Ambassadors of K-Culture

Korean Americans, Korea, and K-pop

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Fig. 1: BTS at 2017 American Music Awards in Los Angeles, 19 November 2017. Korean Culture and Information Service, December 6 2017 (Photo courtesy of Korean Culture and Information Service via Wikimedia Commons).

BTS' performance of their hit song "DNA" at the American Music Awards in 2017 in front of screaming fans marked the triumphant arrival of Korea as a producer of cool culture to mainstream American audiences. This event marked the first time a K-pop boy band performed at a major American music awards show, and it was also BTS' mainstream US television debut [Fig. 1]. While Psy's earlier viral hit "Gangnam Style" (2012) achieved global popularity, it was more of a novelty hit renowned mainly for its unusual depictions of Korean culture. BTS' performance, on the other hand, marked K-pop's breakthrough in the United States, the world's largest music market.

Yet, BTS' performance in the United States was not the first milestone for K-pop, as K-pop had already achieved popularity in the 2000s in Asia and especially in Japan, the world's second largest music market. This is surprising since in the 1990s, Korea was not known as an exporter of popular culture. One of the reasons for the popularity of K-pop in Asia was that it expresses a larger hybrid transpacific "K-culture" labeled as "Made-in-Korea," even though not much is culturally Korean about it. BTS' performance represented this K-culture because, while performing intricate Western choreography and wearing stylish Western fashions, the group also sang in Korean peppered with some English phrases. Importantly, BTS performed a culture that Korean Americans helped create. Korean Americans in the 1990s served as "ambassadors" by helping to create early K-pop and K-culture. This flow of culture, as seen in BTS's performance, has then come back to the United States to influence Asian-American youth. The rise of K-pop reflects the rise of Korea as a cultural production center in what we call the "Pop Pacific."

The Pop Pacific and K-culture: K-pop as a transpacific culture

K-pop is associated with the rise of Korean culture worldwide. Yet, K-pop music use mostly English-language signs and pseudo-American settings. In most videos, there is little symbolic reference to Korea and a startling lack of signs in Hangul. TWICE, a multinational girl group of performers from Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, invokes the image of American students in their video for "Cheer Up" (2016), performing in a gymnasium at an American-style high school pep rally with English signs in the background. With the sound off, this video invokes the image of Asian-American cheerleaders performing in a high school or college, like a mishmash hybrid of Korean and American settings [Fig. 2]. To understand the dominance of hybrid Korean and American settings, consider that K-pop is part of a larger "K-culture."[1] We define this culture as encompassing K-pop, K-cinema, K-drama, K-fashion, and K-food. As this essay will show, K-pop invokes this hybrid culture because Korean Americans were early pioneers of this music.

The "K" in K-culture stands for Korea, but it also represents a larger cultural sphere for what we call the "Pop Pacific."[2] This sphere consists mostly of the US, Japan, and Korea (with significant influences from places such as Europe and Southeast Asia), which combine to create a transnational Pacific culture. Korea is one of the major cultural centers of production in the "Pop Pacific" through the export of K-culture overseas. Rather than being a barrier, the Pacific, as ancient Polynesians used it, functions as a route that connects people and culture. This sphere began in the early 20th century, and American military bases accelerated the spread of this culture in the postwar era. Japanese-American jazz musicians such as trumpeter Jimmy Araki taught bebop jazz to Japanese nationals, and Koreans like the Kim Sisters performed at US bases. In the following decades, television and the Internet accelerated this transnational flow.

The "Pop Pacific" reveals the links between Korea and the United States and how much of K-pop was part of a larger global web of popular music. "K-culture" also contains much Western-influenced culture, such as coffee shops, fashion, and cosmetics alongside native Korean culture. According to Joo Young-ha, a professor of folklore studies at the Academy of Korean Studies, non-Koreans identify *chimaek* (chicken and beer) as their favorite Korean food, and yet most Koreans do not consider it Korean food. Joo recommends focusing on the concept of "K-food" rather than arguing over whether or not this dish is a Korean dish.[3]

It is difficult to describe the difference between Korean culture and K-culture because Korean culture has been influenced at various times by China, Japanese colonialism, and U.S. military bases. Perhaps food could illustrate this relationship between Korean culture and K-culture. To many Koreans, kimchi is the national dish representative of Korean culture. In contrast, the BTS meal (Chicken McNuggets, French fries, Cajun sauce, and a Coke) sold at McDonalds is K-culture, and fans swarmed stores to get these meals in 2021. In a similar fashion, K-pop represents an aspect of K-culture popular worldwide, even though K-pop music holds a great deal in common with other Western music.

Korean Americans and the making of K-pop

Korean Americans played a key role in early K-pop. In Korea, "American" has a cultural cachet, so Korean *Americans* performing K-pop contributed to making it become "cool" in Korea, and then this music was re-exported to the rest of the world as "K-pop." Seen as inauthentic Americans at home but authentic Americans overseas, Korean Americans helped to turn the "K" in K-pop into a pan-Pacific culture appealing to international audiences in places like Japan and the US.

One of the hallmarks of K-pop is its frequent citations of African-American culture.[4] Scholars trace the beginnings of K-pop to 1992 with *Seo Taeji-wa aideul* (서태지와 아이들, "Seo Taiji and Boys"), a trio who invoked American culture through their use of African-American hip-hop fashions, street beats, dancing, and samples from American artists. Their music appealed to Korean youth, much to the dismay of their parents. By using American imagery, Seo Taiji and Boys reflected the strong influence of American culture – especially after the end of military rule in the late 1980s – and marked the rise of Korean popular music favored by teenage fans during the 1990s. Also, Korean Americans mainly from Los Angeles contributed to the popularization of the early K-pop scene by adding an American cultural appeal.

Some historical background will shed light on the Korean-American influence on K-pop. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 accelerated the pace of the Korean immigration into the United States. Koreans in America transformed from a marginal immigrant community to a major presence in areas like Los Angeles Koreatown, one of the focal points of Korean settlement. There were 11,000 Korean immigrants in 1960, but due to the change in immigration policy, that number increased to 290,000 in 1980, a 2500 percent increase.[5] Koreatowns became contact zones for the children of these immigrants to experience many different cultures, especially African-American culture.

A contact zone like the Los Angeles metro area played a key role in the creation of what we call the "DNA of K-pop" because many K-pop artists hailed from that area. To many 1990s Korean youth, LA was both a place of fantasy and threat, reflecting Hollywood-produced popular culture. H.O.T was a K-pop boy band in the 90s, and one of its members, Tony Ahn, hailed from L.A. Because of his fluency in English, Korean youth were fascinated with Ahn and his hip image. In addition, Lena Park, Tiffany Young (from the group Girls Generation), and Tiger JK are some other examples of K-pop pioneers from LA. Furthermore, as Young Dae Kim points out, many K-pop performers were not Korean Americans; rather, many would be better described as *gyopo*, a Korean term that "… broadly embraces people with Korean descent who lives (sic) abroad, with or without a foreign nationality of which they chose to live."[6] This term perfectly describes those Koreans who study abroad in the US or have lived there for a period. One prominent example is Lee Soo Man, the founder of SM Entertainment, one of Korea's major entertainment companies. He studied as a graduate student in Southern California in the 1980s and came up with the idea of SM Entertainment through watching MTV in America. SM Entertainment also played a key role in the growth of K-pop, revealing yet another connection to Los Angeles.

Korean Americans in early K-pop and the K-pop boom of the 1990s

Korean American performers before Seo Taiji both mediated and inflamed cultural anxieties. For example, Kang Susie immigrated to New York in the 1980s and came back to Korea in the 1990s. Her songs, which were taking off in the years following the end of military rule, promoted American-style dating culture. The Korean press portrayed her as a positive example of reverse migration, of a *gyopo* coming back to her roots in Korea to pursue her dream. However, some also felt ambivalence towards her songs. A reporter in *The Kyunghyang Shinmun* criticized one of her songs, *Sigan sogui hyanggi* (시간 속의 향기 "The Fragrance of Time"), as too sentimental and felt it would badly influence teenagers' emotional growth.[7]

As seen in Kang's example, the Korean press in the early 1990s was alarmed at American influences on teenagers. If Kang represented unwanted emotional sentimentality, then Yang Joon-Il, a *gyopo* returned from America in 1990, represented a darker threat with his androgynous fashions, wild dancing, and inability to properly use the Korean language. Although the norm in K-pop now, and for world music of his time, his gender-bending appearance shocked Koreans. Yang was seen as such a threat that the SBS radio program that he co-hosted was suspended for three months because of his excessive use of English.[8] Facing such negative publicity, he faded from the public eye (although he made a guest appearance in 2019 on a nostalgia TV program). As seen in Kang and Yang, the Korean press viewed Korean Americans as pioneers of a globalized Korea but also feared them as spreaders of negative American influences.

The Korean-American R&B boy band Solid (1993-1997) played a key role by providing American-sounding K-pop from model, church-going *gyopo*, thus rendering the music safe for Korean youth consumption. This trio, composed of Korean Americans from Orange County, California, sang the smash 1995 hit *I bam ui gguteul jabgo* (이밤의 끝을 잡고,

"Holding the End of This Night"). A Korean reporter from *The Hankyoreh* found it hard to find any "Koreanness" in their music and noted a more African-American "feel," thus concluding that "there is no race or national boundary to their songs."[9] Another reporter also gave reports on the members' schools and majors, casting them as model, studious Koreans free of negative American influences.[10] Their music reflected the contact zone of Southern California, where Korean Americans came into contact with African-American culture. The song cited African-American R&B culture in its music, choreography, lyrics, and fashion, but it was sung in the Korean language.

Korean-American groups used their Americanness as authenticity but also added their own touches of Korean culture. For example, the popular boy band idol group g.o.d – of which three of five members were Korean American – fused American hip-hop with Korean values in their song *"Eomeonimkke"* (어머님께 "Dear Mother" 1999). This helped make their American-influenced K-pop acceptable to Koreans. A journalist from the *Chosun Ilbo* praised "Dear Mother," as it gave thanks to one of the members' deceased mother and the sacrifices she made raising her child. This song was loved by older audiences as well, especially mothers, who felt their sacrifices were unappreciated by the younger generation.[11] So, Korean Americans like those in Solid or g.o.d adapted American (especially African-American) culture to Korea, where it went from edgy threat to mainstream K-culture.

Solid's success built upon Korean K-pop pioneers like Seo Taiji or Hyun Jin-young and led to an explosion of Korean Americans in K-pop. Idol groups, such as H.O.T often had *gyopo* members to add American "authenticity." The girl group S.E.S had an interesting Korean diaspora mix: Shoo, a Korean resident of Japan, Eugene a Korean American from Guam, and Bada from Korea. With K-culture firmly a part of K-pop, the K-pop companies (e.g., SM Entertainment in the 2000s) made a major push to sell in Japan, the world's second-largest music market. This marked the rise of second-generation K-pop artists, who focused on the market overseas. SM entertainers like DBSK and Girls Generation were trained to speak in Japanese for Japanese audiences. K-pop videos made extensive use of hybrid K-culture images to popularize K-pop overseas in the 2010s. KARA's "Mister" (2009) used imagery of a basketball court and US military bases. Even groups with no American members, like BIGBANG, used K-culture, for example in their English name, or English signs in their videos.

K-pop and Asian America

K-pop is an influential part of Asian-American culture. K-pop has become a means for panethnic Asian-American youth to feel cultural representation in the US media. What do we mean by Asian America as panethnic? In the US, different Asian ethnic groups (e.g., Koreans, Chinese, Filipinos, Vietnamese, or Indians) are lumped into a singular Asian-American panethnicity that makes up around seven percent of the US population. Although the term "Asian" is not commonly used in Asia, K-pop often replicates this panethnicity by putting different Asian members in a single K-pop group. For example, Aespa, a girl group formed by SM Entertainment, boasts members of three different Asian ethnicities: two Koreans (Winter and Karina), one Japanese-Korean (Giselle), and one Chinese (Ningning). There are many other multinational, panethnic groups bound together by K-culture, such as Seventeen, TWICE, BLACKPINK, NCT, or Got7. Thus, K-pop is called "Korean" but encompasses many different Asian cultures and ethnicities in a manner similar to Asian-American panethnicity.

One may ask, how can a Chinese person represent Korean pop music? This is possible because K-culture is a hybrid style that allows this panethnic identity within a cultural production. We argue that K-culture allows non-Korean Asians to represent K-pop. The constant use of these idols becomes "normal" after seeing countless audition shows that embrace Asian panethnicity. At first, it seems odd to see non-Korean Asians in all these shows, but the more one watches, the more it becomes normalized to see Chinese, Japanese, and Thai performing K-pop music in Korean. Thus, K-culture may not be specifically Korean but taps into a wider pan-Asian ethnicity.

American media representations of Asian Americans have been narrowed down to stereotypical roles such as a sexy but dangerous dragon lady or a studious model minority. Only recently, films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* depicted positive Asian characters in US media. Through K-pop, Asians in America can envision themselves in a positive light such as the main characters in love stories. Christina Qu, in writing about her youth with K-pop, noted that the non-white fans were misfits. Thinking of her attraction to K-pop, she wrote that "we were never the potential topics of love songs."[12] Similarly, a young Asian American wrote, "With no representation in American media, we turned to K-Pop – a genre of South Korean music characterized by its use of audiovisual elements – to find people who looked like us: our idols represented us in ways that mainstream American music did not."[13]

Images of Asian-American youth in K-pop videos fill a void in the US media because of the general lack of representations of Asian American youth engaging in everyday social activities. For example, 2PM's "Go Crazy" (2014) uses imagery associated with American college youth, like a house party with people drinking from red solo cups. This video is radical because of the scarcity of American media representations of Asian-American youth doing otherwise "normal" activities like this. Thus, K-pop fills in the media gap caused by mainstream American media neglecting Asian-American youth. K-pop videos are professionally produced and readily available for free online. Therefore, Asian-American youth can easily relate to K-culture's American imagery. They can see themselves partying, dancing, dressing in the latest fashions, and having relationships with each other.

Fig. 2: Screenshot from the music video for "Cheer Up" (2016) by TWICE (Full video available at: https://youtu.be/c7rCyll5AeY).

K-pop as the "sweet spot" with just enough rebellion

While Asian immigrant youths may be turned off by the hypersexuality of the US media, K-pop music allows for a bit of sexuality that may satisfy these youths, but with enough modesty to be close to one's values learned at home. K-pop stars are viewed in a positive light because they convey a humble, well-mannered image. K-pop idols follow a strict code of conduct, and any minor transgression is quickly called out by fans, forcing a quick apology. When T.O.P from Big Bang was caught using marijuana, he apologized publicly, bowing down in front of a slew of reporters. Not only do K-pop stars convey a good attitude; they also allow for a little bit of rebellion that provides a sweet spot for the teenage audience. For example, BLACKPINK's "Kill This Love" (2019) is about a female initiating the breakup of a toxic relationship. This conveys female agency and independence in a country still heavily patriarchal, thus showing a rebellious attitude by strong female idols.

K-pop also challenges the mainstream view of desexualized Asian men. In the US media, Asian men are usually stripped of their masculinity and portrayed as unmasculine clowns, a depiction of Asian masculinity alienating to Asian-American youth. For example, William Hung, who clownishly sang "She Bangs" off-key on *American Idol* in 2004, brought up accusations of negative stereotyping of Asian men.[14] In addition, Ken Jeong's performance in *The Hangover* (2019) was accused of manifesting the stereotype of "a prancing, lisping Asian gangster known as Mr. Chow."[15] Unlike the stereotypical depiction of Asian males in the US media, K-pop male idols convey a tender yet attractive soft masculinity, like *"kkonminam,"* (꽃미남 "flowery handsome man") well-groomed pretty boys with androgynous features such as a thinner frame, soft body, and facial proportions. One could say that women are fed up with toxic masculinity and so they feel safe with these beautiful idols that offer tenderness and softness often missing from Western male singers. Moreover, in the 2010s, there was a phenomenon of "beast idols," male idols who were edgy but still safe according to US standards. These were K-pop idols such as Rain, who showed his abs and muscular features. Such idols can be the object of desire for many fans and provide alternatives to common portrayals of Asian men in US media. K-pop's rise in America forces people to confront long-held stereotypes they have regarding Asian men.

Conclusion

There is so much meaning lying behind BTS' 2017 televised appearance. When BTS stepped on stage that day, it represented the culmination of decades of Pacific interchange. Korean-American pioneers paved the way for their appearance at the American Music Awards. Among the screaming fans for BTS were Asian American youth glad to see other Asians in the spotlight. As discussed, Korean Americans played a key role in helping to create and popularize K-pop and K-culture. In return, Asian Americans have found a home in K-pop, which features Asian American-looking youth as cool normal kids, instead of being invisible, stereotyped, or sidekicks to White and Black kids. Thus, the United States and South Korea are more connected via a common culture than one realizes. And when one considers that much of K-pop is written by songwriters from all over the world, especially Sweden, and that European, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African fans make up a large part of the audience, this culture transcends the Pacific to become a world culture.

As a result of this Pacific interchange, BTS' performance represented the rise of Korea as a global cultural production center, and it heralded Korea's ability to shape culture in the U.S. We have entered the era of the "Pop Pacific," where young people across the world can be united in their love of a common transpacific culture. K-pop is just one aspect of the Pop Pacific. Whether it be anime from Japan, K-pop from Korea, or Chinese movies (Hollywood producers often make movies with the large Chinese market in mind), youth worldwide are consuming the "Pop Pacific" culture. They may consider K-pop as Korean, but it is really transnational. We look forward to more investigations of how popular cultural forms may be labeled as national culture but are really transnational.[16]

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Notes

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