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# Catching the K-Pop Wave: Globality in the Production, Distribution, and Consumption of South Korean Popular Music

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***Catching the K-Pop Wave:  
Globality in the Production, Distribution, and Consumption  
of South Korean Popular Music***

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**Media Studies**

**Senior Thesis**

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## Chapter List:

I. Going with the Flow: K-Pop and the Hallyu Wave.....	2
1. Introduction.....	2
2. So What is K-Pop? Local vs. Global Identities.....	10
II. Making the Band: K-Pop Production.....	25
1. The Importance of Image.....	25
2. Idol Recruitment, Training, and Maintenance.....	28
III. Around the World: Patterns of K-Pop Consumption.....	34
1. Where is K-Pop being Consumed? .....	34
2. Interculture, Transnational Identity, and Resistance.....	42
IV. Crazy! The “Pop” in K-Pop.....	48
1. H.O.T.? Issues of Gender and Sexuality in K-Pop’s Appeal.....	48
2. Fan Culture and Media Convergence.....	69
V. Conclusions.....	77
Bibliography.....	85

## I. Going with the Flow: K-Pop and the Hallyu Wave

*“Korea had become trendy because it provided what the youth wanted throughout the region. The phenomenon can be partially explained by noting how Korean popular culture catapulted forward during the 1990s, leaving much of Asia behind as it abandoned conservatism and censorship, diversifying, appropriating, absorbing and innovating. In its fusions, it created an Asian equivalent of European and American pop. Japanese pop, of course, had long had this function throughout the region, but the 1990s was a time for re-examining the Pacific War’s legacy, and Korea offered a less-tainted alternative to Japan.”<sup>1</sup>*

- Keith Howard

### 1. Introduction

If asked to name a globally successful music artist, an average Westerner might think of a band like Coldplay, whose expansive global concert tours have had the group trekking across Europe, North America, Asia, South America, and Australia. One might also mention someone like Lady Gaga—who by 2010 had sold over 51 million singles and 15 million albums worldwide.<sup>2</sup> In short, one might expect to conjure the names of American or other Western artists that currently dominate iTunes libraries and download charts in the United States and have brought their music to the radios, store shelves, digital devices, and stadiums of other countries. But while the American industry is certainly a powerful global force, the Republic of Korea, a country only slightly larger than the state of Indiana, has managed to cultivate a vibrant and successful industry whose influence has been making its way around the world since the early 2000s.<sup>3</sup>

South Korean popular music (known colloquially as K-Pop) has experienced a meteoric rise in popularity in recent years. K-Pop is a musical genre that incorporates a variety of styles,

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Howard, ed., *Korean Pop Music: Riding the Wave* (Kent: Global Oriental, 2006), viii-ix.

<sup>2</sup> Sophie Elmhirst, “50 People Who Matter Worldwide: 44. Lady Gaga,” *New Statesman*, September 27, 2010, accessed January 1, 2012, <http://www.newstatesman.com/music/2010/09/lady-gaga-york-million-dress>.

<sup>3</sup> Howard, ed., *Korean Pop Music*, vii.

including pop, hip-hop, rap, rock, R&B, and electronic music. But ultimately, it is a genre whose most identifiable attribute is its origin of South Korea. As early as 1997, Korea was the thirteenth largest market for recorded music in the world, and by 2002, it was the second-largest music market in Asia.<sup>4</sup> The Hallyu phenomenon, or the “Korean Wave,” has already effectively swept across the rest of Asia, bringing South Korean music, television, and films to China, Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, the Philippines, and others. And although K-Pop has yet to make as strong of an impression outside of the continent, it is certainly gaining more and more recognition.

The Wonder Girls (JYP Entertainment), for instance, a five-member girl group, first entered the US market in 2009 with an English version of their hit “Nobody” and toured with the Jonas Brothers. They have since worked on an album for U.S. release as well as a TV movie on Teen Nick, which premiered in February 2012.<sup>5</sup> Another example: pop idols T.O.P, G-Dragon, Taeyang, Daesung, and Seungri of Big Bang (YG Entertainment), who debuted in 2006, recently won the award for Best Worldwide Act at MTV’s 2011 European Music Awards in Belfast and have cracked the Top 10 Albums chart on the U.S. iTunes store twice (once in February 2011 for their album *Tonight*, and more recently in February 2012 for their album *Alive*).<sup>6</sup> In April 2011, *Time* magazine readers voted Korea’s king of pop, Rain, the most influential person of the year. There are also formidable local K-Pop fan bases scattered all over Australia, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and North America.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>5</sup> Tina Xu, “The Wonder Girls Reveal ‘The DJ is Mine’ MV Featuring School Gyrls!,” *MTV Korea*, January 11, 2012, accessed January 14, 2012, <http://mtvk.com/2012/01/11/the-wonder-girls-reveal-the-dj-is-mine-mv-featuring-school-gyrls/>.

<sup>6</sup> “Big Bang,” MTV EMA Awards, accessed December 12, 2011, <http://asia.mtvema.com/artists/big-bang>.



**Picture 1: Big Bang, upon receiving their MTV EMA for Best Worldwide Act on November 6, 2011.  
(Source: Seoulbeats.com)**

So how is K-Pop being integrated into (or not integrated into) the musical, cultural, and social identities of so many fans from completely different cultural backgrounds? What are some of the media habits of these fans? How are they becoming as “addicted” to K-Pop as many of them are? In this thesis, I would like to investigate just how K-Pop is being produced, distributed, and received globally. Most importantly, I would like to locate the ways in which such a small niche of cultural production has managed to gain such widespread popularity and global appeal and perhaps begin to take apart assumptions about media globalization and Western cultural imperialism. I would also like to discuss the formations of national and transnational identities in the context of K-Pop and explore how tensions among tradition, nationalism, economic development, a rapidly expanding consumer culture, and the globalization of markets play into the everyday lives of South Koreans, and how these elements are reflected in the world of K-Pop music.

Also important, how is the manufacture of not only the music, but also the singers and stars, affecting the demand for this genre? In this vein, I'd like to analyze the careers of the Korean "idols" from their recruitment to their experiences of living with success. These stars have extremely strong cults of personality. What does the "idol" phenomenon have to say about K-Pop, the global music industry, and music consumption in general? And what kinds of methods are companies utilizing in the active, controlled creation of bands and groups? What sorts of cultural politics are at play here? How are production companies creating these bands in terms of recruitment, image and aesthetic, dancing, singing, and language training, and other ways of mediating bodies? What are some of the differences in terms of gender? In what ways are both male and female pop stars sexualized, and at the same time, how does this correspond—or clash—with the gender politics of South Korea itself? I would ultimately like to explore the ways in which these fetishes and mediated constructions of sexuality contribute to K-Pop's appeal to fans.

These fans are among the most enthusiastic in the world. A concert in Paris sold out in less than fifteen minutes on April 26, 2011, prompting French fans to gather in the square outside of the Louvre—cheering, singing, and dancing—in an attempt to elicit another concert date from SM Entertainment (a powerful independent Korean record label and talent agency). My own firsthand experience at a K-Pop concert in Ridgefield, New Jersey was eye opening. Sponsored by Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), the free concert was promptly moved to New Jersey after it was determined that its original New York venue at Randall's Island Park was too small to contain the projected overflow of fans. Indeed, Koreans and non-Koreans alike lined up days ahead for the free tickets to the outdoor event and then arrived en masse at five AM for a show

that was set to begin at seven PM. It was not an easy task for the county health department and concert security to contain the horde.



**Picture 2: Fans rally outside the Louvre for another SM Entertainment concert date, May 2011.  
(Source: Musicasia.net)**



**Picture 3: Only a partial view of the assembled crowd at the 2011 KBS Concert in Overpeck Park, NJ.  
(Source: personal photograph by author)**

Just a couple of weeks later, SM Entertainment put on a sold-out SM Town Live concert at Madison Square Garden, featuring the talents of the wildly popular group Super Junior (which boasted thirteen members at its maximum) and their sister group Girls' Generation (nine members), among an impressively large roster of other SM groups like SHINee, TVXQ, BoA, and f(x). The *New York Times* wrote the next day, "American teen-pop at its peak has never been this productive." Notably, the *New York Times* also told its readers, "K-Pop—short for Korean pop—is an environment of relentless newness, both in participants and in style."<sup>7</sup>

It is that newness that makes K-Pop interesting. The innovation that the genre brings to the music world lies much in the relatively extreme ways in which the Korean music industry produces its content. As Roy Shuker asserts in *Understanding Popular Music*, "Stardom in rock, as in other forms of popular culture, is arguably as much about illusion and appeal to the fantasies of the audience, as it is about talent and creativity."<sup>8</sup> The South Korean industry takes this sort of statement to new levels. With plastic surgeries on the rise (by 2009, 20% of South Korean women between the ages of 19 and 49 had received some form of plastic surgery) and "eye jobs" (a procedure that adds an extra fold to the eyelid) considered so routine that they're "not even considered surgery," South Korea has become an increasingly image-conscious culture. Rando Kim, a professor of consumer science at Seoul National University, suggests, "Celebrities have helped to drive the trend, as they scramble to keep ahead of digital technology that mercilessly exposes not only their physical imperfections, but any attempts to remedy

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<sup>7</sup> Jon Caramanica, "Korean Pop Machine, Running on Innocence and Hair Gel," *New York Times*, October 24, 2011, accessed December 14, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/25/arts/music/shinee-and-south-korean-K-Pop-groups-at-madison-square-garden-review.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 128.

them.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, “image is the most essential quality of a performer while talent, music, and creativity play secondary roles,” a statement that is reflected in both the music production process and broader social realities in South Korea.<sup>10</sup>

Celebrities may drive the trend, but production companies drive the celebrities. Much of Korean pop music is generally characterized by singing groups, as opposed to individual artists. Music production companies recruit young, attractive Asians not only in Korea, but also elsewhere in Asia and the Asian Diaspora for new members to join such singing groups. Recruits are usually taken to Korea at a relatively young age and taught how to sing, dance, act, speak foreign languages, and carry themselves in interviews.

Of course, music production companies would not cultivate their performers in such a way if their methods did not produce results. Image is important to attracting fans. As Charles Fairchild observes, “the music and entertainment industries imagine their consumers as an inherently dissatisfied public. They exist to satisfy as many of us in as many ways as they can as often as possible.”<sup>11</sup> As it happens, music is not the only medium in which fans can consume K-Pop culture. The genre’s convergence with other media, including television (Korean dramas, variety shows, and reality shows), the Internet (celebrity Twitter accounts, YouTube and other online video streaming sites, blogs, and fan websites), and film (movies starring K-Pop idols) provide other outlets for fan energy and have all contributed to K-Pop’s growing global fan community.

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<sup>9</sup> Choe Sang-hun, “In South Korea, Plastic Surgery Comes Out of the Closet,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2011, accessed November 23, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/04/world/asia/in-south-korea-plastic-surgery-comes-out-of-the-closet.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all%3Fsrc%3Dtp&smid=fb-share](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/04/world/asia/in-south-korea-plastic-surgery-comes-out-of-the-closet.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all%3Fsrc%3Dtp&smid=fb-share).

<sup>10</sup> Heather A. Willoughby, “Image is Everything: The Marketing of Femininity in South Korean Popular Music,” in Howard, ed., *Riding the Wave*, 102.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Fairchild, *Pop Idols and Pirates: Mechanisms of Consumption and the Global Circulation of Popular Music* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), 9.

Some might argue that it is a certain hybrid dependence on or mimesis of Western cultural production that has made K-Pop successful. However, K-Pop does have its own particularities in both content and style. In the 1990s, as Korean pop artists began experimenting with rap, hip hop, reggae, and punk genres, such music was often “made Korean” in that it was produced within a certain cultural context. The contexts that these genres originally developed in (youth rebellion in the West, American urban street culture, or Jamaican reggae culture, for instance) were different than those in which Korean musicians created their music.<sup>12</sup> Even today, K-Pop has developed its own particularities, to be discussed later in this section. Although hybridization is unquestionably at play here, the result is ultimately a new sort of cultural product that itself grapples with issues of national identity and global participation. Marwan Kraidy explains that in analyzing global media, we must “move beyond bipolar models of global against local, power versus resistance, imperialism contra hybridity, and focus instead on complex processes at play.”<sup>13</sup> I will be taking another look at the idea of “hybridity,” and its meaning in relation to South Korean pop. Ultimately, the popular music environment itself is a site of cultural struggle among intersecting global, national, and local identities.

I hope that this project will provide a new lens with which to look at today’s globalized media landscape, transnational identities, the rise of digital communities, the production of brand and image, and the global music industry as a whole. If I am able to analyze the mechanisms through which K-Pop is produced and some of the reasons why the music and the spectacle that surrounds it is so popular, I hope to draw some conclusions about modern music consumption, the hybridization of global identities, and the nature of the global village that we live in today.

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<sup>12</sup> Eun-Young Jung, “Articulating Korean Youth Culture through Global Popular Music Styles: Seo Taiji’s Use of Rap and Metal,” in Howard, ed., *Riding the Wave*, 121.

<sup>13</sup> Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, Or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 13.

## 2. So What is K-Pop? Local vs. Global Identities

*“They're in a Lady Gaga class of artists. Meanwhile, artists like Gaga can't compete over there; they've got no relevance. I went to Seoul's Olympic stadium watching an SM Entertainment extravaganza—seven hours of their hit acts. The place was packed. It was like the Beatles, with young girls screaming consistently. The show itself was of the standard you see when Justin Timberlake or Madonna play live, when it came to the production. They even flew over the crowd from the top of the stadium on to the stage.”<sup>14</sup>*

- Universal Music Publishing's European A&R executive, Pelle Lidell

With an annual average per capita income of less than \$125 in the early 1960s, South Korea was once one of the poorest nations in the world, along with countries like India, Kenya, and Burma. But a generation later, South Korean incomes had increased exponentially to the point at which they were on par with those of many European countries (an average urban South Korean household then earned \$1700 in a *month*).<sup>15</sup> This shift was due partly to the encouragement of export goods and of import restrictions, which helped lead to a stunning transformation from the 1960s to 1980s. Though there were ups and downs, South Korea's gross domestic product increased an average of about ten percent per year between 1965 and 1985. As the country became more prosperous, increasing pressures from its international trading partners demanded that it open its markets to foreign competition. Indeed, after the Seoul Summer Olympics in 1988, local markets offered an increased supply of imported consumer goods, effectively bringing transnational imagination to Korea, connecting citizens to the lifestyles and economic realities of other nations.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Pelle Liddell, quoted in Helienne Lindvall, “Behind the Music: What is K-Pop and Why are the Swedish Getting Involved?,” *The Guardian*, April 20, 2011, accessed December 12, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/musicblog/2011/apr/20/k-pop-sweden-pelle-lidell>.

<sup>15</sup> Laura C. Nelson, *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-22.

Nevertheless, as South Korea's domestic market continued to gain significance, there was a fear that imported goods were an "infiltration" of South Korean economic and cultural space. As such, there was a concerted effort by many citizens to make consumer choices that were the most "Korean," or decisions that were in the best interests of the nation as a whole.<sup>17</sup> This consumer nationalism would also translate into trends within the South Korean music industry.

It was during this time in the early 1990s—a period of increased political liberalization—that Korea began to develop its music industry as we know it today. In prior years, Korean music had been characterized by a state-controlled media monopoly. All production was subject to different levels of censorship (and still is today to an extent), depending upon the political climate at the time—justified as a way to prevent political discord and to protect moral sensibilities.

Ballads were the genre of choice, and as television and radio ownership increased during the 1980s, a studio star system began to rely on TV and radio to determine the success of certain songs and singers. Composers, arrangers and lyricists wrote new songs, and singers were often required to perform with state TV broadcasters' resident studio bands and choreographers. Stylistically, however, Korean music remained typical of the ballad-based pop music of other Asian countries that proliferated throughout the 1980s.<sup>18</sup>

Several factors led to a major shift. First, other sectors of the Korean entertainment industry were floundering as the country opened up to imported films and television. In 1994, the number of domestic films produced fell to just 63 (compared with almost double that number in 1991), and Hollywood had already conquered 80% of the Korean film market. In 1995, Korea's first year of cable television services, 42.82 million dollars' worth of foreign television

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>18</sup> Keith Howard, "Exploding Ballads, the Transformation of Korean Pop Music," in Timothy J. Craig and Richard King, eds., *Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), 80-82.

programming flooded South Korean screens, an over 100% increase from the previous year. It was thus widely perceived that domestic productions were inferior and that Korean media production companies could not outsell or outperform these foreign companies. However, consumer nationalism was still a powerful collective movement, and a sense of new hope arrived in the form of a government report that alerted South Koreans to the financial potential of a thriving culture industry. That 1994 Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology report made an eye-opening comparison between the total revenue of Steven Spielberg's blockbuster, *Jurassic Park*, to the foreign sales of 1.5 million Hyundai cars. The report then suggested that media production become more of a priority as a national strategic industry. The South Korean government responded with the establishment of the Cultural Industry Bureau within the Ministry of Culture and Sports in 1994.<sup>19</sup>

It soon became clear that in addition to a national cinema and a national television culture, Korea also needed its own music culture. Composer and critic Yi Konyong suggested,

“We musicians should create a national music that overcomes foreign influence, pursues our desire for unification, and is relevant to daily life...[our] pop music has become distanced from the people because it is low quality or is an imitation of [the] Japanese...We will, then, overcome conservatism and exclusivity, pursuing musical democracy by bringing together and unifying all musics...as our national music.”<sup>20</sup>

South Korea would indeed create that amalgamating “national music,” but perhaps not in ways that Yi Konyong might have imagined.

The arrival of young Koreans who grew up New York, Los Angeles, and other Western cities would eventually introduce styles of hip-hop, rap, and R&B to South Korea. *Yoen-uh-jok*—literally meaning “a group of salmon”—was a term coined in the 1990s to describe such people who grew up in the Korean Diaspora and later returned to the motherland. It was many of these

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<sup>19</sup> Doobo Shim, “Hybridity and the rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia,” *Media, Culture & Society* 28, no. 1 (January 2006): 25-44. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost, accessed January 5, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Yi Konyong, quoted in Howard, “Exploding Ballads,” 86.

individuals who helped to transform the Korean entertainment industry.<sup>21</sup> It was also after the Seoul Olympics and the 1988 lifting of restrictions on foreign travel that further exposed the country to the outside world, as was mentioned in the Introduction. Thus, younger Koreans were becoming well versed in Western popular culture and later craved new, more creative sounds in local music production.<sup>22</sup>

Which brings us to the question: Just how *Korean* is K-Pop?

The answer? More than one would think, but it's complicated.

In *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*, Marwan Kraidy asserts that it is necessary in today's market to create culturally non-specific hybrid media. He writes,

“Globalization and the commercial imperative to reach large audiences with minimal investment and risk have made hybrid media forms pervasive...despite their inclusion of ‘local’ cultural markers, the hybrid texts spawned by today’s global media industry are more akin to the technologically sophisticated but historically flat processes of digital superimposition and manipulation that create slick images for international consumption.”<sup>23</sup>

Some also prescribe to the media imperialism argument, or the idea that Western influence has been imposed upon Korea. These particular points are salient in some respects, but are ultimately an oversimplification of the K-Pop phenomenon. Korean music and music video production are both most definitely active in appealing to a broad, international audience. But if K-Pop is somehow completely culturally non-specific, how does one explain the fact that it often sparks broader interests in Korean culture among fans? South Korean popular music is produced and marketed in a very culturally specific environment. Fans must navigate a Korean cultural

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<sup>21</sup> Lee, Hee-Eun, “Home is Where You Serve: Globalization and Nationalism in Korean Popular Music,” (paper presented at annual conference for the International Communication Association, San Diego, California, May 23, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Hee-Eun Lee, “Seeking the ‘Others’ Within Us: Discourses of Korean-ness in Korean Popular Music, in Todd Joseph Miles Holden and Timothy J. Scrase, eds., *Medi@sia: Global Media/tion in and out of Context* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 132-133.

<sup>23</sup> Kraidy, 8-9.

space in order to consume K-Pop and follow their favorite idols. Likewise, this navigation creates interest in all aspects of Korean culture—music, TV, food, cultural practices, geography/domestic travel, and films.<sup>24</sup>

With regard to the concept of media imperialism, Henry Jenkins asserts,

“the media imperialism argument blurs the distinction between at least four forms of power: economic (the ability to produce and circulate cultural goods), cultural (the ability to produce and circulate forms and meanings), political (the ability to impose ideologies), and psychological (the ability to shape desire, fantasy, and identity)...the classic media imperialism argument ascribed almost no agency to the receiving culture and saw little reason to investigate actual cultural effects.”<sup>25</sup>

Those cultural effects are evident not only in the ways in which K-Pop has appropriated Western styles, but also the ways in which it has created its own style. K-Pop may have a hybrid voice, but it is a voice that remains culturally grounded at its heart.

Indeed, music is a key center of identity formation, “because it offers a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective.”<sup>26</sup> As such, elements of both global music flows as well as localizing forces have influenced K-Pop. Applied to Korea, music and music videos appear to both subtly construct *and* deconstruct national identities. Indeed, while South Korean music and videos might seem akin to material found in the West, it is important to keep in mind the Korean industry is predominantly a local one that has not given itself over to the embodiment of external, global music conglomerates. At the same time, the combination of external linguistic and stylistic difference within domestically produced music has been an indication of both the desire to appeal to outside audiences and the changing national face of Korean music itself.

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<sup>24</sup> A good example of this rising interest is the case of Canadian bloggers Simon and Martina Stawski. Their website, [eatyourkimchi.com](http://eatyourkimchi.com), satisfies the cultural interests of many K-Pop fans with reviews of K-Pop videos, tours of Korean neighborhoods, information on Korean food, etc.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 156.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

According to Howard, “style[s] became Korean as acculturation collapsed the foreign into a vernacular expression.”<sup>27</sup>

Again, the most visible representations of an increasingly globalized music industry arrived in the early 1990s, often found in dance music that used hip-hop and reggae. Until then, Korean popular music had been dominated by ballads relying on verse and melody, and there was no shortage of skeptics when it came these rhythmic new styles. It was predicted that the faster, more confrontational beat of artist Seo Taiji & Boys (the band often credited with popularizing rap in Korea and transforming the Korean musical landscape), with its eclectic blending of hip-hop, rap, dance, rock, techno, soul, ballad, and even some Korean traditional music elements, would fail to appeal to audiences. But their first album, released in March 1992, turned out to be one of the fastest-selling records in Korean music history.<sup>28</sup> Dooboo Shim comments, “Since Seo Taiji, the syncretism of a wide range of musical genres in one album has become commonplace in Korea. What has come into existence is a hybrid but distinctively Korean pop style.”<sup>29</sup>

Once introduced, these styles experienced localization strategies. Rap was adopted “in less authentic and more hybridized ways, and Korean audiences have become comfortable with a style of rap that employs partially Koreanized representations.”<sup>30</sup> This included subject matter that vastly differed from the kind of rap music being offered in the United States—content that included local and national issues in education, politics, and South Korean culture as well as

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<sup>27</sup> Howard, “Exploding Ballads,” 91.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> Shim, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Hee-Eun Lee, “Seeking the ‘Others’ Within Us,” 138.

traditionally popular sentimental love song content. There was less of a market for American rap, which would not appeal as much to Korea's moral conservatism.<sup>31</sup>

Some examples include Seo Taiji and Boys's 1994 release, "Classroom Ideology," which was influenced by rap and heavy metal styles mixed by American bands like the Beastie Boys or Rage Against the Machine. The song addresses perceived problems with the South Korean education system, and serves as an example in which a sense of rebellion was taken from foreign styles, but adapted to the needs of Korean youth specifically. The group's use of these genres wasn't necessarily offensive, but instead taken as a new sort of language to express nationally specific anxieties. A translated excerpt:

Enough. Enough. Enough. Enough.  
Enough of that kind of teaching. Enough.  
Already enough. Enough. Already enough. Enough.  
Every morning by 7:30, you put us into a small classroom.  
And force the same things into all nine million children's heads.  
The dark closed classroom walls are swallowing us up.  
My life is too precious to be wasted here.

A more recent example of the use of rap lies in the opening lines of the hit, "Fiction" by B2ST (Cube Entertainment). Fresh off their most recent album, *Fiction and Fact* (2011), this song utilizes rap styles, but lacks the lyrical aggressiveness of common American forms of rap music, adhering to themes of lost love common in the ballads of earlier years. A translated excerpt:

I still can't forget you.  
I still can't trust anything.  
Even today I can't send you away like this.  
I will rewrite it again; our story will not end.  
I will bury the fact that reality is seeping into my skin for now.  
I rewrite it once again, the start beginning with you, and I smile happily.  
If you leave me, the background is a small room without an exit.

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<sup>31</sup> Howard, "Exploding Ballads," 90.

This difference in content is also accompanied by different uses of rap—a style in which rap, dance elements, and singing are all equally mixed in the same song. As Hee-Eun Lee observes, Korean rappers “effectively use their voices as a musical instrument, delivering not only background sound effects, but also fusion forms of American rhythms. In this way, their performance appears visually global, while their Korean lyrics and vocal effects are acoustically local...this hybridized Korean hip-hop/dance music has managed to make the once-strange into the familiar, and the once-familiar has been made strange.”<sup>32</sup> The term “local” here can be loosely defined as not necessarily a bounded concept, but as the idea that local concerns are ones in which cultural proximity is just as important as globalized tastes. As Hee-Eun Lee comments, “Korea has served as a compelling example of resistance to globalization and orientation toward localization...it was Korean popular music that paved the way for the popularity abroad of Korean popular culture, supported by strong, sustained local consumption.”<sup>33</sup>

So if K-Pop is hybrid, how does one define hybridity? Kraidy asserts that the essential challenge is “not to come up with an all-purpose, final definition of hybridity, but to find a way to integrate different types of hybridity in a framework that makes connections” among different approaches to the concept.<sup>34</sup> A foundational idea in Kraidy’s analysis of hybridity is that of “critical transculturalism,” a framework that synthesizes an analysis of the “active links between production, text, and reception in the moment of cultural reproduction.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than viewing hybridity through a cultural imperialist lens (placing emphasis on global capitalist structures) or a cultural pluralist lens (placing emphasis on local and individual contexts in the consumption of

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<sup>32</sup> Hee-Eun Lee, “Seeking the ‘Others’ Within Us,” 138.

<sup>33</sup> Hee-Eun Lee, “Seeking the ‘Others’ Within Us,” 129-130.

<sup>34</sup> Kraidy, vi.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-150.

global media), Kraidy looks to the intersection of various social practices, including the creation, the distribution, and the consumption of media.<sup>36</sup> He asserts,

“Hybridity entails that traces of other cultures exist in every culture, thus offering foreign media and marketers transcultural wedges for forging affective links between their commodities and local communities. As a discourse of intercultural relations, hybridity conjures up an active exchange that leads to the mutual transformation of both sides...hybridity, then, is not just amenable to globalization. It is the cultural logic of globalization.”<sup>37</sup>

With this idea in mind, it seems absurd to claim that musical genres are exclusively “Korean”—or exclusively “American,” or “Western,” for that matter. All music is in some way a hybrid of styles created at different cultural moments. New temporal, cultural, and spatial contexts transform music, and in an age where music flows freely and easily across the world over the Internet, those contexts are constantly shifting. K-Pop can thus be looked at through both the lenses of globalization and localization, which are not mutually exclusive processes. It can be conceived in some ways as rather conspicuously global—in its adoption of originally external musical styles. In other ways, however, the result can be seen as an essentially hybrid, yet distinct, cultural product.

Kraidy also emphasizes the importance of considering agency when thinking about hybridity. “*Corporate* transculturalism,” for instance, is “a profit-driven strategy that actively and systematically seeks to capitalize on cultural fusion and fluid identities.”<sup>38</sup> It is, in other words, an intentional creation of hybridity, which is a process that carries with it a specter of power, influence, and otherization. Kraidy might disagree, therefore, with an assessment of hybrid K-Pop as uniquely “Korean,” when it is not the state, but corporations, driving its production. He claims that it is too reductionist to assume that “culture is congruent with

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 90.

nationality.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Koichi Iwabuchi presents the term *mukokuseki*, which refers to “something or someone lacking any nationality.”<sup>40</sup> He discusses Japanese cultural consumer products—computer games, electronics, animation, and others—as “culturally odorless.” Cultural Studies scholar Sun Jung connects Iwabuchi’s idea of *mukokuseki* to a Korean equivalent: *mugukjeok*. She argues that this non-nationality “enables South Korean popular culture to be globally consumed.”<sup>41</sup>

It is true that Korean groups have worked not only with domestic producers, but also foreign ones. Will.i.am, a member of the Black Eyed Peas, has helped to produce an album by girl group 2NE1 (YG Entertainment). In an April 2011 interview, he explained, “the plan is to make someone from Korea big in every country...how do you do for 2NE1 what I do for the Black Eyed Peas?”<sup>42</sup> Teddy Riley, an influential American R&B songwriter and producer, who has worked with notable acts like Michael Jackson, Mary J. Blige, and Stevie Wonder, has recently worked with Girls’ Generation (SM Entertainment) on their new internationally-targeted album—especially an urban hip hop track called “The Boys.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, in a lecture given by JYP Entertainment CEO Park Jin-Yeong at Harvard University in 2007, he said, “for the next step [of *Hallyu*], we shouldn’t have that name...Hal in *Hallyu* actually means Korea...it was basically about introducing Korea...hopefully I think it can be changed into something like sharing. You know, mutual understanding through cultural sharing.”<sup>44</sup> That cultural sharing

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>40</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 28.

<sup>41</sup> Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>42</sup> “Will.i.am on Working with Korean Group 2NE1,” April 10, 2011. Online video clip. YouTube. Accessed February 29, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8J2Xrhh4k8>.

<sup>43</sup> Tina Xu, “Teddy Riley Offends Wonder Girls Fans with his Tweets,” *MTV Korea*, October 2, 2011, accessed February 29, 2012, <http://mtvk.com/2011/10/02/teddy-riley-offends-wonder-girls-fans-with-his-tweets/>.

<sup>44</sup> Park Jin-Yeong, quoted in Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities*, 1.

already exists in K-Pop's hybrid sounds, but that does not necessarily warrant a total de-emphasis of national identity.

It seems evident that nationalism does play a rather large part in the K-Pop world and should not be taken out of the conversation too prematurely. Today's music production companies have recruited non-Koreans before—Asians from the United States, Canada, Japan and China—in order to bring cross-cultural appeal to their music. Nichkhun Horvejkul, a member of JYP Entertainment's boy band 2PM, was born to Thai-Chinese parents in California and spent parts of his childhood in the United States and Thailand. He was discovered in Los Angeles with no experience or particular talent in singing or dancing, nor the ability to speak Korean. Nevertheless, he signed an eight-year contract with JYP, and was taught Korean and Chinese during his training. Victoria Song was born in Qingdao, China, and was brought to Korea to learn Korean and become part of SM Entertainment's girl group f(x). Similar circumstances have occurred with members of other South Korean bands. But despite the acceptance of outsiders into the fold, South Korea remains a very nationalistic society, and idols are expected to behave accordingly.<sup>45</sup>

In January of 2002, the public found out that teen idol Seung-jun Yoo had decided to renounce his Korean citizenship and become an American citizen in order to increase his musical career prospects abroad. As a result, he no longer had to report for his 28-month-long compulsory military service. His decision resulted in widespread vilification. Seoul Records debated whether or not to continue producing his albums. KBS, who had hired Yoo to host one of its new television shows, hired someone else. His fans, who had looked up to him as a role

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<sup>45</sup> An example: in May 2011, Nichkhun and Victoria attended a baseball game while lumped together as the "foreign" couple on the reality show *We Got Married*, a program in which K-Pop idols are paired off in artificial matrimony. When the Korean national anthem played before the game began, Nichkhun placed his hand on his chest and sang along. Korean netizens were impressed by his ability to sing the anthem, and commented things like, "*He has now officially become a Korean person*", and "*Proud of Nichkhun!*"

model, were disappointed in what they saw as a betrayal of their country. Public perceptions of him changed completely; he went from being a model Korean youth to a draft dodger with no respect for his motherland. The South Korean Justice Ministry eventually deemed him “capable of action that may harm the public’s interests or safety,” and he was barred from re-entering Korea.<sup>46</sup>

A similar, yet more recent scandal involved 2PM’s Jay Park, a Korean-American from Seattle known in Korea as Park Jaebeom. He was scouted in the United States, and later became the leader of the successful seven-member group. But on September 4, 2009, unfavorable comments towards Korea surfaced from Park’s personal Myspace account from 2005. Just months after arriving in Korea for his training program, the supposed culture shock and stress of adjusting to his new environment had prompted him to post, “Korea is gay...I hate Koreans.”<sup>47</sup> After the statements were uncovered and released, Park issued an apology, explaining that the statements had been the result of homesickness and his frustrations with an unfamiliar environment. Outraged protesters demanded this (formerly) much loved bandleader’s removal from 2PM, and rising antipathy prompted Park to leave Korea soon after the story broke.

As Daniel Herwitz puts it, “when a celeb goes off the rails, careening into dope, alcoholism, or a pedestrian, the public feels personally betrayed and genuinely outraged. How dare you do this to us, you who have everything on account of us?”<sup>48</sup> But what’s unusual about this particular case is that Jay Park did not get caught driving under the influence or doing drugs. He simply made an immature, offhand comment about the country he was working in. But it ended up alienating a significant number of his fans. A transcript of a four-hour conference held

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<sup>46</sup> Hee-Eun Lee, “Home is Where You Serve.”

<sup>47</sup> “Does Jay Park Think Korea is Gay?” AllKpop, September 4, 2009, accessed January 2, 2012, [http://www.allkpop.com/2009/09/does\\_jaebeom\\_think\\_korea\\_is\\_gay](http://www.allkpop.com/2009/09/does_jaebeom_think_korea_is_gay).

<sup>48</sup> Daniel Herwitz, *The Star as Icon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 29.

with fans, the other six members of 2PM, and JYP Entertainment further reveals not only the gravity of the situation from a public relations standpoint, but also the fans' harsh and unforgiving attitudes toward Park. Fans asked personal, probing questions, often attacking the band members for their attempts to emotionally support their band mate. 2PM was on constant defensive, and their answers remained apologetic and conciliatory.<sup>49</sup> Circulating rumors of Park's possible return to 2PM were confirmed untrue in February 2010, when JYP announced the termination of his contract. Park has since cultivated a solo career, but the scandal will always be a major blight on his history with Korea.<sup>50</sup>

As evidenced by these two cases, South Korean fans expect their idols to act as representatives of their country, tying the music industry with a respect for nationality. Though South Korean music may be forging ahead in its attempts to diversify its sound, it is nevertheless still trying to bring its music to other countries and market it as *Korean*, to represent Korea on a global stage. Hee-Eun Lee claims that the hybridity at play here is actually indicative of tensions and transformations of notions of national identity among youth. She says, "what is represented in the conspicuously global-seeming Korean popular music, in fact, is an earlier form of modern nationalism: content that communicates both political and cultural identity." Seo Taiji and Boys' or B2ST's Koreanization of rap are hybrid, but Korean products all the same.<sup>51</sup> In an article about linguistic hybridity and the use of English in K-Pop, Jamie Shinhee Lee states, K-Pop is a "sociolinguistic breathing space for young South Koreans to construct identity and socially

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<sup>49</sup> "Transcript of JYPE's Conference about 2PM and Jaebeom," All Kpop, March 2, 2010, accessed February 26, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Donnie Kwak, "Jay Park Talks U.S. Album, Covering B.o.B, and Life After 2PM," Complex Media, February 22, 2011, accessed January 1, 2012, <http://www.complex.com/music/2011/02/complex-exclusive-jay-park-talks-us-album-covering-bob-and-life-after-2pm>.

<sup>51</sup> Hee-Eun Lee, "Seeking the 'Others' Within Us," 137-138.

connect with others...English is used as discourse of resistance. Young South Korean artists are empowered by tactical English switches into Korean.”<sup>52</sup>

Thus, K-Pop is not exactly *exclusively* “Korean.” These hybrid media forms, whether they are linguistic or stylistic, often problematize or challenge “traditional ideas of Korean-ness, traditional assumptions of uniformity and cultural homogeneity.”<sup>53</sup> In any situation of cultural mixing, “there must always be interventions and metamorphoses, which emphasize the interaction between two different cultures and create commonalities that are conducive to transcultural consumption.”<sup>54</sup> But it is the changing discourse within transforming musical styles—connected to a strong sense of nationalism—that places music at the center of national identity formation among South Korean youth, and the experiences and motivations of music producers and domestic fans should not yet be separated from considerations of that nationalism.

As we have seen, there are complex relationships between globalization, localization, hybridity, and nationalism at play when it comes to the production and consumption of K-Pop. While global influences do exist, the hybridity that emerges is the result of not only producers’ active formations of hybrid sounds (through a desire for success and wider appeal abroad), but also a perpetual cultural exchange that now exists around the world. No culture can be said to be “pure” or “authentic.” For foreign fans, K-Pop is characterized as Korean through linguistic difference and by its very nomenclature (K, for Korean, in K-Pop). At the same time, K-Pop is stylistically familiar as well as innovative enough to spark interest and enthusiasm.

Music is also a site of changing notions of national identity, in which Koreans seek “the ‘others’ within themselves—the others who have always existed throughout Korean history, yet

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<sup>52</sup> Jamie Shinhee Lee, “Linguistic Hybridization in K-Pop: Discourse of Self-Assertion and Resistance,” *World Englishes* 23, No. 3 (2004): 446.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>54</sup> Sun Jung, 19.

have hardly been heard or witnessed.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, negotiations of foreign and domestic influences in K-Pop’s hybrid forms are opening new possibilities in the continued construction of Korean identity. Meanwhile, both singers and Korean fans feel a strong nationalistic connection to K-Pop, as do producers. Which brings us to the complexities of the production process itself.

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<sup>55</sup> Jamie Shinhee Lee, 143.

## II. Making the Band: K-Pop Production

*“Think of the work required to make just one Justin Bieber. The production, the management, the vocal training, the choreography, the swagger coaching—all that effort to create one teen pop star in a country that’s still starving for them. South Korea has no such drought, thanks to several companies that specialize in manufacturing a steady stream of teenage idols, in groups of various configurations.”<sup>56</sup>*

- Jon Caramanica, *New York Times*

*“When a concept for the group is decided, the songs, dance, and languages that are fitting for the group are also selected and the members go into training immediately... Training periods vary, but they last anywhere from 3-5 years. In the case of TVXQ, they trained for seven years before they made their debut... personality and character training are also very important.”<sup>57</sup>*

- Kim Young Min, SM Entertainment

### 1. The Importance of Image

How exactly has South Korea built the systemic infrastructure to become the origin of so many globally successful performers and hit songs? We’ve seen the development of Korea’s music industry in terms of adapting, blending, and experimenting with new musical styles, as well as its move away from the creative (or lack thereof) control of television networks within the studio system of the 1980s. As the networks’ power decreased, the roles of talent agencies and production companies increased, and the Korean industry expanded in scale and scope, with more frenzied production of albums, music videos, and concerts.

The pioneer in this effort was Lee Soo Man, who founded SM Entertainment in 1989 and is today credited with first challenging the network system and industrializing K-Pop’s now

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<sup>56</sup> Caramanica, “Korean Pop Machine.”

<sup>57</sup> Kim Young Min, quoted in “What does it take to create an SM Entertainment K-pop star?,” Allkpop, November 9, 2011, accessed November 11, 2011, <http://www.allkpop.com/2011/11/what-does-it-take-to-create-an-sm-entertainment-k-pop-star>.

widely adopted star-making process. Lee's strategy? He surveyed teenage girls directly to figure out what they wanted from their idols and their music. The company analyzed thousands of audition tapes and chose candidates based on survey data, taking into account physical appearance along with dancing and singing abilities. The best representation of Lee's earlier products is aptly named: H.O.T., a boy band that debuted in 1996, succeeded with over 10 million CD and record sales in Korea during its active years (1996-2001). Early on, SM Entertainment also set its sights on the rest of the Asian and world markets by training its young teens in languages like English, Mandarin, and Japanese. Kwon Boa (referred to commonly by her stage name BoA)—who was discovered by SM Entertainment at the age of 11—was trained in English and Japanese (as well vocals and dance) for two years before releasing her first album at the age of 13 in August 2000. Today, SM Entertainment still represents some of the most popular acts in the business, including Super Junior, Girls' Generation (also known as SNSD), SHINee, TVXQ, and of course, BoA (who is now twenty-five years old and continues to maintain a strong fan base).<sup>58</sup>



**Picture 4: Lee Soo Man, founder and CEO of SM Entertainment (Source: Hancinema.net)**

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<sup>58</sup> Shim, 37-38.

SM Entertainment was followed by the creation of other powerhouse record labels like YG Entertainment (founded in 1996 by former Seo Taiji & Boys member Yang Hyun Suk) and JYP Entertainment (founded by former pop star Park Jin-Yeong in 1997). These are the “Big Three”—the most powerful music management companies in South Korea.

The ultimate goal of these talent agencies/record labels is the creation of the right image. In the marketing of music, music becomes not only an aural medium, but also a visual one. This is demonstrated clearly and quite extremely in the Korean industry, partly due to the fact that although Korea’s music industry was moving away from network control, it was still developing alongside a newly liberated television industry. During the transition between state control and liberalization in the early 1990s, South Korean TV was left stumbling for new content. Networks realized that musical programming could fill air space, and they gradually became more dependent upon “visualized music” (including concert clips, music news, interviews with artists and singers, and album information reports) in their schedules.<sup>59</sup> In turn, the music industry took advantage of television as an outlet for marketing, establishing a kind of symbiotic relationship that would change South Korea’s musical landscape.<sup>60</sup> Suddenly, music was not just about sound, but also about image—the mediation of the singer’s body, personality, and performance, as well as the visual stories that could be told through lyrics and music videos.

This type of promotion eventually evolved to include even more opportunities to *see* the world of music, including music-oriented programs and music videos shown on South Korea’s music TV cable stations (including Mnet, KMTV, Channel [V], and MTV-Korea) and talk shows, sitcoms, dramas, and variety shows that feature celebrity participants or actors. Such

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<sup>59</sup> Hee-Eun Lee, “Seeking the ‘Others’ Within Us,” 131.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

celebrities do much more than just sing on TV.<sup>61</sup> In dramas, fans have an outlet with which to work out their romantic fantasies by watching their favorite K-Pop idols entangled in romantic storylines. Variety shows, talk shows, reality shows, and behind-the-scenes videos offer slapstick comedy, the sharing of personal experiences and confidences, and the chance to see the stars “as they really are.” These other methods of participation create a more personal connection between idol and audience.

## *2. Idol Recruitment, Training, and Maintenance*

If you’re going to be a Korean idol, you’re expected to do much more than record songs. So when choosing candidates for training, “those singers who ‘merely’ possess singing talent are less welcomed by television than those who have visually entertaining talent.”<sup>62</sup> The issue now has largely become finding and nurturing good-looking talent through vigorous—at times grueling—preparation and competition. Record companies routinely hold massive dance contests and scouting auditions. Recruits can train for years before finally making their debuts, if they manage to get that far at all.

In a November 2011 interview, SM Entertainment representative Kim Young Min revealed that each of the nine members of Girls’ Generation required about 2.5 million US dollars in training costs. According to Kim, it generally takes anywhere from 2.5 - 5 million U.S. dollars to care for and train prospective stars prior to their possible debut (including cost of living and housing expenses as well as the hiring of choreographers, trainers, voice coaches, dance teachers, and language tutors).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> R. Anderson Sutton, “Bounded Variation? Music Television in South Korea,” in Howard, ed., *Riding the Wave*, 208-211.

<sup>62</sup> Hee Eun Lee, “Seeking the ‘Others’ Within Us,” 132.

<sup>63</sup> “What does it take to create an SM Entertainment K-pop star?”

The process is sometimes documented for fans to see. In a television documentary produced about YG Entertainment's Big Bang, the grueling process is presented with very real drama. By the start of the documentary (filmed in 2006), two of the trainees, Kwon Ji Yong (stage name: G-Dragon) and Dong Yong Bae (stage name: Taeyang) had already been training with YG for six years. An additional four members had joined the project two years earlier. Toward the beginning of the documentary, Ji Yong tells the audience, "I really want to be perfect, whether it takes a few years or ten years to train. I hope I can present a perfect side for everyone to see. I must put in more effort in order to debut. Hopefully, the six years of training won't be wasted."

The boys' casting manager explains that YG trainees get to choose between learning Japanese and Chinese. They also have daily lessons in rap, beat boxing, break dancing, gymnastics, dance, and vocals, with five to six practices in a twelve-hour day. The boys live together in a modest apartment provided by YG and rarely get to see their families. They film training videos that demonstrate their talents, which are evaluated by their instructors and—most importantly—YG's CEO, Yang Hyun Suk.

In one particularly dramatic scene, Yang criticizes the boys for a test performance at a Se7en concert in Japan. He tells them that they all have the chance to be eliminated...even Ji Yong and Yong Bae, who had already signed contracts. The documentary maintains a constant focus on the each boy's respective image, already placing each one in certain roles. Ji Yong is consistently characterized as the fearless leader of the group, while Yong Bae is the "quiet one." In terms of the other four recruits, Kang Daesung is the "smiling one (the documentary describes how Daesung isn't the typical YG recruit, in that he's the least attractive of all the members. He received the most criticism and pressure toward the beginning of the recruitment process), Choi

Seunghyun is described as the “power rapper,” and Lee Seunghyun is assigned the role of the group’s *maknae* (the youngest, whose responsibility is to be the “cute,” lovable band member). There was also another member, Jang Hyun Seung, who did not make the cut. After two years with YG, he was let go (he later joined Cube Entertainment’s B2ST).

But while the documentary does provide a glimpse into the difficult factory-like process of making a K-Pop star, it also ultimately serves as an important promotional tool. And “the goal of the promotional culture of popular music has always been clear and stable regardless of the means used to achieve it: make the distribution and sale of music less risky, more predictable, and more profitable.”<sup>64</sup>

There has been some controversy regarding this process. A recent BBC News article reports, “some of K-Pop's biggest success stories were built on the back of so-called slave contracts, which tied its trainee-stars into long exclusive deals, with little control or financial reward.”<sup>65</sup> This is the result of several factors, including the enormity of the initial investment producers must make to train their acts for debut as well as the fact that CD sales are relatively low and digital downloads in Korea are extremely cheap. There is also the rampant international problem of piracy. Several lawsuits have cropped up, involving stars suing management for unreasonable contract terms. Complaints include: lack of sufficient compensation, unreasonably long contract lengths, and strict lifestyle restrictions. As one blogger sees it,

“They might wear nice clothes and look fancy, but these designer duds come from sponsors and don’t actually belong to the idols themselves. The amount of money they’re putting away in the bank is even less than that of the average cog in the corporate machine. And unlike a white collar worker, after these idols have reached a certain age, there’s no real prospect for a hopeful future anymore.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Fairchild, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Lucy Williamson, “The Dark Side of South Korean Pop Music,” BBC, June 14, 2011, accessed December 1, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13760064>.

<sup>66</sup> “Point: Slave Contracts, The Grime of K-Pop,” Seoulbeats, October 21, 2011, accessed February 26, 2012, <http://seoulbeats.com/2011/10/point-slave-contracts-the-grime-of-k-pop/>.

Despite these criticisms, the industrialized “idol” system largely defines the K-Pop industry. Consumption of music is entangled with the consumption of persona, image, and spectacle. Charles Fairchild would say that this system is in some ways indicative of broader trends in the entire global music industry. Fairchild focuses on the “Idol” reality television phenomenon, with *American Idol* and similar competition shows in the UK, South Africa, Australia, India, and the Middle East. For him, the idol figure “gives us a familiar narrative framework which takes the form of a seamlessly integrated cross-media platform through which the music industry can display its expanded palette of products and venues for consumption.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, the emotional connections formed between these idols and fans create more sites of consumption and different cultural products, which all work together to increase the popularity of the idol and his/her music. Related to the recruitment and training process surrounding K-Pop bands, we can apply Fairchild’s observations of the “Idol” franchise.

For instance, Fairchild explains,

“A central part of succeeding in Australian Idol is the ability to demonstrate that you can grow as a person and as a performer because of the challenges you face during the competition itself...we are guaranteed drama and it is made clear to viewers and performers alike that being an ‘Idol’ is not really much fun at all. It is in fact an ethical relationship with the public to whom, it is stated repeatedly, all pop stars are indebted and beholden.”

Thinking back to the Big Bang documentary, there is a similar emphasis on the struggle that the members went through to get to where they were. There was also a similar competition aspect, as the CEO of YG explained that some of the boys would be cut from the band depending on their performance. However, the show is different in that this particular spectacle seems to be much more transparent. Korean fans want to see the “real” Ji-Yong, the “real” Yong bae. There aren’t flashy stages or large performances. The boys don’t live glamorously. No one can vote for them

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<sup>67</sup> Fairchild, 3.

or support them. The record company has complete control over who wins and who loses. K-Pop idols are judged much more openly, and some might say much more harshly. And unlike say, *American Idol*, their appearance (their actual physical looks, rather than just their clothing or style), dancing ability, etc. are given much more open consideration.

And once they become stars, Korean idols are expected to act conservatively. Performers are “allowed to act out a part or a character on stage, but their real life should be untainted and virtuous.”<sup>68</sup> In July 1997, KBS announced a dress code for pop stars appearing on TV. “There were to be no earrings, no dyed hair, no tattoos, no exposing of navels, and: ‘entertainers who wear outfits which may harm the sound emotional development of youth will be banned.’”<sup>69</sup> This code hasn’t remained exactly clear across time, having been defined arbitrarily depending on Korea’s political and social climate at any particular historical moment. Restrictions have since become more lax, as evidenced by the flamboyance and proliferation of Korean fashion and image, but there is still a significant disconnect between how stars are portrayed in their music videos and performances and how they are expected to conduct themselves in real life.<sup>70</sup> These media are spaces in which “fantasies could be safely acted out,” but strict morality is maintained outside of these fantasy worlds.<sup>71</sup>

It is within music videos especially that audiences can often see a very different side of the polite, innocent idols that get interviewed on TV. The Korean music industry currently prides itself on producing modern, edgy content, not only in the lyrics and style of the music, but also in the aesthetic qualities of its music videos. By law in South Korea, a minimum of 60% of total

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<sup>68</sup> Willoughby, “Image is Everything,” 100.

<sup>69</sup> Howard, “Coming of Age,” 82.

<sup>70</sup> In October 2011, it was reported that Big Bang’s G Dragon had been caught smoking marijuana. It had allegedly been a cigarette given to him at a club, and he claimed to have not known what was in it. Having had no prior offenses and such a small amount of marijuana in his system, authorities let him go with a warning. Nevertheless, the incident sidelined his career for months.

<sup>71</sup> Willoughby, 102.

broadcasting hours dedicated to popular music on both television networks and cable channels must be for programs produced domestically. Global music corporations have thus experienced limited access to the television and radio distribution networks and have struggled in the past to gain a foothold in the local Korean music market since the 1990s.<sup>72</sup> But Korea is actively producing its videos for a global audience, as they are disseminated online via YouTube and fan blogs. Although K-Pop videos can be described as more narrative-based (often adhering to similar themes and conventions from Korean television dramas), videos can also contain sexually suggestive content, nightclub scenes, sexually charged choreography (usually among girl groups), etc. The contradictory nature of these images when compared with idols' fiercely maintained "model youth" façades are indicative of the broader trend among South Korean youth of a constant negotiation between "the global and local dialogues to which they are simultaneously exposed."<sup>73</sup> That negotiation is occurring within a strictly controlled system—one that concerns itself with both on-screen and public image.

Lee Soo Man comments on the uniqueness of this type of management system. He says,

"The U.S. couldn't establish a management system like ours. Picking trainees, signing a long term contract, and teaching trainees for a long period of time, this just can't happen in the U.S. U.S. agencies are hired as sub-contractors after an artist has grown and gained popularity on their own. As a result, the agencies only play roles of sub-contractors, and can't make long-term investments in singer-hopefuls. However, in Korea and Japan, whose cultural industries developed later, agencies were free to make such contracts."<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, this industrialized production system is emblematic of the K-Pop industry.

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<sup>72</sup> Hee-Eun Lee, "Seeking the 'Others' Within Us," 133.

<sup>73</sup> Jamie Shinhee Lee, 429.

<sup>74</sup> Lee Soo Man, quoted in "Lee Soo Man on His System of Management, Upcoming Groups M1 & M2, and his Dreams," Allkpop, October 17, 2011, accessed February 1, 2012, <http://www.allkpop.com/2011/10/lee-soo-man-on-his-system-of-management-upcoming-groups-m1-m2-and-his-dreams>.

### III. Around the World: Patterns of K-Pop Consumption

*“According to the group’s agency, Open World Entertainment, X-5 is greatly popular in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Open World states that the group’s official webpage is often visited by fans who live in those areas, and the webpage’s forums carry many posts written by visitors from the Middle East. A rep from the agency stated, ‘the group has never promoted in the Middle East. We believe that the group started gathering fans through KBS’ **Music Bank**, which is aired [there]...the wave of democratization in the Middle East probably helped on the popularity of K-Pop singers including X-5.’”<sup>75</sup>*

- Reported by Mnet

*“Scenarios of global culture are intrinsically political. They echo rival visions of the world and the power practices deployed to create and sustain those schemes while at the same time they attempt to discredit and dismiss alternative views.”<sup>76</sup>*

- Marwan Kraidy

#### 1. Where is K-Pop being consumed?

Sun Jung observes that in the beginnings of the Korean Wave in Asia, it was

*“the new consumer lifestyles of the new rich that become the basis for an emerging ‘cultural Asia.’ As Asia’s economic power and technological infrastructure develop, there are complex social implications that result from the new cultural practices of the new rich. One of these implications is evident in the increasing visibility of a group of consumers that I call ‘trans-pop-consumers.’”<sup>77</sup>*

Jung’s term, “trans-pop-consumers,” refers to the emerging class in Asia that finds itself with more means to procure entertainment in addition to material goods and services. According to Jung, such consumers are culturally hybrid, technologically savvy, and pursuant of a global consumerist lifestyle.<sup>78</sup> Such consumers are not just found in Asia, but anywhere people have the leisure time and the means to maintain such a lifestyle.

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<sup>75</sup> “X-5 Enjoying Surge of Popularity in the Middle East,” Mnet, January 16, 2012, accessed February 19, 2012, [http://global.mnet.com/news/newsdetail.m?searchNewsVO.news\\_id=201201161418\\_2794](http://global.mnet.com/news/newsdetail.m?searchNewsVO.news_id=201201161418_2794).

<sup>76</sup> Kraidy, 16.

<sup>77</sup> Sun Jung, 75.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 76.

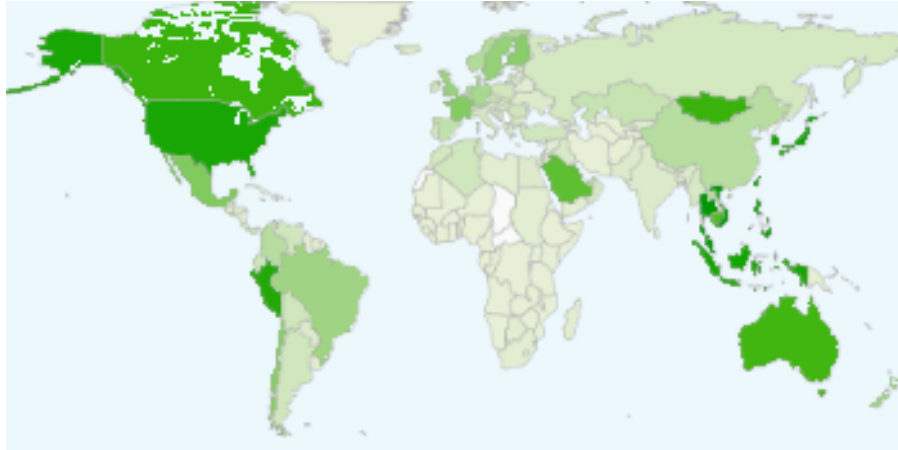
Henry Jenkins writes more generally that “global convergence is giving rise to a new pop cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitans embrace cultural difference, seeking to escape the gravitational pull of their local communities in order to enter a broader sphere of cultural experience.”<sup>79</sup> In a similar vein, David Jennings describes today’s media consumption pattern as “foraging,” an individual, self-motivated form of exploration that “allows for the many social influences and cues that make their presence felt in the process of discovery.”<sup>80</sup> That pop cosmopolitanism—in combination with the foraging instinct that now can be found amongst media consumers with access to the Internet and an interest in entertainment—is what has brought K-Pop to the world at large.

It’s difficult to concretely draw conclusions concerning the popularity of K-Pop around the world. Overseas sales statistics are hard to come by, and do not necessarily reflect where people are listening to K-Pop music, as they do not take into account pirated downloads and other forms of illicit consumption common in today’s music market. One way to draw some insight on the spread of K-Pop culture is to look at the demographic information provided by YouTube Insight (a statistical tool) for various K-Pop music videos. Fans all over the world have access to the site, and it is a go-to source for visual K-Pop content. See the figures below. The darker green colors are an indication of higher numbers of views for that particular region. Also included for comparative purposes are charts for the music videos of popular singles coming from the United States by Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, and Katy Perry.

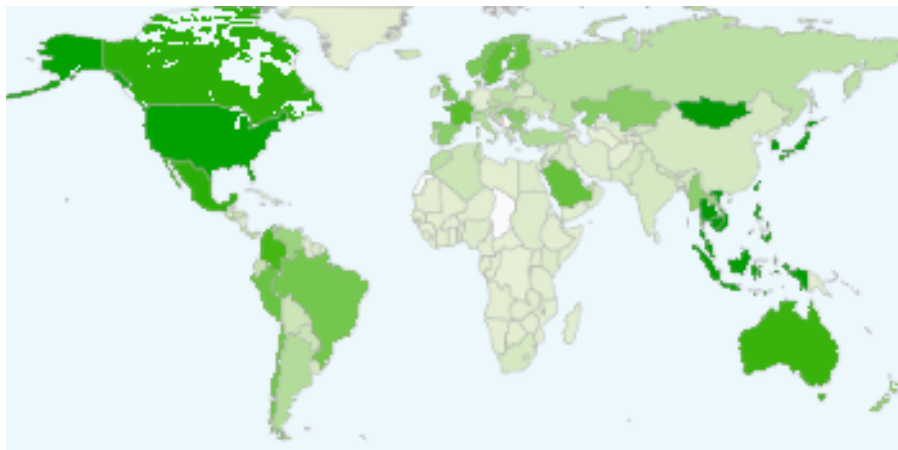
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<sup>79</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, Gamers*, 155.

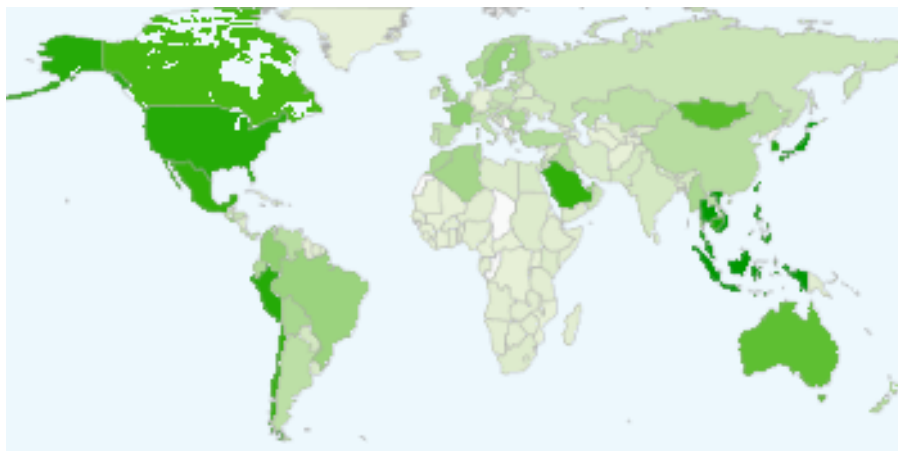
<sup>80</sup> David Jennings, *Net, Blogs and Rock n’ Roll: How Digital Discovery Works and What it Means for Consumers, Creators, and Culture* (Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2007), 12.



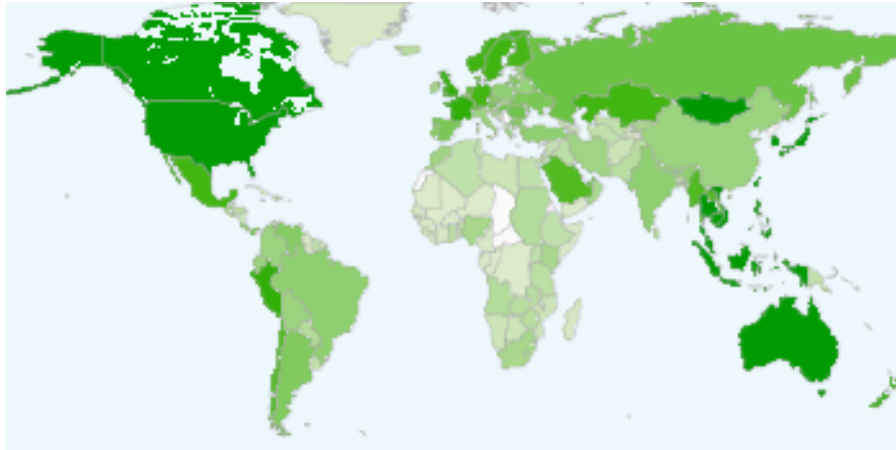
**Figure 1: Distribution of views as of March 23, 2012 for Girls Generation's "Gee," posted to YouTube on June 8, 2009. Total number of views as of March 23, 2012: 69,086,164.**



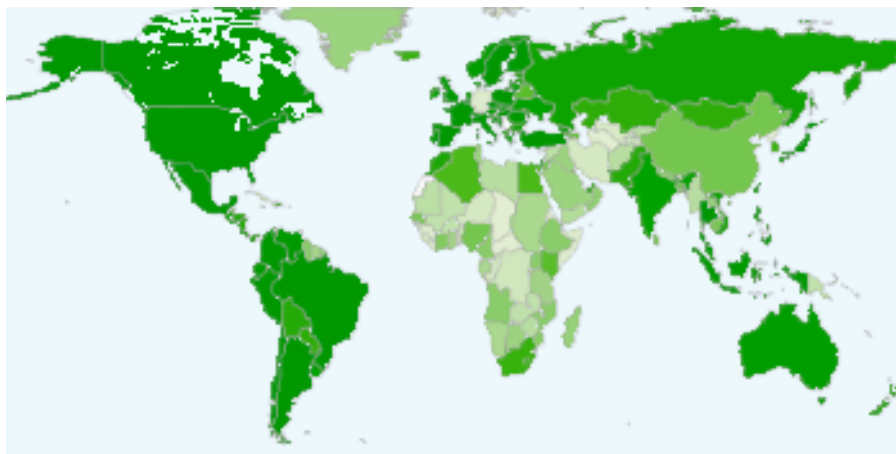
**Figure 2: Distribution of views as of March 23, 2012 for 2NE1's "I Am the Best," posted to YouTube on June 26, 2011. Total number of views as of March 23, 2012: 37,244,292.**



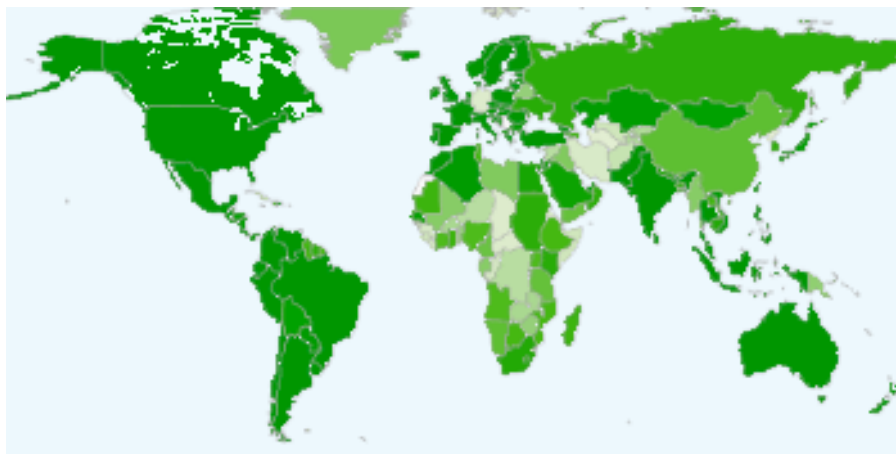
**Figure 3: Distribution of views as of March 23, 2012 for Super Junior's "Mr. Simple," posted to YouTube on August 2, 2011. Total number of views as of March 23, 2012: 39,817,024.**



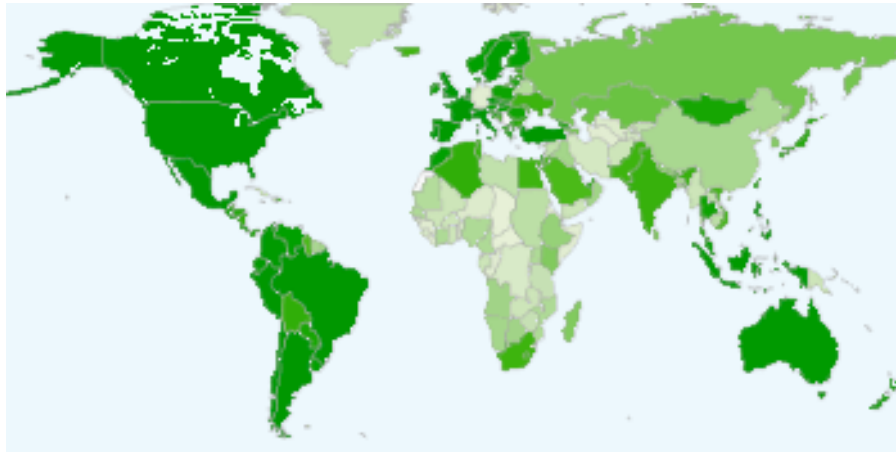
**Figure 4: Distribution of views as of March 23, 2012 for Big Bang’s “Blue,” posted to YouTube on February 20, 2012. Total number of views as of March 23, 2012: 15,895,525.**



**Figure 5: Distribution of views as of March 23, 2012 for Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance,” posted to YouTube on November 23, 2009. Total number of views as of March 23, 2012: 454,444,606.**



**Figure 6: Distribution of views as of March 23, 2012 for Justin Bieber’s “Baby,” posted to YouTube on February 8, 2010. Total number of views as of March 23, 2012: 719,447,860.**



**Figure 7: Distribution of views as of March 23, 2012 for Katy Perry's "Firework," posted to YouTube on October 27, 2010. Total number of views as of March 23, 2012: 280,131,585.**

Comparing these K-Pop video statistics with popular viral music videos coming from the United States, it's clear that the genre still does have a long way to go towards similar levels of popularity. Justin Bieber's "Baby" video has especially experienced enormous global reach (but interestingly, the video has more "dislikes" than "likes," while the consensus on K-Pop videos are generally positive).

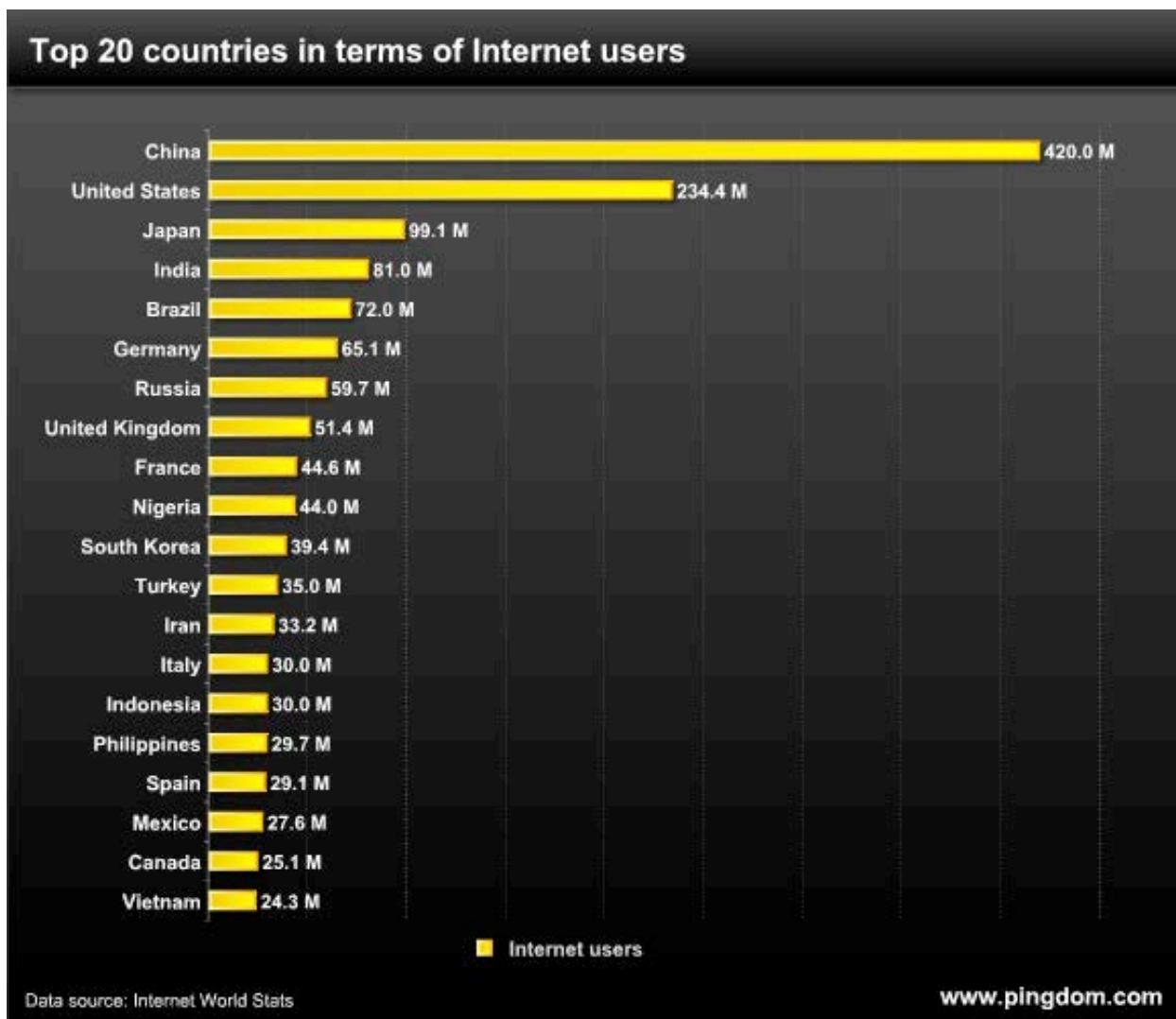
Nevertheless, as can be readily observed, K-Pop has made waves through Asia, including Japan, Mongolia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. There are large viewing populations outside of Asia in the United States, Canada, Australia, Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Saudi Arabia. There are also significant audiences in Brazil, Colombia, the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, Finland, Algeria, and Morocco. Of course, there are limits to this kind of brief analysis. There are no concrete numbers to look at, nor does the survey take into account the fact that YouTube may be blocked/inaccessible in some areas like China. Also, it doesn't measure how much people are actually purchasing/downloading/listening to the music. Again, it is very difficult to measure and access such figures. But these maps are helpful in that

they give a ballpark idea of where and how much K-Pop is being consumed. Most of the K-Pop maps are covered in at least light green, with only a couple countries in Africa with little to no views. K-Pop has clearly reached throughout the world, with certain hotspots (both expected and unexpected).

Reasons for increased viewership in certain countries could have to do with a number of variables, including the distribution of the Korean diasporic population and levels of economic development and Internet access. A 2003 report on the Korean Diaspora and the global economy explains, “Overseas Koreans are concentrated in 5 countries or commonwealths, each with more than 100,000 ethnic Koreans...these are the United States, China, Japan, the CIS, and Canada, which together account for 5.3 million, or 93 percent, of all overseas Koreans.”<sup>81</sup> Thus this variable may factor into the significant viewing populations in the United States, Japan, and Canada. In terms of Internet access, Figure 8 shows the 20 countries with the highest number of Internet users in the world, notably including China, Brazil, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

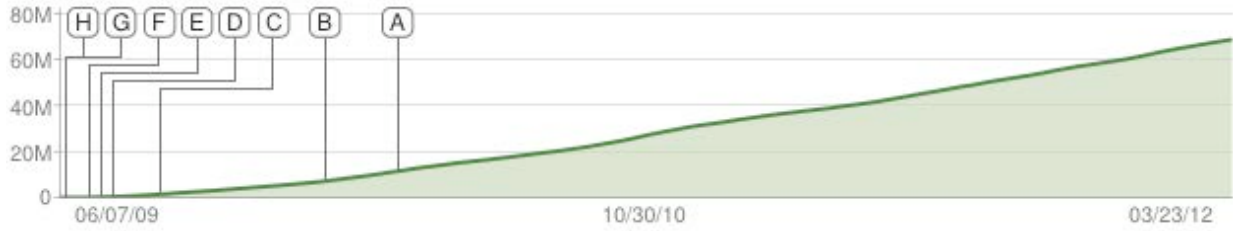
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<sup>81</sup> C. Fred Bergsten, and Inbom Choi, eds., *The Korean Diaspora in the World Economy* (Washington: Institute for International Economics, 2003), 17.



**Figure 8: Top 20 Countries with the Most Internet Users**

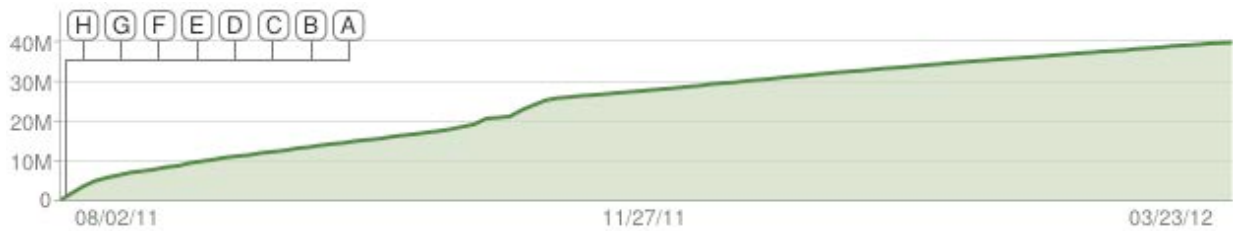
What’s interesting to look at also is the map for Big Bang’s “Blue” (Figure 4), because the data shows the level of viewership for just over one month of time. In Figures 1, 2, and 3, the videos have been up for between six months to over two years, allowing time to analyze the viewership in various countries over a sustained period. Most of the older videos have a linear trend of a steady increase in views (see Figures 9, 10, and 11 below).



**Figure 9: Number of viewers over time for Girls' Generation's "Gee"**



**Figure 10: Number of viewers over time for 2NE1's "I Am the Best"**



**Figure 11: Number of viewers over time for Super Junior's "Mr. Simple"**

[The lettered points included on the graph by YouTube are indications of significant discovery events, or events in which there are many instances of a common source link to a video (certain YouTube searches, referrals from other YouTube videos, Google searches, views from mobile devices, etc)].

Thus, it's clear that viewership has remained relatively steady for these videos over time. Yet the distribution also changes as time passes. Interest in these videos may wane in certain countries while remaining sustained in others. Thus, countries like the United States, Canada,

and countries in the Asia Pacific all have higher sustained viewership, which in turn lowers the percentage of views coming from other countries. This may be an indication of course that there exist many more fans in these countries. However, when looking at the map of Big Bang's "Blue" video, it's clear that in its first month of release, it has reached a more evenly distributed, comprehensive global audience, including more of South and Central America, Western and Eastern Europe, and parts of Africa.<sup>82</sup> Thus, it can be said that at least in this instance, a K-Pop group's new album release really did spark enormous interest around the world.

## 2. *Interculture, Transnational Identity, and Resistance*

Arjun Appadurai writes, "neither images nor viewers fit into circuits or audiences that are easily bound within local, national, or regional spaces."<sup>83</sup> This does not necessarily mean, however, that locality and individual identity do not still factor into how people consume foreign media. Jenkins asserts, for instance, that although "the 'surrender' of oneself to a foreign culture enables fresh perceptions upon which a deeper understanding can be built, there is no guarantee that pop cosmopolitanism will lead to any real understanding between different cultures, since...it often involves the selective appropriation and repurposing of other cultural traditions for one's own interests."<sup>84</sup>

Jenkins makes a salient point about the importance of one's local influences on consuming foreign cultural products. It is important to challenge the fact that "conceptualizations of the national...have been somewhat sidelined or second-leagued in a world increasingly dominated by the processes of globalization, deterritorialization, transmigration, and forms of

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<sup>82</sup> Global interest in the video and the rest of the group's new album is also clear in other ways. Attention to the new album came from outside of Asia with acknowledgment from *TIME* magazine and the French music site "Jukebox."

<sup>83</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: The Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>84</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, Gamers*, 169-170.

cultural hybridity.”<sup>85</sup> Because K-Pop as a musical genre is so deeply connected to a nation and a culture, it is important to consider how to understand the fluid circulation and spread of different musical practices across an enormous variety of cultural spaces and contexts. Music is tied with personal, cultural, and national identities (Tia DeNora writes, “music can be used as a device for the reflexive process of...spinning the apparently continuous tale of who one is.”)<sup>86</sup> However, although Jenkins also says that pop cosmopolitanism would not necessarily lead to more cultural understanding, in what ways *can* music foster greater cultural understanding?

It might be helpful to think about the rather vague idea of world music, or a broad category that includes various non-Western “Asian, Latin, African, and Caribbean mass-mediated genres.”<sup>87</sup> According to Martin Stokes, “world music...testified to a radically new political moment and more equitable cultural relations between the West and the rest.”<sup>88</sup> He asks,

“How and why do Italian bel canto singing, Anglo-Celtic jigging and reeling, Latin dance forms from the tango to the Macarena, modal (maqam) improvisation in the Middle East and the Balkans, tasting and rapping in the Caribbean and the United States, Central European polka, the bell patterns of West African drumming, the timbre-rich droning of Australian aboriginal music...cross so many cultural boundaries with such energy, boundaries at which so much else comes to an abrupt halt?”<sup>89</sup>

Indeed, music seems to play an important role in bridging cultural gaps or creating intercultural connections that might not have had another avenue through which to occur.

So how does interculturalization, or the creation and shaping of these new cross-cultural global spaces, happen? “One factor may be [music’s] cognitive ‘graspability’ within certain broadly shared cultural formations.”<sup>90</sup> In an article about the anthropology and cognition of

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<sup>85</sup> Ian Biddle and Vanessa Knights, eds., *Music, National Identity, and the Politics of Location* (Cornwall: Ashgate, 2007), 1.

<sup>86</sup> Tia DeNora, “Music and Self-Identity,” in Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee, eds., *The Popular Music Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 141.

<sup>87</sup> Martin Stokes, “Music and the Global Order,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 51.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

music listening, Bruno Deschenes explains that “one’s musical tastes are never strictly aesthetic; they are...established according to the psychosocial context that defines any type of music, i.e. how and what can be appreciated in this music, and how one can do so.” In other words, our expectations of new music are based upon our environment, the choices that we have made already, and our receptiveness to the unfamiliar. Deschenes is quick to emphasize that regardless of whether audiences consume foreign music, their position as foreigner creates a different “cognitive focus of attention...we attend to any type of music based on the psychosocial background with which we are entrained.”<sup>91</sup>

As musical choice expands and people begin to appreciate that wider musical environment, however, peoples’ “listening attitudes and aesthetic considerations will reflect this kind of diversified open-mindedness.”<sup>92</sup> Theoretically, that open-mindedness is what builds fan bases for K-Pop and other foreign or “world” music. This can be looked at in conjunction with hybridity, and Hee-Eun Lee’s idea that “hybridized Korean hip-hop/dance music has managed to make the once-strange into the familiar, and the once-familiar has been made strange.”<sup>93</sup> As foreign audiences latch onto the “familiar,” more global aspects of K-Pop, they become more willing to accept the “stranger” sides of the genre, like the ways in which artists integrate rap, singing, hip-hop and pop styles in new ways. Likewise, the broad circulation of music around the world has created a more receptive audience in general.

At the same time, the industry actively seeks to make K-Pop stylistically acceptable to global audiences through that reinforcement of “strangeness” with a certain amount of familiarity. A larger hurdle for foreign audiences is probably the language barrier. Jamie Shinhee

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<sup>91</sup> Deschenes, 140.

<sup>92</sup> Bruno Deschenes, “Toward an Anthropology of Music Listening,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 29, no. 2 (December 1998): 139.

<sup>93</sup> Hee-Eun Lee, “Seeking the ‘Others’ Within Us,” 138.

Lee talks about the use of English in K-Pop lyrics to challenge dominant representations of authority, assert a sense of self-identity, resist mainstream norms, or reject conservatism. Though K-Pop is dominated by Korean lyrics (unless the producers create English, Japanese, or Mandarin versions of their songs), small insertions of English into Korean songs can make them more accessible for foreign audiences.

The Korean lyrics, however, maintain culturally distinct characteristics. Lee explains that often, in a song with mildly rebellious uses of English words, “Korean lyrics within the same song represent a reserved, wholesome, and introspective conformist’s view. Mixing two language codes epitomizes South Korean youth’s battle with their unsettling identities in dealing with the tension between the global and local dialogues to which they are simultaneously exposed.”<sup>94</sup> While there exists a linguistic and cultural barrier, the industry utilizes English to make songs more approachable as well as a space for youth to challenge notions of national identity. However, there must also be a negotiation on the part of foreign audiences, who cannot understand the entirety of a K-Pop song, but enjoy it anyway (this has led to the fan subbing phenomenon, which will be discussed in Chapter 4).

Another important point that Deschenes makes is that “to be a fan of a type of music, one must identify, even if only partially, with the cultural models that characterize it.”<sup>95</sup> Indeed, K-Pop fans do seek to learn more about Korean culture more broadly. The Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS) has taken note of this, working diligently in other ways to expand Korean culture abroad, including the construction of cultural centers in 30 foreign countries including Spain, Australia, and Indonesia. These centers’ activities include language and culture lectures, movie screenings, and performances. Their promotion of Korean culture includes K-

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<sup>94</sup> Jamie Shinhee Lee, 446.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 142.

Pop of course, as “K-Pop fever, which met with great success in Paris, the cultural capital of the world, is...spreading to Latin America and Africa, across the Atlantic.”

Seo Kang-soo, director of the KOCIS, said, ““culture stands in the center of soft power...the Hallyu [Korean wave] phenomenon will become clearer than ever before in Europe, and more Korean culture will advance into the European market in the immediate future.”<sup>96</sup> Seo also commented on the KOCIS’s role in supporting K-Pop specifically: “we will establish a system that systematically supports activities of Hallyu fan clubs and K-Pop cafés in the world...At the same time, we are pushing ahead with the ‘Hallyu concert world tour’ by Korean Hallyu stars.”<sup>97</sup>

It is clear that the Hallyu Wave can be considered a form of soft power, defined by Joseph Nye as wielding influence through attraction, co-option, and persuasion.<sup>98</sup> Soft power resources, or the assets that produce such an attraction, can include scientific knowledge, technology, and cultural exchange. K-Pop and other cultural products can certainly be looked at as soft power if you look at the foreign interest and economic benefits that they have brought to Korea. Statistics Korea released a report on October 30, 2011 that stated that the 8.8 million people visited Korea in 2010, a 70.9% year-on-year increase from 5.15 million in 2001. Korean cultural exports have had a steady annual average increase rate of 18.9%, going from \$1.3 billion in 2005 to over 2.6 billion in 2009.<sup>99</sup>

When framed in this “soft power” context, K-Pop has the potential to become (if only slightly) politicized. In fact, there have been some small pockets of resistance toward Korean

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<sup>96</sup> Lee Kyung-min, “K-Pop Fever Spreads to Latin America and Africa,” *Korea IT Times*, November 28, 2011, accessed March 23, 2012, <http://www.koreaitimes.com/story/15858/k-pop-fever-spreads-latin-america-and-africa>.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Perseus, 2004), 5-6.

<sup>99</sup> Hwang Dana, “Korea in the World Seen Through Statistics,” *Korea.net*, November 18, 2011, accessed March 10, 2012, <http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=89916>.

cultural influence in Japan, where people have protested against the Hallyu wave. For although K-Pop is booming business in Japan, J-Pop isn't doing so well in South Korea. A manager at J-Pop for Sony BMG Music Entertainment Korea explains, "after the opening of the market to J-pop in January 2004, we expected J-pop to take a 10% market share. But J-pop's 2004 total music market share was only 5%." There are other industry estimates that are even lower—three percent.<sup>100</sup>

On August 7, 2011, about 500 protesters rallied outside of Fuji TV headquarters to voice their anger at the broadcaster's support and perpetuation of the Korean Wave. Demonstrators waved Japanese flags, while chanting, "Long live the emperor" and singing their national anthem. Japanese celebrity actor Sousuke Takaoka also criticized Fuji TV, saying, "I often think it's Korean TV. Japanese people want traditional Japanese programs."<sup>101</sup>

Of course, Japanese cultural influence in the world is not to be discounted. Koichi Iwabuchi's *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* seeks to explore the proliferation of Japanese popular culture in Asia and elsewhere. If anything, the minor clash here between Japan and Korea demonstrates that Asia itself is becoming more of a force in global cultural production.

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<sup>100</sup> Mark Russell, "Korean Pop Seeps into Japan," *Billboard - the International Newsweekly of Music, Video and Home Entertainment*, Jun 11, 2005, accessed March 25, 2012, <http://libproxy.vassar.edu/docview/996170?accountid=14824>.

<sup>101</sup> "Anti-Korean Wave in Japan Turns Political," *CNN Go*, August 9, 2011, accessed March 3, 2012, <http://www.cnn.go.com/seoul/life/anti-korean-wave-japan-turns-political-141304>.

#### IV. Crazy! The “Pop” in K-Pop

*“The music and entertainment industries express their power by trying to shape as many contexts of consumption as possible in order to reduce market risk...acknowledging the agency of consumers and then working with or around that agency to establish as many ways to profit from it as possible.”<sup>102</sup>*

- Charles Fairchild

*“We were at the Asia Song Festival on the weekend and got to see some awesome acts, including 4Minute, Kara, 2AM, B2ST, Rain, and BoA. All were great. B2ST was fantastic, Rain was unbelievable, and BoA was, well, we don’t know. When BoA went on, we couldn’t hear the show. Like, not at all. Why? Because the people you see in the video were sitting right behind us screaming the whole time. And not regular screaming. It was cold outside, and one of the girls was screaming so much that her face was covered in sweat. No joke.”<sup>103</sup>*

- Eatyourkimchi.com

##### 1. *H.O.T.? Issues of Gender and Sexuality in K-Pop’s Appeal*

In a blog comment posted on September 2, 2011, a fan replied to a post asking why people enjoy K-Pop. Her answer:

“I got tired of watching half naked girls on TV. Im [sic] a girl, I don’t want to see that. Plus the lyrics have gotten dirtier over the years. I don’t listen to much mainstream music anymore. Just country and rock. If I want a pop song, I listen to kpop. The music is so cheerful and happy. I would rather listen to 100 songs about love than about sex, drugs, and partying. It is also more easier [sic] to relate to kpop idols...you dont [sic] hear about them partying all night, sleeping around, or spending millions of dollars.<sup>104</sup>

As evidenced by this comment and others on the blogosphere, a common perception of K-Pop among fans seems to be that the music and the people who perform it are both more wholesome than their counterparts in say, the United States. As was discussed earlier, the

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<sup>102</sup> Fairchild, 4.

<sup>103</sup> “Jumping BOAs and K-Pop Fan Groups,” Eat Your Kimchi, accessed February 26, 2012, <http://www.eatyourkimchi.com/jumping-boas-kpop-fan-groups/>.

<sup>104</sup> Sharon Lillian Overlord, comment on “Why do YOU like Kpop?” Wannabefob: Embracing Asian Culture, blog entry November 23, 2009, <http://wannabefob.wordpress.com/2009/11/23/why-do-you-like-kpop/>, accessed February 26, 2012.

industry does have certain standards when it comes to lyrical content, choreography, the public conduct of their stars, and music videos. Censorship does happen in abundance, led primarily by broadcasting companies as well as the South Korean government's Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF). In the past three years, almost 3000 songs have been banned from being aired at certain times and from being sold to youths younger than nineteen. Reasons for a blacklisting range from inappropriate references to drinking to sexually suggestive content. But there aren't clear guidelines. The ministry is notorious for its arbitrary, inconsistent censorship decisions.<sup>105</sup>

Within these tensions among censorship, conservative perceptions of “decency,” complicated cultural notions of gender, the active production of image and sexuality, and K-Pop's attempts to remain edgy, there is a complex negotiation of femininity, masculinity, sexuality, and morality. It is often the successful navigation of these tensions that help contribute to K-Pop's appeal.

### *Masculinity*

With regard to masculinity, Sun Jung brings a discussion of hybridity back into the picture. She argues that hybridizations of Korean traditional masculinities and global masculinities allow various sets of “regional viewers” to embrace such representations.<sup>106</sup> When looking at idol boy bands, she calls this result “manufactured versatile masculinity,” which simultaneously “Asianizes” band members and diminishes their “Korean-ness” while also

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<sup>105</sup> Lee Yoo Eun, “South Korea: Pop Music Censorship Meets with Strong Opposition,” *Censorship in America*, August 29, 2011, accessed February 25, 2012, <http://censorshipinamerica.com/2011/08/29/south-korea-pop-music-censorship-meets-with-strong-opposition/>.

<sup>106</sup> Sun Jung, 4.

actively retaining a kind of national specificity.<sup>107</sup> It seems paradoxical, but it is this constant construction, reconstruction, and flexibility of K-Pop culture that Jung says allows it to traverse various globalized and localized contexts.

Jung highlights Judith Butler's term "gender performativity," which is the idea that conceptions of gender are unstable and solidified at certain points in time by "a stylized repetition of acts...gender is instituted through the stylization of the body, and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."<sup>108</sup> In other words, constructions of both femininity and masculinity are created within repeated patterns of every day social behavior.

According to Jung, different forms of non-Korean global masculinities include different forms of "cute" (Japanese *kawaii* masculinity), "cool," and "metrosexual" masculinities. These stand in contrast to what Moon Seung-Sook refers to as "hegemonic masculinity," or the dominant expressions of masculinity in Korea. These include patriarchal authoritarian masculinity (couched in an ability to provide for and run the family), *seonbi* (a Confucian, traditional masculinity that reflects a separation from domestic space and labor), and violent masculinity (which stems from compulsory military service for men).<sup>109</sup> Jung argues that these features of South Korean hegemonic masculinity have been deconstructed and reconstituted in recent decades.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theater Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

<sup>109</sup> Seung-sook Moon, "The Production and Subversion of Hegemonic Masculinity: Reconfiguring Gender Hierarchy in Contemporary South Korea," in Laurel Kendall, ed., *Under Construction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 79-114.

<sup>110</sup> Sun Jung, 29.

Jung uses the term “soft masculinity” to describe a non-national, hybrid construction that combines traditional *seonbi* masculinity with Japanese *kawaii* (cute) masculinity, and “global metrosexual masculinity.”<sup>111</sup> This, she says, is characterized by three performative elements. The first, “tender charisma,” is a masculine “third space,” in which the man can be simultaneously gentle and strong. This idea is connected to *seonbi* masculinity, and the Confucian ideal of a man with “a tender exterior and a strong inner will.” A second aspect is that of purity and innocence, while the third is politeness.<sup>112</sup> This form of soft masculinity has translated into the *kkonminam* (a word that is a combination between the words for flower and “beautiful man”) pretty boy phenomenon in South Korea, which began in the late 1990s and may have stemmed from Japanese *bishōnen* (beautiful boy) images in *shōjo manga*, which are comics usually about the romantic lives of teenage girls.<sup>113</sup> Evidence of this phenomenon exists in many corners of Korean popular culture, whether in fashion, music, photography, advertising, or television. There has recently been an explosion of “flower boy” Korean dramas, including *Shut Up Flower Boy Band*, *Boys over Flowers*, and *Flower Boy Ramyun Shop*.

These more feminine males have often replaced the macho image of the South Korean man, and have resulted from various cultural crossings. Bands like TVXQ, SHINee, and Super Junior have adopted this approach. “Soft masculine” gender performativity is highlighted and negotiated notably in various gender-bending parodies by male singing groups. Transgender role-playing, in which male groups imitate girl group performances on game shows and music programs, have become a common occurrence.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 46-52.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 58.



Picture 5: Super Junior, working on their pretty boy, *kawaii* image. (Source: kyuubi.net)

On the other hand, however, Jung emphasizes that there is another side to Korean constructions of masculinity—the *jimseungdol* phenomenon that she dates to 2008. This involves an emphasis on the tough, virile male figure. This includes bands like 2PM, B2ST (pronounced “beast”), and MBLAQ. However, these bands maintain an even more hybridized, multi-faceted approach to masculinity, keeping some aspects of *kawaii* and *kkonminam* masculinities, in order to appeal to other established audience sensibilities. This approach “is multi-layered, culturally mixed, simultaneously contradictory, and most of all strategically manufactured.”<sup>114</sup> Jung talks about 2PM member, Taeyeon:

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 165.

“He is a *kawaii* cute boy in a sexy beast-like man’s body. For sex appeal, Taecyeon would not hesitate to fiercely rip his shirt off...on the other hand, in a number of episodes of the aforementioned reality shows on cable channels, he often exercises ‘cute gestures,’ making girly and sweet facial expressions and voices. Moreover, this 186-centimeter tall muscular boy often transforms into one of the girl group members, wearing a navy cap with a big pink ribbon or bright orange-colored tight skinny jeans. His masculinity is flexible, transformable, and hybridized.”<sup>115</sup>

Thus, there are many ways in which masculinity is transformed and carefully maintained in order to appeal to a certain feminine desire.

These desires have changed over time, and are also the result of cross-cultural exchange in various social practices and media demonstrations of these performativities. The influence of Chinese Confucian ideals, Japanese *kawaii* masculinity, and the global sort of masculinity espoused by international Western celebrities have all contributed to varied gender “performances” among male K-Pop bands. And their ultimate goal? To sell an image to the screaming girls in the crowd.



Picture 6: 2PM members Taecyeon and Nichkhun posing for a Coca Cola ad. (Source: Daebaksubs.com)

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.



**Picture 7: 2PM members Taeyeon, Chansung, and Wooyoung parodying girl group Orange Caramel at their 2010 concert at Seoul Olympic Park. (Source: popseoul.wordpress.com)**

### *An Analysis of 2PM's "Again and Again" Music Video*

"Again and Again" was a wildly popular single off of 2PM's 2009 album (JYP Entertainment), *2:00PM, Time for Change*. Its music video demonstrates some of the kinds of hybrid masculinities that Sun Jung points to. The song is about a man's inability to get out of a toxic relationship with a femme fatale figure. The video alternates between a kinetic synchronized dance section and a narrative section. In the narrative part of the video, one of the members is brooding in a large black SUV, outside of his former girlfriend's home. A sleek, silver sports car pulls up, and a couple gets out. He watches them embrace through the window, lamenting his inability to forget about this girl. The girl then becomes the object of the 2PM members' collective fixation. They all walk around the glass house, pining after and watching her through windows.

In terms of their clothes, the dance sections feature leather vests and heavy, strong clothing. In the narrative sections, they all wear simple black suits, which signals what might be

described as a “cool,” non-descript global masculinity. In the dance sections, the wardrobe speaks of toughness and grittiness. Indeed, their robust, purposeful dance moves signal a certain sense of power and authoritativeness that is in line with 2PM’s *jimseungdol* image. This power is reflected in the narrative section, as the male figure voyeuristically watches the girl without her knowledge.

At the same time, the entire song is about what is essentially a group of sensitive men in inner turmoil. It is assumed that the woman in the house has an overwhelming power over them. Although she is the object of their voyeuristic fixation, that fixation is the result of an inherent vulnerability. The dance ends with their faces in their hands. Here is the soft masculinity that Sun Jung points to—the simultaneity of femininity and masculinity.

But then the video closes with an acrobatic dance section, which is performed not along with the “Again and Again” track, but with a solid, non-descript drumbeat. They perform flips and feats of strength as they dance. A growl of frustration can be heard over the beat. The video ends with a gymnastic flip and an end title screen with the name of the song and the 2PM logo. Similar end sequences appear in 2PM’s other videos. They remind the viewer once again of the members’ raw physical power—their “beast-like” characteristics.

### *Femininity*

When it comes to constructions of femininity in K-Pop, it’s quite a different world. Again, the influence of Confucian philosophy is apparent. “Traditionally, the husband was metaphorically referred to as ‘heaven,’ to signify his superiority, and his wife (as ‘earth’) was

supposed to serve him with reverence.”<sup>116</sup> Members of girl groups may not be allowed to get married under their contracts, but they are still serving a masculine gaze.

Heather Willoughby observes that between 1996 and 2003, there was a marked increase in how much flesh women were showing in the media in general. “In 1996, sex appeal was engendered with a look of demure sophistication, while in 2003 it was far more blatant.” This, she says, is the product of a “dreamworld of male producers, managers, and media makers.”<sup>117</sup> That dream is not only expressed in terms of overt sexuality but has also extended into the infantilization of various girl groups like Girls’ Generation, Sistar, 4Minute, and f(x). In many of their music videos, there are pervasive elements of the young, innocent, yet sexually charged girl/schoolgirl archetype.



**Picture 8: 4Minute, at a photo shoot. (Source: Fanpop.com)**

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<sup>116</sup> Kavita Karan and Katherine T. Frith, “Commercializing Asian Women: Images in Media,” *Media Report to Women* 35, no. 2 (2007): 13-18.

<sup>117</sup> Willoughby, 103-104.



**Picture 9: Another side of 4Minute. (Source: Fanpop.com)**

As one feminist blogger observes,

“there is no end to the number of girl groups who capture both the images of being innocent and cute and super sexy...the images projected seem to be designed to appeal to men, or to appeal to women *to* appeal to men. The virgin/whore paradigm is arguably locked into the image of many of these girl groups and even when many of the girl groups inevitably go for their “tough/sexy” image, even the dance choreography is often designed to be overtly submissively sexual.”

This comment not only highlights the privilege of the male gaze, but also brings in the idea of the feminine gaze. When women watch these types of performances, this blogger argues, their own self-images are couched in male desire.

Indeed, these pervasive representations of doll-like, tall, perfect women in the K-Pop industry, coupled with the global presence of media portraying the Western ideal of beauty has created a widespread sense of image insecurity among South Korean women (evidenced by

intense interest in beauty and personal products and cosmetic surgery). This trend is both caused by and the cause of current representations of women in the South Korean entertainment industry.



**Picture 10: Sistar in a 2011 promotional photo. (Source: Allkpop.com)**

To a small extent, however, globalization has brought not only equally objectifying Western representations of women, but also notions of feminism.<sup>118</sup> In Asia, feminism “remains outside the economic sphere.” Anthony Fung argues therefore, that “the feminist movement remains dependent on *individual* producers or economic directors” (emphasis added).<sup>119</sup> One company that seems to be taking this somewhat different route is YG Entertainment, with their newest female group, 2NE1, whose image cultivates a more individualized, empowered female

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<sup>118</sup> Anthony Fung, “Feminist Philosophy and Cultural Representation in the Asian Context,” *International Communication Gazette* 62, no. 2 (April 2000): 157.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

figure. Still, the question of whether “feminism can also survive within the commercial terrain [is] contingent on market reactions and profit consideration.”<sup>120</sup> 2NE1 has been extremely popular so far, which may be a reflection of a desire for a more globalized, independent representation of women.

*Girls’ Generation: “Oh!”*

Girls’ Generation (SM Entertainment) consists of nine girls. With that many members, it’s no longer about talent. It’s not about individuality. It’s about commodities. Their song “Oh!” is the lead single off of their 2010 album of the same name. The song is about a girl who wants a certain boy (she calls him “oppa,” an honorific term used by females to refer to older males) to notice her changing, more mature appearance. A translation of some of the lyrics:

Hey oppa look at me, just take a look at me  
It's the first time I've spoken like this  
I fixed my hair and put on make-up too  
Why do you not notice me?

Thump thump, my heart is beating  
I just continue imagining  
What should I do, having been so proud  
I just want to tell you

Oh! Oh! Oppa, I love you  
Ah! Ah! A lot, a lot  
It's embarrassing so don't laugh  
It's the truth so don't make fun either  
I'm just saying stupid things again

The video has received almost 48.5 million views on YouTube (February 2012). It opens upon the girls in what looks like a child’s play room. They’re laughing, high-fiving each other,

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

and playing games. They're all wearing bright, colorful outfits, with short shorts and skirts. The video then brings them to a bright turquoise high school locker room. They're now wearing sequined visors and baseball caps, along with tiny midriff-bearing t-shirts screen-printed with sports numbers, white shorts, and pink thigh-high boots. The dance that follows is somewhat suggestive, but also conveys a sense of innocence; they flip their hair back and forth like young girls.

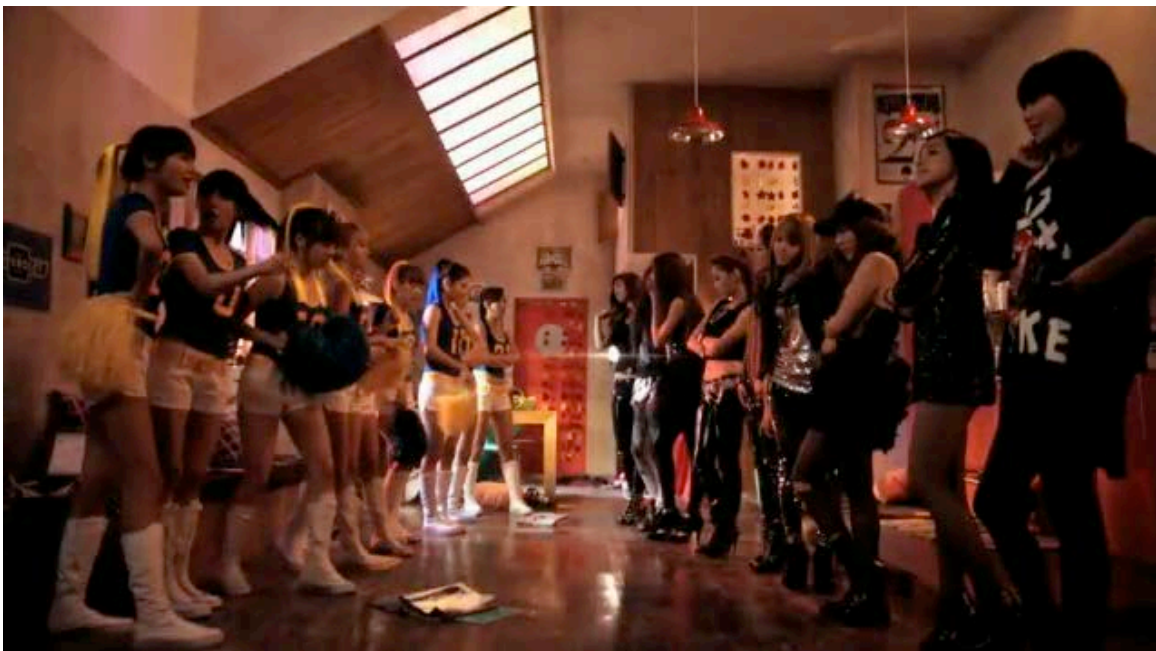


**Picture 11: Screen shot from Girls' Generation's "Oh!" (Source: SM Entertainment, GOM TV)**

These segments are interspersed with shots of the girls back in the playroom, singing, teasing each other, and making cute faces for the camera. A male football player briefly passes in front of the screen, and the scene shifts to one in which they are all dressed as cheerleaders. The video alternates between these three spaces: the playroom, the locker room, and the football

field. Then at the end of the video, the girls return from the football game to their playroom. Interestingly, there to greet them are other versions of themselves, dressed rebelliously in black, fishnets, and heavy makeup.

The male voyeur here is invoked not only in the fleeting image of the football player, but also the girls' role as cheerleaders, as both entertainers of and subordinates to a masculine organization. One does not have to look far in this case to see the infantilization and sexualization at play in this video and in the song lyrics. The ending is especially interesting; the girls face off against their visual, moral "opposites," perhaps suggesting a possibility of deviance underneath their innocent exteriors.



**Picture 12: The ending of Girls' Generation's "Oh!" music video. (Source: [kpoploves.wordpress.com](http://kpoploves.wordpress.com))**

This type of music video is extremely common for Girls' Generation. Other popular videos like "Gee," "Genie," or "Mr. Taxi" feature similar homogenizing, infantilizing, and

objectifying characteristics. These are some of the most popular videos up on YouTube, with tens of millions of views. Similar images and representations can be found in the videos of groups like Kara, Sistar, f(x), 4Minute, the Wonder Girls, and others.

### *2NE1: “Can’t Nobody”*

2NE1 (YG Entertainment) is a more complicated subject. As blogger Latoya Peterson wrote in December 2011, “2NE1 is far, far more aggressive in appearance than more traditional pop groups like The Wonder Girls, which could have been a liability.”<sup>121</sup> But 2NE1 has been challenging the stereotypes that surround Asian women—the kinds of tropes of the type that are on display in Girls’ Generation’s “Oh!” video. Peterson points out how difficult it was for Asian men to break into the hip hop music market: “There was no place on the airwaves for Far East Movement – until they completely overhauled their sound and image, sailing up the charts with more simplistic rhymes and dance-oriented beats.” Asian women, she says “have an even harder climb—roles are even more constrained by race and gender expectations.”<sup>122</sup>

2NE1 seems to struggle with these expectations. Peterson points out the group’s “simultaneous acceptance and rejection of beauty.” In their hit single, “Ugly,” the girls sing about their perceived unattractiveness, while another massively popular hit called “I Am the Best,” boasts these lyrics: “Whoever looks at me can see I’m kind of fabulous. Even if you were me, you’d be envious of this body.” What this demonstrates is a concurrent struggle and identification with notions of beauty. This is a reflection of 2NE1’s negotiation of both old and

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<sup>121</sup> Latoya Peterson, “How Nicki Minaj Kicked Open the Door for 2NE1,” *Racialicious*, December 11, 2011, accessed December 12, 2011, <http://www.racialicious.com/2011/12/12/how-nicki-minaj-kicked-open-the-door-for-2ne1/>.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

relatively recent themes to the K-Pop world: the pressure to be beautiful, the commoditization of the female body, and a newfound resistance to those pressures.

In general, 2NE1 goes against the grain. In their “Can’t Nobody,” video, the girls are dressed in outlandish costumes that call to mind figures like Madonna or Lady Gaga. Although there are a couple of scenes that strike the viewer as somewhat sexual—with provocative clothing and dance moves—many of the costumes actually cover a significant portion of skin. One might argue that the emphasis is placed more on strangeness and uniqueness in this video than on sexuality. They rap and sing in utter defiance of groups like Girls’ Generation, along with just about everyone else. Here is an excerpt of the lyrics of the Korean version of the song:

Beautiful Seoul City  
The loud sound of music  
Black eyes, brown hair  
You’re following too slow  
With a reassured attitude  
Your confidence is reaching the sky  
Even if you say, in a shameless and dignified manner  
That you want me, can’t touch this

Your gaze is tingly tingly  
Makes my heart beat it beat it  
Humming lady dadi  
Dancing body body  
Excitement is no no  
Now here we go go  
We’ll turn the world inside out  
And backwards show show

Cause I’m so bad bad  
But I’m so good good  
Yeah, I’m so bad bad  
And I’m so hood hood  
And I’m so hood hood

Can’t nobody hold us down  
Don’t try to stop me  
Until we’ve all gone crazy  
Until we’re all worn out tonight

Can't nobody hold us down  
Can't nobody, can't nobody hold us down  
I've gone as far, as far as there is to go  
Can't nobody, can't nobody hold us down  
Cuz we keep rockin', we rock rockin', yeah

And the English version, released for an international audience:

Ridin' down Seoul city  
Black on black Lamborghini  
Haters can't never see me  
Come and get me, too slow  
I'm 'bout that paper chasing  
Body, fly face amazing  
Burn, burn keeps it blazin'  
Too hot to handle, can't touch this

You think you with it, with it  
But you can't hit it, hit it  
You know I got it, got it  
Cuz I'm so 'bout it, 'bout it  
I let them hoes know  
I run this show, show  
We get it poppin'  
And we stick you for your dough, dough

Cuz I'm so bad, bad  
But I'm so good, good  
Yeah I'm so bad, bad  
And I'm so hood, hood

Can't nobody hold us down  
Nothing's gonna take us down  
And you think you can stop it  
But we just can't stop it tonight  
Can't nobody hold us down  
Can't nobody can't nobody hold us down  
We gon' keep it goin' bout to run this town  
Can't nobody can't nobody hold us down  
Cuz we keep rockin' we keep rockin', yeah

2NE1 has notably taken a more global approach to female representation, especially in their English version of “Can't Nobody,” which captures the same general feeling of the Korean

version of the song, with some added attitude.<sup>123</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 1, the group has been working with Will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas on a new album, in order to establish themselves as global artists.

The messages of empowerment and self-expression that they bring in their songs and the toughness of their wardrobe have a much different tenor than the bland lyrics and style of Girls' Generation. "Likewise, the dance choreography of the group is heavily grounded in street styles, lending the group assertiveness, but does not ignore their own conception of strong femininity, which, like other girl groups, can project an air of sexuality, but you'll notice that their dance moves, even when sexually hinting, are often aggressive and self-possessed (like the locomotion thrust move in "I Am the Best"), being more outward displays than come-hither invitations."<sup>124</sup>



**Picture 13: Screen shot from 2NE1's "I Am the Best" video. (Source: YG Entertainment)**

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<sup>123</sup> This connects back to Jamie Shinhee Lee's analysis of the use of English in K-Pop, and how English is often utilized in more subversive ways, while Korean lyrics remain comparatively tame.

<sup>124</sup> "Feminism and K-Pop: Why 2NE1 Matters," *Racialicious*, August 16, 2011, accessed February 26, 2012, <http://www.racialicious.com/2011/08/16/feminism-and-k-pop-why-2ne1-matters/>.

Another interesting song and video to look at is 2NE1's "Go Away," a breakup song. An excerpt of the lyrics:

I'll Meet Someone So Much Better  
I'll Make You Regret It All  
Sadness Is Only For Now, Boy  
Cause Love Is Over  
Love, Love Is Over Tonight

The music video opens with a cruel breakup scene in a café, in which CL (the leader of 2NE1) is threatened by her boyfriend and told to leave him alone. A distressed CL puts on her sunglasses, shakily bumps into the door of the café on her way out, and eventually drives off in her car with her friend, another 2NE1 member. It begins to rain, and CL drops what is presumably a promise ring out of the car. In the next scene, CL prepares to drive at a racetrack. She sees her boyfriend there as well, and the two race. Intercut are scenes with 2NE1's other members drinking away their sorrows and later playing music together in a garage.

The next scene shows a drunk CL approaching her ex-boyfriend's house, where they have a confrontation. He physically abuses her, slapping her and pushing her to the ground. After he's gone back inside, the other members arrive and help her get up. In the third chorus, CL comes to the track again with a bruise on her cheek and races against her ex-boyfriend for a second time. She races aggressively against him, and the cars crash into each other, exploding in flames. But in the last scene, CL is away from the crash, watching the scene with the other members. They all turn and comfort CL, smiling as they walk away.

This is a complicated text. While it is quite rare to see domestic abuse in K-Pop music videos as well as the figure of the defiant female, the message of empowerment is not entirely clear-cut at first. On the one hand, the cruelty of the male oppressor is blatantly shown. On the other hand, CL is not fully liberated. She is still in some way subjugated by him, as evidenced

by her attempts to see him at his house and the abuse she gets in return. Ultimately, however, the two are placed on equal footing on the racetrack. The crash may symbolize the turbulence of their relationship, the pain of the break up, or the final end to it all—lending a sense of closure. CL, consistently supported by her members, finds solace with the help of other women as opposed to finding a new man. The lyrics convey 2NE1’s signature—a sense of defiance that is rare in the music of Korean girl groups.



**Picture 14: A bruised CL at the racetrack in “Go Away.” (Source: YG Entertainment)**

It is important to note that 2NE1 is produced by one of the Big Three K-Pop production companies, as opposed to some rogue indie label. Also, their primary producer and songwriter, Teddy Park, is representative of the hybridization that exists in the industry. As a former member of 1YTM, another group on the YG label, he has long been entrenched in the K-Pop production system. At the same time, he did grow up in both Korea and the United States. His

contributions to the style of 2NE1 and the resulting popularity that they have experienced may be an indication of the beginnings of a changing industrial strategy towards women. Likewise, for Girls' Generation's foray onto the international market, SM Entertainment producers have begun to move away from the identical costumes and styling. The girls are now often dressed in complimentary, but different outfits. Their new single "The Boys," also has a more hip-hop, street culture feel than the bubblegum pop style that the group is famous for.

However, it is important to note that 2NE1's image, like the images all of these groups, are actively manufactured for maximum popularity and profit. The members still endure and respond to criticisms regarding their appearance and must remain conscious of their status as trendsetters. Although they deviate from the traditional K-Pop girl group model, they remain somewhat constrained by various industrial and social pressures.

The manufacture of gender and sexuality in the K-Pop world is reflective of various social realities in Korea, Asia, and to an extent, the rest of the world. While certain feminine desires and consumptive forms of global and foreign masculinities clash with traditional Confucian forms of masculinity among male idols, patriarchal authority and fetishizations of various cultural tropes impose their influence on female idols. At the same time, there is an active production of innocence and purity among idols that downplays the more sexual nature of these representations. These tropes ultimately reflect the desires of the audience, creating a contradictory, all-encompassing "ideal" man or woman. In part at least, it is the K-Pop industry's appeasement of these varied desires and its careful negotiation of sexuality and purity that builds its appeal at home and abroad.

## 2. Fan Culture and Media Convergence

Idols and their carefully manufactured spectacles aren't the only reasons for K-Pop's popularity. There is also a domestic and global economic, technological, and social infrastructure that allows for the proliferation and penetration of K-Pop around the world, including the convergence of music with other forms of media, the spread of pirated content, an increase in the technological capabilities of audiences and audience-produced content, and the general increase in connectivity among individuals around the world through social networking portals and other participatory forums. These new realities allow for the creation of formidable, connected, dynamic fan cultures. K-Pop news blogs, band tribute videos on YouTube, online video streaming sites, and other fan-produced content are not just reflections of K-Pop's popularity around the world. They help to drive the production and popularity machine. Fans form online and real world communities, working together to share knowledge and content. David Jennings writes, "perhaps most importantly for a community of music fans, the extended period of doing things together gives a sense of collective identity linked to their favorite bands."<sup>125</sup> These communities are often given odd names. Big Bang's fans are known as "V.I.P.s." 2 PM's fans are called the "HOTTEST." Super Junior's fan base is called, believe it or not, "ELF."

Henry Jenkins defines media convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."<sup>126</sup> This is key especially to fan culture, in that there are multiple sites of

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<sup>125</sup> Jennings, 54.

<sup>126</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

consumption as well as multiple ways to *produce* content in response to the media they are consuming. In terms of the range of outlets that fans have to consume K-Pop, there is more out there than just CDs, concerts, and mp3 files; there is also television, film, and the wide world of the Internet. As Jenkins says, these different industries work with the music industry both directly and indirectly to produce an enormous amount of content. And fans have the technological mobility to find it all.

In terms of television and film, it was discussed earlier that K-Pop is not only an aural medium, but also a visual one. Music-oriented programming like Music Bank (now broadcast in 72 countries through KBS World) provides live performances and chart information.<sup>127</sup> Similar shows include *M! Countdown* (MNet), *Show! Music Core* (MBC), *Inkigayo* (SBS), and many others. But fans don't just want to see their idols traversing a stage in concert and dancing in music videos. They also want to see them getting their hair and makeup done, having fun at an amusement park, playing games, cooking lunch, participating in athletic competitions against other idols, waking up in the morning in their dorms, or negotiating a new relationship in a pretend marriage, perhaps.

This facilitates a closer relationship between fan and celebrity, which has both tangible and more illusory sides. The idol is a persona—a hyper-real creation. The culture industry (the K-Pop industry does this especially well) creates other ways in which to consume idol media, which creates a sense of intimacy between fan and celebrity. K-Pop fans are often very aware of the people who sing their favorite songs, and as was discussed earlier, they become closer to those celebrities through interviews, television dramas, embarrassing displays on variety shows,

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<sup>127</sup> “Music Bank to be Broadcast Live in 72 Nations,” HanCinema, June 30, 2011, accessed February 28, 2012, <http://www.hancinema.net/music-bank-to-be-broadcast-live-in-72-nations-31039.html>.

behind the scenes features, and other forms of entertainment. In this type of programming, there is commonly a clear goal of getting to know their personalities.

They are therefore an important public relations tool for the music industry, as well as good business for television networks. These shows range from small “day in the life” or “behind the scenes” segments, to shows like *Running Man* (in which participants must complete various “missions” and games), *Healing Camp* (a talk show), *We Got Married* (in which celebrities are placed in ersatz “marriages,” and viewers watch their “married life” develop), *Hello Baby* (idols must band together to take care of a small child) and *Invincible Youth* (in which seven female K-Pop idols learn what it’s like to live and work in rural Korea). These shows often include an in-studio commentary by other Korean celebrities and emcees. They make remarks on the actions of the idols, often imposing certain judgments of character and personality upon the audience. It is also common for there to be small comments written at the bottom of the screen during the show as well as instant replays of the same shots, if something funny, endearing, or surprising happens.

A Korean film producer vehemently criticizes this system. On idol variety shows, he says,

“each member achieves her/his own ‘mission’ based on her/his manufactured character...the Korean cable channels’ ‘idol real variety shows’ are nothing but the easily consumable manufactured products created by a factory, which is a result of the combination between the worsened broadcasting environment, the power of the gigantic entertainment management companies, and the individual desires of the public.”<sup>128</sup>

Indeed, as a very centralized structure, the K-Pop industry is hyper-conscious of the desires of audiences.

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<sup>128</sup> Hwang Jeong-Hyeon, quoted in Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities*, 169.

K-Pop idols also dabble in acting, starring in television dramas and films—another crucial branch of the Korean Wave. Kim Hyeon-Mi stresses a postcolonial view of their popularity, as opposed to a cultural imperialist argument. She explains that a new middle class of women experience a “new modernity” through the consumption of these images and products. “Rather than being a product of South Korean popular culture’s uniqueness or superior quality, the Korean Wave may be a result of the ‘ability’ of a most secular capitalistic materialist desire to appease the newly emerging desires and diverse anxieties in the Asian region.” Dramas also display the kinds of masculinities and femininities that find popularity globally. This kind of crossing has been common in today’s entertainment industry, broadening the scope of celebrities’ visibility. And the Internet has been a portal for fans around the world to watch this content.

Jenkins explains that “media convergence is more than simply the digital revolution; it involves the introduction of a much broader array of new media technologies that enable consumers to archive, annotate, transform, and recirculate media content. Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift; it alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences.”<sup>129</sup> This new kind of participatory fan culture strengthens the bonds between fan and idol even more than the simple consumption of media flows produced by corporate convergence, a term Jenkins uses to describe an increasingly concentrated group of media producers and owners who are “actively insuring the flow of content across different platforms and national borders.”<sup>130</sup> K-Pop fans have created an environment of “grassroots convergence,” in which audiences increasingly influence the production, distribution, and reception of media.

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<sup>129</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, Gamers*, 155.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

This grassroots convergence is manifested through the hundreds of K-Pop blogs and news sites. One notable American site is All K Pop, which reports scores of small stories per day, synthesizing information coming from various Korean news sources and entertainment sites. Jenkins' concept of grassroots convergence is grounded in a structure that can be informed by Pierre Levy's concept of "cosmopedia" or *self-organizing* "sites of collective discussion, negotiation, and development...Unanswered questions will create tension within cosmopedic space, indicating regions where invention and innovation are required."<sup>131</sup>

In other words, fans fill holes. They negotiate their own needs and desires and have been articulating them as well as enacting them. They do so in the service of other fans as well. Matt Hills calls this "semiotic solidarity," or a sense of connection with others throughout the world that share one's tastes and interests.<sup>132</sup> Likewise, Jenkins says that fans "are motivated by epistemophilia—not simply a pleasure in knowing but a pleasure in exchanging knowledge."<sup>133</sup> That knowledge is varied and dynamic. As Jenkins points out,

"Far from demanding conformity, the new knowledge culture is enlivened by multiple ways of knowing. This collective exchange of knowledge cannot be fully contained by previous sources of power—bureaucratic hierarchies...media monarchies...and international economic networks—that depended on maintaining tight control over the flow of information."<sup>134</sup>

This lack of centralized control over the flow of information and meaning making has made fan culture its own powerful, independent entity. To make matters more complicated, that flow of information is now global in scope (Jenkins says, "fan communities have long defined their

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<sup>131</sup> Pierre Levy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: Perseus, 1997), 217.

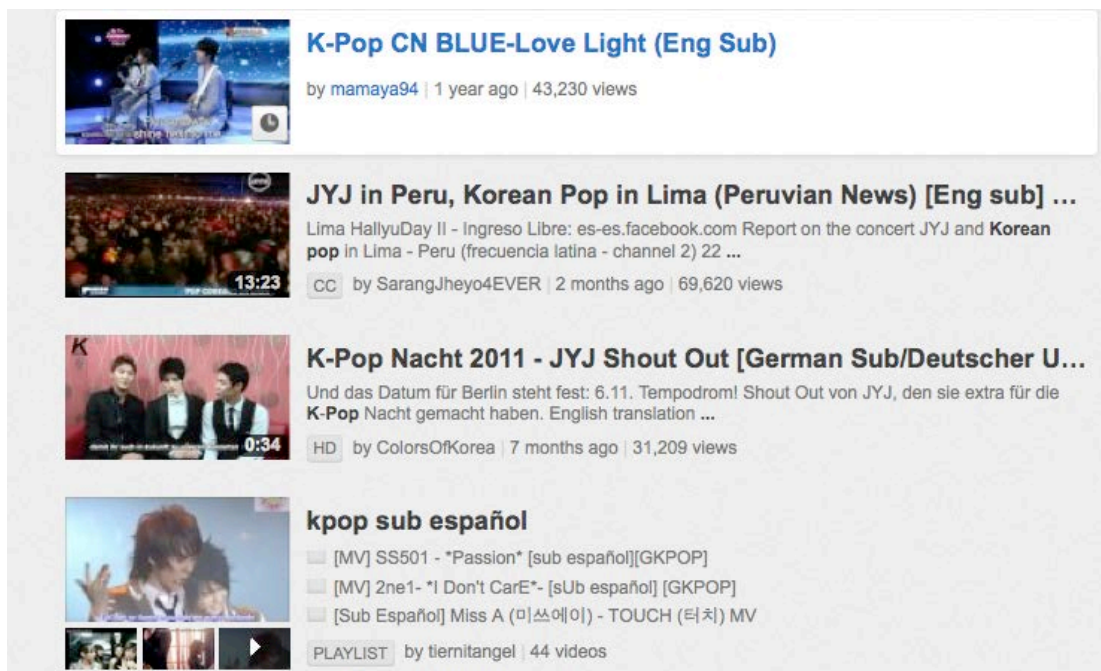
<sup>132</sup> Matt Hills, "Transcultural Otaku: Japanese Representations of Fandom and Representations of Japan in Anime/Manga Fan Cultures," paper presented at "Media-in-Transition 2: Globalization and Convergence" conference at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, 2002.

<sup>133</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, 139.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

memberships through affinities rather than localities.”).<sup>135</sup> Thus, the desire to know and the desire to share are the two central factors that create a thriving fan culture. While the industry does try to carefully control and monitor the knowledge community by maintaining and protecting celebrity image and orchestrating complex promotions campaigns, grassroots fan participation has drastically changed the landscape they’re operating in.

A good example of this knowing/sharing instinct among fans is the fan-subbing trend. K-Pop videos inevitably end up on YouTube and other streaming sites, posted by those invested in making content available to others around the world. But many fans cannot actually understand Korean. The result is fan-produced subtitling in English, Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese, Russian, Spanish, and other languages. Want to find an English-translated video? Simply type in what you’re looking for, followed by the abbreviation, “eng sub.”



Picture 15: The fan-subbing phenomenon. (YouTube screenshot)

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 137.

Because of this emotional investment, the network connectivity of K-Pop fandom, and the high level of structural organization among many of these fan operations, fans have become an active force in the industry not only as a source of viewership and capital (in the distribution and consumption realms of the industry), but also as indirect participants in production. Bands don't just thank their fans for support in buying albums and concert tickets. There is a constant acknowledgment of their desire to also give fans what they want. This, of course, is reflected in the wide variety of content that bands produce as "gifts" to fans, including things like documentaries or parodies of popular dramas.

In 2011, Big Bang filmed a parody of the romantic drama *Secret Garden*, in which two members had to play female roles. T.O.P., the member playing the male protagonist, had to kiss two of his band mates, to the delight and amusement of Big Bang fans. Thus, fans have a certain sense of entitlement—a sense of entitlement that the industry cultivates and appeases. Because ultimately, the cultivating of grassroots fan knowledge culture “serves as the ‘invisible and intangible engine’ for the circulation and exchange of commodities.”<sup>136</sup> Such attempts to “link consumers directly into the production and marketing of media content...are increasingly promoted as the model for how to sell goods, cultural and otherwise, in an interactive environment.”<sup>137</sup> An article in the *Guardian* presents the following example of the industry's business selling not just music, but also merchandise:

“SME even has its own merchandise store in Seoul. The SM Entertainment building...contains a coffee shop, luxury restaurant, a section where you can take pictures that look like you're sitting with the SME stars, and a store for SME artist memorabilia. Though 55% of Korean music sales are digital, [SM Entertainment] makes sure that physical CDs are attractive enough for the fans to splurge on them as well. It

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 147-148.

doesn't release records in ordinary CD cases; they're all in glossy luxury packaging. They're often released in up to five different packages—and the fans buy them all.”<sup>138</sup>

International fans, of course, can find such goods available online.



**Picture 16: Five different versions of Big Bang’s *Alive* album in stores. (Source: Ningin Blog)**

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<sup>138</sup> Helienne Lindvall, “K-Pop: How South Korea Turned Round Its Music Scene,” *The Guardian*, April 20, 2011, accessed March 21, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/organgrinder/2011/apr/20/k-pop-south-korea-music-market?INTCMP=SRCH>.

## V. Conclusions

### *K-Pop as Visual Consumption:*

The K-Pop industry is, at its heart, about music—about listening. But we have seen that another important aspect is the visuality of the genre. During the 1980s, the music industry began to rely on television to determine the success of a song or artist. As the TV industry liberalized in the early 1990s, South Korean TV needed programs to fill air space. One strategy was to show concert footage, news updates about various bands and artists, interviews, and music videos. The music industry saw this as effective marketing, and took a more active role in preparing performers for the camera.

In the current environment, there are loads of ways to *see* the world of K-Pop, including an explosion of music programs dedicated to showcasing live performances, talk shows, sitcoms, dramas, variety shows, behind-the-scenes documentaries, and music videos. The visual culture of K-Pop is also reflected in the mediation of the body itself. K-Pop is very much a trendsetting industry, taking care to craft costumes for performers. Idols themselves are often fashion icons. Likewise, when it comes to recruiting idols in the first place, physical appearance is of utmost importance. I would argue that the K-Pop industry is more open about its preoccupation with appearances than other music industries around the world that are, at least in some cases, more concerned with talent. On various talk shows, bands have even been asked to rank their band mates based on looks, fashion sense, etc.

It is the visuality of K-Pop stars that make the years of preparation and training seem necessary. When SHINee films a music video, their dance moves must be in perfect synchronization. When Big Bang appears on an episode of the talk show *Strong Heart*, they must prepare their variety show “skills” in order to please the audience. Member Seungri has

been openly praised for his “skills” in this arena—his ability to pull up funny anecdotes, his energy on camera, his talent for doing impressions of other celebrities, and his charming personality. Idols must also walk the line between their edgy, alluring, or rebellious stage images and their more conservative public images. They must appear “real” while maintaining a careful façade. The harsh realities of the idol factory system in Korea are largely the result of giving people the spectacle or fantasy that they want, while the demands of society and the threat of censorship bring in considerations of propriety.

### *Fetishes, Femininity, and “Global Masculinity”*

Part of the spectacle is of course the careful construction of gender and sexuality in K-Pop. For men, we see a hybridity in the formulation of the masculine image that combines virtues of traditional Korean and Confucian values of masculinity, *kawaii*, or cute, masculinity, and a more global metropolitan masculinity. Such values are expressed through performativities of movement, speech, gestures, and enactments exhibited in every day social behavior (especially on camera).

Fans often speak of their male idols’ charisma, which is a vague term used to describe the attractive qualities of their general bearing and behavior as well as their ability to sing and perform on stage. With regard to masculinity specifically, “tender charisma” is a masculine third space in which a male figure simultaneously possesses strength and virility as well as a certain sensitivity and gentleness. And while they are often sexualized in music videos and on stage, K-Pop’s young stars are surrounded by an aura of innocence and purity.

Although different bands take different approaches to masculinity (some take on the pretty boy image, while others market themselves with the newer “beast” image), the interplay

between strength of will and of body and emotional introspection is present in all of these strategies. They are reflective of the desires and expectations of fans across the world, who prescribe to various images of what men should be and how they should act. The global masculinity espoused by male K-Pop idols is flexible enough to move among these varied desires.

When it comes to constructions of femininity, the male gaze is ever-present. Women in the K-Pop industry are arguably more sexualized than their male counterparts, with more overt attempts by the producers of girl groups to pander to fantasy and fetish. We see a mixture of innocence and sexual submissiveness, with the proliferation of the schoolgirl image as well as images of the same women in more sexually charged situations. The objectification and oppression of women is also more pronounced, as they are often made to look and dress alike or be more limited in their ability to express themselves in public. In the opening of Girls' Generation's "Gee" video, the girls are dressed in matching outfits and play mannequins in a store window, glassy-eyed and still, ready for consumption.

There have been some indications that attitudes toward the representation of women having been changing, with 2NE1's more unique, tough girl image. But it's important to keep in mind that the women of 2NE1 are not all that much more autonomous than the women of Girls' Generation or Sistar. Their parent company, YG Entertainment, may simply be following the changing desires of their audience and adjusting accordingly.

### *Digital community and Fan Culture*

The habits of fans have been changing, and the participation level is enormous. The ways in which fans interact with their idols is reflective of the increased individual-to-individual

sort of connectivity that the global, digital age has brought us. In fact, fan culture now has more power than ever over the industry. Online fan culture has empowered fans to influence the turns that the industry takes and to let producers know what they want. This is very much evident in the K-Pop world. The industrialized manufacturing process surrounding idol bands is the result of this complete subordination to the desires of the audience. And fans are aggressive with not only their opinions of music, but they can also make/break careers when it comes to their judgment of idols' behavior.

In an essay on the future of music in the age of the Internet, John Sterne writes, “music is an important site for Internet culture—as something that attracts people to particular online sites or conditions their modes of online practice.”<sup>139</sup> We have seen the ways in which K-Pop shapes online habits and practices, including the watching of K-Pop-related streamed television, blogging about Korean culture and music, or the constant checking of K-Pop news sites for updates. Although Sterne argues that “the online ethnography of music cultures offers us one useful way to think about the role of the Internet in people’s every day lives, rather than a space apart or a special case of culture,” I would argue that in a global context, the Internet is not just a supplement to people’s day to day consumption of world music, but a critical, fundamental space for it.<sup>140</sup> Without online distribution and marketing, K-Pop would not have reached the global audience it has.

This is evident in the ways in which fans engage with K-Pop on the Internet. This self-organizing production aspect of online K-Pop fan culture builds and maintains digital communities, who remain in contact with each other and consistently provide or share new K-

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<sup>139</sup> Jonathan Sterne, “On the Future of Music,” in Michael D. Ayers, ed., *Cybersounds: Essays on Virtual Music Culture* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 255.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

Pop related content with each other. This strengthens the bonds between fans as well as the bonds between fans and the music they enjoy.<sup>141</sup> Fans are also conscious of the globality of the K-Pop phenomenon, as fan translators allow many around the world to watch Korean videos. The industry works within this environment, releasing material online and nurturing digital communities.

*Hybridity, Nationalism and Global Culture:*

If you want to reach your full potential as a music artist these days, you need to sell to the world. K-Pop is extremely successful and lucrative domestically. But Korea is still a small market, and the pressures of global capitalism have pushed K-Pop beyond its former borders. The K-Pop industry is in itself grappling in subtle ways with both ideas of capitalist success abroad, and their desire to remain loyal to and respectful of their nation and its culture. We see a constant tension between the creative search for K-Pop's unique sound and the manufacturing process that looks to reach out to a larger audience. The Korean culture industry often proudly frames its success abroad, therefore, as an avenue through which to expand Korea's influence around the world.

The audience is certainly looking for that culture. As musical choice expands and people become more open to new forms of music, their "cognitive filters" widen, making more room for new and foreign forms of music (of course, the K-Pop industry helps this process along by inserting pieces of "the familiar" amongst what might be construed as "strange," whether it's the language barrier or the innovative ways that producers utilize styles of rap, techno, hip hop, and rock). Jenkins calls this "pop cosmopolitanism," or the embrace of cultural difference and a

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<sup>141</sup> One especially interesting manifestation of this is the "reaction video," in which fans watch a new music video or listen to a newly released song and film their reactions and share opinions with other fans.

desire to remove oneself from the limits of local communities. We've seen how this sense of restlessness leads to a foraging instinct made possible by the Internet.

It has worked for K-Pop. Although the genre does not quite yet have the global reach of someone like Justin Bieber, it is, undoubtedly, a global phenomenon, with pockets of intense fandom in Asian countries as well as more surprising countries like Mexico, Peru, Chile, France, Sweden, Saudi Arabia, and Australia. Although this interest in K-Pop may not *necessarily* lead to significant cultural understanding, it has definitely led to more interest and immersion of foreign fans into Korean media spaces. Some have argued that it is K-Pop's "non-nationality" that makes it accessible to the world. But I would argue that the manner in which people consume K-pop is reflective of not just cultural hybridity, but also a growing capacity and desire for cultural learning. Fans actively consume not only K-Pop itself, but also various forms of Korean culture through watching Korean television and films, traveling to Korea, or experiencing Korean cuisine.

K-Pop and the rest of the Korean Wave phenomenon demonstrate the need to de-center the "West to the rest" kind of thinking about global culture. We should no longer look at globalization as a flow from the United States and Europe to a passive global audience. This cultural imperialism argument shallowly frames the rest of the world as those who only appropriate, copy, imitate, or consume. Not only do different sites of cultural production exist, but hybridity is also much more complicated than the ideas of homogenization or mimesis allow.

In K-Pop, we see a negotiation of Korean youth and Korea at large with modernity and a changing sense of national identity through music. Because idols are caught up in domestic concerns of nationalism (if the cases of Seung-jun Yoo and Jay Park are any indication), this is

often reflected in their interactions with the world, as representatives of a new Korea. Korea remains a nationalistic country, and national identity is a mutable construct. Korea's cultural transformations become part of that identity, and although it may have "hybrid" characteristics, it belongs to the people who own it. It is superficial to say that because K-Pop is a hybrid cultural product, that it is somehow "culturally odorless" to consumers. It might be helpful here to think about what culture really is—the values, attitudes, behaviors, interpretations, and perspectives of a society and the products and customs that come from those values. Culture is essentially transformative, and notions of "pure" or "authentic" cultures discount the evolution of culture over time. Indeed, I would like to argue that K-Pop is "Korean" because it has evolved in a Korean cultural context and does indeed have its own particularities, but also because it is a reflection of new negotiations of national identity among young South Korean audiences and cultural producers.

We saw the various localization strategies that K-Pop utilizes to take rap, for instance, and use it to express not only Korean social and cultural anxieties, but also in the expression of themes common to the more traditional ballad form in Asia. K-Pop utilizes the English language in varied ways as well, whether to insert youthful rebellion or challenge tradition, while at the same time maintaining traditional values in the Korean lyrics. This kind of hybridity, as Marwan Kraidy sees it, is "the cultural logic of globalization." We must work to move beyond the dichotomization often utilized in globalization discourse—of the local against the global, power vs. resistance, production vs. consumption, or "authenticity" as a counter to hybridity. K-Pop has demonstrated that hybridity and globalization are not one-dimensional or one-directional. While Korea is influenced by global media, the rest of the world is influenced also by K-Pop's

entrance on the world stage. Music flows freely across the world and transforms along the way in a perpetual cultural exchange.

A group of teenagers enter a K-Pop contest in Egypt, performing a series of elaborate, choreographed dances. Five Ukrainian girls make costumes matching a Big Bang music video and film their own version. An African-American girl in the United States performs a cover of Big Bang's "Bad Boy," singing in almost flawless Korean. A large group of Russian teens gather at St. Petersburg's Palace Square to participate in a K-Pop flash mob, dancing to songs by 2NE1, B2ST, Block B, MBLAQ, f(x), SS501, DBSK, SNSD, Super Junior, SHINee, GD & TOP, 4Minute, and Miss A—a demonstration of their enthusiasm for a wide variety of K-Pop music. A prison in the Philippines that uses group dance as a form of rehabilitation performs to Super Junior's "Sorry Sorry." Today, people around the world are becoming more receptive to new genres of foreign music. Who cares if it's in Korean?

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