

BTS vs. The West

How Yellow Peril lives on in K-Pop Journalism

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Fifty thousand twinkling lilac lights.

A crowd of fans from around the world, ranging in age, race, background, sexual and gender identity. That was the scene on October 10th, 2018 when the Korean band BTS played their first sold-out stadium show at Citi Field in New York City.

According to Billboard, BTS was the first Korean act to ever headline a stadium show in the United States. They have since played countless shows to increasingly larger crowds around the world. But ask any ARMY, a fan of BTS, and they will tell you that Citi Field was a career landmark for the group of seven young men.

Today, a year and a half after their legendary 2018 Citi Field performance, BTS continues to thrive and grow as internationally famous



BTS' final bow at 2018 CitiField concert.

musicians, racking up awards at home in Korea and abroad.

But, despite their laundry list of accomplishments and genre-bending music catalog, BTS is time and again disrespected and cast aside in scathing articles by Western journalists for reasons largely tied to their Korean heritage.

“The fact that they’re Korean just adds fuel to the fire for racists who view Asian men as inferior.”

A quick google search turns up countless articles dedicated to what journalists have dubbed "the dark side of K-Pop." That phrase alone yields over 9 million results. The first page of search results is filled with articles lamenting the treatment of young men and women in the Korean entertainment industry.

Since its genesis in the early 2000s, K-Pop has drawn harsh criticism from Western journalism for its overproduction, bad music, and cultural appropriation



K-Pop band EXO's Kai wearing dreadlocks.

to name a few. While each of those critiques has its merits, these catch-phrases have been trotted out time and again to belittle and deride musical acts that the West to be different and therefore other.

As the most globally successful K-Pop group to date, BTS has endured a

lion's share of this criticism. In just one article from the Hollywood Reporter, compares BTS to dogs being held on a leash by their agency BigHit Entertainment, going on to say that Korean performers who attend auditions are like cattle at an auction. The article even goes so far as to say BTS is lucky to be alive, citing the 2017 suicide of Kim Jonghyun of the K-Pop band SHINee who was a close friend of several members of the group.

This attitude towards BTS stems from the West's view of Asian culture as a monolith. Because Korea is a collectivist society-- meaning they value the group over the individual-- then BTS must be "Disney animatronic figure[s]," as the Hollywood Reporter calls them. Following the publication of this article, fans clapped back online.

The xenophobia in this article is appalling yet not surprising. God forbid someone from another country succeed & surpass anyone in the US right? I feel sorry for THR bc they have all the resources in the world to make this an accurate article & they blew it.

— Whalien52 (@sharynss) October 2, 2019

I understand you're The "Hollywood" Reporter, but if your publication enjoys privileging its Western identity so much, please refrain from doing articles about Asian entertainment. Unless you send reporters from those actual cultures to write them, but wow that's a long-shot...

— alapadma (@alapadma2) October 2, 2019

Racist criticism like the kind BTS experiences is best explained by Jae-Ha Kim, a Korean entertainment journalist for *Variety*. In an interview for MTV, Kim explains “mainstream Western audience has never been kind to most boy bands, so I’m not surprised that they’re dismissive of BTS... the fact that they’re Korean just adds fuel to the fire for racists who view Asian men as inferior.”

But where does this idea of Asian male inferiority come from? The consensus from the field of Asian Studies suggests that discrimination like this stems from “Yellow Peril,” a term referring to the belief that East Asian men immigrating to the United States in the late 18th century were invaders who sought to destroy Western society.

To combat this fear, the West perpetuated the stereotype of Asian men as nonthreatening, emasculating them to remove any semblance of threat.



Political cartoon depicting "Yellow Peril" c. 1899

The white male-dominated music industry perceives BTS as nonthreatening. Because journalists don’t take BTS seriously, their music is deemed inconsequential.

But, since their genesis in 2013, BTS has worked diligently to perfect their craft and connect with their fans. Recycled racist stereotypes might be offensive and disheartening, but they do nothing to stop BTS’ trajectory as they continue to rise as one of the preeminent musical acts of our time.