

What Is the K in K-pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity

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In the early 2010's, the expansion of South Korean popular culture around the world is led by popular music, usually known as K-pop. In this paper I seek to answer two questions. First, what are the sources of its success beyond the South Korean national border? Secondly, what does it say about contemporary South Korean society and culture?

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I. Introduction

The phenomenal success of the Korean Wave has generated collective celebration in South Korea.¹ In the early 2010s, the national self-

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1. The Korean Wave is the literal translation of the term which originated in China (韩流; Hánliú). The first character refers to "Korea" and the second usually evokes "flow" or "current," signifying "style." The same Chinese characters

congratulation is especially manifest for the popularity of South Korean popular music (K-pop), which has spread from neighboring Asian countries, such as Japan and Taiwan, to farther ashore in Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East.² The K-pop World Festival in December 2011 attracted wannabe K-pop singers from sixteen different countries and confirmed its global appeal to South Koreans (Choe and Russell, 2012). K-pop news generate media headlines. The South Korean government, intent on enhancing its soft power along with its export prowess, has actively promoted K-pop. Many younger South Koreans are eager to embrace the global success of K-pop, which somehow proves the creativity and coolness of South Koreans, hitherto known for producing cars and cell phones rather than engrossing dramas and popular songs: diligence and intelligence rather than beauty and style. K-pop in particular and the Korean Wave in general raise a wide range of questions, but I focus on two. What are the sources of K-pop's recent commercial success? What does it say about South Korean society and culture?

II. Cultures of Choson Korea

Any effort to make sense of culture is fraught with difficulties, beginning with the concept of culture. Do we mean the greatest achievements of the elite or the least common denominators of the people?³ The very idea of an integrated culture or a (culturally) unified people is also something of a dubious proposition in most places and times before the advent of the modern nation-state (Lie, 2004). Be that as it may, taking the latter half of the long Choson-dynasty period

yield Hallyu in Korean and Kanryū in Japanese. See Paek (2005).

2. See *inter alia* on K-pop's popularity in France, *Le Monde M Magazine*, February 3, 2012; Cambodia, *The Economist*, February 18, 2012; and Japan, Sakai (2012: 14-23). For a useful overview, see Abe (2012).

3. This contrast is neatly summarized by two late nineteenth-century British writings: Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871).

(1392-1897), we can identify two distinct cultures, albeit with considerable commonality in music.

The elite culture was dominated by Chinese-influenced, Confucian-drenched monarchy and the *yangban* ruling class. The Sinocentric worldview valorized classical Chinese civilization, conveniently summarized in this period as being Confucian, with its stress on respecting the elders and ancestors, hierarchy and patriarchy, and tradition and order. In contrast, in spite of its regional variations, the culture of the masses or the peasantry tended to be much more egalitarian and disorderly. To put it in a shorthand form, then, the Confucian rituals of the elite — all quiet and orderly — contrasted with the shamanistic rites of the masses — emotional and expressive. In terms of music, the courtly performances of Chinese-derived instruments stood in sharp contrast to the popular performances of folk tunes and drums. The former seemed to be all about harmony and order; the latter appeared to exemplify energy and chaos. To invoke the European categories of contrast: Apollonian vs. Dionysian. The ideal-typical contrast exaggerates the distance between the two musical cultures. Both traditions were broadly pentatonic, in line with much of Asia. Furthermore, the Confucianization of the Korean peninsula during the long dynastic rule integrated the soundscape (Deuchler, 1992). At times, the influence flowed upward: *pansori* — recitation accompanied by a drum — which began as a popular genre became increasingly prestigious and embraced by the Confucian elite (Pihl, 1994).

In practice, by the beginning of the twentieth century, there was something of a common musical culture in the Korean peninsula. Its musical register was pentatonic, itself a regional marker across East Asia. The dominant singing style stressed emotive wails and melismatic expressions. While dancing, both in its courtly and country articulations, existed, it was placed explicitly outside the boundary of music. Singers by and large stood still during their vocal performances. The body was Confucian: not only preserving the parental gift but also avoiding any display of the flesh. The singer's still and enveloped body expressed serious, spiritual message in the form of moralizing lyrics, such as parental and familial love. The sensibility of

Korean music, then, was in harmony with the cultural sensibility of Confucian Korea.

III. The Advent of the Modern

In one reading of post-traditional, post-Choson-dynasty Korea, the incursion of the modern — primarily through Japan before the Liberation and the United States after 1945 — signaled a relentless retrenchment of the traditional. In the realm of music, the simple reading captures the dominant trend: traditional music gave way to Japanese and Western genres. The popular that had been equivalent to the folk receded as the new “popular music,” itself more a product of the culture industry rather than an emergent expression of the people, reverberated throughout the peninsula.

If the 1876 Treaty of Kangwha “opened” the “Hermit Kingdom” to Western influences, then the brute reality of power politics meant the predominance of Japan until the end of the colonial period. It is largely through Japanese channels that urban Koreans became attuned to Western musical forms, from “classical” music to “popular” genres such as ballads and *chanson*.⁴ It is not that Western music was merely emulated in Japan or Korea. As I elaborate below, the pentatonic scale continued to dominate — in contradistinction to the diatonic of Western popular music — and lyrics were translated, adapted, and created to fit local sensibilities. It is possible to argue that Japanese *enka* or Korean *trot* [t’ŭrot’ŭ] emerged as a fused and musical genre, somewhat as African and European music forms generated blues and bluegrass, jazz and country in the United States (Van Der Merwe, 1989). Given the Japanese rule over Korea — including cultural production and musical education — the Japanese influence over Korean musical sensibilities was profound.

4. Japan had actively attuned itself to Western sounds from the mid nineteenth century, colonizing the soundscape of the educated population by the early twentieth century. See the suggestive book by Nakamura (1987).

The period of Japanese dominance gave way to the U.S. dominance in South Korea after Liberation. The U.S. occupation and its aftermath brought popular American music: not only jazz and blues but also pop and rock via the U.S. Armed Forces radio and television, U.S. military camptown bars and dance halls, and movie theaters that largely showcased Hollywood films. The era of American cultural dominance — the 1950s and 1960s — affected an ever larger population. Rapid and compressed urbanization brought South Koreans in close proximity to imported cultural products, which in turn disseminated by means of modern communication technologies: radio, movies, and television.

Nonetheless, if we consider the musical consumption of South Korea in the 1970s — a time of rapid economic growth, authoritarian politics, and considerable social dislocation — it would falsify the simple claim of U.S. popular-cultural dominance. Traditional, folk songs remained popular, especially in the countryside. In urban areas, in spite of the elite embrace of Western “classical” music, the prevalent popular music was “trot,” a Korean variant of Japanese *enka*.⁵ Indeed, South Korean popular music in the immediate post-Liberation decades was deeply influenced by contemporary Japanese popular music, even as the South Korean government banned Japanese cultural products.⁶ It is not surprising, however, that the dictatorial President

5. In spite of the debate over the Korean origins of Japanese *enka*, it is important to stress that it was a genre borne of Western musical form and Japanese soundscape. That there were numerous ethnic Korean singers and composers, during and after the colonial period, should not avert our gaze from the cultural hegemony that Japan exercised in the first half of the twentieth century (Lie, 2001: Ch. 3).

6. The widespread popularity of Japanese popular music, especially in urban areas, was obvious yet occluded, and certainly without extensive documentation. The proximity of the two countries' soundscapes had much to do with it — not to mention the legacy of Japanese colonial rule and influence — but also that Japan, for better or worse, provided something new and attractive. Chŏn (2008: 164-165) reports that Ishida Ayumi's “Blue Light Yokohama” (1969) was extremely popular in South Korea in the 1970s. In any case, the ubiquity of Zainichi (Korean-Japanese) singers, whether *enka* — such as Miyako Harumi — or pop — such as Saijō Hideki — vitiated any instinctive anti-Japanese

Park, who grew up under Japanese rule, embraced “trot” and *enka*. The regime banned Yi Mi-ja’s wildly popular song, “Tongbaek Agassi” (1964), in 1965 for its malign Japanese influence, which was done in part to appease the popular resistance to the Normalization Treaty with Japan. Hypocritical though it may have been, it was apparently one of his favorite songs that he requested to be sung in the privacy of Blue House, the South Korean presidential mansion.⁷ Enka or trot performance usually employed ostensibly Western presentation — lyrical matters of love and longing, for example, that recalled blues and with an orchestral accompaniment — but singers belted out tunes employing the pentatonic scale. That is, the register of Korean and Japanese musical sensibility remained stubbornly rooted in traditional musical meters.⁸ Performers usually stood still, dressed in traditional ethnic garb or conservative “western” outfit and projecting an utterly respectable appearance. The contrast to the gyrating Elvis or the ruffian Rolling Stones could not have been more apparent.

Cho Yong-pil is a consensus superstar of South Korean popular music in the 1970s and 1980s. Although he dabbled in several musical styles, including his early infatuation with rock music, his initial popularity owed to “trot” that he sang in traditional, *pansori* style. Suggestively, he claims to have mimicked the traditional training of *pansori* singers, which entailed destroying one’s vocal chords by singing loudly and repeatedly in the woods (See Cho, 1984). Suggesting the persistent proximity of Japanese and Korean cultures, some of his songs became very popular in Japan in the 1970s — something of a harbinger of the Korean Wave. Yet his music was almost inevitably in the pentatonic scale, he sang without moving, employed melismatic

sentiments in embracing “Japanese” music.

7. Even as a representative national singer, Yi had 27 of her songs banned by the government (Chōn, 2008: 130-132). Given that she recorded over 2,000 songs, the censors might deem 27 to be a very small number.
8. Koizumi Fumio, in a string of influential works, showed that Japanese pop music of the 1970s and 1980s remained “Japanese” musically, principally showing that they employed the pentatonic scale. In spite of the superficial Western dressing, he argued for the persistence of the traditional. See e.g. Koizumi (1984).

and *pansori* singing techniques, and relied on his vocal skills, rather than on his looks, to achieve stardom. Although he attempted many distinct musical genres, his musical life personified the South Korean popular music of the time, usually dubbed *kayo*.⁹

Not surprisingly, the ambit of Cho's appeal remained restricted to the Korean and Japanese cultural spheres of influence, only extending haphazardly to Taiwan and other pockets of Japanophilia. It would be difficult indeed to imagine Cho's rapturous reception in 1970s New York or Paris, Jakarta or Lima. Drenched in national markers — though in fact shared by Japanese and others — Cho's music signified Korean-ness, which rendered it alien to those uninitiated to the national culture and the dominant musical style. To be sure, national boundaries were well-policed. Not only did many governments practice an aggressive policy of cultural nationalism but tariffs and other forms of import restrictions kept all but a handful of musical forms from being almost exclusively nationalist. The principal exception was classical music and musicians. Western "classical" music had long superseded traditional Confucian or Korean court music among the elite, percolating downward in the status hierarchy such that piano instruction became de rigeur among socially aspiring households. Not surprisingly, some of the earliest ethnic Korean successes in the world of music came from Western classical music composers and performers, such as Isang Yun and Kyung Wha Chung. American pop music, especially rock but also jazz, folk, and other genres, was a distinct presence in many countries, including the peripheral status it enjoyed in South Korea. Yet, by and large, the nationalist, involute, and traditional state of South Korean popular music would not have differentiated it from any number of countries in the 1970s.

9. This rendition of popular music featured at least two genres: the more traditional sounding "trot" and the more modern sounding "pop" in South Korea as in Japan. The curious unity was that both forms were musically in pentatonic scale.

IV. The Drift toward the Global

A critical transformation was a shift in scale: from the traditional pentatonic to the Western — and by now global — diatonic. To be sure, it is not that music composed in pentatonic scale cannot become popular — consider only the *Japonisme* of some of Debussy's compositions — but a sure way to alienate an audience is to play music in alien registers and scales.¹⁰ New and alien music may be received as being tantamount to noise, an object of visceral dislike. Hence, just as South Koreans looking for something “new” or just good in popular music in the 1970s embraced someone like the Japanese folk singer Itsuwa Mayumi, they were slower to accept the alien sound of Western rock music.¹¹ There was, in short, a chasm between Cho and Elvis Presley or the Beatles, much less Pink Floyd or Led Zeppelin: the musical distance between South Korea and the United States (and the so-called West) remained significant. Nonetheless, the distance was to narrow rapidly in the ensuing two or three decades.

10. As with Debussy's “Oriental” pieces, the diatonic rule has exceptions. “Sukiyaki” (originally “Ue o Muitearukō,” 1961), sung by the Japanese singer Sakamoto Kyū, became popular in Europe in 1962 and a number one hit in the United States in 1963 ([<http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%8A%E3%82%92%E5%90%91%E3%81%84%E3%81%A6%E6%AD%A9%E3%81%93%E3%81%86>], May 27, 2012). Apparently an upbeat melody and a pleasant vocal can overcome musical and cultural barriers. See Dexter (1976: Ch. 18). Satō (2011: 122-126) has devoted a whole book to this topic. Especially noteworthy is his claim that Sakamoto's narrow range and uncertain pitch was overcome by his sense of rhythm and elegance learned in part from Elvis Presley.

11. Needless to say, there were pioneers of American or Western rock music in South Korea in the 1970s and even earlier, primarily playing to American audiences in camptown bars and venues. The cult-like popularity of Itsuwa is interesting precisely because all Japanese musical import was officially banned at the time. Hence, somewhat curiously in hyper-nationalistic South Korea, playing Japanese music became for some an expression of their anti-government and anti-authoritarian politics. It is also the case that the music, for various reasons, appealed to the young. On one outing in 1974, I heard Itsuwa's song “Koibitoyo” played repeatedly in two different coffee shops. Prone to earworms, when I mentioned that the song was played too often, the response at each location was that “it is such a great song.”

As I suggested, the pervasive U.S. cultural influence in the post-Liberation period saturated South Korean soundscape with American and Western music, with its almost inevitable deployment of the diatonic scale. Certainly, formal musical education almost always imparted Western theories, prized above all as the Western “classical” tradition. Hence, many South Koreans had at least passing familiarities with Western sounds, including most orchestral instruments. Few South Koreans by the 1970s had never heard a piece of Western music; Western musical instruments, from trumpet to timpani, were also increasingly common. There were certainly fans of Western popular music as well as native rendition of “western” pop, such as Shin Joonghyon (Sin Chung-hyon; also known as Jackie Shin), Kim Chu-ja, Kim Chong-mi, the Pearl Sisters, and many others. The music appealed to the younger generation, which could only stealthily listen to Japanese pop music. Yet the Park regime also resisted American-style pop music, speculating fantastically that Kim Chu-ja’s gesticulations may have been covert messages to North Korea.¹² More cogently, the authoritarian government worried about the corrupting effects of “American” music in South Korea — as much as the North Korean government has resisted it during the post-Liberation period — for rock, after all, was associated with sex, drug, and political deviance. Shin, for example, was embroiled in a marijuana scandal in 1975 and, along with his associates such as Kim Chu-ja and Kim Chong-mi, suspected of anti-government sentiments. As with virtually everything deemed even remotely anti-government and pro-communist, many of their songs were banned.¹³

The very performance of self-consciously Western musical sensibilities distinguished some South Koreans from others stubbornly dwelling in the traditional sound world. A South Korean who

12. I first heard this claim in the mid-1970s, signaling at once the equation of rock-pop as anti-authoritarian and the deviance of combining singing and dancing (see Kang, 2012: 86).

13. The proximate reason was Shin’s refusal to compose a song in honor of President Park in 1972. See Russell (2008: 140-142). More generally on the correlation between rock-pop music and political resistance or radicalism, see Frith (1981).

expressed enthusiasm for Led Zeppelin, no less than another waxing ecstatic about Beethoven, would have exemplified elitism and even snobbery. In spite of stubborn support among small segments, rock and pop became disarticulated from the mainstream of student and anti-government movements in South Korea. The increasing intertwinement of anti-government sentiments and people's [*minjung*] movements generated its own popular musical genres, especially folk, not unlike that of Bob Dylan or Joan Baez, in the guise of Kim Min-gi and others. Even more than the mainstream "pop" music, the leftist "popular" music was inscribed with moral seriousness and political engagement. The right and the left converged in the message of seriousness, shackling popular music to the tether of the serious and the respectable, thereby pushing it toward the margins.

In the 1970s, the most politically and culturally oppressive decade in post-Liberation South Korea, the Park regime banned not only ostensibly "conservative" music, such as trot, for Japanese influences but also "progressive" music, such as rock, for its association with corruption and decadence. Musically-staid folk songs, in turn, often aired anti-government messages, and were often banned as well. The authoritarian regime relied not only on anti-communism but also nationalism and Confucianism to justify its culturally restrictive policy. The Confucian ideology restricted "loud" or "political" music and encouraged "conservative" dresses and gesticulations. Given the impoverished repertoire, it is not surprising that people sought refuge in banned Japanese and Korean music or sought American and Western alternatives.

As a pop-music lyric might have it, time changes everything. South Korean enrichment brought in its wake paraphernalia of popular entertainment. Most crucial was television, which began broadcast in 1961, and became a household necessity by the 1980s. A very popular genre was musical variety shows, usually featuring "popular songs" (*kayo*), which was an adaptation of a popular U.S. and Japanese television genre. Even more spectacular was the widespread popularity of *noraebang*, which debuted in 1991. As places to engage in *karaoke* singing — *karaoke* machine was invented in 1967 in Japan and became

popular there in the course of the 1970s — it became one of the most popular forms of entertainment for the young and the old (Ugaya, 2008: 24, 77). Along with the dissemination of portable listening devices, especially the appearance of Sony Walkman in the 1970s, technological transformation facilitated reproduction and production of popular music. Listening and singing popular music became a national pastime, albeit replete with generational and other divides in taste. Out of the national musicfest arose a new, post-*kayo* genre that was distinctly contemporary and western in sensibility and sound.

Change is inevitably quantitative and gradual but often expresses itself as a qualitative jump. For the purposes of making sense of K-pop, that quantum leap was the emergence of SeoTaiji and the Boys in 1992. It was one of the first groups to incorporate rap music and hip-hop sensibilities to South Korean popular music. Needless to say, they had jettisoned the traditional pentatonic in favor of the contemporary diatonic. No longer did we hear the soul-screaming wails of melismatic singing but the percussive and syllabic singing signaling the urban cool. What made their music innovative was that it did *not* sound Korean; as some critics remarked at the time, it sounded strange. To temper the claim of their originality and revolutionary impact, I should mention the impact not only of a generation of American popular music, disseminated by music videos since the 1980s, but also of J-pop, a distinct Japanese popular music genre that became dominant in the 1980s.¹⁴

Seo's group was important not only in pioneering a new musical soundscape that became almost invariably "Western" pop music but also in introducing dance as a critical element of their performance. To be sure, there were others, such as Kim Chu-ja or Kim Chong-mi in the 1970s, as well as Kim Wan-son or Sobangcha in the late 1980s who had sought to incorporate dancing in performance.¹⁵ Yet in

14. The emergence of J-pop around 1988 coincided with the end of an era (the end of Shōwa or the reign of Emperor Hirohito in 1989). Particularly noteworthy is that J-pop did not sound Japanese, at least in terms of received popular music. See Ugaya (2005: 160-167); and Kikuchi (2008: 274-277). For J-pop's impact in South Korea, see Chōn (2012: 77-83).

bringing together the latest American trends in sound and movement, SeoTaiji and the Boys announced themselves as something new in South Korean popular music. The MTV revolution — post-Michael Jackson innovations in marrying singing and dancing in popular music — and the hip-hop turn coalesced in SeoTaiji and the Boys. Critical resistance was predictable; what was less predictable was the embrace by South Korean youths.¹⁶

Another interesting dimension is Seo and his colleagues' seeming independence from politics. Popular music in advanced industrial societies tends to be disengaged from overt politics, despite numerous exceptions and objections. In South Korea, as we have seen, the realm of popular music was hardly innocent of politics: the traditional, rightwing association of "trot" — though simultaneously incurring the nationalist wrath of being Japanese — and the leftwing embrace of folk songs and other "people's music," including traditional peasant music. This is of course not surprisingly in an authoritarian polity with a great deal of cultural surveillance. The post-Seoul Olympics, democratic South Korea by the early 1990s had begun to shed the overt politicization of everyday life, including popular music. Although SeoTaiji and the Boys is far from the only act to embody its autonomy from the entangled politics of the 1980s and before, they struck a resonant political chord for the increasingly affluent youths liberated from the demands of anti-government politics.

15. Influenced by Japanese teen-idol groups, Sobangcha incorporated dance as part of their bright, syrupy performances and was especially popular in the late 1980s. See ([<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErewtVOZn6M&feature=related>], May 29, 2012). Sobangcha was inspired in part by the popular Japanese group Shōjotai as well as earlier Japanese "idol" singers and groups (Chōn, 2012: 136-137).

16. See SeoTaiji and the Boys' virtual national debut in the TV station MBC in 1992: ([<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjGacuy0eTU>]). Noteworthy are the critical commentaries after the performance in which the "experts" chide Seo and his colleagues' music and movement, precisely the two points which were distinct from the received norm.

V. The Rise of K-pop

Until the mid-1990s, the very idea of exporting South Korean popular music would have struck most South Koreans as bizarre. Except for occasional trot singers with warm receptions in Japan and Taiwan, and perhaps explicitly Americanized performers such as Patti Kim or classical musicians, the South Korean music industry was resolutely domestic in orientation and consumption.¹⁷ It is, in retrospect, precisely around this period that there were murmurs of the Korean Wave in Chinese-language areas: Taiwan, Hong Kong, and even mainland China. The very concept of *Hallyu*, which had hitherto referred to the wind hailing from the Korean peninsula, spread rapidly in East Asia, signaling the coming of South Korean popular culture.¹⁸

The Korean Wave, at least in its initial articulation, seemed to be all about South Korean soap opera. Especially critical — even beyond its circulation in the Chinese-language spheres — was the phenomenal popularity of the 2002 KBS drama series *Winter Sonata*, which became an overnight sensation in Japan and heralded for many the beginning of the Korean Wave, coming as it did on the heels of the joint hosting between Japan and South Korea of the 2002 World Cup. In spite of the popularity of South Korean television dramas that entrenched the idea of the Korean Wave, the initial referent included South Korean music

17. If we exclude the colonial period — when many ethnic Korean performers and musicians worked, often successfully, in Japan — the 1960s and 1970s featured the initial “Korean wave,” with trot singers such as Yi Mi-ja and Cho Yong-pil, as well as Patti Kim, achieving modest success. At the high tide of monoethnic ideology, many ethnic Korean (Zainichi) performers achieved great popular success in both *enka* and pop, the two most popular genres at the time, see in general Lie (2001: Ch. 3). More curiously, the popular folk group, the Folk Crusaders, released “Imujingawa” (*Imjingang*) in 1968, a North Korean song composed in 1957. It achieved popular success but was rescinded after the North Korean organization in Japan (Sōren) objected. See Chōn (2008: 90-94).

18. The origin of this concept is undoubtedly up for a lengthy and fruitless debate. Surely it did not take a stroke of genius to come up with a readily available term. See in any case Robert K. Merton on the usually multiple origins of scientific discovery which should apply to neologisms of this sort.

groups, such as H.O.T. (1996-2001) and Baby V.O.X. (1997-2006).¹⁹ By the late 2000s, however, the driving force of the Korean Wave — at times dubbed the Korean Wave 2.0 — seemed to have shifted to the rapid ascent of K-pop.

How should we explain the seemingly sudden rise of K-pop in the early twenty-first century? The myth of the market — in this case, a more or less spontaneous emergence of a supply of desirable commodities called South Korean popular music — is far from adequate to make sense of it. Rather, we need to consider several contexts and contingencies that render K-pop inextricably intertwined with the very fabric of South Korean economy, society, and culture. I have already signaled the arrival of South Korean popular music to the prevailing, America-led norm by the early 1990s. Yet Japan, for example, surely had a larger pool of talented and dedicated popular music performers, but in spite of the interest in J-pop, Japanese performers never garnered overseas success that K-pop stars had achieved by the 2010s.

South Korean economic growth self-consciously stressed the centrality of export orientation since the late 1960s (Lie, 1998: Ch. 3). Beyond being something of a South Korean business reflex to seek export, the South Korean music industry faced a series of dire straits by the late 1990s. The 1997 IMF crisis led to a massive downturn in South Korean consumption, which was grossly exacerbated by the introduction of digitized music and largely unprotected internet downloads (mp3 players were introduced in 1996). CD sales declined propitiously. More strikingly, the South Korean domestic market was inherently limited. If we employ figures from the year 2000, the total South Korean popular music industry generated US\$ 300 million in comparison to US\$ 14 billion for the United States and US\$ 6.4 billion for Japan (US\$ 244 million for Taiwan, US\$ 108 million for Hong Kong, and US\$ 78 million for PRC). In brief, all viable roads for the

19. It is worth remarking that, in spite of SM Entertainment's effort to export performers and their music, their overseas success was modest at best. For the "underground" and marginal status of South Korean popular music in Japan in the 1990s, see Sakai (2011: 18-21).

industry pointed to cultivating the export market.

Needless to say, opportunity needs to be seized and two transformations were critical. First, the post-Cold war globalization vitiated the hitherto high walls of cultural protectionism in East Asia and elsewhere (see, *faute de mieux*, Hopper, 2007: Ch. 5). It was, after all, only in 2002 that South Korea lifted ban on all restrictions to Japanese cultural imports. Although Japanese or Taiwanese walls of protection against South Korean cultural products were not as robust during the Cold War, there is no question that they weakened considerably in the 1990s and 2000s. In any case, all these countries had long accepted the very category of “pop music,” its standard format of three or four minute songs of love and other adolescent themes. Consider only the increasingly positive Japanese outlook on South Korea and Koreans, which was a sine qua non for the blockbuster success of *Winter Sonata*. South Korea was able to take advantage of cultural globalization in part because its large and far-flung diasporic population provided a ready source of information and expertise, whether in the form of apprising distinct national trends in popular music or in the guise of singers, dancers, and composers (Sakai, 2012: 38-39).

Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, technological transformations played a significant role in facilitating the Korean Wave. Here the two landmarks are the introduction of digital music in the form of mp3 players in 1996 and the appearance of Youtube in 2005. In that short span of time, recorded music became not only unmoored from its physical manifestation as LPs or CDs to be instantaneously downloaded around the world but it also became part and parcel of visual culture. Even if music is said to be a universal language, the resistance to a foreign-language lyric could be overcome easier with beauty standards and dance routines of the prevailing global norm. MTV of course had appeared as early as 1981, but it nonetheless remained tethered to the music industry and its networks and practices. What digitized music and music video, which in turn could be disseminated with relatively low cost, did was to generate a condition of possibility of reaching a mass audience outside of national borders without a massive investment (Austerlitz, 2007; Kot, 2009).

These transformations manifested themselves in the form of music entrepreneurs — those who trained the inchoate talent pool and linked them to find new audiences via aggressive marketing and social-media technology — who surfed the coming wave or perhaps helped generate the wave in the first place. Perhaps the dominant K-pop agency is SM Entertainment, founded by Lee Soo-man. Lee studied in the 1970s at the prestigious Seoul National University and became attracted to counter-cultural folk music and anti-government activities. Spending time in southern California as a graduate student in the 1980s, Lee became exposed to the MTV revolution and returned to South Korea. Although SM Entertainment’s timeline suggests “H.O.T. China concert in February 2000” as when “the Korean Wave starts,” it had earlier explored and exploited the lucrative Japanese market. Seeking to occlude her Korean ancestry, SM Entertainment invested heavily in promoting BoA, whose “Listen to My Heart” had reached the No.1 spot in the Japanese pop charts by 2002. Even more spectacularly, TōhōShinki (Dong Bang Shin Gi/DBSK/TVXQ/東方神起), debuting in 2003 but focusing almost exclusively in Japan by 2005, became a sensation in Japan (Onoda, 2011: 67-70). SM Entertainment consciously sought to promote them as quasi-local performers: both BoA and TōhōShinki sang in Japanese and acted like J-pop acts. To be sure, the Japanese focus is not a necessary condition. BIGBANG (2006-) and MBLAQ (2009-), among others, have a universalistic orientation that stresses neither Japanese nor Korean nor any national orientation. Others under the management of JYP Entertainment, such as Rain (2002-) and Wonder Girls (2007-), have sought to cultivate the U.S. market.

VI. Why K-pop?

A. The Question Remains: Why K-pop?

I have already discussed the heightening regional demand — East Asia in particular and Asia in general — for “modern” popular

music. Not only had there been a global convergence of pop-culture norms, exemplified most clearly in lyrics — the idea of romantic love, for example — but also in the very nature of acceptable and accessible musical performance — the percussive beats, the diatonic scale, syllabic singing, the fusion of voice and dance etc. — across East Asia. Precisely at time when enrichment allowed greater demands of the youth market for cultural consumption, national barriers were lowered. Yet why not demand the global standards of American pop music?

The short answer is that a substantial segment of the East Asian youth population did look to American and European performers, just as much as many of them remained loyal to the more local, national traditions of popular music. What K-pop did was to fill a niche that was relatively open for clean, well-crafted performers. It is also possible that physical resemblance — something like racial isomorphism — may have accentuated the appeal of K-pop to other East Asians but it is more likely that they filled the gap left vacant by the urbanized and sexualized American performers — celebrating sex and violence, replete with tattoos — and the staid, tried popular music of local, national performers — in effect, their parents' music. K-pop exemplifies middle-class, urban and suburban values that seek to be acceptable at once to college-aspiring youths and their parents: a world that suggests nothing of inner-city poverty and violence, corporal or sexual radicalism, or social deviance and cultural alienation. K-pop in this sense satisfied the emergent regional taste and sensibility, though it would be remiss to stress the region as its appeal could easily extend beyond it. The oft-repeated claims about K-pop singers' politeness — their clean-cut features as well as their genteel demeanors — is something of a nearly universal appeal, whether to Muslim Indonesians or Catholic Peruvians.

K-pop filled the niche in part because others did not do so. J-pop would have been a likely candidate but the combination of the large domestic market and the involute music industry made it a largely a domestic affair with only a cult following elsewhere. In the heydays of J-pop in the 1980s and 1990s, there were little incentives — and considerable risks — for music executive to seek international expansion.

Some of the conditions I have stressed — cultural globalization and technological transformations — were not ripe. Whereas the emerging Asian markets were small and therefore unprofitable — the South Korean market was virtually closed, for example — and manifold difficulties of scaling the cultural and economic barriers of the U.S. market remained. At bottom, the large, relatively homogeneous Japanese market provided ample profit (Ugaya, 2005: 174-177).

K-pop fills a large demand for those whetted by U.S.-led pop music — with its fusion of infectious beats and skillful dancing — without its excesses. Here South Korean groups sing pop tunes with simple, earworm-inducing melody, usually on the hegemonic pop-music theme of love. Given the strong inflection of English lyric, it is difficult to decipher from listening just briefly whether the song is in Korean or any other language. The refrain of Girls' Generation's hit "Gee" is, for example, "gee gee gee gee baby baby baby," which poses a very low hurdle for even those challenged in their English comprehension. In general, K-pop performers are, appropriate for the age of music videos, extremely photogenic (often enhanced by plastic surgery and other interventions). They exemplify sort of pop perfectionism: catchy tunes, good singing, attractive bodies, cool clothes, mesmerizing movements, and other attractive attributes in a non-threatening, pleasant package.

It is also worth stressing that as cultural export, K-pop had high production value. In part it stems from a deep talent pool. In spite of the proliferation of popular musical styles and the large supply of would-be singers, South Korea is also notable for the near absence of the independent music scene, which is vibrant, for example, in Japan.²⁰ In a country in which perhaps the most popular form of entertainment is singing (in *noraebang* or *karaoke* rooms), becoming a K-pop star is at the top of the most desired profession for South Korean youths. Given that the independent music scene is limited, many

20. Techno pop, heavy metal, and even punk had entered South Korea by the 1990s, as witnessed by Pipi Band (1995) and No Brain (2000). Yet there is very little of the "live scene" that is ubiquitous in urban Japan or the mythic garage bands that exist in the United States.

talented and trained singers seek K-pop careers in which the success rate at audition is said to be 1 in 2,000. These would-be K-pop stars, in addition, undergo rigorous training for five years, which costs perhaps 200-300 million won (when an average annual income of a new college graduate is 28 million won per annum). Then, only 20-30 out of 1,000 trainees ever appear professionally. The star factory or incubation system is professionally managed with stern discipline that may mean up to 100 hours of practices and lessons, including learning English or Japanese, per week. Agencies, such as SM Entertainment, in turn seek eminent composers, choreographers, designers, and stylists. K-pop is, in short, an explicit export-oriented culture industry, “popular” in the sense that it is “for” but not “by” ordinary people (Sakai, 2011: 46-56, 70-71).

The talent pool extends not only to performers but also to backstage actors. Given South Korea’s penchant for study abroad — the valorization of prestigious, often meaning foreign, diplomas — there is an overpopulation of people trained in music composition, dance choreography, stage design, and many other aspects important to creating a viable popular-music industry. Furthermore, South Korean business practice is export oriented but it also imports and outsources readily, seeking best talent from abroad. South Korea, in addition, is blessed by a sizable diaspora. Lee Soo-man once said in an interview that: “South Korea has best consumed black music in Asia. Just as J-pop was built on rock, we made K-pop based on black music” (Takatsuki, 2011: 101). Given the wide popularity of “black music,” it is not a mere coincidence that Korean Americans who learned hip-hop music and allied dancing techniques in situ in turn brought them directly to South Korea.

The K-pop industry is dominated by several talent agencies, which share not only a global outlook and ambition but a keen business sense. It would be difficult to stress the way in which K-pop is a business in which financial and other business concerns consistently trump musical or artistic considerations. To take one example, consider the proliferation of groups (rather than solo acts). The formation of groups is predicated not only on an economy of scale — it is less

expensive to train a group rather than individuals one by one — but they render back-up singers and dancers otiose (which would cost money to train and hire them). Having many members provide not only an insurance against illnesses and injuries but also enable agencies to use them separately (one member can act in a television drama, for example, for another might be attending a meeting of a fan club). Different members can appeal to different fans. SonyoSidae (SNSD or Girls' Generation), for example, has nine members of varying shape and size, including members proficient in English, Japanese, and Chinese, who in turn take a leading role when performing in non-Korean stages. Group structure is thus dictated in part by cold-blooded business calculations. That it proved to be a successful formula reinforced its format goes without saying.

Qua business, K-pop entrepreneurs replicate South Korean modality of conducting business. This should not be surprising in and of itself but it also undercuts claims that look largely to the talented performers or to the invisible hand of market mechanism. K-pop enthusiasm in Japan has generated a vocal minority — operating largely in the blogosphere — castigating K-pop, as earlier enthusiasm for the Korea-Wave drama inspired an anti-Korean Wave movement. Some of the more sensational claims focus on K-pop business practices, which are said to be improper if not illegal, such as the non-standard margins of profitability of Japanese (or other non-Korean) partners or the dispensation of sexual favors.²¹ Although information is extremely difficult to verify — there is no norm of openness in entertainment-industry contracts — it appears to be the case that South Korean talent agencies often offer extremely attractive deals for local (national) agencies to promote and market K-pop groups. This is, after all,

21. Most of the more or less factual claims can be found in Takatsuki, chapters 1-2. Anti-Korean wave fanatics in Japan go to the extreme of claiming that Japanese men have larger penis than Korean men (presumably on average), see Kitahara (2012: 203). Such a claim underscores the gendered nature of the Korean Wave in Japan in which women tend to favor the Korean Wave and South Korean actors and singers (though more recently supplanted by female South Korean singers).

precisely the practice and strategy that South Korean corporations used to crack the U.S. and other markets when it was beginning its export drive in the 1970s. Be that as it may, it is important to stress that the K-pop industry, despite being a content- rather than technology-led enterprise, seems to share many of the common South Korean practices of doing business. In this regard, just as Samsung or Hyundai do not necessarily make homogenous products applicable uniformly around the world, we may similarly see South Korean talent agencies target various national markets separately. Certainly, national-market differentiation is clear in terms of lyrics (songs released in Korean, English, Japanese etc.) and even group names (SonyoSidae in South Korea, ShōjoJidai in Japan, SNSD and Girls Generation elsewhere, and so on). Indeed, we may very well see attempts by South Korean entrepreneurs to include not only foreign members but also to establish distinct, non-Korean, performers.

Finally, the South Korean state has backed the Korean Wave and K-pop. From its traditional role as a censor, the government has become a promoter of popular culture. Kim Dae-jung, elected as the president of the country in 1997, sought to become a “culture president” and promised to devote one percent of government expenditure on cultural content. Even the conservative Lee Myung-bak, elected in 2007, has sought to promote Brand Korea and enhance South Korea’s soft power. K-pop, to put it hyperbolically, is almost a representative national culture and industry (Bougon, 2002: 2). The domain of government support ranges from favorable financial arrangements to cultural promotion (Sakai, 2012: 79-88).

VII. The “K” in K-pop

The appeal of K-pop to non-Korean audiences — both across Asia and beyond — is in a pattern with South Korean export products, such as Samsung or Hyundai, that have broad appeal precisely because of the combination of reasonable price and dependable quality. It is of course trivially Korean in the sense that the singers and producers are

almost exclusively ethnic Koreans — albeit with a fair sprinkling of émigré and diasporic South Koreans — and the South Korean government and fandom alike take some pride in the Koreanness of K-pop. Yet as a matter of traditional culture, there is almost nothing “Korean” about K-pop. K-pop, however identified as part of Brand (South) Korea, is a globally competitive product without encumbrance of traditional Korea.²²

As I stated at the outset, traditional Korean music was pentatonic, the singing style stressed melismatic and raspy vocalization, and the performer stood still: the stress was on the sound. K-pop is uniformly diatonic, lyrics peppered with English phrases, the singing style is resolutely syllabic of “western” pop, and dance is an integral element of the performance. Chosŏn-period *pansori* singers would recognize Cho Yong-pil’s singing; it is highly unlikely that they could make any sense of Girls’ Generation as fellow musicians. In terms of music, there is very little, if anything, of traditional Korean music.

The radical displacement of traditional values is much clearer in the very popularity of K-pop. In the Korean Confucian worldview, the good life was the gentlemanly life, of which singing would be merely one element in a world that stressed learning. In any case, entertainment and certainly entertainers were devoid of prestige, and not something that would be desirable. Yet, as I suggested, the most popular career choice for young South Koreans — the (South) Korean dream — is to be, to use the unfortunate mixed metaphor, a star in the Korean Wave. All the strivings to be a pop-culture star may be an expression of the new enriched and meritocratic South Korea, but it is surely opposed to the Confucian worldview.

The very embodiment of K-pop is distinct from the traditional Korean body and beauty. What is striking about most K-pop acts is how tall, thin, and unblemished they appear. This is of course a country that has sprouted up rapidly: the average 18 year-old male was 165 cm in 1977, but had shot up to 174 cm by 2007. Furthermore, the

22. Onoda Mamoru (2011: 28-30) argues that K-pop is a form of western popular music for Japanese youths.

standard of beauty had traditionally valorized round, even chubby look. The most popular member of the late 1980s idol group Sobangcha was the “chubby” one in the middle. Yet all this changed beyond recognition. “Beauty” itself is stylized as aesthetic surgery is very much a norm. The Confucian body that was envisioned as the precious gift from parents — so much so that some Confucian literati refused to cut hair or clip finger nails — find itself under scalpel in the name of beauty and popularity.

K-pop is symptomatic of the cultural transformation of South Korea: at once the almost complete repudiation of traditional cultures — both Confucian and folk — and the repeated rhetorical stress on the continuities between the past and the present: the nearly empty signifier that is South Korean cultural-national identity.

VIII. Conclusion

The transformation of South Korea — or, more broadly speaking, post-traditional Korea that we can date to the beginning of Japanese colonial rule — is rapid and compressed. Colonial rule, the Korean War, rapid industrialization and urbanization, and recent democratization and egalitarianism have pulverized tradition, for better and worse. In this context, the very idea of Korea — and components of Korean culture — was almost always in flux, with radically distinct and contradictory notions at play at any given point in time. Not surprisingly, “Korean culture” remains something of the proverbial floating and empty signifier of contemporary cultural studies.

If one can understand the rise of K-pop largely as another instance of South Korean export success — a triumph of the culture industry — then one should recognize that the sources of success denude and destroy whatever exists of received (South) Korean culture and tradition. Indeed, it is precisely because there isn’t very much “Korean” in K-pop can it become such an easy “sell” to consumers abroad. In this sense, the K in K-pop is merely a brand, part of Brand Korea that has been the export-oriented South Korean government

since the 1960s. The Korean Wave in general and K-pop is particular is naked commercialism, albeit with the grateful garb of cultural respectability that comes from prestigious, luxury goods. It would be too much, however, to regard this as having anything to do with traditional Confucian, Korean culture.

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