

## K-pop

K-pop, described by *Time Magazine* in 2012 as “South Korea’s greatest export”, has rapidly achieved a large worldwide audience of devoted fans, largely through distribution over the Internet. This book examines the phenomenon and discusses the reasons for its success. It considers the national and transnational conditions that have played a role in K-pop’s ascendancy and explores how they relate to post-colonial modernisation, post-Cold War politics in East Asia, connections with the Korean diaspora, and the state-initiated campaign to accumulate soft power. As it is particularly concerned with fandom and cultural agency, it analyses fan practices, discourses, and underlying psychologies within their local habitus, as well as in expanding topographies of online networks. Overall, the book addresses the question of how “Asian culture” can be global in a truly meaningful way and how popular culture from a “marginal” nation has become a global phenomenon.

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# **K-pop**

The international rise of  
the Korean music industry

**Edited by JungBong Choi  
and Roald Maliangkay**

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## Introduction

### Why fandom matters to the international rise of K-pop

*JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay*

Following in the footsteps of the Korean Wave (also known as *Hallyu*), a rapid expansion of Korean popular culture across many parts of the world since the late 1990s, K-pop has recently entered the lexicon of global popular cultures. Connoting a new standard of popular music that is characterised by, among other things, the visual appeal of its idols and performance, as well as by a significant degree of musical conservatism, it has captivated millions of fans across the world and drawn the attention of the international media. In part because of a tendency to rely too much on aggregated data and anecdotal evidence, academic studies on the topic have so far failed to shed much light on related phenomena. They do not elicit meaningful discussions as much as further enquiry in regards to the astounding upswing of the music industry from what remains a cultural periphery – South Korea. This volume seeks to respond to the conspicuous lacuna. While zeroing in on the productive, distributive, and cultural processes of K-pop, it aspires to be more than a compilation of reports on the ripple the Korean music industry has created. Broaching larger issues in popular culture, digital mediation, cultural politics, and transnationalism, it investigates the reception of K-pop and its application across cultures. It explores fandom and cultural agency through analyses of fan practices, discourses, and underlying psychologies within their local habitus as well as in expanding topographies of online networks.

Fan communities may represent homogeneous subcultural groups spread across geographic sites yet united by shared interests, identities, and media use. The authors in this volume share a fascination with what it is that enthral K-pop fans, and explore what their enchantment and its object signify locally, and cross-culturally. New routes of mediations and types of agencies are involved in the viral spread of K-pop, and digital social media play an important role among them. This collection comprises approaches that examine the significance of such new media to K-pop-related subcultures. They question in what ways those media are independent from and/or symbiotic with conventional broadcast media and discuss what roles other cultural agents play in the design, dissemination, or endorsement of K-pop-related cultural goods. While the focus is on the consumption of K-pop, by accounting for all kinds of cultural possibilities and barriers, this volume also illuminates how popular cultures from this marginal nation have become a semi-global phenomenon. Key issues explored include the

## 2 *JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay*

implications of the global expansion of K-pop on preceding discussions of cultural globalisation and empire: What cognitive or cultural changes does K-pop fandom bring about? What changes in cultural agency does it highlight? In order to engage with broader cultural debates we look at the ascendancy of K-pop beyond contemporary developments: How does K-pop's international rise intersect with the history of colonial modernisation or post-Cold War politics in East Asia? And in what way does it relate to the psychology of cultural cringe, the mobilisation of diaspora, and official policies to accumulate soft power?

As these questions indicate, our interests in K-pop fandom are tied to other major areas of enquiry such as cultural cosmopolitanism, social media, digital youth culture, ethno-cultural capital, and the rise of Asia. This volume explores related issues on the basis of critical new ground. Corresponding to the multifaceted edifice of K-pop, it espouses a methodological syncretism, whereby various modes of research – such as ethnography, institutional study, discourse analysis, historiography, political economy, and textual analysis – are brought together cogently.

### **The *Hallyu*–K-pop continuum and transnational valence**

K-pop departs from the earlier waves of Korean popular culture in its mediational route, geographic scope, and generational specificity. Preceding currents of Korean popular culture had centred on the transmission of Korean television dramas through conventional mass media – terrestrial, satellite, and cable television – to neighbouring countries such as Japan, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The K-pop heat wave has nevertheless gone beyond “Asian” ethno-regional bounds. In 2013 alone, K-pop concerts were held in, among others, Los Angeles, New York, Paris, London, Vancouver, Sydney, Berlin, and Mexico City, and K-pop flashmobs continue to take place in such metropolises as Singapore, Lima, São Paulo, Toronto, Jakarta, Dublin, Bergen, and Rome.

From an empirical standpoint of fandom, a distinction between K-pop and *Hallyu* is implausible. Even from an analytic standpoint, K-pop has to be seen in continuity with *Hallyu*. In many ways, the K-pop craze is but the latest phase of *Hallyu*, and the former owes a great deal to the latter. Hence, this volume approaches the prevalence of K-pop in reference to the earlier or parallel groundwork laid by Korean cinema, television dramas, and, to some degree, Japanese popular cultures en masse. Take *Hallyu* drama, for example. Since the mid 1990s, South Korean television dramas have gained a foothold in China and Vietnam. From 2002, the year in which Korea cohosted the World Cup with Japan, they were exported to Japan, South Asia, the Middle East, and North and South America. The period in which the export of Korean dramas exploded was later dubbed *Hallyu* 2.0. Boldly stylistic, extravagantly melodramatic, and decidedly conscientious about ethical/communal values, Korean dramas have struck a chord with global audiences, for whom family, work, and a sense of justice are of paramount concern. Replete with velvety original soundtracks (OSTs), Korean dramas gently familiarised audiences with the world of Korean

popular music. Featuring K-pop idols as main or minor characters, they accustomed the fans to K-pop's sound and performing style (see Chapters 6 and 7).

The South Korean government deserves credit for the synergy created between K-pop and other media/culture industries. It started building rapport with popular culture since the inauguration of the civilian regime in 1993, which offered a comprehensive package of deregulatory measures to creative industries en bloc. K-pop has enjoyed a long, undisturbed honeymoon with state-capital power from the late 1990s, when the creative industries as a whole were designated as a key sector for the growth of the South Korean economy. With various tax benefits and support for expansion in overseas markets, the K-pop industry has since grown exponentially.

Between the late 1990s and the mid 2000s – a period some have labelled *Hallyu* 1.0 – a number of Korean pop groups made successful international debuts. The first Korean idol groups to establish a fan base across Northeast Asia include the boy bands H.O.T., Sechs Kies, Shinhwa, N.R.G., and G.O.D., and the girl groups S.E.S., Fin.K.L., and Baby V.O.X.<sup>1</sup> The focal points of these groups were their visual and choreographic presentations on- and off-stage, with much less attention given to music itself. Nonetheless, their songs set the tone for the present form of idol-centred K-pop music: fast, mostly cheerful contemporary R&B dance tracks with a heavy beat and rapped bridge sections interspersed with random English phrases. In performance, the groups carried out perfectly synchronised dance routines in matching costumes (see Chapter 1). Apart from the musical and performative styles, however, the template for K-pop distribution and marketing also took shape around this time.

Cognisant of the magnitude of music videos' influence, the management companies of these idol groups commissioned the production of narrative music videos to reputable experts in the advertising or film industries. Overseas fans of the early K-pop watched their favourite videos on music channels like MTV Asia and Hong Kong's Channel V, or purchased video CDs and DVDs, though mainly bootleg versions. The prominence of music videos in the early stage of K-pop was concomitant with the rise of multitalented entertainers with a strong visual appeal, who could juggle all at once: singing, acting, dancing, hosting, and modelling. As visuals began to take priority over sound, presentation came to outweigh representation. This cardinal rule of ocularcentrism in K-pop remains unaltered to date.

Since the early 2000s, the scope of international involvement in the production of K-pop has gradually widened, as has the scale of overseas fandom. The frequency of holding K-pop concerts in foreign countries has increased, and, concomitantly, so has the number of songs sung in a foreign language, though most are sung in Chinese, Japanese, and English. Like the steady streaming of diasporic Koreans into K-pop production, a commensurate flow of foreign nationals into K-pop bands has grown in volume and velocity, as instantiated by 2PM, Miss A, f(x), Exo-M, and Super Junior M. While critics charge that K-pop *reproduces* Western music styles, defenders maintain that K-pop *reprocesses* them, giving peculiar Korean “spins” to the mode of presentation. Their argument

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is that, despite the transnational thrust of K-pop fandom, a dominant mode of production and presentation in K-pop remains distinctly “Korean”.

The trans/international valence in K-pop production has nevertheless become increasingly salient. Consider, for example, the people behind the product of Girls’ Generation (also known as SNSD). The group’s video for the song “Paparazzi” (2012) was produced by Miles Walker and sound engineer Tom Coyne of Sterling Sound, and their song “I Got a Boy” (2013) was “crafted” by composers from England, Norway, Sweden, and Korea. The group’s entry into the US market was handled by the renowned talent manager Scooter Braun, and the English version of the song was released through Interscope Records, owned by Universal Music Group. Similarly, f(x)’s 2013 album *Pink Tape* was produced by a total of 29 international composers, including people from Norway, the UK, France, the US and South Korea, while half of the staff responsible for the music of SHINee’s 2013 album *Why So Serious? The Misconceptions of Me* were from Canada, the US, Denmark, Finland, and Australia.

A transnational production of K-pop in the fullest sense of the word is exemplified by the Korean–Indonesian talent agency YS Media Entertainment. The company formed and trained both a male and a female quartet for the Indonesian market, respectively named S4 (after the characters of the singers: sweet, smart, sexy, and sentimental) and S.O.S. (Sensation of Stage). Members of these groups were scouted from the finalists of the Indonesian talent show *Galaxy Superstar*, which also faithfully followed the formula of Korean audition programmes. In order to highlight their connections with Korea, the music video of S.O.S.’s song “Independent Girl” consciously shows the girls being trained in and walking around Seoul. An embodiment of what is called “Kin-pop”, that is Korean–Indonesian Pop, these two groups try to assure the Indonesian audience of both the music quality matching K-pop and cultural loyalty toward local fans.

#### **K-pop as augmented entertainment**

Given the scale of multi/transnational coproduction in K-pop, the concept of hybridity may seem well suited to the textual composition of K-pop. But one must question whether any music genre is immune from hybridisation, and therefore whether the concept of hybridity adds any interpretive novelty to understanding K-pop in particular. We are ill at ease with the conceptual poverty in the analysis of global cultural affairs today. Previous works on *Hallyu* and K-pop have perfunctorily resorted to the much worn-out notions of transnational hybridity, glocalisation and the like. It is true that K-pop unequivocally embraces a stylistic eclecticism in its musical composition, performative style, workforce, marketing strategies, and organisational formats. But whereas this feature is intrinsic to every conceivable cultural form, the notion of hybridity promises little inspiration or explanatory power specific to K-pop, unless the mode of hybridisation is spelled out in analytically concrete terms.

In the place of hybridity, we foreground the idea of *augmented entertainment*. Reasons to characterise K-pop as a form of augmented entertainment are abundant.

Stylistically, K-pop is best described as an integrated popular culture *sui generis* – an entertainment of its own class. It is a mosaic that blends storytelling, music, group dance, body performance, and fashion show. In terms of musical and performative conventions, it draws on hip hop, Euro techno, grunge, pop, and rap, all the while incorporating contemporary choreographies, acrobatics, and runway acts. Linguistically, it routinely fuses Korean with English words, introduces neologisms and mobile device-based jargons, and occasionally interjects Japanese and Chinese onomatopoeia.

From an industrial standpoint, K-pop is a business thriving on a vast pool of versatile human resources. K-pop management companies promiscuously dabble in radio/TV broadcasting, film, popular music, advertisement, musical, and live concerts. K-pop idols are the gluing agent of this cross-industry assemblage, for whom “multitalent” is an imperative. The idols are as much a “common property” of the Korean culture industry in its entirety as the crux of the K-pop enterprise. K-pop idols have, for example, become an indispensable element of Korean television programmes. Starting with *Full House* (KBS 2004), which starred Rain<sup>2</sup> as the male protagonist, Korean trendy dramas have become a “colony genre” for K-pop idols, who now dominate other television genres including sitcoms, quiz shows, talk shows, variety shows, reality shows, and even comedy programmes. The Korean film industry is not impervious to the foray of K-pop idols, either. As a matter of fact, Korean movies constitute a new “suburb” crowded with former or active K-pop idols, whose prominence partly explains the outstanding box office record of domestically produced movies vis-à-vis Hollywood imports in the past several years.

Apart from the *mélange* stylistics and industrial multidimensionality, one needs to pay attention to the functional variability of K-pop, stretching far beyond the perimeter of popular music. To the South Korean government and people alike, K-pop and its representative idols are arguably most treasured national assets. Some even say in jest that K-pop idols are, together with Samsung smartphones, the best merchandise ever produced by the nation. More often than not, K-pop idols have acted as a cheerleader for various state and market affairs in exchange for lavish underwritings from local/national governments. Under the state auspices, K-pop artistes/bands were showcased to a range of domestic and international events held by local/national governments. Over time, it became customary for K-pop idols to be appointed promotional envoys of public campaigns and corporate/governmental events like the 2010 G20 summit, 2012 Yeosu Expo, and 2014 Incheon Asian Games. Given the magnitude of brand-enhancing effects K-pop idols bring to the country, they can be considered involuntary agents that facilitate the merger between South Korean entertainment and cultural diplomacy (see Chapter 2).

Recently, South Korea’s incumbent President Park Geun-hye met with members of Girls’ Generation and Super Junior at the Korea–China Friendship Concert held in June 2013 in a clear move to accentuate cultural affinities between China and Korea. This meeting took place during her official state visit to China, and analysts agree that K-pop and *Hallyu* are, presently, the only dependable antidote

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to the troubled post-Cold War politics in East Asia. But President Park was not the first to harness the adhesive power of K-pop in the treacherous foreign relations of East Asia. As is widely known, BoA performed at a formal dinner following the summit between Korea's former president Roh Moo-hyun and Japan's then prime minister Junichiro Koizumi in June 2004, when the political tension between the two long-estranged nations was at a peak. Psy is yet another figure that exemplifies what might be regarded as the "compulsorily meddling" nature of K-pop in foreign affairs. After attending the 85th birthday of Thailand's king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, in November 2012, Psy even met and dined with the President of the US, Barack Obama, during the "Christmas in Washington" concert at the National Building Museum on 9 December 2012. Curiously, this meeting took place immediately after the breakout of the controversy surrounding the rapper's anti-American remarks in 2004 calling for the killing of "Yankees who have been torturing Iraqi captives". Of course, he apologised in public for his provocative deeds and remarks prior to his "official visit" to Washington.

As these instances suggest, K-pop artistes/idols are the fulcrum of what might be termed an entertainment-diplomatic complex. The quality of K-pop as an all-round medium cannot be properly grasped when perceived as a mere subgenre of popular music. It is a nascent form of augmented entertainment with substantial impact on public/state affairs for the cultural parvenu that South Korea is.

### **Of the fan, by the fan, for the fan**

As the authors in this volume all point out, fan cultures often comprise activities that have little to do with K-pop music. At times, K-pop is but an outlet through which fans would express their feelings, identities, or interests. Like other popular cultures, K-pop could serve as a vector of communion, excuse for distraction, method of peer pressure, or simply a communication piece. This is not to trivialise but to stress the self-directedness of K-pop fandom. Put differently, K-pop fandom is as much about fans themselves as about K-pop. Even if fans may immerse themselves in K-pop, the immersion is not a form of drowning but of swimming.

Fandom for young audiences is an extension of the individuation process elucidated in Jungian psychology. The journey for self-making requires both identification and dis-identification, just as fandom entails both belonging to a group and distancing from others. Hence, it is not uncommon for K-pop to be pitted against Japanese and American pop music. In places where K-pop is the bandwagon to jump on, like in Southeast Asia, K-pop fandom can be driven by fears of marginalisation and ostracisation. In contrast, a number of fans from the Middle East, Scandinavia, and Western Europe admitted to having concealed their love of K-pop for fear of being shunned and detested by their peers. Accordingly, it is not unusual to come across K-pop fans whose motivations are completely irrelevant to K-pop. Some say it is cool to support what few people like; some others say it is not so cool to not know what everyone else likes. For these young audiences, K-pop fandom can be a statement about their dispositions, dis/likings, and aspirations, not just reflective of the actual, present self but also

formative of the desired, future self. Sometimes, a statement can be made without strong faith or even falsely just to be on the same page with the group they wish to be a part of.

Competitions and rivalry among fan clubs/members are an auxiliary cause for the distension of K-pop fandom. A host of fan clubs of local to global scales have mushroomed, due in part to the post-Fordist mode of production in the K-pop industry, a mode that produces an overabundance of “differentiated” items that are actually very similar to one another. What Freud calls the “narcissism of minor difference” is the name of the game for competing fan clubs, through which an unwitting inflation of loyalty/disgust runs beyond control (see Chapter 8). A fan club is a community of passion, membership of which is granted to and maintained by only those demonstrating a sufficient level of enthusiasm. In the case of most online clubs, rare information about their beloved idols or a specialised skill such as language carries currency. For offline clubs, however, allegiance is gauged by the amount of time, effort, and even by the size of donation to the charity their darling idols endorse (Chōn 2012; SM Bae 2013).

K-pop fandom is multifaceted and polycentric. Governed by global fans, K-pop fandom is not necessarily derivative of, but somewhat autonomous from, the music industry at the helm of K-pop. Fans of various age, gender, ethnicity, or nationality would have different interests in and expectations from K-pop. Fans in Thailand, for example, are on the trail of male K-pop bands by and large, while Japanese fans show a predilection for female bands (Lie 2013, 56). The difference is, of course, tangled with a myriad of factors we cannot possibly pretend to know. The only clear point we can extract from this divergence is the centrality of locality. Even though K-pop is inextricably tied to the culture, economy, and politics of South Korea, the primary site of concern for international fans is their own locality and its cultural milieu. The site-specificity of K-pop culture compels us to shift the focus away from K-pop to what K-pop means to local fans and how they use it (see Chapter 10).

In Australia, for example, K-pop is a rallying point for Australians of Asian ethnicities and is leveraged for the promotion of multiculturalism (see Chapter 5). In various places including Korea and Malaysia, Psy’s “Gangnam Style” was employed as a vehicle of political criticism/activism (see Chapter 9). Some denounce the way in which K-pop is mobilised for the mercantile nationalism of South Korea. As a result, K-pop has met with significant resistance in Japan. The anti-*Hallyu* and anti-K-pop sentiment expressed by some Japanese has less to do with cultural contents than with what the influx of Korean cultural products signifies to them (see Chapter 7). K-pop, in this case, serves only to amplify latent anti-Korea sentiments. None of these suggests the insignificance of K-pop or the frivolity of K-pop fandom. Rather, they illustrate the importance of how and why K-pop is appropriated to what ends. As culture often becomes a medium through which political/economic objectives are communicated, K-pop, too, has become a unique channel through which heterogeneous interests of global fans are negotiated.

Equipped with an array of communicational gears, individual fans come in touch with the greater circuit responsible for the post-textual production of K-pop

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music – that is, K-pop culture. SNS (social networking services), or what we would like to call *site-media*,<sup>3</sup> play a vital role in organising fan communities and activities. Songs shared through site-media stimulate online interactions among physically separated global fans, all while bringing visual and musical experiences to a new level. As discussed by authors in this volume, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are invaluable platforms for the cultural actions of K-pop enthusiasts as well as for the global visibility of K-pop. Together with leading fan sites like Allkpop and Soompi, these digital site-media hold enormous sway over the flora and fauna of K-pop ecosystems. Catalysed by these site-media and online fan clubs, K-pop has emerged as the epitome of digital youth culture: a social-media-friendly, fan/user-steered, and participation-conducive anthropological occurrence.

Upon the launch of YouTube's K-pop channel, management companies started exerting greater efforts to streamline the virtual engine of K-pop. To maximise digital interfaces with fans, they assigned dozens of staff to bedecking their SNS sites and uploading an array of enticing materials in diverse formats.<sup>4</sup> They would even offer voyeuristic perks like “inside scoops” – luring fans to peep into the supposedly unedited backstage practice of K-pop stars. The fact that the global K-pop rush is much obliged to the pervasiveness of portable digital devices and SNS was made evident by the Psy syndrome.

South Korean singer Psy's comic music video “Gangnam Style” went viral soon after it was released on 15 July 2012. It surpassed 100 million hits on YouTube in less than 80 days, making it the most-viewed video in such a short period of time, and it has now surpassed a record of two billion views. Countless parodies of Psy's comic video have sprung up, further tightening the bond between SNS and K-pop fandom. Even though Psy's connection with K-pop was tenuous, the “Gangnam Style” syndrome not only instanced the sheer distributive power of SNS, but also evidenced the creative instinct/aptitude of fans in their use of SNS, on which the globalisation of K-pop is predicated.<sup>5</sup>

### Who calls fans consumers?

Between K-pop and K-pop culture is a legion of commodities. In discussing K-pop culture/fandom, one cannot overlook “the elephant in the room” – that is, the question of cultural commodity and consumption. In fact, no other genre in popular music has ever shown as solid a connection with cultural commodities as K-pop has. It can even be argued that K-pop is a meta-commodity that can commodify a host of other cultural goods as pseudo avatars of K-pop idols. For better or worse, global K-pop devotees do hail the K-pop spinoffs manufactured by Korean conglomerates. Many fans joyfully succumb to the siren call of the cosmetic, fashion, gastronomic, and digital products, which are endorsed by deified idols and deceptively associated with the images and songs of K-pop.

This interoperation of economy and culture in general, and of K-pop and pop commodities in particular, is most palpably observed in the case of digital electronics.<sup>6</sup> Kitted up with idol-studded advertisements, hi-tech electronic goods



Figure 1.1 Big Bang cookies, at Incheon International Airport.

such as smartphones, tablet PCs, and 3D/UHD television sets have bombarded K-pop audiences with irresistible narratives of urban chic and ultra-modern life. Haptic, lifestyle-specific, loyalty-sensitive, media-intensive, and identity-conditional, the digital devices are magically impregnated with popular zeitgeists symbolised by K-pop.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, the K-pop enterprise has been a faithful ally to the reign of capital, commodity, fame, and nationalist ideology. Conglomerates like Samsung and LG have sought to cash-in on the soaring value of the nation's cultural capital enhanced by K-pop. Complicit with this state-corporate joint manoeuvre are Korean citizens, intellectuals, artists, and mainstream media, whose post-colonial impatience to exit the standing of cultural invisibility hazardously instils K-pop/*Hallyu* with nationalist drives. It is for this reason that K-pop cannot afford to be reduced to a mere subgenre of popular culture. It is an econo-cultural spectacle that turns ocular-acoustic-choreographic styles into reified cultural commodities. It is a mutant character business that enmeshes advertisement, idol figures, digital technologies, and cultural merchandise – a business operated by the syndicate of South Korean mega-corporations and show-business magnates.

In addressing international K-pop fandom, nevertheless, the volume keeps the simplistic image of consumer/consumption at arm's length. We view K-pop fans as a massive, loosely connected collective, whose cultural endeavours traverse the curatorial, re/distributive, artistic, and consumptive spheres. A wealth of fan practices cropped up in different regions, broadening the global repertoire of

creative expressions and participatory undertakings. From K-pop night, flashmob, cover dance, and fashion show that have already been in vogue to K-pop garage sale, skit, fiction, auction, donation, and bazaar – the gamut of K-pop fan culture is too vast and procreative to be encapsulated by the monotonous term consumption/consumer. Instead of being a buyer with no other power but purchasing end products, they are trailblazers, expanding the cultural breadth and depth of K-pop products. Their “cultural brickwork” brace global K-pop strongholds, as their labour of love furnishes the productive core with distributive momenta.

It is noteworthy that the K-pop industry has come to rely on fans to show them where the need for innovation is greatest. Two decades ago, John Fiske (1992, 47) contended that “There is a constant struggle between fans and the industry, in which the industry attempts to incorporate the tastes of the fans, and the fans to ‘excorporate’ the products of the industry.” But things have changed a great deal, and Fiske’s idea does not hold water any longer. In the case of K-pop, there is more collaboration/negotiation than struggle/tension between the industry and fans. During the late 1990s, for example, fans of certain groups would identify themselves by holding coloured balloons: white for H.O.T., yellow for Sechs Kies, orange for Shinhwa, and sky blue for G.O.D. (Pae 2012, 204). Later, K-pop management companies adopted the idea of fan colour, and began assigning bands to certain colours. The colour scheme in K-pop is ubiquitously practised today as a symbol of connection and bilateral influence between the industry and fans.

It is certainly alarming that a handful of Korean entertainment agencies wield absolute command over a legion of similar idol bands they have mass-produced and merchandised. Critics often claim that the unbridled power of those management giants smothers artistic agency with what is known as a “slave contract”, which has sparked major controversies over labour and human right issues of K-pop performers (see Chapter 3). Nevertheless, fans do chime in with the mis/management of the stars they root for, as shown by the passionate support for the debut of JYJ, a group that broke out of TVXQ. Keenly aware of the growing clout of global fans, the leading management moguls (SM, YG, and JYP Entertainment) make efforts to stay on good terms with the K-pop devotees.

Indeed, the industry has learned over time the benefits of engaging the audience in the process of production. Major management companies have cleverly maintained various channels of communication with fan representatives and even consulted their production plans face to face with ordinary fans. Today it is the industry who treats fans/audiences as adjunct producers, when many erudite scholars cling to the antiquated binary between producer/production and consumer/consumption.

### **The Big Three and the Cultural South**

From a macro perspective of cultural politics, the rise of *Hallyu* and K-pop brings to light the question of global cultural geometry and hegemony. The global culture industry has been ruled by the duopoly of the US and Western Europe. With Japan’s entry in the late 1980s, a Big Three league was formed – an exclusive

circle governing the global flow of cultural products. The oligopoly in cultural production is founded on market and content divisions: the US is the indomitable baron in the realm of commercial movies, TV shows, popular music, and character industry; Western Europe has maintained its leading edge in fashion/design/luxury goods, literary criticism/products, arts and artistic films; and Japan has cornered the pre/teenage market with manga, anime, and video games. Accordingly, little room has been allowed for popular cultures from other nations to squeeze in.

Exceptions are few and far between. Al Jazeera of Qatar and Globo of Brazil are meagre instances of TV networks with a reasonable degree of international success. Other than *Al Jazeera News* that wields pan-Islamic viewership and more, *Telenovelas* from Latin America are the only programmes that have garnered a large-scale viewership in Portuguese, Spanish, Filipino, and North American markets. In the arena of film, Hong Kong cinema once carved out an Asian niche market by churning out a plethora of kung fu, martial arts, and gangster/cop movies. But its fame was short-lived, and its genre conventions dissipated into Hollywood's action subgenres. Even though Bollywood of India and Nollywood of Nigeria merit serious attention today, their ascendancy is confined more or less to regional audiences.

In popular music, so-called "ethnic" or "world" music has sporadically surged with an intense yet ephemeral flare followed by a long period of silence. Good examples to conjure are reggae music of the 1970s, with the charisma of Bob Marley, and the legendary dance song of the 1990s, the Macarena.<sup>8</sup> ABBA from Sweden is another instance, but the band can be grouped into Euro-pop broadly construed. Other than a few "ceremonial" exceptions, the sector has been dominated by the US-UK coalition. All of these attest to the flagrant asymmetry in the cultural power/role between the Big Three and what might be termed the *Cultural South*.<sup>9</sup> While the Big Three are proud creators and pacesetters of worldwide cultural trends, the Cultural South has remained a grateful customer at the mercy of the artistes and impresarios of the Big Three. In this respect, the quantum leap made by K-pop from a national sensation through a regional trend to a semi-global phenomenon is something of an anomaly in the history of popular cultures beyond the scope of popular music. It compels us to revisit and rethink the geopolitics in global popular cultures.

Audiences across Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America have long lost patience with US products that are saturated with violence, drugs, and obscenity. The mounting discontent with the US media content – television dramas, rap music, war-mongering video games, etc. – has initiated a quest for "clean" alternatives. On the other hand, popular cultures from Japan and Western Europe fell short of the vitality to trigger trans-regional sensations. The vacuum was an enormous boon to the Korean culture industry. Nations in shortage of locally produced programmes of decent quality began turning to the Korean option, known for ideological and ethical soundness on top of dexterity in whipping up a cocktail for the best ingredients/formats from America, Europe, and Japan (see Chapter 4).

On the other hand, the Cultural South as a whole has been a dutiful yet often forced buyer of everything and anything that the Euro-American duopoly has supplied. Japan, too, is no exception in the mindset of cultural subservience. So much so that the sharp divide between cultural production and reception spurred theories of cultural imperialism during the 1970s and 1980s. Even after theories of cultural imperialism gave way to the far more pacifying narrative of cultural globalisation from the 1990s, the lopsided cultural traffic between the Cultural South and the Euro-American nexus has hardly changed.

Despite the therapeutic account of cultural globalisation, the Cultural South has been at a standstill into the new millennium, easing its anxiety over the historically conditioned sterility/infertility in cultural production with the consoling precepts put forth by pundits of globalisation, namely polyvalence, decentralisation, glocalisation, and hybridisation. But the entrenched unevenness in cultural fecundity at the global scale seemed impossible to remedy. Outside the Cultural North, only a select few – such as mobile diaspora, transmigrants, and the inhabitants of the South with Western education – were granted to take part in the titular globality of cultural production. It is at this grim juncture that the prevalence of K-pop comes into the limelight of global cultural politics.

In a way, the Korean Wave and its latest manifestation, K-pop, is symptomatic of the shift in the power geometry of global cultural supply and demand. It is the materialisation of the escalating demand for a new ecology in global popular cultures by countless fans who yearn for a better representation of their cultural inclinations, ethnic upbringings, and aesthetic standards, as well as by younger generations for whom joining the latest cultural developments is a requisite and a prerogative at the same time. The import of K-pop's global becomes amplified when taking into consideration the rapid ascent of Korea's soft power, also pronounced in the fields of television drama, film, computer games and digital communications. The steep climb of Korea up the slippery ladder of cultural productivity signifies an unprecedented "mutiny", which could potentially imperil the centuries-long stability in global cultural hierarchies. It is so because Korea is a small country in Asia, a nation with a long history of colonial cringe, cultural obscurity, and economic dependency. For that matter, the sudden rise of Korea as a cultural upstart transmits a glimmer of hope to those with similar historical experiences of having been cultural subalterns. The ascendancy of K-pop, therefore, signifies much more than a levitation of a popular music genre from Korea.

### **Meta/partisan fandom and soft racism**

For analytic purposes, it would be useful to distinguish the K-pop phenomenon from K-pop plus K-pop fandom. The K-pop phenomenon refers to the enormity of the whole response to K-pop, inclusive of the K-pop fever itself. It encompasses resounding international feedbacks to and professional accounts of the K-pop rage, be they favourable or hostile, and personal or institutional. Cynics would frown at apparently synthetic, mechanical modes of K-pop production; distant

onlookers would show reservations on the sustainability of the fleeting fad, while zealots keep themselves busy evangelising all that is K-pop. But they all throw in their two cents anyway.

K-pop has been newscast, observed, analysed, documented, and discussed by laypeople, critics, journalists, culture industry workers, and policymakers alike. The *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Times*, the BBC, Canal+, and the *Asahi Shimbun*, to name but a few, have all fervently commented on the enigmatic discharge of cultural energy from a country unmarked on the map of global culture. Their search for convincing narratives illuminating the inscrutable incident is quite reminiscent of the hurried invention of tales to decipher the furious rise of Japan during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>10</sup>

Our observation is that this K-pop phenomenon fortuitously undrapes the inner layer of ethno-cultural psychodynamics concerning cultural creativity. To put it bluntly, this global fascination with K-pop unveils a covert tenor of racism in the very hyperreaction to the success of K-pop. The hyperreaction is practically tantamount to asking in perplexity “Why K-pop and why Korea?” It therefore scrutinises the authenticity of cultural creativity held by Korea, a nameless “intern” in the production of global popular culture. As a matter of empirical fact, cognitive colonialism/racism still lingers on by the measure of cultural creativity, which is often diluted with the geo-marketing terminology of the productive North versus the consumptive South. The ostensibly “functional” divide between the polar opposites masquerades a sharp perceptual split between the artistic, original North and the aping, derivative South. Beneath the glitzy, cosmopolitan surface of global popular culture there lie intricate forms of cultural disdain and self-negation along the question of cultural creativity. The reason why the K-pop rush looms particularly seditious is that it plays havoc with the division of cultural labour/role that has been taken for granted.

Far more delicate forms of cultural racism can be observed within K-pop fandom. There are two odd types of support for K-pop, which can be characterised as *meta-fandom* or *partisan fandom*. One is similar to the ethos of political correctness – hence, a “cultural correctness” so to speak – and the other is analogous to *esprit de corps*. Emanating from certain wards/groups of the Cultural North, the first one imparts difference-based camaraderie, while the second one is affinity-driven empathy from a majority of the Cultural South. But both unite in their categorical, super-textual approval of K-pop.

Unlike usual fandom, motives for these sweeping endorsements are extraneous to the presentational mode and content of the integrated entertainment genre, K-pop. Likes or dislikes of K-pop notwithstanding, these meta-fandoms rejoice at the very *popularity* of K-pop and ultimately root for the impressive upturn of the long-time cultural outcast, Korea. Emergent of political consciousness/sentiments regarding the inequity in global cultural geometry, these partisan fandoms cheer holistically on the Korean Wave and the country it derives from.

One specific symptom of meta/partisan fandom is what we would like to call *soft racism*. A good portion of K-pop fandom comprises a fascination with the cultural craftsmanship of an undersized, undistinguished nation in Asia in

producing something comparable in quality to the ones that have been deemed singular to Euro-American nations. For fans of Asia and Asian diaspora/descent, the nature of this fascination is self-celebratory. For them it is a long-overdue vindication of their potency in cultural creativity. Summoning up an overinvested signifier of Asia, they would lay collective claim to K-pop and *Hallyu* as an embodiment of their ethno-cultural asset: “My cultures by my folks.”

For cultural subalterns of non-Asian ethnicities – those from the Middle East, North Africa, and South America, for instance – this fascination borders on a vicarious satisfaction aided by the sentiment of minority solidarity. For them, championing K-pop and *Hallyu* could mean a roundabout way of defying or at least distancing the Euro-American cultural products – an imposed option to which they have been grudgingly habituated. For fans from the Cultural North (or Euro-American, Caucasian fans in a more ethnocentric classification), it could well be an amazement/admiration at the gifted exotic Other. Their fascination has plural functions: it helps assuage pain over the programmed inequity in the global creative industry; allows them to parade their cosmopolitan propensities; and meets their need to be in sync with the emerging hot culture in an alleged era of Asia.

Different ethno-cultural positions aside, all of them share the fascination with the role reversal in the global creative industry. The covert pleasure of soft racism in K-pop fandom’s can be compressed into an image of Euro-American fans cheering and marvelling at the dizzying performance of the former cultural subalterns in the limelight. This epic transposition is, perhaps, too stupefying to be instantly grasped, especially by those who have long been condemned to the position of envious audience on the floor. Additionally, the true nature of this soft racism is somehow ineffable due to the cognitive “hiccup” it triggers.

Soft racism in K-pop fandom is unquestionably ethnocentric by nature; but it hardly is a resurgence of cultural essentialism that has been consistently administered into the vein of global popular culture. It is a form of retributive, if not restorative, racism spawned and nurtured by the perverted trajectories of colonialism and ensuing disparities in human values, creative prowess, and self-esteem between the Cultural North and South. The uncanny sight of soft racism in K-pop fandom “messes with” the deep psychology of cultural superiority and self-defeatism alike. To some K-pop fans we have observed, it is an ego-boosting shot in the arm, much needed and even sweet. It is historically incubated and politically understandable.

### **Summary of the chapters**

Fandom, especially when it concerns foreign people or cultural items, can cause a backlash and elicit claims of cultural imperialism, fetishism, exoticism, complacency, mimicry, or blind conformism. Both K-pop and its fans have been the target of such allegations. In Chapter 1, Roald Maliangkay investigates the claims of complacency and mimicry by tracing the history of K-pop’s primary characteristics. He finds that those elements belong to a well-established format of

Korean popular music that despite revealing significant mimicry has been repeatedly adapted over the years in order to maintain a “fresh” appeal to very different domestic and foreign audiences. In the second chapter, Stephen Epstein analyses how one of K-pop’s main acts, Girls’ Generation, has helped South Korea enter the arena of global popular culture. He shows that the group projects a multitude of symbolic images that range from highly localised to global ones. He demonstrates the way the group’s images have targeted very different audiences: while the girls’ representation of an ideal Korean femininity allowed, for example, their employment as ambassadors for different brands competing in the domestic market, their image as cosmopolitan, global Koreans underpinned the group’s success in Japan.

In Chapter 3, Inkyu Kang studies the South Korean government’s decision to develop its national cultural industries following the economic crisis of the late 1990s. He argues that de-individualisation and hypercommodification characterise the approach adopted by the entertainment companies, which ultimately produced a form of popular music that a Marxist view might hold as the McDonaldisation of musical entertainment. He warns, however, that K-pop harbours significant creativity and individualism, and to the consumers in particular, the promise of liberation. Ju Oak Kim also deliberates the key factors behind the fast rise of K-pop. She examines how the boy band TVXQ managed to break through in the Japanese music market in spite of the obvious political, historical, and sociocultural barriers, and finds that the promotion of the group’s various hybrid and localised qualities were instrumental in finding appeal among Japanese fans. Her analysis reveals that sensitivity to Japanese expectations and standards called for careful positioning and compliance, which ultimately led to various forms of collaboration between Korean and Japanese producers and fan communities.

The role of the media is highlighted in Chapters 5 and 6. Liz Giuffre and Sarah Keith discuss the intentions behind the Australian TV programme *SBS PopAsia* and its use of music videos to introduce cultural literacy to a youth demographic. The television series has had considerable impact, despite the marginality of Asian pop music otherwise. Through interviews and careful analysis of the show’s reception, Giuffre and Keith demonstrate not only that the channel has come to be regarded as an acknowledgement of the presence of Korean and other East and Southeast Asian migrants and diasporic communities in Australia, but that it has also formed a bridge between them and Australians more broadly. JungBong Choi investigates the various possible conductors of K-pop from one culture to another. Using examples of K-pop’s acclimatisation in Latin America, he examines the crucial groundwork laid by Korean TV dramas, arguing that Japanese popular culture has in many cases served to mediate K-pop’s fandom, often through online site-media. The possibility for K-pop acts to revive dormant sentiments over a similar foreign fad does not apply to Japan itself. In Chapter 7, Eun-Young Jung scrutinises the various responses to *Hallyu* in Japan, and to K-pop in particular, in Japan. She discusses the successful Japanese debuts by K-pop acts over the years and notes the important foundation laid by Korean TV dramas. She finds, among other things, that a lack of affinity with the Japanese language has not been an

impediment to all K-pop, and that Japan's anti-*Hallyu* movement reacted less to K-pop per se than to the threat Japanese consumption posed to national pride.

In Chapter 8, Haerin Shin explores the mechanism of K-pop content production, consumption, and re-mediation by analysing the online dispute over the academic credentials of rapper/musician Tablo. In particular, she examines how the public's enjoyment of the witch-hunt was situated on the precarious balance between the violation of and subscription to social norms based on undefined notions of integrity. The case highlights the hyperrealism of K-pop idols who have to conform to high unnatural standards of beauty and behaviour while remaining identifiable role models that elicit emulation. By dissecting the many factors in play, Shin offers important new perspectives on the phenomenon of Internet vigilantism. In another study of the semiology of K-pop fandom, Gaik Cheng Khoo analyses the numerous Malaysian parodies of Psy's "Gangnam Style" video that emerged in the months leading up to the nation's general elections. She argues that rather than merely embracing K-pop for its offer of an alternative social identity, the parodies serve to reflect on and nurture pride in the makers' local place and identity. Khoo carefully examines YouTube videos and their comment threads to show that by allowing and nurturing debates over issues impermissible in the state-controlled media, the site-media had a significantly impact on people's notions of community.

In the final chapter, Roald Maliangkay and Geng Song investigate the impact of K-pop's male idols on Chinese notions of male beauty. Arguing against the common treatment of China as a cultural monolith, they analyse the various factors that lead consumers towards or away from the contemporary Korean ideal of male beauty in two remote areas of China, the Korean autonomous prefecture of Yanbian, and Hong Kong. They find that in formulating and pursuing their beauty ideal, consumers are driven by a compound range of concerns, which includes their socioeconomic position, their own aesthetic desires, and the realm of Korean culture as they imagine it.

### **Romanisation and style**

Because the official Korean Romanisation system promulgated in 2000 sometimes renders unfortunate connotations, we use the McCune-Reischauer system instead, albeit in the revised form created by the Korean Ministry of Education in 1988. This allows us to use "shi" for sounds previously transcribed as "si", which does not represent the actual sound, and therefore defeats the main purpose of transcription. We make exceptions in the case of commonly accepted or personal names, using the spelling preferred by the person. We also add hyphens to separate suffixes from nouns, so the transcription reflects how the sound of the noun's final consonant is inflected when it is followed by the initial vowel of a suffix. Rather than *kūrup-ūi*, whereby *ūi* is a possessive marker, therefore, we use *kūrub-ūi*. Chinese and Japanese terms are transcribed according to the Pinyin and Hepburn systems, respectively.

Although it has become common in cultural studies to indicate when a particular website was last accessed by the author, the value of this information is often very

small, especially in the case of discussions of comment threads, which can change radically over the course of a few days, or even hours. In this volume we have chosen to indicate the date on which something was uploaded instead. Not only does this help avoid having obsolete data in print, but it may also support attempts to locate the original data when the link displayed becomes invalid.

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JungBong Choi  
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### Notes

- 1 Acronyms for K-pop groups came in vogue: H.O.T. is an acronym of High Five of Teenagers; N.R.G. of New Radiancy Group; G.O.D. of Groove Over Dose; S.E.S. of the first names of singers Pada (sea), Eugene, and Shoo; Fin.K.L. of Fin Killing Liberty (a partly French, partly English mission statement opposing oppression); and Baby V.O.X. of Baby Voices of Xpression.
- 2 Rain is a K-pop heartthrob whose immense popularity across Asia and North America landed him on the roster of the world's 100 most influential people named by *Time* magazine in 2011.
- 3 They are not self-sufficient media technologies but only online sites with autonomous mediational features.
- 4 Contemporary K-pop videos can be easily viewed (and downloaded) in high definition. But the availability of digital content online or the widespread sale of counterfeit copies overseas scarcely threatens the commercial value of K-pop. Authentic copies of K-pop albums and live concerts remain popular with fans, because they are often sold in small numbers as limited editions, and commonly include collectible extras such as photo albums, posters, or various forms of artwork. Also, live concerts are the main source of income for the K-pop industry. Although a growing number of fans is coming to Korea to experience the culture of their idols first-hand, K-pop bands travel extensively to meet the local demand for live concerts (see Maliangkay 2014).
- 5 Note that the video was not a phenomenon everywhere, not even in neighbouring Japan where K-pop had already won many fans (Lie 2013).

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- 6 The wedlock between economy and culture has become a near-universal phenomenon. But the intensity of their coupling proves to be most salient in countries with an export-driven economy, as is the case in Korea.
- 7 Digital pop commodities enhance cognitive proximity and cultural intimacy with South Korea among global youths. They foster audiences' allegiance not simply to the manufacturers – namely LG and Samsung, South Korean electronics giants – but more importantly to the country they are from, to the cultural mores they uphold, and to the people they belong to. It is possible, therefore, to regard the corporate entities of pop commodities as agents of cultural diplomacy.
- 8 Originally by Los del Rio before the release of the English version.
- 9 The Cultural South is not a geographic reference only. It is even embedded in the Cultural North. Ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities in North America, Western/Northern Europe, Australia, and Japan who have migrated from the Global South constitute broad strata of the Cultural South.
- 10 This concluded in a depiction of Japan as a permutation of Western modernity once thought to be innate to Euro-American civilisations.

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# 1 Same look through different eyes

## Korea's history of uniform pop music acts

*Roald Maliangkay*

K-pop is commonly regarded as a form of musical entertainment. To most fans, however, the appeal of the genre lies as much in the look and visual performance of the acts involved as in their music. Its main menu is comprised of boy bands and girl groups whose members are often styled similarly, presumably in order to increase the visual appeal of their dance routines. Perfect looks, the latest fashion, and highly stylised, synchronised movements make K-pop acts seem like catwalk dance skits. As with fashion, it is the products and their models that are on display, rather than the creative minds themselves. A small number of idols are actively involved in the development of their act, but, like boy bands and girl groups elsewhere, most of them merely perform what others have created for them.<sup>1</sup>

Although each act has its own style of music and dance, due to the significant homogeneity in the sound and performance across all K-pop acts it would be quite a challenge to ascribe a new music video to a particular music act without seeing the face(s) of its main idol(s).<sup>2</sup> Differences and idiosyncrasies exist, but innovations are small, as the industry is conservative. It will be under pressure to diversify and innovate to a degree, but seeing as most K-pop fans are teenagers, it is likely to avoid too radical changes that might put them (or their parents) off. As a rule of thumb, “genre” in popular media is a crystallisation of market dynamics: innovative and repetitive, acquiescent to the gravity of the past as well as to the push for the new. K-pop is no exception. The look and performance of girl groups can easily be termed uniform. While boy bands also show a degree of uniformity in performance and appearance, such as by wearing matching combinations based on the same fabric, their members rarely wear identical outfits and they tend to have longer solo sections within songs and videos.

The range of K-pop is broad and includes playful early teen pop, rock 'n' roll, electro and house acts. Most songs are fast dance tracks with a strong contemporary R&B flavour in terms of their melodic contour and beat, and they often include short rap sequences. The sequences have little “attitude” and sound rushed, as if the fact that the lines do not suit the beat well is unintentional. Although the hurried performance of those lines, which often include a few random English phrases, can be reminiscent of an unrehearsed *noraebang* (Korean-style karaoke) rendition, singers always recite their lines within the beat, sometimes rushing through a set of phrases to do so. On recordings, voices are clear and pitch-

perfect, while auto-tuned, heavy arrangements and sound effects help support a rich “studio-sound” that involves few acoustic instruments. At “live” performances, the small number of acoustic instruments heard are rarely shown. In order to preserve their breath for the energetic dance routines, singers often lip-sync at least part of their songs. On stage, the complex choreographies are usually performed in front of giant video screens that show colourful computer-generated backgrounds and sceneries, and key phrases from the lyrics. The use of the video screens, and the set choreographies, allow the live performances to serve as re-enactments of official music videos. Audiences appreciate good live singing, but they are no *sine qua non* as the music videos remain of primary importance.

Contemporary K-pop is regularly criticised for being too homogenous and for prioritising looks over content (Willoughby 2006; Chua Beng Huat 2010, 19; Seabrook 2012, 91; Yu 2013). In an interview in January 2013, Yang Hyun Suk, the CEO of YG Entertainment, one of Korea’s main talent agencies, acknowledged that “too many similar groups” had saturated the market and reduced demand (Yi 2013). Critics commonly argue that the sound of the various acts is not Korean, but Western,<sup>3</sup> and that there isn’t enough individualism in the acts to make them appeal to foreign audiences because the focus lies on uniform, synchronised looks and dance, rather than on the quality of the singing. To rebut the criticism, one could, in theory, argue that apart from the fact that pop music and true originality are virtually incompatible (see Shweta 2013), and that the sound of Western popular music has become increasingly homogenous over the past semi-decade (Serrà *et al.* 2012), many of the people involved in K-pop today have Western backgrounds, and that a growing number of performers were raised in a country other than Korea. But those involved in the industry are not bothered much by the criticism. Not only is the revenue generated by Korean pop music still growing – which Jason Yu argues (2013), unconvincingly, is because “bubblegum pop is incredibly easy to manufacture” – but all-boy/all-girl acts dressed in matching costumes performing in perfect sync have proven to be a successful format in Korea at least since the 1930s. What is more, by carefully tweaking the format, such song and dance acts have long managed to appeal to vastly different audiences over the years, transcending generations and cultural borders.

Close examination of the history of Korean popular song and dance acts reveals that the uniform-looking template has been carefully adjusted over the years to maintain an element of “freshness”. Analysing changes in the appeal of such acts to different audiences should underscore the complexity behind them and add a useful historical dimension to discussions over the seeming complacency of today’s K-pop industry. In this chapter, I therefore explore the history of Korea’s uniform-looking pop acts and closely examine its defining concrete stylistics: visual uniformity in appearance and performance, and a repertoire largely comprised of relatively fast R&B songs with rapped bridge sections that include random phrases in a language different from that of the main song. Although other developments have also generated changes over the years – such as those ushered

in by technological innovation and changes in the Korean language – I will not consider them here, since they are tied less to the realm of popular music.

### Colonial uniforms

Acts involving groups of young women performing synchronised, Western-style chorus-line dance in uniform dresses were introduced to Korea by Japanese entertainment companies in the early 1910s, and became popular on Korea's elite live theatre stages in the 1920s. By 1929, a year before John Adolphi's revue *The Show of Shows* would come to Korean cinemas,<sup>4</sup> revue dance had become a standard part of the Western dance routines of all the Seoul-based schools (*kwōnbōn*) for young women entertainers, or *kisaeng* (*Tonga ilbo* [East Asia Daily] 8 February 1930, 5; Kim Yōnghūi 2009, 36–40, 44; Seoul yōksa pangmulgwan 2003, 68–71). In 1930, following the success of revue-type shows, Kwōn Samch'ōn put together the *Samch'ōn kagūktan* (Three Streams Operetta Group), which was inspired by Japan's Takarazuka theatre and offered a type of all-female vaudeville (*Tonga ilbo* 11 July 1931, 5; Pak Ch'anho 2009, 540).<sup>5</sup> Little is known about the formation and repertoire of this group, but its repertoire is said to have included chorus-line dance, which was presumably performed in titillating, uniform costumes like other Korean revue acts, such as those involving dancer Pae Kuja (*Tonga ilbo* 3 February 1938, 5; Kim Yōnghūi 2009, 42–43).

In 1932, musician and band manager Yi Ch'ōl created a Korean subsidiary of the Japanese Imperial Record Co. Ltd. (Teikoku chikuonki kabushiki kaisha, or "Teichiku"), called Okeh. Yi had a nose for talent and was able to create the best talent portfolio among the record companies operating in Korea. In 1936, he produced the documentary-like movie *A Korea of Songs* (Norae Chosōn). Although it is nowhere to be found, it is said to have included a significant amount of footage of Okeh's main stars performing as members of the so-called Okeh Band (*Ok'e yōnjudan*) for Japanese audiences in Japan from February to March 1936.<sup>6</sup> The movie featured an all-girl act called the Chōgori (Jacket) Sisters, which comprised the young singers Yi Nanyōng, Chang Sejōng, Yi Chunhūi, Kim Nūngja, Pak Hyangnim, and Sō Ponghūi and entailed them harmonising Korean and Japanese hit songs dressed in identical gowns (Pak Ch'anho 2009, 549–550; Maliangkay 2011, 62).<sup>7</sup> To the Japanese audiences, which were mixed in terms of gender and social class, the Korean acts symbolised a war trophy: here was a group of women that emulated the summit of popular entertainment that the empire to which they now belonged and came to pay respect had introduced them.<sup>8</sup>

Folk and pop songs composed shortly after Liberation expressed a desire for overdue sociopolitical change and an end to foreign intervention. Although entertainers generally struggled to make a living and were often forced to find other ways to make a living, former Chōgori sister Yi Nanyōng continued to play a key role in the music business. While her husband Kim Haesong, a well-established big band director and composer, was able to rely on his connections to secure a regular income for his family via regular gigging at clubs,

Yi began to turn her three teenage daughters into an all-girl singing group of her own. During and immediately after the Korean War (1950–53), the young girls – Sook-ja (b. 1941), Ai Ja (b. 1940), and Young Ja (b. 1939?) – would often perform at American military clubs singing both traditional and popular Korean as well as Western songs in identical dresses. With the support of their mother and uncle, Yi Pongnyong, another former Okeh talent, the girls became one of the most noted Korean pop acts and were sometimes referred to as the Korean Andrews Sisters. Because the emphasis of their act lay on them singing a large variety of songs and playing a large number of instruments, they were, arguably, the first Korean all-girl band as opposed to merely being an all-girl group. But their image also relied much on their uniformity in styling and harmony in singing. The so-called Kim Sisters migrated to the US around 1958, where in the 1960s and early 1970s they became true celebrities: they brought out various singles and albums, regularly appeared on major TV and radio shows, as well as in a number of advertisements (Maliangkay 2006, 28–29).

The girls' success overseas provided much inspiration for others back home. Many similar acts would try to fill the void left by the departure of the Sisters, but they rarely played instruments. Acts such as the Pearl Sisters and Arirang Sisters would rely mostly on their physical appeal, and the mini-skirt fashion that helped them flaunt it. As with the Kim Sisters, however, the technical difficulty of their dance routines was low. They had a limited song repertoire that comprised well-known folk songs, a few Korean pop songs, and a number of covers of foreign hits.<sup>9</sup> Many of them made a name for themselves through the USO (United Services Organizations) shows organised in and around the cities to entertain US servicemen (Shin *et al.* 1998, 25–29). Although their target audience was predominantly male, they emulated the latest fashion ideals and helped to set new ones. Their many foreign audiences were not genuinely excited by the quality of their performance. To them, all-girl acts served to not only highlight the preeminence of American pop culture, but also to quench their appetite for eroticism and to remind them of a love back home. Popular girl groups from the mid 1960s include the Lee Sisters, the Chŏng Sisters, and the Chebi (Swallow) Sisters. In the late 1960s they were joined by, among others, the Pearl Sisters, the Arirang Sisters, the Yuri (Glass) Sisters, the Hwani Sisters, the Tul (Two) Sisters, the Kimchi Kats, and the twin act of the Pani (Bunny) Girls (Shin *et al.* 1998, 235).

Although uniform all-male pop acts existed too, they were outnumbered by girl groups. In the early to mid 1970s there were the Young Sisters, the Pidulgi (Dove) Sisters, the Venus Sisters, the Cool Sisters, the Candy Sisters, the Apple Sisters, the Lilly Sisters, and more competing for fame. Between the late 1970s and the late 1980s, however, few new girl groups emerged. All-girl groups from this period included the Chun Sisters, the Tol Sisters, Hŭi chamae (Hee Sisters), Ŭnpangul chamae (Silver Bell Sisters), and Kŭmbi tanbi (Golden Rain Sweet Rain). Another group worth mentioning from this period is the two-girl act Kukpo chamae (National Treasure Sisters), which debuted in 1981 with the hit songs “He’s Like Heaven” (Hanŭl kat’ŭn kŭ saram) and “I Look Lonely” (Nae mosŭb-i ssŭlssŭrhaeyo), and followed that up with the even bigger hit “Please Don’t Forget



Figure 1.1 Arirang Sisters album from the 1960s (Asia Records ALS-81).

Me” (Na-rül na-rül itchi maseyo) in the following year. Although the teenagers Im Kyöng’hüi and Im Söng’hüi had a strong musical pedigree, much like the Kim Sisters, it was their hot pants and sleeveless tops that led them to climb up the charts and even go on tour in Japan and the US. The act fell apart in 1986 when Kyöng’hüi decided to complete her education at the Tokyo College of Music, where her father was a professor. In September that year, Söng’hüi announced she would go solo under her own name (*Kyönghyang shinmun* [Capital and Country Newspaper] 4 July 1986, 11; *Maeil kyöngje* [Daily Economy] 23 September 1986, 9).

Unlike male bands, most of the female groups comprised siblings, which usually limited the number of group members to two. Since they carried the responsibility of financially supporting their family, men, let alone brothers, were less likely to dedicate their high school or university years to the pursuit of temporary fame. A notable exception to the rule were the twins of Nogojiri (Skylarks) and the three

brothers of the successful rock band Sanullim.<sup>10</sup> Siblings who chose a career as a joint act were, nevertheless, less likely to fight over financial matters or the sharing or relaying of responsibilities. Another factor in the relatively large number of girl groups was that they were particularly popular with the many all-male audiences during and shortly after the Korean War and in Vietnam during the time of Korea's involvement in its war (1965–1973). Until the mid 1970s they could sway audiences with their physical charm and their repertoire of popular foreign and Korean songs. Among the former were well-known “Oriental” songs that their foreign audiences would expect and appreciate, partly because it confirmed their cultural superiority (Maliangkay 2011, 63–64).<sup>11</sup>

Movies and television had much impact on popular music, since they associated songs with the passion and sensuality expressed through dance. Although television broadcasting did not begin until the early 1960s,<sup>12</sup> many Koreans had access to a wide range of foreign entertainment through the television channel of the American Forces Network Korea (AFKN) from 1957, the various radio and television channels, and the records sold on the black market (Sŏn Sŏngch'in 2008: 292; Sŏn Sŏngwŏn 1996: 54). Films like *Mambo*, *Rock Around the Clock* and *The Americano* – which in Korea was entitled *Mambo-ŭi yuhok* (The temptation of mambo) (Yŏlhwadang yŏngsang charyoshil 1998, 126, 143, 179) – allowed Koreans to keep up with the latest music and dance fads from Europe and the US. From the mid 1950s to the early 1970s, many Korean movies began to feature somewhat voyeuristic cameos by Korea's top music talents. In Han Hyŏngmo's *Madame Freedom* (Chayu puin, 1956), for example, audiences could marvel at a performance by the real-life band of Pak Chugŭn playing an exotic mambo, shown almost uncut in real time. In Kang Taech'ŏl's 1971 *Tomorrow's Korea* (Naeir-ŭi p'aldo kangsan) one could watch a performance by the Pearl Sisters, while Pak Ku's *Cha Cha Cha Across the Nation* (Uri kangsan ch'a ch'a ch'a) from the same year included a rather lacklustre performance by the Swell Sisters (Shwel sshisŭt'ŏsŭ) that, perhaps unsurprisingly, failed to launch the novel act's career.

From the early 1960s until the late 1980s, all media and venues for public entertainment were scrutinised for disorderly conduct or unpatriotic expressions, even in the case of traditional music (*Wŏlbo kongyŏn yulli* [Public Screening Monthly] 15 May 1977, 8; Yi Sŏnguk 2004, 116–117). Because the Seoul city government disapproved of go-go music and dance, on 12 October 1972 it banned both on account of them being “demoralising” (*t'oep'ye*) (*Tonga ilbo* [Tonga Daily] 12 October 1972, 7; 14 October 1972, 3). However, venues that were off-limits to Koreans – those located within US military camp towns and the Walker Hill resort on the outskirts of Seoul – continued to offer entertainment that was banned by the police outside the premises, like go-go dance nights and titillating all-girl acts, including one called the Doris Girl Dancers (*Tonga ilbo* 25 January 1972, 7; *Wŏlbo kongyŏn yulli* 15 January 1977, 8). Elsewhere, accompanying musicians or dancers were not exempt from scrutiny: on two occasions in 1987, for example, television shows that featured performances by the singers Hong Such'ŏl and Min Haegyŏng were permitted only after a warning

was issued in relation to their backup dancers wearing swimsuits and skin-tight outfits, respectively (Pangsong shimü wiwönhoe 1987, 79).

In comparison to the many all-male rock bands, girl groups stood a better chance of swaying the censors with their optimistic repertoire, their predictable, cutesy dance routines, and their relatively uniform look. Nevertheless, interest in their type of entertainment was waning. Back in the 1950s, the image of a brightly smiling group singing flirtatious songs in mini-skirts supported the still common perception of the US as a utopia, which began shifting in the 1970s. Koreans started tackling prevalent sociopolitical violence and injustice and became concerned over the possible repercussions of their government's collaboration with the US. Their musical preference subsequently shifted in favour of performers featuring a critical view of the sociopolitical malaises in both their music and lyrics, despite rampant scrutiny by the tough censorship committees (Sön Söngwön 1996, 130–132). Many girl groups were unable to adapt to the changing conditions, and, instead, continued to rely on their flamboyant presentation rather than their repertoire and the quality of their singing. While some were able to appear in a movie or on a major live entertainment television programme such as *Show Show Show* (Syo, syo, syo),<sup>13</sup> eventually all-girl acts were superseded by rock bands and singer-songwriters. Some of the latter wrote sentimental songs about friendship, honesty, and injustice, which provided much-needed inspiration for those behind the pro-democratisation movement that would eventually succeed in toppling the military regime in 1987.

Uniform girl groups returned to the scene no sooner than the late 1990s. Groups such as S.E.S., Fin.K.L., and Baby V.O.X brought a female uniformity back to the stage, but this time their image was soft and playful as opposed to cheeky and seductive. Although their outfits weren't always identical, they were usually of similar designs. The lyrics they sang were about teenage love and relationships, and they presented themselves as decent girls who would stand up for their friends, but without showing much attitude. Over the course of several years, their presentation became as erotic as that of their peers back in the early 1930s. Although the average age of their fans was much younger, usually in the early to mid teens, the new acts once again attuned young women to the emulation of a masculine fantasy (Maliangkay 2014b). They failed to win the heart of the critical mass, namely college students, because the acts initially lacked any significant dance prowess, and sang songs that were inferior both musically and lyrically to other domestic and foreign genres. Over time, however, and in particular since the mid-2000s, when they began to exhibit the traits described in the introduction of this chapter, the acts' all-pervasiveness in the media has seen an increase in consumption among university students.<sup>14</sup>

### **A new generation of conformity**

Between 1991 and 1996, the boy band Seo Taiji and Boys<sup>15</sup> would have a profound impact on developments in Korean popular culture. While the trio's innovative music and presentation found an instant resonance, Seo Taiji, the band's leader,

manager, lyricist, and composer, continued to innovate and set many popular trends in music, dance, and personal styling. Drawing on a wide range of musical and choreographic styles, including rap, hip-hop, and metal, and adding lyrics tuned to the struggles of his generation, Seo's act became a major inspiration. His fan base was a generation in sync with a new civilian government that began relaxing censorship and liberalising the consumption of a wide range of popular entertainment, including Japanese music. Unlike preceding generations, this new audience had considerable purchasing power and substantial overseas travel experience. Seo Taiji and Boys would have a profound impact not only on them but also on other successful boy bands that followed in the group's wake.<sup>16</sup> Acts such as H.O.T. and Sechs Kies, which in the late 1990s had notable success in Korea and overseas, did not innovate much in their repertoires and performances and relied considerably on their teenage idol status. Their audiences were younger than those of Seo Taiji and Boys, and less critical.

Much like singer/dancer Pak Namjŏng and the dance group Sobangch'a (Fire engine) did in the late 1980s, Seo Taiji and Boys incorporated complex dance routines as a primary aspect of their performance, both on stage and in their music videos. Their music videos were very popular, and were widely shared on VHS. Fans could also tune in to one of the satellite channels dedicated to pop music, such as Mnet and MTV Asia, visit a *noraebang*, or tune into one of the many pop programmes on Korea's main terrestrial channels (Sŏn Sŏngwŏn 1996, 84; Kang Hyegyŏng 2011, 68–71). Another option, for the more affluent university students in particular, was to visit a so-called "rock café", which played foreign and domestic music videos non-stop on large wall displays.<sup>17</sup> In the late 1990s, when music videos began to be shared and viewed via personal computers, pop acts such as that of the Young Turks Club or singer Yu Sŭngjun began to take dance routines to a new level, encouraging others to follow suit (Yi Hŭngu 1997, 138–146).<sup>18</sup> The music video for Yu's 1997 dance hit "Saranghae nuna" (I Love You, Sis), for example, was noted in particular for the sequences in which Yu and five male dancers performed energetic moves in perfect sync.

Complex, synchronic dance routines have since become a standard aspect of K-pop group performances. The agencies make their stars go through notoriously harsh training regimes, and sometimes they release videos of their stars practising dance routines without make-up or uniform in front of a mirror. These "mirrored dance" videos show that without all the fanfare they look just like the fans, who might want to try the dance routines themselves, and thus become more involved in the act. What the videos highlight indirectly is the difficulty of the synchronised performances and the many hours of hard work put in by the stars. Many fans upload similar videos of their own and circulate them via social networking services (SNS) just like the official videos. Others show off their skill in public (while making the uninvolved passers-by appear to be out of touch) by way of a flashmob, videos of which are also commonly shared online. In response to the many flashmobs organised by K-pop fans overseas, the Wonder Girls' video "Like This" (2012) shows the five stars starting a flashmob

at some foreign-looking shopping centre. Although the people doing the group dance in the video are all extras, it is another attempt at building on fans' dream of one day becoming part of the real act, or at least a similar flashmob, and dancing in perfect sync.

Like synced dance routines, rap has become another standard element of K-pop group performances. According to Sŏn Sŏngwŏn, it was first introduced in Korea by the comic duo Chang Tusŏk and Yi Pongwŏn before Hong Sŏbŏm used it in his hit song "Kim Sakkat" (included on Hong's 1989 un-named debut album with King Records Co., Ltd.). Rap also featured on 015B's track "4210301" on the band's second album *Second Episode* (1991), and on the track "Turn Off the T.V." on the debut album of Shin Haech'ŏl's band N.EX.T.<sup>19</sup> (*Home* 1992), but in the latter case, the respective lyrics were rapped in English. While N.EX.T.'s fan base mostly comprised college students, DJ DOC – a hip-hop band that emerged on the scene in 1994 – became popular with children and young teenagers, in particular due to the group's tongue-in-cheek lyrics, slapstick humour, and synchronic dance (Hong Hop'yo 1995). The trio often resembled Seo Taiji and Boys in the way it performed on stage – rap, b-boy dance sequences, and baggy hip-hop streetwear – but the rap and song sequences were slower, the dances often silly, and the voices unvarnished, giving the act an impromptu feel that eschewed gravitas.



Figure 1.2 DJ DOC performing their song "Dancing with DOC" (DOC-wa ch'um-ül) on MBC's TV show *Best 50 Pop Songs* (In'gi kayo pesüt'ŭ 50) on 13 September 1997.

It was Seo Taiji who first rapped about sociopolitical issues in Korean in the mainstream (Sön Söngwön 1993, 195–197; 1996, 80, 210). Unlike his predecessor Hong, whose “English” had comprised mostly rap with a melodically sung bridge section, Seo reserved the use of rap for the bridges of what are perhaps best described as fast R&B or rock ballads (see also Eun-Young Jung 2006, 114). The rap followed the same or double the tempo of the verse over up to four measures. It did not commonly use crotchet triplet-type patterns, but often included *appoggiatura*-type single grace notes, with a small number of tuplets. The application of these rhythmic ornaments to the same beat as that of the verse sometimes makes the rap sound hurried, as if the poor fit between the words and the beat is unintentional. Although the 1981 song “Rapture”, by the American pop band Blondie, features a similar use of what appear to be unintentionally poorly fitting words in the rap chorus, Seo Taiji’s songs are faster overall, and his rap more expressive. His lyrics addressed the violence and extreme pressure that Korean students were subjected to, and they preached the importance of individualism. When Seo refused to follow the order from the censorship committees to change a few phrases that criticised the older generations, his fans staged public protests. Seo’s music and rap had become a token of individualism, even though his masses of fans conformed to his style in order to express that notion (Maliangkay 2014a).

Many pop acts have used rap in their songs’ bridge sections since. The lyrics of mainstream acts that these days regularly appear on the broadcast media are, however, all devoid of social criticism. Around the turn of the millennium, when mixed bands like Roo’ra (1994–2001) and Sharp (1998–2002) were still popular, it was usually the male members’ duty to perform the rap segments.<sup>20</sup> In recent years, girl groups perform their own rap, though a few leave it up to their single androgynous member, such as in the case of f(x) (Amber Liu) and 2NE1 (CL; orig. name Yi Ch’aerin).<sup>21</sup> The use of the androgynous member associates the rap segments with “attitude” – an element that a few decades earlier led to many people voicing their concern over the popularity of Seo Taiji and Boys. Even though the rap of boy bands and girl groups rarely takes up any particular sociopolitical issues, the association of attitude with individualism and a degree of independence from the industry remains an important ingredient.<sup>22</sup> While the element of rap in the songs of girl groups may be less about the actual lyrics than their musical role in the structure of the song, it retains its importance overall.

Rap sequences in K-pop idol bands these days often consist of random English phrases. An early example of this use was Seo Taiji and Boys’ song “Come Back Home” (2005). Although it was sung entirely in Korean for Korean audiences, the refrain ended with the title phrase, which hinted at some correlation with the rest of the lyrics despite its mainly acoustic function. Many other acts followed suit and began to also regularly include easy sing-along random English phrases in their chorus. Many foreign fans of K-pop these days tend to find this enjoyable. A particularly noted example is the phrase “hey sexy lady” in the refrain of Psy’s 2012 global hit “Gangnam Style”, which has often been gleefully recited by non-Korean speakers. Although such phrases were at first targeted at Korean

audiences, they have eventually come to be devised for K-pop's foreign fans. English is no longer the only language used. In the Chinese song "Growl" by boy band Exo-M, for example, the refrain "I growl growl growl at you" (Wo ūrūrōng ūrūrōng ūrūrōng ni) is a mixture of Chinese and Korean. What is more, while I suspect that a fair number of Koreans failed to notice the rude pun – "I'm a mother-father-gentleman" – in the refrain of Psy's follow-up hit "Gentleman", I doubt native English speakers did. Similarly, three Chinese students taking my course on pop culture at the time of writing were able to recite, unrehearsed, the first few nonsense English lyrics of boy band Exo-M's Chinese-language hit "Mama" – "Careless, careless. Shoot anonymous, anonymous. Heartless, mindless. No one who care about me?"<sup>23</sup>

The rapped bridge section remains one of the main musical aspects of contemporary K-pop groups. Since few performers these days have more than average singing talent, the sections potentially serve four purposes; they can: (1) announce a break in the melody of a song; (2) reduce the risk a solo would pose to the vocal quality of a live performance (the rapped part often coincides with a change of singer to allow the previous one to catch his/her breath); (2) allow non-Korean speakers to sing along to a particular verse, sometimes by using one or two English phrases; and (4) add a degree of attitude, albeit a cosmetic one, to the performance. Without the rap, several K-pop girl groups could easily be defined as modern-day revue formations as opposed to music acts. Although the rapped words no longer bear any particular message like they did in the heydays of Seo Taiji and Boys, they can still lend a small degree of attitude to the act and as such associate it with mild resistance to the hegemony.

## **Conclusion**

Many contemporary K-pop acts share a similar look, sound, and style of performance. Whereas some of their trademarks were created almost a century ago due to, and in response to, changing audiences, the ongoing success of the format has continued to inspire many new representatives over the years. The lyrics sometimes contain clear messages, but usually the particular aspirations of a specific act or performer are not directly expressed through the music or performance, in particular since relatively few performers have been involved in the creative process. During the colonial period, for example, some will have regarded the Okeh Band's Chōgori Sisters' all-girl act as representative of the promise of Korean talent, while others regarded it as evidence of Japan's successful policy of colonisation and incorporation. When the girls performed in Japan in front of a large crowd of paying Japanese customers, to some this may have represented a minor Korean victory, while to others it may have merely confirmed that they had chosen the right profession to make a living. Despite their look, uniform acts have always made careful adjustments according to their audiences by way of different outfits, lyrics, repertoires, and moves. Although considerable differences in the qualities of the various aspects of the acts must be taken into account – with today's acts being superior to earlier ones in terms of the dance

sequences – the acts have always relied first and foremost on their visual presentation. The commercial appeal of that presentation with a specific, targetable male or female audience helps to explain why, even today, mixed-sex non-uniform K-pop groups are virtually non-existent.<sup>24</sup>

Over the past decade and a half, the music and performance of uniform girl groups have improved considerably, and, along with the media saturation, this helps to explain the considerable broadening of their domestic audience. Their physical attraction nevertheless continues to play a major role. Their image on stage and in videos has remained largely unchanged: singers are portrayed as teenager-cute puppets or sexy barelegged divas performing in similar or identical outfits in perfect sync, often lip-syncing to the music rather than singing live. The video for the Wonder Girls' (Wöndögölsü) song "Nobody" (2009) may have been intended as a modern homage to early acts like that of the Chögori, Andrews, or Kim Sisters, but without the tall, vintage microphones, the gloves, and the 1960s French twist hairstyles,<sup>25</sup> the video might not have been associated with the past at all. Korean teenagers are unfamiliar with the Korean or Western acts from more than half a century ago, yet they are no less accustomed to the format of the uniform-looking girl group performing in perfect sync, and the attraction it holds to men.

The video for the Wonder Girls' hit "Like This" was different from most other actual flashmob videos available on YouTube at the time, in that it features grannies and children dancing alongside the idols. The age range of girl group fans is, however, widening and it includes a growing number of adult men (Kim Sua 2010, 80). Acts such as Crayon Pop – whose cutesy dance routine for their 2013 hit "Bar Bar Bar", though perhaps uncharacteristically simple for a contemporary K-pop group, proved very popular with overseas audiences – play a role in this. The audiences of uniform K-pop groups have not only become older on average, but, much like the formations themselves, they have now also come to include many people overseas. Elsewhere, similar acts may exist, but for many overseas fans, the Korean groups represent a novelty and will come to be endorsed first by younger fans willing to explore them. The broadening of the fan base nevertheless applies to more than just age and location. While revue dance was performed in front of primarily male audiences at venues restricted to rich middle- or upper-class audiences, the domestic and foreign audiences these days are made up of people from a much wider range of social backgrounds. Different backgrounds represent a great diversity in the ways in which the various aspects of the acts are consumed and evaluated.

Uniform K-pop acts have met the needs and expectations of many different audiences over the years and they have managed to do so by carefully adjusting their act to the audiences they aimed to attract. As Epstein shows in the next chapter, even the single act Girls' Generation has targeted different audiences over the years. Critics would argue that the success of such acts is based mostly on their sex appeal and their lack of individualism, but the sheer number of more senior, female fans suggests that they do more than satisfy a need for voyeurism. The "perfect" beauty of contemporary idol groups will not sway K-pop critics, but the increasing number of tomboy group members and tomboy acts suggest a new

range of uniform acts is being created that may lure in, among others, the teenage girls who feel overwhelmed by the picture-perfect look of so many groups. It is likely that there are other reasons for the surge in tomboy-like idols, but, like their predecessors, uniform tomboy girl groups such as Global Icon (GI) will respond to a need for entertainment that justifies closer examination of the market they attract, rather than mere criticism over their lack of musical innovation or individualism.

## Notes

- 1 The word “band” may refer to a group of musicians, but in practice only few of the members of Korean boy bands compose or play the music to which they sing and dance. Director Lee Hark-Joon of the documentary *Nine Muses of Star Empire* (2013) found that only the successful idols could get involved in the creative process (Daniella 2013).
- 2 Although I am aware of the unfortunate connotation with things fake, in this chapter I use the word “act” to refer to music groups or bands.
- 3 Jocelyn Clark proposes to use the term *seoryu* (西流) for K-pop because it represents a love of the West in Korea (2013, 22).
- 4 The movie was renamed *Rebyu-shidae* (The age of revue) in Korea (*Tonga ilbo* [Tonga Daily], 7 February 1930, 1). Revue musicals like this were popular throughout East Asia. Although *The Show of Shows* would not come to China until 1931, a similar one, Joe Francis’s *La Revue des Revues* (1927) had opened in China in 1928 (*The China Press*, 9 October 1928, 4; 27 March 1931, 6).
- 5 According to Hwang Munp’yōng (1981, 154), the person responsible for establishing the group was Kim Sorang.
- 6 The band stayed three days in Tokyo, three days in Osaka, and one day in Kobe, Kyoto and Nagoya, respectively. According to Kim Chip’yōng (2000, 370) this is the earliest record of a Korean act performing for foreign troops overseas.
- 7 An all-male Arirang Boys act was also part of the same pool of Okeh talent and comprised singers Yi Pokpon, Yi Haesong, Hyōn Kyōngsōp, Pak Shich’un, and Song Hūisōn (Kim Chip’yōng 2000, 371–372).
- 8 In 1932 the Japanese military sent a group of 20 Korean “sing-song” girls to Shanghai to entertain Japanese troops in bars there. See *The China Press*, 27 April 1932, 2.
- 9 In the mid 1960s they appeared alongside several popular boy bands. Examples are the Kim Sisters’ own siblings, the Kim Brothers, as well as the Key Boys and the K’okkiri (elephant) Brothers. In the late 1960s they were followed by groups such as Add 4, He 6, the Arirang Brothers, and the Johnny Brothers, as well as the Kimch’is, and the Pabosū (idiots). As the inspiration for these groups came mostly from the Beatles, the Doors, and the Rolling Stones, they tended to play either pop ballads, rock ‘n’ roll, or psychedelic rock or a mixture of these three.
- 10 See picture in Shin and Kim 2014, 292.
- 11 In the 1960s, most North American girl groups were also characterised by uniformity in appearance and performance. Cynthia Cyrus argues that it served to make the acts more familiar to fans by emphasising that the girls were not so much individual stars in their own right, but, rather, team members of equal importance to the group act (Cyrus 2003, 179).
- 12 In December 1961, Korean Broadcasting System’s KBS-TV was established. It was joined in December 1964 by the TV channel of Tonga Pangsongguk (East Asia broadcasting station; TBC), and in 1969 by that of the Munhwa (Culture) Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) (Hwang 1981, 246).

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- 13 *Show Show Show* was broadcast first by TBC-TV in 1964 and was later taken over by KBS until 1983 (*Kyŏngnyang shinmun* [Capital and Country News], 9 August 1983, 12; Pak Yunu 1995, 133; Sŏn Sŏngwŏn 1996, 31–32, 41).
- 14 For a discussion of the possible rationale behind the uniformity of contemporary girl groups, see Maliangkay 2014b.
- 15 Although the name of the act suggested a family relationship, the three young group members were unrelated to one another. Very few acts have used a name suggestive of a family connection since. More than 1.5 million copies of the debut album were sold within a month from the date of its release and together with its other three albums, which came out in 1993, 1994, and 1995, Seo Taiji and Boys reached a total sales volume of approximately five million within the space of four years (Howard 2006, 87; Lee 2007, 59; Kim Chip'yŏng 2000, 245).
- 16 Seo Taiji and Boys emphasised the enormous commercial potential of boy bands. Seo's fans bought his music, his merchandise, sang his songs in *noraebang*, and adopted his fashion. The boy bands and girl groups that were set up in the wake of Seo Taiji and Boys and successfully emulated its idol culture constituted important drivers of the Korean Wave.
- 17 Because the size of personal television sets and the speed of the Internet increased rapidly, the appeal of rock cafés wore off around the early 2000s, approximately a decade after they had first emerged.
- 18 K-pop act dance trainer Oh Seongjin says he was himself inspired by Yu (Naega net'ŭwŏk'ŭ 2012, 151).
- 19 N.EX.T. is an acronym of New Experiment Team.
- 20 See, for example, Sharp's hit "Tell Me" (2000), and Roo'ra's hit "3! 4!" (1998). In 1997 Shinhwa boy band members Mun Chŏngnyŏk (Eric) and Yi Sŏnho (Andy) became known first for rapping in the song "I'm Your Girl" of girl group S.E.S.
- 21 See f(x)'s song "Rum Pum Pum Pum" (2013).
- 22 The fact that, just like in Japan, talent agencies are all owned by men may need to be considered when assessing the products and marketing strategies (Aoyagi 2005, 17). Even so, the implications of the industry being run predominantly by men cannot be deliberated effectively without at least some competition from female-owned agencies.
- 23 Even though some acts, such as Exo-M and Super Junior M (the M stands for Mandarin), are created for a particular foreign market, many others have brought out Chinese or Japanese versions of their songs.
- 24 Mixed-sex groups were prominent in the mid 1990s. Heather Willoughby (2006, 101–2) has argued convincingly that industries decide on their audiences well before they pick their pop stars, who are easily shelved in case of disappointing sales.
- 25 See fabulouslyaejin, "Hair Stylist – Ayumi", *Asiance Magazine*, [www.asiancemagazine.com/print/4894](http://www.asiancemagazine.com/print/4894), uploaded 30 November 2009.

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