hop and R&B, primarily reflected the young, hip, and masculine images in black America (Hopkinson and Moore, 2006; Belle, 2014). In part, their song selections and musical styles adopted based on contemporary black sound seemed to be an antidote to the Hung stereotype. Paul's most acclaimed audition song selection was 1990s' R&B tune, "If I Ever Fall in Love" by Shai, which made a sharp contrast to Hung's deliberately comic rendition of Ricky Martin's "She Bang." John Park, while never mentioning Hung, seemed to attempt to show a similar type of serious quality through incorporating black music in every round. For instance, he first chose to sing "I Love You More Than You'll Ever Know," which was originally recorded by the 1960s' rock band Blood, Sweat, and Tears, but he instead picked soulful rendition of Donny Hathaway. In the following round, he chose to sing another soul/jazz tune, Billie Holiday's Jazz standard "God Bless the Child." Hee-jun Han made it clear that he was pursuing R&B and soul since the first appearance at the show and chose a series of pop/R&B repertoires from "How Am I Supposed To Live Without You" (Michael Bolton) to even more oldies soul music like "Song For You" (Donny Hathaway), which also might be a

smart choice to showcase his ability to sing and more "masculine" charm that Hung's corny performance had never shown.

These performers, to some extent, were successful in replacing the stereotypes of Asian pop singers with their talent-oriented approach and the wide variety of black repertoires. However, they still draw from certain aspects of Asian stereotypes for securing their positions and accommodate audiences' expectations. The "model minority" is probably the most frequently witnessed stereotypical images in the practice of *gyopo*. This concept was first introduced by American media during the 1960s, in describing the successful acculturation of Japanese people in the American mainstream, and later evolved to be associated with other Asian American groups, including Korean. According to model minority stereotypes, Asians are perceived as docile and submissive attitude, hard-working and smart, and often highly spiritual (Lesser, 1999). These images are reflected and often negotiated in the journey of Korean participants in the show. Paul Kim, for example, introduced himself to be a humble "pool" guy, and John Park maintained his reserved personalities and family-oriented character throughout the whole rounds. Hee-jun Han was portrayed by the show as a devoted, sincere, and even weirdly modest young Asian. Some of these common 'model' features were also found in their manners: They never talked too much, nor attempted to make excuses and argue with the judges for negative comments against them. Unlike the majority of typical American participants, who are often over-confident and self-indulgent about their talent, their performances were generally reserved and never crossed a certain line, which was often different from their real-life personalities. Hee-jun Han somewhat tried to opt-out of these typical Asian characters by establishing himself as a more humorous and carefree Asian male, nevertheless maintaining his serious vocal quality and passionate personality. However, his rather aggressive personality, which does not correspond

with more popular Asian stereotypes, was often a target of criticism from both public and judges. It is no wonder that he had to finish his last performance with a much more serious repertoire in a rather conservative manner, which ended up receiving critical acclaim from judges and media and considered to be his best effort on the show.

On the one hand, it looks evident that *gyopo* performers in the show always wanted to challenge the notion that Asians cannot sing R&B, or more technically driven musical repertoires. At the same time, however, they had to rely on some of the pre-existing stereotypes of Asian people to meet the expectation so that they could *survive* through the competition. However, no matter what kind of strategy they would adopt, the overall circumstances of the mainstream pop music scene is not always favorable to Asian talents. Regardless of actual skill, even successful participants come to face high barriers of race and ethnicity, which is necessarily connected to their commercial value and marketability in the American music market. In this situation, they are compelled to seek favorable conditions for managing their music careers, and the rapid growth of the Asian music market started to provide a different kind of breakthrough for these Asian American performers (Wang, 2007).

#### 4.3.4 It's better than American Idol: the journeys of three "idols" in K-pop

As Korean pop music industry grows as a substantial market for foreign-born Korean talents throughout the 1990s, these *gyopo* musicians have been trying to seize an opportunity to pursue a musical career in Korea. However, the overall circumstances around the industry have been changed to some degrees from the previous decades. These performers were increasingly expected to meet a much higher standard of talent and images, as I discussed in the earlier sections. The T.V. auditions and competition process shows these dilemmas and challenges they

should face qualifying the proper *gyopo* model required by the public and the industry, in the form of a condensed reality drama.

By the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the most influential reality T.V. singing competition in South Korea is arguably *Superstar K*. As clearly modeled on the American Idol, the central concept of the show is to recruit and train new recording artists where the viewers' vote, as well as judges' scores, determine the winner. *Superstar K* highly resembles the concepts and details of the American Idol franchise except for the differences in setting reflecting the characteristics of the Korean industry. For example, Superstar K features a similar type of expert panels of 3-4 judges consisting of musicians and record executives who audition and critique (or "mentor") the contestants' performances. After the initial round of audition, qualified contestants would gather at the boot camp round (coined "super week") and practice songs and dances helped by broadcaster's teams of producers and trainers, to be competing at the preliminary rounds. The most crucial procedure is, to be sure, a live-aired stage performance with an eliminating system that was predominantly determined with votes from live viewers, including social media and text messages, which often influenced by the critics given by judges. The process of shows begins with local auditioning held across some biggest cities in Korea, which is now expanding to the international venues, including North American, under the catchphrase of "global K-pop audition." After the enormous commercial success of multiple seasons of the Superstar K franchise, several other broadcasters started to emulate the format to launch their own franchises. The two other famous shows in the recent years include "Star Audition: The Great Birth (Korean: "위대한 탄생")" and "The survival audition, K-pop Star (Korean: "스타오디션 케이팝스타")," which was on air through MBC and SBS respectively. The latter launched most recently, has enjoyed greater success than other competitors since the onset, partially due to the



unique system of judging and mentoring, which allow contestants to experience the in-house training system of some of the famous K-pop agencies whose CEO serves as main judges for the program. The first two seasons of the show, broadcasted between 2001 and 2002, features all the so-called "big 3" companies in K-pop idol music industry, SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment.

Since the earlier establishment, these reality T.V. auditions have helped to build singing careers for many would-be amateurs from the U.S. Many of them achieved great success throughout the shows, and a substantial number of singers have earned record contracts with Korean labels after each season. Each season of these programs has made at least multiple numbers of *gyopo* singers in the final rounds. Most prominently, the large number of the winner and runner up of "K-pop Star" (SBS) were all American *gyopo*. These participants usually use the American name, instead of Korean, to reveal the dual identity and showcase their American images.<sup>56</sup> Among these increasing *gyopo* participants, all three former American Idol finalists were also included. The trajectory of these different participants in Korean auditioning programs illustrates some similar yet fundamentally different status and approaches they draw for securing their success in Korea. First off, John Park, a Korean American singer from Chicago, Illinois, is arguably the earliest, and by far the most successful Korean American solo artist whom any audition program has ever discovered. Recognized as extraordinary success as East Asian male contestant in American Idol at the time, he decided to leave the school and pursue his career in Korea. Park made an appearance at the audition with many surprises from both countries, for the second season of *Superstar K*. Although he struggled during the preliminary rounds due to the less familiar repertoire and language issue, eventually ended up as a runner up of the season.

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<sup>56</sup> Even in the case of using American given names, their Korean surname is mostly pronounced in Korean way.

Paul Kim was another Korean American who was trying to recapture the scenario of John's success in Korea. He even made it clear when he first tried out for the preliminary round of "Great Birth" in 2010. Being asked about his thoughts on John Park's success at Superstar K, he addressed that he would do the same thing [as John Park] for this different franchise. Unfortunately, he failed to get through the preliminary round because his (vocal) style was considered to be as old as his song selection. Hee-jun Han, who appeared on the third season of *K-pop Star* in 2013, passed the audition and reached the final Top 6.

The most important motivation for them to choose Korean over the American market appears to build a successful career in the market in which their American-ness is directly appealing and quickly embraced.<sup>57</sup> Although it is a challenging task to participate in another audition in a considerably different cultural environment, they willingly accept the process of re-verification of their talent, which was believed to be proven already by American media and audiences through a presumably "bigger" stage. Since an initial appearance of the audition round, their decorated career as former "American Idols" played an ambivalent role in constructing the images and quality as a qualified performer. As much as their previous career in the U.S. was respected by many Korean viewers and even judges, they were consistently challenged by whether they, certified talent, could live up to the expectation at even more 'foreign' territory to *gyopo*, that is K-pop business. The language adjustment, for instance, has been the most notoriously challenging task for most of them, especially the second-generation youth. A failure of learning and memorizing the lyrics often leads to disqualification at any round regardless of

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<sup>57</sup> The motivations were described in somewhat diverse manner such as "to find my true identity" or "to learn more about my root [Korea]."

the talents they would show.<sup>58</sup> The Americanized accents and pronunciation of Korean, which had often considered to be a distinctive mark of *gyopo* performers, especially in African American genres, becomes a decisive shortcoming to remedy for becoming a competent K-pop performer, especially at the live-performing show. Secondly, they are highly expected to deliver the exotic talent that should be distinctive from domestic Korean performers, which could also cancel out any disadvantages in language issues. Although the current K-pop scene does not provide any foreign language version for the local market, American pop music repertoires tend to be highly encouraged for these performers. It often features '[American] pop music' round, which is usually designed to showcase their vocal quality and style, which, in many cases, advantageous for *gyopo* participants who are fluent in English and familiar with repertoires. For instance, John Park was able to make a breakthrough performance with his rendition of "Man in the Mirror" (Michael Jackson) and "If I Ain't Got You" (Alicia Keys), which were considered by both judges and audiences the kind of performances that successfully revealed his exceptional skills and his fluent articulation of English lyrics. At the same time, they also need to satisfy what contemporary Korean audiences need to hear from them. Paul Kim and Hee-jun Han had to face criticism on their lack of a modern edge in singing Korean songs, especially for their "old" vocal style. It is noteworthy that Paul Kim, who was well recognized by American judges for his "smoky" soul voice that appeared rather exceptional for Asian singers, eventually failed to pass the qualification round even with his thoughtful choice of famous Korean R&B song by Solid to show his "Korean" quality, which also revealed how competitive the current K-pop industry has transformed into. Also, Han's dramatic, rather evolutionary change of style in singing throughout

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<sup>58</sup> An exotic "accent" or mispronunciation is one of the most common charge for disqualifying *gyopo* or even foreign participants in this kind of auditioning program. This, to some extent, resonate with the fact that the actual K-pop training system has been operating a language training course as a part of in-house idol training program.

the rounds also illustrates how elaborate and complicated the level of requirement for the quality of *gyopo* could be. The televised audition process itself, therefore, assumes a form of drama that the identity of *gyopo* has been presented, tested, and negotiated. The programs would have a particular recursive pattern accordingly throughout each round: at an audition level, the show tends to depict the technical superiority and unique sensibility of *gyopo* musicians. But as the audition progresses, people would start to witness that these participants struggle to prove their talent yet forge the custom fit style to appeal to local Korean audiences, which is continuously encouraged and directed by the judging and mentoring process. The broadcasters want to portray the show as a series of drama, typically including verges of elimination and overcoming the challenges, which is carefully designed as a kind of ritual that proves an inherent quality as next commercial pop star. *Gyopo* seems to perform a proper role for his type of setup. Against the backdrop of all those struggles and opportunities given to *gyopo*, it might also be implied that while the career of *gyopo* in America Idol might illustrate about the level of talent, the status should no longer be absolute as in the previous decade when their authority as a cultural bearer was almost impossible to be contested. Thus, by challenging, or sometimes re-acknowledging the authority that was seemingly 'pre-certified' by American music experts, K-pop industry wants to claim its leverage and convince the audiences of how much K-pop has grown as a diverse, transnational, and eventually *contemporary* scene.

Korean Americans, or *gyopo*, in K-pop audition program, illustrate the way in which the talent and images of *gyopo* consistently perform in the current system of Korean pop culture. It also shows a considerable transition that has been made in the last few decades in terms of how requirements of the industry toward Korean Americans have been diversified, reflecting the elaborate system of K-pop. Most of all, these *gyopo* singers are willing to endure this kind of

musical and cultural challenge, not because the task is easier than as in the American scene. Rather, they understand that K-pop has appeared as a more promising venue they could demonstrate their talent and pursue a future recording career through appropriating their American-ness to be a compelling commercial value. To maximize the opportunity, however, they not only devise a way to be more foreign, updated, yet compatible, but also put their every effort to negotiate their talent, identity, and desire, in emerging and globalizing K-pop scene.

#### 4.3.5 "Homecoming"

Regarding the role and identity of Koreans, one of the fascinating phenomena in the recent K-pop scene is what is called 'homecoming' by Korean American artists. 'Homecoming' has many meanings. One of them is literally an opportunity for Korean American artists working in K-pop to perform in the American stage. In 2018, one of K-pop's most successful female singers, Ailee, performed at KCON USA, the K-pop festival. As her performance began, a message was displayed on the board inside the stadium, which was 'Welcome Home.' All of the American fans cheered, and the female singer expressed to her fans how excited she was when she returned home. Just as *gyopo*'s meaning is ambiguous, 'Homecoming' does not necessarily apply to her 'nationality.' During the first US tour in 2019, Wendy, the lead singer of the popular Korean girl group, Red Velvet, experienced a similar kind of homecoming. Wendy is Korean, who was born in Korea but spent her adolescence in Toronto, Canada. In that sense, her 'home' is Canada. She shed a tear in her face at the Toronto show, and her mother, who watched the show, shed tears with an emotional face. It would have been tears of joy mixed with feelings of joy for longing and success. Being able to perform in front of people in the United States on the American stage as a K-pop artist for Korean Americans born or raised in the United States is a tremendous

success in itself. And this is possible because K-pop has had considerable success on the international scene.

Gyopo's "homecoming" is not just about moving location. They use K-pop's success for their footsteps to a new career in their home country, which they might have hoped for eventually. There are several different cases in this regard. The most recent example is the successful advancement of Tiffany, a member of Girls' generation, into the American pop market. Tiffany was born in San Francisco, California, and spent his school days at the Diamond Bar in California. She came to Korea in 2003 to audition for a K-pop agency to fulfill her singer's dream. After successfully trained at SM Entertainment, Tiffany made her debut in Girl's Generation after four years of training. She has released over ten albums in the name of Girls' Generation for ten years and succeeded in several successful solo singles. After Girls' Generation announced their hiatus in 2017, Tiffany started pursuing a solo career. However, instead of remaining in Korea, she, as Tiffany Young, signed a contract with an American music agency to focus her activities on the U.S. scene. Still, Tiffany's reputation as an artist in the United States is entirely associated with her previous accomplishments as a K-pop artist in Korea. Many of her fans and audiences she would interact in the U.S. are also fans from her earlier career, who has supported Tiffany of Girls' Generation and remained faithful K-pop fans. Despite the success in K-pop, she uses her success to challenge her ultimate goal of achievement in her hometown.

Despite the occasional breakthrough by the success of Korean American musicians in the U.S. such as Far East Movement, Korean Americans still face a high hurdle in making it in the U.S. pop culture market (Jung, 2014). Better that they return to their homeland and try their luck in the K-pop industry, which at least carved out a place for them--however restricted that place may be. Indeed, this applies not only to Korean Americans but Asian Americans generally. K-

pop idol scene has become a beacon of pan-Asian globality, in which diaspora Asians can come and find international stardom through the global reach of K-pop. Thai-and-Chinese American Nickhun and Taiwanese American Amber Liu became household names through their groups 2PM and f(x), respectively. The fame built through f(x) allowed Amber to debut as a solo artist who can primarily perform in the U.S., her home.

But the question remains, particularly when considering the steep path that lies before the Korean Americans who aspire to be a K-pop star. Why would they come back to the country that often otherizes them as "black-haired foreigners," to join an industry notorious for years of arduous work, often-abusive treatment and contracts reminiscent of indentured servitude, just to have a shot at the slim chance of success? Just as much as their parents and grandparents saw the U.S. as the land of opportunity, Korean Americans see Korea as the land of opportunity.

#### 4.4 CONCLUSION

The modern history of Korean popular music has always been a kind of compulsive journey to attain its long-cherished desire toward western modernity and globalization. And a substantial part of this mission has been accomplished through the consistent inflow of *gyopo* into the scene and the transnational dynamics and negotiation between the mainland Korean and Korean American communities. In the earlier phase of K-pop, *gyopo* played a decisive role in modernizing the genre, using, and displaying their musical authenticity. The rise of K-pop in the international market provided a new position to them. The unprecedented global presence of K-pop would show that Korean modernity itself is no longer a mere reproduction of western/American modernity nor a regionally confined movement. Thus, the talent and the image of Korean Americans have become more useful and practical assets for the success of Korean popular music. In the K-pop scene transformed into a global industry, they retain their

value as essential beings who can effectively embody and represent K-pop's cosmopolitan aesthetics. At the same time, the K-pop industry utilizes their fluent English and international images as crucial elements of its sophisticated global market tactics, Cultural Technology. The modernity of K-pop as a global genre and industry is constantly shaped and evolved by such a pan-Korean identity that transcends nationality.



## Chapter 5. BTS: THE NEW MODEL OF K-POP

With their Billboard chart-topping albums and sold-out stadium concerts around the globe, BTS today is arguably one of the world's most popular music groups and the biggest success story of globalized K-pop. The unprecedented success of BTS challenges the understanding and study of K-pop, as it simultaneously reinforces existing perspectives while demanding several new ones. BTS's takeover of the mainstream U.S. market is an important moment for K-pop and beyond. Instead of being relegated to its own sandbox (like "world music") or dismissed as a subculture (like most of Asian pop music had been in the U.S. market) BTS now became the first Asian or Korean artist to top the Billboard 200 charts consecutively with non-English language albums, as well as the first foreign act in the history of American popular music to win the Billboard Music Award and American Music Awards in Pop Duo/Groups category as a non-Anglophonic act. In the U.S. mainstream pop music market that has been dominated by U.S. and U.K. acts thus far, these groundbreaking achievements by BTS demand reconsideration of the future of Korean and Asian pop stars in the U.S. mainstream pop scene. The BTS phenomenon shows K-pop's success formula and other new models in many different ways. BTS is a group that actively reflects the new trend of change in the K-pop industry, but it is a group that showed a new way of responding to the needs of fandom in the global market in the era of new media. In the process, their music rejected many of K-pop's typical methodologies and images and presented new ways.

In this chapter, I will talk about the identity of BTS as a hip-hop idol, a unique methodology or strategy that emphasizes its authentic messages and narratives. One of the unique aspects of the BTS phenomenon is that while the format and performance primarily draw upon the existing model of K-pop idol, but in essence, they incorporate hip-hop and as their core identity as an artist from the onset. In particular, this effort is deeply associated with the

way BTS present their stories and embrace their cultural identity as Korean. In this section, I will examine the career and the music of BTS, surveying the historical implications of their rise, and discuss how the success of BTS would illustrate the evolution of K-pop and provide new insight on the future of K-pop industry. I also examine how the way BTS defines their identity as hip-hop idol would draw upon the discourse of the authenticity of Korean hip-hop and how the effort would define BTS as distinctively Korean act in the phase of globalization.

### 5.1 K-POP'S NEW MODEL OF SUCCESS IN THE U.S. MAINSTREAM

BTS became the first major K-pop idol group in the U.S. mainstream market, but more importantly, the way they conquer the U.S. market was distinguished from their predecessors. Since its proactive venture to the global music market in the early 2000s, Korean popular music has achieved a substantial level of success in the global music market. K-pop artists such as BoA, trained and produced by SM, proved to be an accomplished pioneer, especially in the Asian market. As discussed in the earlier chapters, BoA is especially notable as K-pop's first successful result of a sophisticated localization strategy for Japan and the U.S. later, which presented a direction for the future of the industry. Around the 2010s, K-pop idol groups such as Girls Generation and Super Junior have led the world-wide K-pop boom that also ignited dance cover fevers across the globe. From this period, the group entered the market in earnest rather than solo artists, and from their success, especially using social media, the so-called Hallyu 2.0' was created (Jin, 2016). All current K-pop discourses are focused on the music and success of the artists of this period. Not to mention PSY's "Gangnam Style," that reached No.2 at Billboard's Hot 100, and the ensuing global cover dance craze, arguably the most prominent global viral hit from Korea. All of these examples demonstrate the global competitiveness and

commercial strategy of K-pop music and performance. It was at this point that Western media began to be interested in and analyze K-pop's conquest of the world market.

But none of these are comparable to the weight of the BTS phenomenon that has gone global since 2017. Especially in America, most of the previous success of K-pop was a niche level despite all the marketing tactics and localization strategy. In other words, K-pop's success in America and other western world has been far from that of the mainstream and was strongly supported only by limited K-pop fandoms and ethnic groups. But BTS's unprecedented success has been changing the landscape of K-pop's global presence lately, especially in American mainstream music market. BTS has made 10 of their studio albums on the Billboard Top 200 from 2015 to 2020, with three of them reached No.1. Given that only one other K-pop act has made the number one album on the Billboard 200 so far, this should be considered an exceptional success. Besides, two albums by the members of the BTS have been listed in the Top 200. At the same time, six of their singles were at the Billboard Hot 100, two of which were at the Top 10, which makes BTS the only K-pop artist to make the Top 10 at the Billboard Hot 100, except for the viral hit, Psy's Gangnam style. K-pop has entered the Billboard charts since the 2010s, but none of the groups have gained similar popularity to the BTS so far.

The exceptional success of BTS has two critical implications regarding the globalization and localization strategy of K-pop. First of all, a new direction is being created in the global re-establishment of K-pop by BTS with their exceptional success in the US. The success of BTS showed that K-pop no longer relies exclusively on Korea and Asia, but can dig directly into the United States, the center of the global music market. In previous cases of globalization of K-pop, it normally transpired from Korea to other East Asian regions (Korea, China, and Japan), took over Southeast Asia, then partly spread to the U.S., Europe, and South America. In the case of

BTS phenomenon, however, their global popularity was first documented in the U.S. and increasingly passed on to other markets. BTS' unexpected popularity overseas went on to detonate their popularity back in Korea, becoming the first case of two-way or reverse import of popularity in the history of global K-pop. One of the most decisive reasons for this is, of course, that the advent of streaming social media and streaming services, such as YouTube, Twitter, and Spotify, makes K-pop's market and popularity increasingly diverse and obscure at the same time. Thus, while the concept that K-pop debuts in Korea and then enter the overseas market sequentially through the strategy of localization is still valid, but the success of BTS proves that this could be bypassed in a different flow. Secondly, BTS's unprecedented success in North America shows the possibility of K-pop's new status as a mainstream pop rather than a niche sub-culture phenomenon, without being labeled as "K-pop" or lumping into the existing category of world music. Although K-pop has shown significant activity in the U.S. for the last decade, it has been treated as nothing more than "social media fad." The reports on K-pop has focused mainly on its subcultural aspects based on social media and limited age groups, such as online dance covers. But BTS's success provides a chance to reshape the discourse surrounding K-pop as more legitimate mainstream pop music success, rather than a fad or internet "virals."

The process by which BTS gains recognition from the American audience and media is far from the typical K-pop localization success. Most importantly, their success was not driven by company-led top-down promotions or campaign, but rather by building and expanding their fandom through consistent effort to establish intimate interactions with their fans. The origin of such a trend was first documented at KCON LA, held in the summer of 2014 in Los Angeles, California. A few months before KCON., BTS held a surprise concert at a small theater in Los Angeles called Troubadour for a crowd of about 200 fans. It was far from the large scale

showcase that K-pop industry is associated with, if not closer to, those of indie musicians. Regardless of the size of the venue, the experience of intimacy like an indie gig established a heartfelt interaction with their dedicated fans in a small space, which led to incredible reactions at the subsequent KCON stages a few months later. At the ‘Meet and Greet’ event, and during the performance, there was the first march of ARMY clad in matching black masks and clothes. The debut concert paved the way for the massively successful bonfire of North and South American fan meetings in the following year. The American fans’ response to BTS, a rookie band whose name was barely becoming known even to Korea, was something unusual. Though the sheer magnitude of fan support was incomparable to other mainstream K-pop stars at the time, the wild reception for BTS in the U.S. was a surprise to many people, including K-pop fans and American media. Several major media such as Billboard quickly picked up on the unpredicted popularity of BTS among American fans.

The success of BTS, especially in the American market, was something difficult to predict because the group was not carefully prepared using a systemized localization strategy for the American market, like other global acts or “units” that I discussed before. As Jin Dal-young pointed out, BTS was initially a project created without expecting success in the big market, which was why BTS did not have to carry out sophisticated customized strategies conscious of the global market.<sup>59</sup> For example, the composition of the group was not necessarily “US-friendly” or prepared for international fame, compared to those groups with global experience and linguistic capabilities of Korean American or foreign members. Also, among the popular K-pop bands that made it to the Billboard charts at the time, BTS was the only group that was not produced by “Big 3” Korean agencies — SM, JYP, and YG. — that have asserted dominant

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<sup>59</sup> Jin, Dal Yong. *Globalization and Media in the Digital Platform Age*. United States, Taylor & Francis, 2019.

influence over promotions and popularity in the K-pop industry, especially abroad. As a small size label at the time, BigHit Entertainment had limitations in not having enough infrastructure or experience to promote the group in the global market beyond Asia, but this limitation eventually led to enthusiastic voluntary support from unified fandom on social media. This, in turn, was the reason they were able to reach the market in a different way from the existing K-pop strategy, which was centered on large production companies and promoters. The absence of an elaborate strategy provided a background for them to tell their own stories more frankly without being aware of mass appeals, which characterized them as a different group from traditional 'factory' K-pop idols.

## 5.2 AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE OVER LOCALIZATION

The most significant difference between BTS' success and other K-pop is that BTS has not gone through the process of localization that the K-pop industry has long pursued. However, the absence of this strategy constructed an original, authentic image of BTS as a hip-hop-based group, and became a reason for fans and journalists to claim their distinctiveness. What should be pointed out here would be the context of BTS' authenticity as a group borrowing hip-hop. Since BTS's phenomenal success, media and scholars have been trying to find some of the reasons for their success in the authenticity of their music.<sup>60</sup> In American hip-hop journalism and scholarships, "authenticity" in hip-hop has been discussed in a very diverse and complex way. The work of Kembrew McLeod (1999) is one of the pioneering ones in the scholarship of hip-hop. He analyzes hip-hop authenticity in six different semantic dimensions: social-psychological,

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<sup>60</sup> Dorof, Jacob. A Deeper Look at Why BTS Has Thrived in America. *Vulture*. 06/12/2018. <https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/a-deeper-look-at-why-bts-has-thrived-in-america.html>; Shah, Neil. Seven Reasons Why South Korea's BTS Is an American Phenomenon. *The Wall Street Journal*. 03/6/2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/seven-reasons-why-south-koreas-bts-is-an-american-phenomenon-11583505183>

racial, political-economic, gender-sexual, social location, and cultural. He argued that the American hip-hop scene has traditionally distinguished “real” from “fake” based on these dimensions (McLeod, 1999). Of course, McLeod's research is based on the particular historical and social situation of American hip-hop, so it cannot be applied directly to the context of Korean hip-hop or K-pop. But his discussions may still be useful to understand BTS and its distinction as an evolution of K-pop, especially as idols borrowing hip-hop. I draw upon a few criteria from McLeod's discussion of authenticity and apply them to present some examples of BTS' music and career confirming the authenticity of their music as hip-hop.

McLeod presents "Staying True to Yourself" as an essential condition for judging the authenticity of hip hop. The most important part here is whether an artist can project himself in reality into music. The most significant difference in BTS music in this regard is that they communicate with their listeners by putting honest and exceptionally personal stories into music. This is different from the music of K-pop idols who take strategies to minimize individual stories of artists by dealing with more abstract or universal themes. In K-pop, this is more difficult than it looks. Unlike hip-hop, where artists (rappers) are writers (composers), the K-pop industry often completely separates artists from musicians. Many idol musicians do not participate in the production of their music, and neither do their fans make it an essential criterion for good idol music. Every process of K-pop involves experts from various fields related to music, and they write music based on universally applicable values rather than revealing the artist's individuality. Often this music is used as a kind of template, and the artist's real-life and their message do not necessarily match. In this respect, BTS' music is very distinctive. Fans of BTS often use the words such 'genuine,' 'authentic,' or 'raw' to describe the music of BTS, which they believe is an important distinction from other K-pop idol music. This distinction is made not merely about the

message of music but also related to the issue of musicianship and artistic attitude. And this is closely related to the fact that the members actively participate in the entire songwriting process, which is rare for a K-pop idol group. Indeed, the credits of almost every BTS songs have the names of BTS members on them, and they have been involved in various processes such as writing lyrics, composition, or arrangement. In the case of “mixtape,” in particular, an individual work directly led by each member of the group, they are often credited as producers of their music. It is undoubtedly a unique aspect considering the nature of the K-pop industry, which was called the “factory” idol group. In other words, they claim that while the original K-pop idol music is mainly created by songwriting camps of composers covering a wide range of genres, BTS’s music is more organically shaped by the collaboration of producers and members of BTS.

Unlike most idol groups, BTS secures its identity as a hip-hop group by making their own music and putting very personal stories in it. And in the process, they reveal a personal and raw attitude that has rarely been attempted in K-pop idol music. Here, important contradictions and conflicts arise regarding the authenticity of hip-hop, which is the conflict between BTS and other rappers, especially with underground rappers. According to McLeod (1999), the political-economic criterion for judging authenticity in hip-hop is whether it is “underground” or “common.” In the history of hip-hop, commercial rap stars are always faced with criticism of being “fake.” Korean underground rappers have been trying to prove their authenticity by acting independently and not belonging to a commercial system. BTS, which belongs to K-pop industries such as broadcasting and large public relations companies, does not strictly satisfy the authenticity of hip-hop in this regard. At the same time, they have tried to fulfill the standards of authenticity expressed by Korean underground hip-hop in different directions. One way of doing so is to recognize their position as commercial artists and at the same time emphasize their



background as 'underground' rappers. Before debuting as an idol group, BTS rappers have worked as underground rappers through various mixtapes. They also performed stronger songs that they could not show as idol groups through mixtape, not commercial albums, even after their debut. These activities are part of an effort to reveal their identity as sincere hip-hop artists. But at the same time, underground rappers have taken issue with their sincerity. The BTS wants to reaffirm the value of "Staying true to yourself" by exposing these conflicts to their music. For example, their full-fledged hip-hop tracks, the "Cypher" series, prove their very identity as a hip-hop group by revealing the toughest attitudes and messages that K-pop idols can rarely show. One of the essences of the Cypher series is their direct response to those who are hostile to them. In these songs, their main targets are underground hip-hop musician, which denies or criticizes the authenticity of BTS, or fellow idol rappers who attack them as competitors. As a rapper, they showcase their excellence, criticize others' lack of rap skills, and at the same time, show off their musical efforts and commercial achievements. In the "Cypher" series, as in the mainstream hip-hop of Korea, there are also lyrics about showing off their commercial success, but that is not the essence of what their lyrics would ultimately deliver. They are trying to prove their legitimacy as rappers through a message of healthier competition and vindication, while at the same time building their own realm through differentiation from mainstream Korean rappers. The third release of the "Cypher" series, Cypher pt.3, is the track that most effectively conveys the personality of BTS with the identity of the hip-hop group.

I live a hundred times harder  
 Than those who do hip-hop through the keyboard  
 "Rap=easy genre," too many generals  
 Be well-mannered, everyone  
 You don't even know how to make a proper single verse  
 How dare you talk about rap or music?

“Hip-hop through keyboards” refers to hip-hop fans on the internet who kept criticizing them since their debut. “Those who can't even continue on one verse” refer to competitors or underground rappers who have no skill but only try to criticize their competitors.

I don't need GIVENCHY cause I'm a star  
 I don't need H.U.G.O. already a boss  
 I'm not Buddha but I'm a butcher I cut away your flesh like a  
 Change your iPhone  
 You don't need your airplane mode  
 My roaming fees are hundreds of dollars  
 And you know I can take it more  
 Make money with rocks, sell rocks, you frauds  
 San Paulo to Stockholm, Places you'll never sit in your entire life I sit

This section shows two different attitudes of R.M., the main rapper of BTS. First of all, he drops the names of luxury brands and says those are not necessary for him. His use of the name of the luxury brands is not for proving their skills and values. This is a kind of ridicule for the materialistic attitude of Korean hip-hop. At the same time, he wants to break down the momentum of their critics by mentioning their busy schedules working across the world.

Rappers who act arrogantly  
 My flow job that takes them all and toys around with them  
 If you try to damage me with simple words like that  
 I only become stronger  
 The mysterious me is a bulgasari<sup>61</sup> who grows by eating your jealousy and envy

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<sup>61</sup> A name of Korean traditional monster.

Suga, another lead rapper in the group, maintains a similar attitude. The “arrogant rappers” probably mean underground competitors who used to mock BTS or hip-hop idol format in general. Suga feels confident that his rap skills can outdo them no matter what, while he says that the criticism toward him is simply due to their “jealousy” and “envy.”

Hyungnims who gained age carelessly  
 From my standards, you're at the level of a kid too  
 Even if I'm wack or if I'm fake if I'm this or that  
 I'm the new standard of the music industry  
 This rap will throw a slap an endless slap at their ears chop chop chop

He continues the counterattack against those who would not stop blaming and attacking him. To “Hyungnim,” who would mean either older brothers or seniors in the scene, Suga dismisses them as saying that he is just older and still “kid” in mental or rap skills. At the same time, Suga defends itself as a new “standard” for the industry, although he admits he could also be a “wack” or a fake himself. Here, he brings up a dichotomy of “real vs. wack (fake),” an essential criterion in hip-hop authenticity. This is another evidence that BTS has a clear understanding of hip-hop culture and industry while they do not entirely deny their status as idols.

The pioneering effort of BTS did not always receive a favorable response from fans and critics. BTS's music has been publicly criticized by other artists, especially the underground rappers, and has not received much favorable attention from Korean idol fans either. But paradoxically, it has become one of the reasons for BTS’ huge and unique breakthrough with their international fandom and the basis of the authenticity of messages. It still has the format as an idol, but its hip-hop-based image, candid message, and unrefined raw attitude have created a unique personality that distinguishes it from the existing K-pop boy band. This feature has been a

significant strength for them to appeal to the North American market, where hip-hop originated, and the discourse of authenticity is compelling. BTS' methodology of being responsible for their own music and incorporating their honest stories go beyond those of an idol, which propelled them significantly against the stereotype that K-pop is artificially manufactured. At the same time, it earned them a whole new set of fans who did not follow the existing K-pop groups before.

It is difficult to conclude that BTS's way of emphasizing the authentic narrative could completely replace the current localization model of K-pop. The current direction of development in K-pop looks like the enhancement of existing localization strategies, regardless of the success of BTS and the advent of hip-hop idol. For instance, in 2018, JYP. declared the era of "globalization by localization" at a presentation titled, "JYP 2.0." J.Y. Park, the C.E.O. and the chief producer of JYP proposed to develop, produce, and release music by utilizing the talents from all over the world.<sup>62</sup> Reportedly, Park has launched a six-member boy band recruited in China called "Boy Story" in June last year, and a girl group is planned to debut in Japan later. This is not an entirely new concept. In 2016, SM Entertainment had revealed its strategy with a new boy group system called "NCT (Neo Culture Technology)." In this system, SM plans to recruit members from different regions of the world to form groups or units that promote locally. The China unit, called WayV, has launched in 2019. As such, K-pop is now evolving from a consolidated training system to the phase of localized modularization. At the same time, however, the success of BTS in the global pop market, especially in the United States, obviously suggests a new success model that emphasizes an authentic narrative and message. An increasing number of K-pop idol groups, including Monsta X and Stray Kids, have begun to seriously

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<sup>62</sup> JYP 2.0. 07/26/2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08257W8sdNs>

engage in the production of their music, including lyrics reflecting their own experience. This trend helps K-pop idol acts to explore more artistic side of them and present more authentic messages, rather than focusing on more generic aesthetics. The trend is also joined by SM Entertainment, the K-pop mega-agency on the opposite side of the spectrum that had invented a modern K-pop business that focused on the professional perfection of music rather than the authentic narrative arc. For their major project at the moment, NCT, SM started releasing materials that vigorously integrate personal stories of members.

### 5.3 KOREANNESS AS A PART OF THE AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE

#### 5.3.1 “Han” and *Satoori rap*

Along with the authentic narrative, one of the reasons that distinguish BTS from other K-pop is that the music of BTS has relatively strong Koreaness in it. Fans and journalists often point out that their music contains “Han,” which is Korea's unique feeling of sadness. Obviously, 'han' is an emotion that is hard to define neatly. However, fans who listen to BTS music believe that this deep sadness is a unique sentiment of BTS and often explains why they feel BTS music is unique.

*Han* is present in quite a few BTS songs, and it's these songs that have a better chance at drawing in more of the general Korean public as well as older fans. It's also not a stretch to say that *Han* is what makes BTS more popular around the world—even though *Han* is a very Korean concept, the emotions and struggles it represents are surely felt by many people all over the world. This makes BTS's music human and relatable, and to some Koreans, it makes their music entirely Korean.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Courtney Lazore. “Han Influence: Why BTS Isn’t Just K-pop.” 28. April. 2018. MACG Magazine. <https://macgmagazine.com/2018/04/28/han-influence-why-bts-isnt-just-k-pop-guest/>

Fans of BTS believe that the sentiment of "Han" in BTS' music contributes to building a fandom with a different personality than other K-pop fandom. According to the claim, "Han's" sentiment is an essential background for turning the fandom into a highly diverse group with different age or ethnic groups.

This adult "Han" element also explains why Bangtan(BTS)'s fandom cohort is unusually diverse for a K-pop artist. Although Korean history is uniquely saturated in themes of melancholy, struggle and hope, they are ultimately ageless, universal concepts. Therefore, unlike other K-pop fandoms, BTS fans span every age, gender and ethnic group -- BTS is not a "crazy" teenage phenomenon, it is an intellectual phenomenon. It's about time the media started treating it like one. You will find as many adults as teens within the fandom, often working voluntarily on top of their employment or studies -- for example, teachers may function as translators while accountants, attorneys, engineers, librarians and other professionals work as our record-keepers and statisticians. I can vouch for this anecdotally, too, as I have personally befriended a nurse and a nuclear engineer.<sup>64</sup>

*Han* in BTS music is expressed in various ways. For instance, Journalism often associates Spring Day with the sentiment of 'han.' The song and its music video are known to have been motivated by the 2014 Sewol Ferry disaster, an unusual case for K-pop idol music for social or politically sensitive issues to be reflected in the music.<sup>65</sup> "Han," regarded as the unique sentiment of BTS' music, is closely linked to the fact that they reveal their views on society relatively openly as an idol group.

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<sup>64</sup> C, Sarah. "The Curious Case Of BTS: How Journalism Mistakes Production For Manufacture." 29 Apr 2019. Medium. <https://medium.com/@selizabethcraven/the-curious-case-of-bts-how-journalism-mistakes-production-for-manufacture-73721c270088>

<sup>65</sup> T.K. Park. "Your Guide to BTS and Their Musical Universe in 25 Songs." Vulture, 2019, pp. Vulture, April 19, 2019.

Herman, Tamar. "BTS' Most Political Lyrics: A Guide to Their Social Commentary on South Korean Society." Billboard. 13 Feb 2018. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/8098832/bts-lyrics-social-commentary-political>

As discussed in the previous chapters, one of the predominant natures of K-pop is its global competitiveness by maintaining a vague attitude toward nationality, locality, and the cultural root or background. BTS differs significantly from the existing K-pop group in this regard. They are not only honest about their backgrounds, but they also actively express them in music. The central theme of BTS, especially in their early career, is their pursuit of dream and happiness, as the most common experiences shared by K-pop groups are the dreams of a very young trainee, the hard times and waiting times to be fulfilled, and the process of overcoming them. The lyrics of BTS releasing such content quite frankly. BTS's candid attitude toward origin is evident in their use of language as well. They were the only K-pop idol group to reveal their identity using Korean dialect on rap. Their song, Paldogangsan, for instance, expresses the theme of unity in the region through authentic Korean dialects.<sup>66</sup> These dialects not only speak of the rapper's local origin, but often represent the rap's aggressiveness, sincerity, and unique rhythm and rhyming skills. Traditionally, dialect has never been associated with the music of K-pop idol. This is an obvious choice because the regionally specific identity of dialect is not consistent with K-pop's aesthetics as modern, urban, and cosmopolitan music. In that regard, it is difficult to consider the use of dialects of BTS as a commercial strategy or gimmick. Instead, their dialect raps simply emphasize the fact that they are willing to reveal origins and backgrounds, which is a sincere yet clever way to express their musical authenticity for the group that considers hip-hop as their primary identity.

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<sup>66</sup> English translation of Paldogangsan. Genius. <https://genius.com/Genius-english-translations-paldogangsan-satoori-rap-english-translation-lyrics>

### 5.3.2 BTS' exploration of Koreanness in "IDOL"

Since the popularization of Korean pop culture into the world since the 21st century and the creation of the international phenomenon of the "Korean wave," there have been various discussions about what Koreanness would mean in Korean pop culture. Several studies have discussed the modernization of traditional Korean music, gugak, and the way Korean Wave contents utilize Korean traditional culture (Finchum-Sung, 2009). However, music is still the most ambiguous area in Korean pop culture compared to movies or dramas, where Koreanness is more explicitly expressed. One of the most important reasons is that the idea of K-pop's modernity has always evolved and developed in a way that avoids or eliminates Koreans as much as possible. Since the 2000s, the outward strategy of K-pop targeting the global stage usually avoided expressing Koreanness extensively. K-pop has embraced transnational production, including the transnational songwriting camp system, and strategy based on non-nationalistic aesthetics. Such a vision essentially created visuals in music videos that eliminated Koreanness and any hint of locality, while aiming to produce entirely western sounds imitating music from Scandinavia, U.S., U.K., and Japan, that resulted in cosmopolitan hybrids. K-pop has modernized the industry based on western aesthetics from U.S. or western aesthetics that was already interpreted through Japanese culture, and the trend of 'de-Koreanization' has become more and more evident for the last two decades since the first globally known K-pop. In popular music, the exploration of Koreanness was often expressed by combining elements of Korean traditional music. Most of the time, they come in the form of fusion gugak or crossover gugak, a modern variation of Korean traditional music (Yeo, 2018). Such modern Korean music exists as an independent genre, which is a popular choice for soundtrack music for Korean trendy historical drama or film. On the contrary, in popular music that is not directly related to Korean



traditional genres, such as modern dance music or hip-hop, a sign of Korean tradition and the expression of Koreanness are mostly less specific.

In the entire history of Korean popular music, not limited to the 21st century's K-pop, the exploration of Koreanness is an extremely unusual effort. Shin Jung-hyeon, dubbed "Godfather of Korean rock," is a pioneer in the field. Blending Jimi Hendrix-esque psychedelic rock with the pentatonic scale that was inspired by Korean traditional music, he wrote "Beautiful Woman," which is a Korean hybrid of blues-rock and gugak (Lee, 2016). "A Cup of Coffee" and "Beautiful Rivers and Mountains," also composed by Shin, have become the archetypal Korean-style pop that embraced both the distinct sentimentality specific to Korea and the grammar of western rock music. Compared to the eclectic style of Shin, "Little Giant" Kim Soo-chul experimented more extensively, tackling Korean aesthetics as a rock musician. Past the 1980s, the prime of western pop music, he attempted metamorphosis in search of a new identity as a Korean musician. Kim began to study gugak from scratch, meticulously, and thoroughly researching how he would fuse it with his roots in rock music. The masterpieces produced through this process include *Hwangcheongil*(1989), *Sopyonje*(film score, 1994), and *Guitar Sanjo*(2002). The earnest crossover of gugak and popular music was partially inherited by Shin Haechul's "Kmerican Blues" or *Monochrome*(2001), and now being developed more liberally by a fusion group 2nd Moon and a post-rock group Jambinai in the 2000s.<sup>67</sup>

In the genre that still requires global compatibility by eliminating Koreanness such as contemporary K-pop music, especially hip-hop and idol music, it is an extremely rare attempt to introduce Korean music or express Koreanness. A most notable example in hip-hop is "Bulhandangga," produced in a combined effort by an underground rapper crew, Bulhandang. It

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

samples a vocal phrase from “Jeokbyeokga (Song of the Red Cliffs),” a Pansori piece, and blends hip-hop with gugak rhythms. The experimental attempt is considered one of the monumental moments in Korean hip-hop history. While such an endeavor is rare among K-pop idol music, “Shangri-La,” recorded by Vixx, introduced a Korean instrument gayageum and traditional clothes hanbok, to their music visual elements, exploring the theme of Asiatic fantasy. At the moment when K-pop music is targeting the global market, the K-pop idol group's exploration of Koreanness is a commercially bold attempt and inevitably a problematic task. In that sense, the meaning of BTS's 2018 hit song “IDOL” in the history of modern K-pop is an exceptional piece. And this is another important implication that BTS differentiates itself from other mainstream artists in the K-pop market.

“IDOL” is not gugak. It is hardly fusion gugak or a crossover based on gugak, either. The official press release of the song indicates that the song is based on *gqom*, South African house music. In some respects, however, this song clearly shows Koreanness in a rather unusual way, while it is still far less explicit than the hybrid genres like fusion gugak. This song has three notable versions: a teaser, the original album version, and the live version that was performed at the award show, MAMA (Mnet Asian Music Awards) 2018. The teaser version is the shortest but shows the clear intention of Koreanness in several different ways. First, it incorporated the sounds of two Korean traditional percussion instruments, kkwaenggwari and jing, and rhythms using virtual Korean instruments created by Seoul National University. Although it is performed with virtual instruments, it creates a mood that evokes a distinctive Korean (or Oriental) sound. The melodies played by these instruments also emphasize Korean traditional scales, while the music videos show varieties of Korean aesthetics. IDOL's Koreanness is further strengthened through various images of the music video shown along with the music. In the music video

version of “IDOL,” several different devices were used to visualize Korean tradition as the central concept of the song. The computer-generated image of traditional hip-and-gable roof (paljak-jibung), a running tiger, ink-and-wash paintings, and fashion inspired by Korean traditional clothing, hanbok, all indicate the song’s allusion to the elements of Korean tradition.



Figure 5.1. "IDOL" by BTS

The album version of IDOL, unlike the teaser version, does not display Korean-ness explicitly. Korean traditional instrument that appeared on the teaser version has been replaced by electronic instruments, making the rhythm of the music sound closer to gqom, the African house music that the arrangement of the song originally intended, rather than the traditional Korean music. However, even in the album version that emphasized this exotic feeling, the Korean aesthetic did not disappear completely. The lyrics of this song contain a series of verses that are meaningful only to Koreans or those who can understand Korean traditional culture. For example, the use of ad-libs called “Eolssu,” “jihwaja jota,” and “deonggideok kungdeoreoreo” in the lyrics, was derived from the Korean traditional music genre, pansori. This element is called "Chuimsae" in the Korean traditional vocal music genre, pansori, and is performed by a drummer called Kosu, not a singer. Although it is not considered complete music by itself, it still plays an essential role

in Pansori performance. The use of chuimsae in IDOL is brief yet effective because it is easily recognized by both Korean audiences who are familiar with pansori and the general public who does not understand the genre deeply. In this context, IDOL reminds of another pioneering experiment of K-pop in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Seo Tai-ji and Boys' "Hayeoga." By comparing the music characteristics of two artists representing each generation and the similarities in performance and musical characteristics of the two songs, which are considered one of the most unique songs in their careers, I examine the evolution of the use of Korean traditional music, emphasizing why BTS' exploration of Korean-ness is a meaningful attempt in the current state of K-pop.

Hayeoga is an iconic hit song of K-pop by Seo Tae-ji and Boys, one of K-pop's most famous groups. In terms of the musical genre and the impact in the industry, many consider Seo Taiji and Boys as the progenitors of modern K-pop (Howard, 2002; Lie, 2014). While "Hayeoga," a follow-up single after the success of "I Know," was shocking for its disconcerting hybrid arrangement, it's not necessarily a gugak crossover. To young musical genius Seo Taiji, who forged his musicality based on rock and absorbed a variety of genres including hip-hop and techno, gugak probably seemed to be an interesting element for his musical experiment while claiming his cultural identity. "Hayeoga" is a milestone of K-pop that blends his imaginative artistry with the sound of gugak. The insertion of taepyeongso, played by *samulnori* musician Kim Deok-su in the middle of the song, portrays the grief of breakup in the distinct Korean sentiments of han, which created one of the most ambitious eight measures in the history of modern K-pop. It was reflected in the performance on stage too. In their performance version of the song Seo Taiji and Boys' members and dancers Lee Juno and Yang Hyun-suk, who were once underground b-boys before they were recruited by Seo to form a trio, would add Korean

folk-dance style dance moves to the choreography based on hip-hop, remarkably rendering the Koreanness of the song. Gugak and Korean sensibilities in “Hayeoga,” apart from the musical components, alluded most impressively to the pentatonic chorus and overall rhythms. Given that they are pop stars supported by avid teenagers, the music attempt of Seo Taiji using Korean traditional music was an unprecedented experiment.

“IDOL” is strikingly similar to “Hayeoga” in a number of ways. If “Hayeoga” is the ultimate crossover between thrash metal, reggae-style rap and fashion, rhythms, and the elements of pungmul, Korean percussion tradition, “IDOL” intermixes *gqom*, a house genre originated in South Africa, with rhythms inspired by hip-hop, house music, and gugak. The incorporation of hip-hop elements and juxtaposition of genres are some of the apparent resemblances. Their performances are even more similar. In fact, “Hayeoga” was more expressly Korean on live stages than the music video. At “’93 Last Festival” in 1993, Seo Taiji and Boys performed the song with a band of pungmul percussion players and Jang Sa-ik’s taepyeongso performance. In terms of representing Koreanness, the most exquisite performance of “IDOL” was at the 2018 Melon Music Awards in December 2018.<sup>68</sup> More than making up for the absence in the album version, BTS blended gugak rhythms and dancing with the chorus of “IDOL” for nearly three minutes. Once the performance started, j-hope, one of the group’s leading dancers, began his intense modern dancing next to a drum dancing called *samgomu*, considered one of the most beautiful repertoires among Korean traditional music performances. It then continued to a fan dance, *buchaechoom*, by Jimin, followed by Jung Kook’s dynamic mask dance, *talchum*, as the grand finale of solo performances. And then the mask worn by Jung Kook turned into a huge

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<sup>68</sup> BTS. BTS - IDOL (at MMA 2018). BangtanTV. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayGl-igrwy8>

mask that filled the stage, which commenced a round of exciting lion dancing, *Bukcheong sajanoreum*, and pungmul drumming before returning to BTS' main performance.



Figure 5.2. BTS' J-hope performing Korean traditional style dance

Although the idea of combining rap and gugak is similar, there is a noticeable difference in context between Seo Taiji's 'Hayeoga' and BTS's 'IDOL.' The most obvious one is the nature of the audience watching the performance. The pungmul and taepyeongso performances of "Hayeoga" is directed at their domestic fans in Korea because the piece was written in the era before K-pop's globalization. "IDOL" and BTS' Melon Music Awards performance is also for their Korean audience. However, in the age of YouTube and other activities on social media, where the world shares content simultaneously, BTS was well aware that their music and performances are concurrently enjoyed by their global fans all over the world. The crossover with gugak and performances and costumes filled with Korean aesthetics both inspire cultural pride from Koreans and intend to flaunt their identity as a Korean group to their global fans. Another reason Koreanness of "IDOL" is considered an extraordinary attempt is related to the timing this music was released. Following their consecutive winning of the Billboard Music Awards' Top Social Artist award in 2017-18, they have become hottest artists on the social

media world. Moreover, they topped the Billboard 200 for the first time as an Asian pop artist with LOVE YOURSELF 轉 'Tear,' followed by two more albums to top the chart, reaffirming their mainstream popularity in the U.S. market. During this period, American mainstream media began to release a series of reviews and interviews, and their world tour tickets were sold out in minutes. "IDOL" was released at the apex of such popularity and attention. It's not just a search for identity to localize western music in Korea; it's a "provocation," fully aware of the global audience. For aesthetic, or more importantly, strategic reasons, the K-pop industry has purposely avoided Koreanness. Their releasing something so Korean is undoubtedly an expression of their confidence as a leading K-pop group.

"IDOL" is not a crossover between pop and gugak, nor does it intend such an outcome. All they did was to place conspicuous elements of Koreanness within and outside of their music. But this attempt is still significant because it is the music of the K-pop idol group BTS. For K-pop, which has enhanced its competitiveness in the global market with only contemporary and cosmopolitan music and images, Korean image and traditional culture have been largely avoided. However, "IDOL" shows that Korean traditional music and the modern K-pop sound can be interchangeable through proper fusion with contemporary music without revealing the Koreanness explicitly. And this can be considered as a new model and possibility in K-pop's existing strategy of entering the global market by removing the nationality and locality.

#### 5.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I discussed some implications of BTS' success in the future of K-pop. As Lie pointed out, K-pop established a modern industry called K-pop through the process of Cultural Amnesia (Lie, 2014), which allowed it to emerge as a new powerhouse in the global era. Also, as Howard (1999) and Fuhr (2016) pointed out, K-pop was often rootless, putting forward a

strategy of hybrid pop music that eliminated elements of time, space, and nationality, which was the essential nature of K-pop as transnational music. However, the success of BTS presents a somewhat contradictory strategy. BTS, as Koreans, does not hide their identity, emphasizes their true narratives instead of customized strategies in the global market. Their attitude is derived from hip-hop, which distinguishes them from the essence of K-pop that has been rampant. At the same time, they became the most successful band in K-pop history, becoming the first mainstream artist in the U.S. market. The success of BTS shows that the way K-pop conquers the world market does not necessarily have to be a localization dependent on sophisticated strategies and systems. This suggests that K-pop can evolve in a new way beyond rootless music, forgetful music of tradition, and mixed music of local and national origin.

This chapter's discussion on BTS, ultimately, leads once again to the questions raised in the introduction concerning K-pop's modernity and evolution. Throughout the history of Korean popular music, there were various attempts to articulate K-pop's modernity. This impulse sometimes expressed itself in innovative sound and format (e.g. dance groups with spectacular performances), and other times in marketing and publicity (e.g. the localization strategy targeting different national markets). Through sophisticated "cultural technology," the K-pop industry systemized and modularized its modernity. If BTS is at the cutting edge of K-pop today, it is also the heir to this history of strategic development. Their unprecedented success reminds us that K-pop must explore new models even as it builds on its past. As BTS pursues K-pop's core value of cosmopolitan universality, they also actualize a specifically Korean narrative. They combine K-pop's pursuit of Western and transnational modernity, the long held aspiration of Korean pop music, but they combine this with the narrative, language, and aesthetics that reveal the locality of Korean popular music. Their success shows more clearly than ever before that the



particularity of Korean popular music can find universal resonance, and that multiple paths and various forms of evolution are possible in the Korean popular music's pursuit of modernity.

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