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Reimagining Korea

Identity and Values in a Changing World

Edited by
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Song Chong Lee

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Palgrave Series in Contemporary Korean Studies

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Over the past decade, South Korea has experienced a remarkable surge in global popularity. This phenomenon is largely fueled by influential cultural forces such as K-Pop, K-Dramas, K-Beauty, and K-Cuisine, among others. In the past decade, the number of foreign universities and research institutes dedicated to Korean studies has doubled, indicating a deepening commitment to understanding Korean culture and society. Building on the current cultural momentum of interest in contemporary Korea and growing scholarly interest, this book series proposal aims to refresh, update, and, where necessary, redirect the discourse in Korean Studies. The focus is on contemporary issues and concerns, organized around seven major thematic areas: 1) Value and Identity (religion and society), 2) Politics and Economy, 3) K-Future (philosophy), 4) K-Narratives (literature), 5) Modernity and Development, 6) Contemporary K-Music, and 7) Hallyu (Korean Wave). This project is initiated by SNU to help shape global discussions about Korea. The goal is to advance contemporary Korean studies with global networks of scholars.

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Reimagining Value and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cases	1
	Yohan Yoo	
Part I	Excluding or Embracing Others Based on Identity and Value	19
2	How K-Pop's Pursuit of the US Billboard Hot 100 Charts Shifts Its Value and Identity	21
	Grace Kao	
3	Rejection of Coexistence Through Impurity: Opposition to Mosque Construction in Contemporary Korean Multicultural Society	49
	Yohan Yoo	
4	Anti-LGBTQIA+ Discourse and Hate Speech in Korean Protestant Organizations: Focusing on Sexuality Education Discourse in Schools	73
	Soo-Ah Kim	

5	A Rational Evaluation of <i>Idan</i> and <i>Saibi</i>: A Market Approach to Religious “Troublemakers” in Korea	99
	Song Chong Lee	
6	Constructing K-Multicultural Space from Below: A Case of Little Manila and Korean Catholic Church	131
	Hyunjoo Jung	
Part II	New Flows of Value and Identity in Contemporary Korea	165
7	The Cosmopolitan Vernacular: Korean Shamans (Mudang) in the Global Spirituality Market	167
	Liora Sarfati	
8	Religious Disaffiliation and the Religious Identity of Koreans: Focusing on “Religious Nones” and “Meditation”	203
	Hae-young Seong	
9	Samboilbae and Ochetuji in the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster Movement: Affirmations of the Value of Life and the Establishment of New Identity	223
	Minah Kim	
10	New Mourning Spaces: Historical Reflections on Recent Youth Deaths in South Korea	249
	Merose Hwang	
Index		275

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LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 3.1	Pig heads in a refrigerator. (© Chi-Yeong Choi)	57
Fig. 3.2	A replica pig head and a placard opposing the construction. (© Chi-Yeong Choi)	58
Fig. 3.3	A placard and picket in the alley leading to the construction site. (© Chi-Yeong Choi)	60
Fig. 6.1	Map of Little Manila	143
Fig. 6.2	Hye-hwa-dong Cathedral (left, 2024.11.) and after Mass (right, 2010.11.)	143
Fig. 6.3	Filipino street market (Left, 2009.12., Right, 2024.11)	149
Fig. 6.4	Change in cutting edge products from the 2G phones with a carrier (left, 2009. 11.) to a remittance app (right, 2024.11.)	150
Fig. 6.5	Annual number of patients in Raphael Clinic	152
Fig. 6.6	Nationalities of Raphael Clinic patients	153
Fig. 6.7	Contact zones: Street food stalls, crosswalk, and coffee shops (2024.11.24)	157
Fig. 7.1	Mudang Yi Hae-gyeong (Lee Hae-kyung) performing a Hwanghaedo gut ritual while being filmed by a documentary film production team. July 2022, the photograph was taken by the author with consent from the people depicted	171
Fig. 7.2	<i>Café Minamdang</i> , Promotional poster and main characters. 2022, image KBS2	174
Fig. 7.3	Mudang Yi Hae-gyeong instructing an American visitor how to arrange his costume for a mugam dance during ritual. July 2022, the photograph was taken by the author with consent from the people depicted	177
Fig. 7.4	Recent Korean magazines featuring Pang Eun-mi as their cover story. July 2022, photograph by the author	180

Fig. 7.5	Mudang Pang's invitation for foreigners to meditate. January 2023, the photograph is published with authorization from Pang Eun-mi	182
Fig. 7.6	Andrea Kalff in her home shrine in Germany, polishing brass bells in preparation for ritual. Behind her hang posters of documentary films featuring her. May 2022, the photograph was taken by the author with consent from the person depicted	186
Fig. 7.7	Andrea Kalff clad in the outfit of a mythical General, Janggun. 2021, the photograph is published with authorization from Andrea Kalff	188
Fig. 7.8	Altar for the ancestors. Screen capture from Mudang Jenn's Facebook page. March 2019, the photograph is published with authorization from Jennifer Kim	191
Fig. 7.9	Mudang Jenn during her visit in the Shamanism Museum in Seoul. July 2022, the photograph was taken by the author with consent from the people depicted	192
Fig. 9.1	Samboilbae in the summer of August 2023. (© Susanna Kim)	232
Fig. 9.2	Ochetuji in the winter of December 2023. (© Susanna Kim)	234

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	K-Pop songs on US Billboard Hot 100 Chart: 2009–2016 (prior to BTS)	26
Table 2.2	K-Pop songs on US Billboard Hot 100 Chart: 2017–June 2024 (BTS arrives)	29
Table 2.3	K-Pop songs on US Billboard Hot 100 Chart post–COVID-19: February 2020 to February 2025	32



How K-Pop's Pursuit of the US Billboard Hot 100 Charts Shifts Its Value and Identity

Grace Kao

I INTRODUCTION

K-Pop, or Korean Popular Music, usually refers to the single-sex boy or girl group that performs in synchronized and heavily choreographed dances while singing various genres of pop songs. In South Korea, the trainee system usually requires that pre-teens or young teenagers audition to be a trainee at an entertainment company such as HYBE (the home of BTS and SEVENTEEN), SM (home of Super Junior, EXO, NCT127, Girls Generation, SHINee, etc.), or JYP (Stray Kids, TWICE, The Wonder Girls). These trainees work for many years (although the actual range can be from a few months to 10 years) before some have the opportunity to debut as part of a group formed by the entertainment company. These are usually single-gender groups with four to nine members, and traditionally they include a leader (often the oldest or most mature member), center (main face of the group), visual (the most handsome or beautiful member of the group), lead singers, dancers, and rappers.

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As evidence of its popularity worldwide, K-Pop songs have made appearances on music charts outside of South Korea and East Asia. Because the US has the largest music market in the world (IFPI 2024) in terms of revenue and due to American hegemony in terms of popular culture (Scripps 2024), K-Pop has been in pursuit of the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart since the inception of idol groups. In a survey of individuals from 17 countries, Pew Research Center found that 71% of those outside of the US believe American entertainment is the best or above average (Scripps 2024). Moreover, K-Pop artists may also seek validation from Western measures of success. Since the first appearance of a K-Pop single in 2009 when The Wonder Girls hit #76 with “Nobody” and the second appearance of a K-Pop song with Psy’s “Gangnam Style” (2012), K-Pop artists and their entertainment companies view this goal as not just aspirational, but attainable.

This chapter examines the history of K-Pop singles on the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart. I argue that by pursuing the US charts, K-Pop songs and music videos have to grapple with the loss of Korean content and identity as well as shifting values of Hallyu (or Korean Wave). I do so by first briefly summarizing the history of this chart. Next, I delineate every K-Pop song that has appeared on the US charts, along with the dominance of BTS from the late 2010s to the present. Finally, I discuss how the pursuit of the success in the Western market by entertainment companies may shift the most successful K-Pop songs away from Korea (exemplified by “Butter” or “Dynamite” by BTS, which are entirely in English). However, K-Pop artists such as BTS may rebel against purely market-driven decision-making about the content of their songs.

2 DESCRIPTION OF THE HISTORY OF THE US BILLBOARD HOT 100

The *Billboard Advertiser* was first published on November 1, 1894 as a trade publication for the bill-posting industry, and proclaimed that it was “developed to the interests of advertisers, poster printers, advertising agents and secretaries for fairs” (Anand 2005, p. 145). Even then, it included columns that focused on “stage gossips,” which reported on the private lives of celebrities (Anand 2005). The magazine included a mail forwarding service for traveling entertainers, which coincided with its

publication of their tour dates. Because of this service, Billboard became an essential part of the entertainment industry (Anand 2005).

By 1913, Billboard created its first chart, "Popular Songs Heard in Vaudeville Theaters Last Week," which covered the most popular songs from live venues in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco (Anand 2005). However, this chart did not last long, and the first chart that is closest to the modern charts we are familiar with is the "Jukebox Record Buying Guide" (later called the "Most Played in Juke Boxes" chart) by April 1938. In July 1940, there was a chart for "Best Selling Retail Records" and by July 1940, they introduced the "Disks with Most Radio Plugs," later known as "Most Played by Jockeys" in 1945 (Anand 2005).

By 1949, RCA invented the 45 rpm (revolutions per minute) records, popularly known as the "45." These records held a few minutes of music per side, which was perfect for a single. They were inexpensive, and later jukeboxes were designed to play one single at a time. In his 1961 book, *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and Its Impact on Education*, sociologist James Coleman talked about the development of the teen culture post-WWII. Here, he clearly discussed the development of an independent teen culture where feminine and masculine roles are practiced and cars and popular music become vital parts of the adolescent subculture (Coleman 1961). Mitchell Hall (2014) also argues that economic security after WWII offered middle-class adolescents the respite from transitioning immediately to adult responsibilities. Hence, a youth culture could develop for the Baby Boomer generation. Hall (2014) argues that this generation also sought out more diverse musical styles, which made it possible for rock and roll and rhythm and blues to thrive.

Almost immediately following the advent of the 45, Omaha, Nebraska radio station owner Todd Storz came up with the Top 40 Radio format in 1951. Some jukeboxes had 40 slots. This format relied on record sales from record stores. He decided that his station would play these songs most frequently, hence developing the Top-40 radio format (Radio Hall of Fame 2024; Hall 2014). His station (KOWH) listener share went from under 5% to over 45% after the transition, hence leading others to follow (Hall 2014).

Simultaneously, in 1952, radio DJ Dick Clark took over local TV show *Bandstand* in 1952–1956. It was later rebranded as *American Bandstand* in 1957, when it became syndicated on ABC. This show ran from 1957 to 1989. In its early days, Dick Clark also had a system of Top 10 singles.

Moreover, Dick Clark established the link between teenage consumers and the ranking of top singles.

The Billboard Hot 100 Chart officially began on August 4, 1958. This chart essentially combined three of Billboard's charts (including the aforementioned "Most Played by Jockeys" chart). The first number one song was "Poor Little Fool" by Ricky Nelson, which clocks in at 2:43 minutes with a 1-6-4-5 progression in C Major. Interestingly, while many music journalists lamented the shrinking length of today's K-Pop songs, traditional rock and roll songs were about the same length. Compare "Poor Little Fool's" song duration of 2:43 minutes to NewJeans' 2023 song "Super Shy," which is 2:34 minutes in length.

Since then, *Billboard* magazine has introduced hundreds of different charts, some lasting longer than others. Moreover, the names of some genres are credited to *Billboard* magazine staffers. In 1942, records made by African Americans were listed on the "Harlem Hit Parade" chart, which was later called "Race Records" by February 1945. Eventually, an employee suggested "Rhythm and Blues," and the name was adopted in June 1949. Currently, the name remains as "Hot R&B Songs."

3 TODAY'S US BILLBOARD HOT 100 CHART

Despite the plethora of chart rankings, the US Billboard Hot 100 remains the gold standard of singles charts. The list of 100 singles is published weekly, and tracks physical and digital sales, radio play, and online streaming. Since July 2015, the chart has begun its data count for sales and streaming from Friday to Thursday, while the radio play is counted from the following Monday to Sunday. Then, the list is published on Tuesdays. In an article published in *Billboard* magazine, Trust states: "Today, airplay is still among the chart's data mix, with downloads largely continuing the legacy of sales, and streaming—now the chart's most dominant metric, on average—essentially a modern-era, more personalized digital jukebox" (Trust 2022). While the precise formula that Billboard uses is proprietary, Wallace (2023) suggests that "radio airplay impressions are divided by 8,000, sales numbers are divided by 10" (Wallace 2023). For streams, professionals guess that "paid streams get divided by 1250, free streams by 3,750, and programmed streams by 5,000" (Wallace 2023). While the measure for pure sales is weighed heavily, it probably accounts for only 1–3% of the points used to calculate their position in the Hot 100.

4 HISTORY OF K-POP ON THE US BILLBOARD HOT 100 BEFORE BTS'S APPEARANCE

The first K-Pop song that appeared on the US Billboard Hot 100 was The Wonder Girls' "Nobody" in 2009. The Wonder Girls is from JYP Entertainment, and its CEO (songwriter, producer, and performer Park Jin-young, popularly known as JYP) wrote this song. This is a Motown-inspired song, both in its sounds and visuals, with an indelible hook. They recorded both Korean and English versions of the song, and the English version of the song appeared on the October 31, 2009 chart at #76 for 1 week. As a result of their success, The Wonder Girls opened for The Jonas Brothers on their tour that year. One might expect that this feat would have set the stage for other K-Pop songs to follow. Moreover, the appearance on the chart may have added pressure for other groups to release songs with only English lyrics (Wikipedia, 2024).

However, no other song would appear on the chart until Psy's "Gangnam Style," which charted on September 22, 2012, and reached a peak of #2 on this chart. It stayed on the charts for 31 weeks, a record for a K-Pop song that would be only surpassed by BTS's "Dynamite" (which appeared on the charts for 32 weeks).

Psy's "Gangnam Style" was not in English. For most in the Western World, this was seen as a comedic novelty song with memorable horse-like dance moves. In a 2012 CNN article, Justin Bellini compares it to "Macarena" by Los Del Rio, another campy song that became popular despite having decidedly unhip musicians in the music video. Psy's caricature of himself is also atypical of pop stars and especially K-Pop idols. Bellini further writes:

It was cute for a while. We had some fun. And a few Americans even learned to locate South Korea on a map. (I think it's near Pittsburgh.)

But now it's time for all of us to come together and stop the madness. Thus, let it be known that I hereby declare October 12, 2012, as the day "Gangnam Style" died.

Sorry, folks. We're done. It's officially no longer a thing. Psy seems like a really good dude, and I hate to have done this to his song, but this morning I slowly walked "Gangnam Style" out into the backyard, thanked it for the good times and shot it. (Bellini 2012)

Of course, Bellini was wrong. The song stayed on the charts for six more months after the article was written and has maintained its status in the history of K-Pop. As of December 2024, the video has enjoyed 5.3 billion views, much more than any other K-Pop music video (unless you count Pinkfong’s “Baby Shark,” which has 15.4 billion views). Psy clearly set the stage for other K-Pop acts, although Psy was decidedly not an image of a handsome Asian male. Instead, he served as a comedic counterpart to the typical handsome Western male pop star.

Table 2.1 lists all K-Pop songs that appeared on the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart from 2009 to 2016, just before BTS’s appearance on the chart (Wikipedia 2024). There is a total of six songs, with most enjoying just a brief appearance on the chart. The notable exceptions are Psy’s “Gangnam Style” and “Gentlemen,” the latter reaching #2 and staying on the chart for 15 weeks. “Gentlemen” is also interesting because the imagery shows exactly the opposite of the idealized appearance and behavior of K-Pop idols. In the video, Psy is shown to be anything but a gentleman—he pulls chairs from under women as they sit down, delays an elevator as another person is rushing to use the restroom, etc. One could argue that he plays into the image of Asian American men as being seen as less attractive and unlikely romantic interests (Kao et al. 2019; Kao and Shinkoda 2021). During the pre-BTS era, four of the six songs are by Psy, and all his

Table 2.1 K-Pop songs on US Billboard Hot 100 Chart: 2009–2016 (prior to BTS)

<i>Number</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Song title</i>	<i>Highest position</i>	<i># of weeks</i>
1	October 31, 2009	Wonder Girls	“Nobody”	76	1
2	September 22, 2012	Psy	“Gangnam Style”	2	31
3	April 27, 2013	Psy	“Gentleman”	5	15
4	June 28, 2014	Psy feat. Snoop Dogg	“Hangover”	26	1
5	December 19, 2015	Psy feat. CL	“Daddy”	97	1
6	October 22, 2016	CL	“Lifted”	94	1

Source: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_K-pop_songs_on_the_Billboard_charts and author’s own calculations

songs follow the caricature that is consistent with Western images of Asian men as geeky and undesirable.

As Psy's single "Daddy" featured CL (leader of 2NE1), this likely helped elevate CL's own single "Lifted," which reached #94 on the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart on October 22, 2016. Like many songs from YG, this song is co-written by Teddy Park. This song is completely in English and heavily refers to beer (40 oz refers to the size of a malt liquor bottle and is a euphemism for it) as well as getting "lifted" or high. These are not typical themes for a K-Pop song and reveal no Korean content (unless you count CL herself).

During the era prior to BTS, the few K-Pop songs that made it to the US charts were consistent with American images of Asian men (as in the case of Psy). For The Wonder Girls and CL, they had to produce a product absent any Korean content. In other words, for a K-Pop song to be successful in the US, the identity of K-Pop songs that were in Korean was still interpreted within the traditional confines of Asian Americans. The other option for K-Pop artists was to erase any trace of Korean-ness and act as if they were simply American, hence obliterating any of the cultural content of K-Pop. All of these songs failed to disrupt the expectations of American audiences for Asian cultural products. BTS would change these expectations in the coming years.

5 ENTRANCE OF BTS TO THE US CHARTS IN 2017

It is impossible to talk about the history of K-Pop on the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart without mentioning BTS. BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan, literally Bulletproof Boy Scouts or 방탄소년단) is a seven-member group that originally comes from Big Hit Entertainment. The members are leader RM (Kim Namjoon), Jin (Kim Seokjin), Suga (Min Yoongi), J-Hope (Jung Hoseok), Jimin (Park Jimin), V (Kim Taehyung), and Jungkook (Jeon Jungkook). Unlike the typical K-Pop group today, all members are native Koreans and have not spent any time abroad. Moreover, none of them are from Seoul—this is an important part of their origin story since they were seen as a group of boys from secondary cities (such as Gwangju, Daegu, and Busan) and produced by a small and previously unsuccessful company. They were the underdog K-Pop group. In fact, their story matches that of South Korea, who were previously overshadowed by its larger East Asian counterparts, China and Japan.

Their founder and manager, Bang Si-hyuk, formed the group, and they debuted in June 2013. By 2019, BTS accounted for 97% of the Big Hit’s revenue, although by 2020, BTS accounted for 85% of Big Hit’s revenue as they acquired other companies (allkpop 2022a). Due to the group’s popularity, Bang was able to spin Big Hit into the conglomerate HYBE in March 2021. HYBE is now the largest K-Pop company, with a market cap of over US \$5 billion as of September 2024 (Tencer 2024). Previously, SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and YG Entertainment were historically hailed as the “Big Three” in K-Pop. Moreover, Bang bought Scooter Braun’s Ithaca Holdings, previously the management company of Justin Bieber, Ariana Grande, and others. Scooter Braun is now the CEO of HYBE North America. Bang’s vision of K-Pop expands far beyond Korea, and he has often said in interviews that he imagines a global pop music rather than something that is only local to Korea.

BTS actually began its Twitter account two years before debuting—this may not seem surprising today, but at the time it was unheard of (Herman 2023). In Korea, there are many weekly TV shows that feature K-Pop musical acts. On network SBS’s *The Show* in May 2015, BTS won its first award on one of these shows for “I Need U.” By November 2015, BTS began making their appearance on the Billboard 200 charts (for record albums). In October 2016, BTS first topped the Billboard Social 50 Chart. While the chart became inactive by 2020, BTS spent 210 weeks at number 1 on the Billboard Social 50 Chart. Eventually, they became the first K-Pop group to debut at #1 on the Billboard 200 charts with *Love Yourself: Tear* (June 2018) (Herman 2023).

As of 2021, the *Guinness Book of World Records* notes that BTS holds 23 world records, but of course, their popularity has continued to soar since then. In terms of album sales, they are one of the best-selling artists in the past 30 years, just behind Eminem and Taylor Swift (AllKPop 2022b).

Table 2.2 presents the list of K-Pop songs on the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart from 2017 to October 2019, just prior to the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This also marks the period of BTS prior to reaching their record-breaking Number 1 singles. Even Blackpink pales in comparison to the dominance of BTS. Note that I have numbered the songs sequentially, starting from the first K-Pop song on the chart, The Wonder Girls’ “Nobody.” This column provides a total tally of the K-Pop songs that appear on this chart.

BTS achieved their first appearance on the US Billboard Hot 100 on the October 7, 2017, Chart with the song “DNA,” which peaked at #67

Table 2.2 K-Pop songs on US Billboard Hot 100 Chart: 2017–June 2024 (BTS arrives)

<i>Number</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Song title</i>	<i>Highest position</i>	<i># of weeks</i>
7	October 7, 2017	BTS	“DNA”	67	4
8	December 16, 2017	BTS feat. Desiigner	“MIC Drop” (Steve Aoki remix)	28	10
9	June 2, 2018	BTS	“Fake Love”	10	6
10	June 30, 2018	Blackpink	“Ddu-Du Ddu-Du”	55	1
11	September 8, 2018	BTS feat. Nicki Minaj	“Idol”	11	3
12	November 3, 2018	Dua Lipa & Blackpink	“Kiss and Make Up”	93	1
13	November 10, 2018	Steve Aoki feat. BTS	“Waste It on Me”	89	1
14	January 12, 2019	Pinkfong	“Baby Shark”	32	20
15	April 20, 2019	Blackpink	“Kill This Love”	41	4
16	April 27, 2019	BTS feat. Halsey	“Boy with Luv”	8	8
17	April 27, 2019	BTS	“Make It Right”	76	2
18	October 12, 2019	J-Hope feat. Becky G	“Chicken Noodle Soup”	81	1

Source: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_K-pop_songs_on_the_Billboard_charts and authors' own calculations

and stayed on the charts for four weeks. They looked nothing like Psy. Even in “DNA,” they are presented as handsome young men, typical of teenage idols with whom Western audiences have been familiar since the beginning of the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart. In fact, Ricky Nelson, whose 1955 song was the first #1 song on this sound, personified the teenage idol at the time. Still, the members of BTS danced in sync and sported brightly colored hair—this would be the first exposure of a K-Pop boy band to most Americans. Like Psy, however, most of the lyrics in BTS’s “DNA” are in Korean, and fans would have to learn the lyrics either by memorizing a sequence of syllables (which many did) or by learning Korean. The boon to Korean language studies worldwide certainly owes some debt to BTS. In fact, according to the Colleen Baer in the Modern Language Association (MLA), from the period from 2016 to 2021,

foreign-language enrollment decreased by 16.6%, but in contrast, Korean grew by 38.3% (Baer 2023).

Before Psy's "Gangnam Style," very few non-English songs ever made it to the chart. According to Billboard, as of October 2023, only 36 non-English songs have ever appeared on the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart. Most of these singles are in Spanish. If we only consider non-Western languages, all but one ("Sukiyaki" by Kyu Sakamoto, which reached #1 in 1963) are in Korean. K-pop has clearly put Asia on the American pop music landscape.

In the same year as "DNA," their next song, "Mic Drop," peaked at #28 and spent 10 weeks on the US Billboard Hot 100. This song enjoyed a remix from Asian American DJ and producer Steve Aoki (interestingly, son of the entrepreneurs behind the restaurant chain Benihana). By June 2018, they enjoyed their first Top 10 single, "Fake Love," which spent 6 weeks on the chart. That same month, Blackpink enjoyed their first appearance on the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart with "Ddu-Du Ddu-Du," but it only reached number 55 and stayed on the chart for just a single week. While I have included "Baby Shark," a popular children's song in this table, it is not K-Pop in the traditional sense. Still, I include it given that it likely promotes the Hallyu.

When evaluating the list of songs on Table 2.2, with the exception of "Baby Shark," all of the songs include at least some Korean lyrics. To any viewer of these music videos, it is clear that these songs are from K-Pop groups hailing from Korea and singing Korean lyrics. In the case of "Chicken Noodle Soup," J-Hope (BTS) and Becky G (Mexican American singer)'s cover of a classic hip-hop song by DJ Webstar and rapper Young B from 2006, the song is in English, Korean, and Spanish and features a multi-ethnic group of dancers. The video was shot in Los Angeles.

In general, it is rare for listeners to hear non-English language songs on American radio. Given that radio airplay still accounts for a non-trivial share of the score used to determine a song's chart position, K-Pop fans rightly feel that K-Pop songs are disadvantaged. In 2017, BTS ARMY (the name of BTS's fandom) in the US organized themselves to call their local DJs to play BTS songs. The network they created was BTSx50 States (Chang 2017). Moreover, some fans sent American DJs flowers and other gift baskets to thank them for interviewing BTS. For example, on October 4, 2017, a DJ for 103.7 KISS FM in Chattanooga tweeted a photo of a bouquet of flowers and a card that thanked them for playing BTS (@KissChattanooga 2017).

5.1 *Korean Language as an Expression of Identity*

In terms of K-Pop songs and music videos, its producers must present products that are appealing to a wide range of audience members. To some extent, it may be tempting for them to simply increase the English language content of their song lyrics. Is it important for K-Pop songs to be in the Korean language to properly express its Korean identity? Do members of K-Pop groups have to be Korean or from the Korean diaspora? Since the first K-Pop idol group, H.O.T., there have been Korean American members. Later, Super Junior introduced a Chinese member, but all of these groups were still dominated by Korean members born and raised in South Korea. To what extent does the pursuit of success on the American charts require the erasure of Korean-ness?

6 BTS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

From December 2019 to January 2020, a new illness that caused pneumonia-like symptoms was discovered in China. By January 23, 2020, the city of Wuhan, China, was placed on complete lockdown due to the new virus termed 2019 Novel Coronavirus (later COVID-19). By March 2020, many cities in the US and Korea mandated people to stay at home as much as possible (Centers for Disease Control 2024). As of December 2024, there have been approximately 777 million reported cases of COVID and 7 million deaths (World Health Organization 2024) from COVID.

While all of us spent more time at home, we were also more likely to watch YouTube. According to the Pew Research Center, 73% of Americans used YouTube in 2019. By 2021, this had increased to 81%. Among 18- to 29-year-olds (presumably the age group that is most likely to follow pop music), 95% said they used YouTube (Pew Research Center 2024a). For those ages 13–17, in 2024, 93% reported using YouTube (Pew Research Center 2024b).

By March 2020, most public gatherings were shut down, and this, of course, included live music concerts, including K-Pop performances (Lee and Kao 2023). K-Pop companies were especially quick to innovate. SM Group SuperM held its *Beyond Live* online concert in April 2020, while TVXQ and Super Junior both held their online concerts in May 2020. BTS held a teaser event called *Bang Bang Con* on YouTube in May 2020 and broadcast many of its earlier concerts for free. They then announced

that they would have an online concert called *Bang Bang Con: The Live* in June 2020. This concert earned about \$20 million from 756,000 viewers who paid a range of prices, averaging about \$45 each. A few months later, in October 2020, they held another online concert titled *Map of the Soul ON:E*, which took place over one weekend. These shows garnered 993,000 viewers from 191 countries and earned over US \$40 million. By June 2021, BTS held two more online concerts, which sold 1.33 million tickets and earned \$71 million in sales revenue. In total, these three sets of concerts generated more money than the 31 stadium performances they held in 2019 (\$113.6 million) (Lee and Kao 2023). In fact, during a year where there were no in-person concerts, Big Hit Entertainment (the parent company of BTS before HYBE was formed) reported \$716.7 million in revenue for 2020 compared to \$507.9 million in revenue in 2019.

Table 2.3 lists all of the K-Pop songs that appeared on the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart from February 1, 2020, to February 15, 2025. Again, the songs are numbered consecutively starting from Table 2.1 so that we can see a total tally of the songs. Overall, there have been 97 songs since The Wonder Girls’ “Nobody” in 2009. Note that 58 of the 97 songs on the list are by BTS or its members. We can also see that most songs appear on the chart for just a week before disappearing. If we were to total the number of weeks that these singles stayed on the chart, BTS’s dominance would be even more dramatic.

Table 2.3 K-Pop songs on US Billboard Hot 100 Chart post-COVID-19: February 2020 to February 2025

<i>Count since 2009</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Song title</i>	<i>Highest position</i>	<i># of weeks</i>
19	February 1, 2020	BTS	“Black Swan”	57	1
20	March 7, 2020	BTS	“On”	4	2
21	March 7, 2020	BTS (Jungkook solo)	“My Time”	84	1
22	March 7, 2020	BTS (Jimin solo)	“Filter”	87	1
23	June 6, 2020	Suga (Agust D)	“Daechwita”	76	1

(continued)

Table 2.3 (continued)

<i>Count since 2009</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Song title</i>	<i>Highest position</i>	<i># of weeks</i>
24	June 13, 2020	Lady Gaga and Blackpink	“Sour Candy”	33	2
25	June 27, 2020	Jawsh 685, Jason Derulo, and BTS	“Savage Love” (Laxed—Siren Beat)”	1	14
26	July 11, 2020	Blackpink	“How You Like That”	33	2
27	September 5, 2020	BTS	“Dynamite”	1	32
28	September 12, 2020	Blackpink and Selena Gomez	“Ice Cream”	13	8
29	October 17, 2020	Blackpink	“Lovesick Girls”	59	1
30	December 5, 2020	BTS	“Life Goes On”	1	3
31	December 5, 2020	BTS	“Blue & Grey”	13	1
32	December 5, 2020	BTS	“Stay”	22	1
33	December 5, 2020	BTS	“Fly to My Room”	69	1
34	December 5, 2020	BTS	“Telepathy”	70	1
35	December 5, 2020	BTS	“Dis-ease”	72	1
36	March 27, 2021	Rosé	“On the Ground”	70	1
37	April 17, 2021	BTS	“Film Out”	81	1
38	June 5, 2021	BTS	“Butter”	1	20
39	July 24, 2021	BTS	“Permission to Dance”	1	7
40	September 25, 2021	Lisa	“Lalisa”	84	1
41	October 9, 2021	Coldplay & BTS	“My Universe”	1	17
42	October 16, 2021	Twice	“The Feels”	83	1

(continued)

Table 2.3 (continued)

<i>Count since 2009</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Song title</i>	<i>Highest position</i>	<i># of weeks</i>
43	November 6, 2021	Lisa	“Money”	90	2
44	December 25, 2021	Juice Wrld & Suga	“Girl of My Dreams”	29	1
45	January 8, 2022	V	“Christmas Tree”	79	1
46	February 26, 2022	Jungkook	“Stay Alive”	95	1
47	May 14, 2022	Psy feat. Suga	“That That”	80	1
48	June 25, 2022	BTS	“Yet to Come”	13	2
49	June 25, 2022	BTS	“Run BTS”	73	1
50	July 9, 2022	Charlie Puth feat. Jungkook	“Left and Right”	22	17
51	July 16, 2022	J-Hope	“More”	82	1
52	July 30, 2022	J-Hope	“Arson”	96	1
53	August 20, 2022	Benny Blanco, BTS & Snoop Dogg	“Bad Decisions”	10	5
54	September 3, 2022	Blackpink	“Pink Venom”	22	6
55	October 1, 2022	Blackpink	“Shut Down”	25	3
56	November 12, 2022	Jin	“The Astronaut”	51	1
57	December 17, 2022	RM with Youjeen	“Wild Flower”	83	1
58	January 28, 2023	NewJeans	“Ditto”	85	5
59	January 28, 2023	Taeyang feat. Jimin	“Vibe”	76	1
60	February 4, 2023	Twice	“Moonlight Sunrise”	84	1
61	March 18, 2023	J-Hope with J. Cole	“On the Street”	60	1

(continued)

Table 2.3 (continued)

<i>Count since 2009</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Song title</i>	<i>Highest position</i>	<i># of weeks</i>
62	April 1, 2023	Jimin	“Set Me Free Pt. 2”	30	1
63	April 1, 2023	Fifty Fifty	“Cupid”	17	25
64	April 8, 2023	Jimin	“Like Crazy”	1	5
65	May 6, 2023	Agust D	“Haeguum”	58	1
66	June 3, 2023	Kodak Black & NLE Choppa feat. Jimin, Jvke, Muni Long	“Angel Pt. 1”	65	2
67	June 24, 2023	BTS	“Take Two”	48	1
68	July 22, 2023	NewJeans	“Super Shy”	48	8
69	July 29, 2023	Jungkook feat. Latto	“Seven”	1	15
70	August 5, 2023	NewJeans	“ETA”	81	1
71	August 5, 2023	NewJeans	“Cool with You”	93	1
72	August 26, 2023	V	“Love Me Again”	96	1
73	September 23, 2023	V	“Slow Dancing”	51	1
74	October 14, 2023	Jungkook & Jack Harlow	“3D”	5	9
75	November 4, 2023	The Kid Laroi, Jungkook & Central Cee	“Too Much”	44	6
76	November 18, 2023	Jungkook	“Standing Next to You”	5	19
77	November 25, 2023	Stray Kids	“Lalalala”	90	1
78	December 30, 2023	The Weeknd, Jennie, Lily-Rose Depp	“One of the Girls”	51	15
79	March 9, 2024	Le Sserafim	“Easy”	99	1
80	March 30, 2024	V	“Fri(end)s”	65	1

(continued)

Table 2.3 (continued)

<i>Count since 2009</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Song title</i>	<i>Highest position</i>	<i># of weeks</i>
81	April 20, 2024	Illit	“Magnetic”	91	1
82	May 25, 2024	Stray Kids feat. Charlie Puth	“Lose My Breath”	90	1
83	June 22, 2024	Jungkook	“Never Let Go”	97	1
84	July 13, 2024	Lisa	“Rockstar”	70	1
85	July 13, 2024	Jimin feat. Loco	“Smeraldo Garden Marching Band”	88	1
86	August 3, 2024	Jimin	“Who”	14	1
87	August 3, 2024	Stray Kids	“Chk Chk Boom”	49	1
88	August 31, 2024	Lisa feat. Rosalía	“New Woman”	97	1
89	September 14, 2024	Le Sserafim	“Crazy”	76	2
90	September 21, 2024	Megan Thee Stallion & RM	“Neva Play”	36	2
91	October 26, 2024	Jennie	“Mantra”	98	2
92	November 2, 2024	Rosé & Bruno Mars	“Apt.”	3	16
93	November 30, 2024	Jin	“Running Wild”	53	1
94	December 13, 2024	V & Park Hyo-shin	“Winter Ahead”	99	1
95	December 21, 2024	Rosé	“Toxic Until the End”	90	1
96	December 21, 2024	V & Bing Crosby	“White Christmas” (remix)	93	1
97	February 15, 2025	Jennie & Dominic Fike	“Love Hangover”	96	1

Number 1 songs are in bold

Note that 58 of 97 songs are by BTS or its members

Source: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_K-pop_songs_on_the_Billboard_charts and author’s own calculations

6.1 *K-Pop and BTS's First Number Ones*

The beginning of 2020 marked the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned previously, not only were music fans spending more time at home, concerts, including the BTS tour that would have supported *Map of the Soul:7*, were canceled. This album was released in February 2020 and included 20 tracks. The album reached music charts all over the world, from Argentina to Denmark, Estonia to Mexico, and reached #1 on the US Billboard 200 (US chart for album sales). Like almost all K-Pop albums, an EP *Map of the Soul: Persona* was released one year earlier, and previewed some of the songs which would appear on *Map of the Soul: 7*. BTS already enjoyed the success of “Boy with Luv,” which reached #8 in April 2019.

The new album included “Make It Right” (reaching #76), “Black Swan” (#57), and “On” (#4) as well as the solo songs “My Time” (Jungkook’s solo, #84) and “Filter” (Jimin’s solo, #87). These songs are primarily in Korean, and with the exception of “Boy with Luv,” received little radio play. In fact, even for “On,” their highest charting single from the album, Vox writer Aja Romano noted in March 2020, “BTS just landed an unprecedented spot on the Hot 100—with virtually no radio play” (Romano 2020). In the same article, Romano quotes BTS’s RM (Kim Namjoon) in their goal to hit #1 on the US Billboard Hot 100. In a 2019 Entertainment Weekly article by Leah Greenblatt, she also mentions that “mainstream radio airplay—a huge component of Hot 100 domination—still eludes them stateside” (Greenblatt 2019).

Even then, BTS noted the struggle between reaching their goals and abandoning their identities. In the same article, RM says:

You know, Latin pop has its own Grammys in America, and it’s quite different. I don’t want to compare, but I think it’s even harder as an Asian group. A Hot 100 and a Grammy nomination, these are our goals. But they’re just goals—we don’t want to change our identity or our genuineness to get the number one. Like if sing suddenly in full English, and change all these other things, then that’s not BTS. (RM as quoted in Greenblatt 2019)

In fact, RM expressed this sentiment many times in various interviews. He often emphasized that they were a Korean group first and foremost. Interesting, RM discusses their identity as well as their values as being “genuineness.”

Technically, BTS hit #1 on June 27, 2020, through a remix of a song by Jawsh 685 and Jason Derulo titled “Savage Love.” They actually added Korean rap lyrics to the song. However, after the success of their online concerts, they released the single “Dynamite” on August 21, 2020. This would be their first original #1 single on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart, debuting at #1 on the September 5, 2020, US Billboard Hot 100 Charts. It became the first song to enjoy 100 million views on YouTube within 24 hours. However, directly contradicting what leader RM said in previous interviews, this song was completely in English.

In fact, it was primarily written by two English songwriters, David Stewart and Jessica Agombar. Unlike almost all of BTS’s other songs, the members were not listed as songwriters on this single. The music video is a dreamy amalgam of an imaginary Los Angeles of the 1980s, complete with pastel colors reminiscent of “Ocean Pacific” shirts and the famous Randy’s Donuts. However, Jungkook first appears in a bedroom draped in a 1970s color scheme of browns and greens, but the room also includes a poster of the film *Terminator* (released in 1984). It also featured a large Disco sign that felt out of place in this landscape, given that Disco disappeared from the US in 1979 after Disco Demolition Night in Comiskey Park in Chicago, IL, on July 12, 1979 (Sclafani 2009). The record store in the music video also sold CDs, which were not available until 1983. They sport disco-inspired outfits from Gucci. However, at the end of the video, they are wearing pastel-colored (from the 1980s) outfits clearly inspired by American boy bands from the 1990s (see Boyz II Men’s music video for “Water Runs Dry” from 1994). They referred to these outfits and scene as “Teletubbies” (which began airing in 1997). Despite its jarring imagery, it is a very catchy song, and as of December 2024, the music video has 1.9 billion views.

The visual elements are borrowed from “retro” styles of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s America, but there are no signs of Korea or Korean-ness except that the BTS members are Korean. There are no Korean lyrics in the song, nor does the music video include any obvious or hidden signs of Korea. There are no Korean movie posters in the bedroom Jungkook sings in, nor are there albums featured by Korean artists in the record store from which RM sings his verses. Even the burger and donut shop does not sell any Korean food. In other words, BTS had to eliminate all signs of their Korean identity and abandon their aforementioned values as Korean artists to hit #1 on the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart. Still, this song is a

landmark in K-Pop history in the US. It remained on the chart for 32 weeks, beating Psy's "Gangnam Style" by one week.

A few months later, in November 2020, BTS released *BE*. All the singles from this album debuted on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart, with "Life Goes On" hitting #1, and the other songs ranging from #13 to #72. Given that BTS had three number-one songs on the US Billboard Hot 100 in three months, they became the fastest group to do so since the Bee Gees. Not only that, "Life Goes On" became the first song primarily sung in Korean to reach number one. Moreover, all of the other songs are primarily in Korean. However, only "Life Goes On" lasted more than 1 week on the chart. The music video was shot primarily in outdoor locations in Seoul, and it was clear that they were in Korea. The indoor scenes showed them at home in their pajamas—also presumably in Seoul. Moreover, the music video was directed by maknae (youngest member of a group) Jungkook. As of December 2024, the music video has had 556 million views on YouTube.

BTS's next #1 singles were "Butter," "Permission to Dance," and "My Universe." "Butter" reached #1 on the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart dated June 5, 2021, and stayed on the charts for 20 weeks. This was a 1980s-inspired synth-pop number that was completely in English and not written by any of its members. The sets were primarily indoor sets, with no signs of Korea in its visuals. As of December 2024, this song has 1 billion views on YouTube.

"Permission to Dance" appeared on the chart dated July 24, 2024, and was primarily written by Ed Sheeran and included various English and Canadian songwriters. Again, this song was not co-written with any of the BTS members. The introduction of the music video showed a cast of characters that were multi-ethnic, and the setting looked like suburban America. It begins with a waitress holding a stack of pancakes topped with butter, presumably referring to their last single. The scenes with the members in Western-inspired outfits (with denim and fringes) were shot in a newly constructed laundromat. These shots were interspersed with scenes clearly shot in middle America. As of December 2024, this music video has about 660 million views.

Finally, in "My Universe," a song written by Chris Martin of Coldplay, BTS and Coldplay appear in a science fiction universe set in outer space, complete with aliens. The storyline is that in this universe, there are three bands, DJ Lafrique's Supernova 7, Coldplay, and BTS, and they are collaborating on a song via a "holoband" device despite being many miles

apart. Here, BTS abandons any choreography but sings primarily in Korean (with the exception of the chorus). Interestingly, the fictional band also has no standalone part in the song. While BTS is not recognizable as a K-Pop idol group, they do primarily sing in Korean. This song was on the US Billboard Hot 100 charts for a total of 17 weeks, and as of December 2024, the video has had 330 million views.

Given that BTS began as a hip-hop/rap group (see their first music videos “No More Dream” and “We Are Bulletproof, Pt. II”), their number one songs are a far departure from their roots. Their old songs had almost no English, with the exception of the titles and a few hooks that repeat the title. Even their big hits in Korea, such as “Run,” “I Need U,” “Fire,” “DOPE,” “DNA,” “Fake Love,” and “Spring Day,” sound very different. BTS wrote their own lyrics and imbued them with meaning. They admitted that “Dynamite,” “Butter,” and “Permission to Dance” were just light songs with no meaning (and no Korean words or visuals). The latter three were written by Western songwriters.

Many other K-Pop songs were also on the charts during the period from February 2020 to December 2024. Besides BTS and its members, most of the songs are from Blackpink or its members (Lisa, Jennie, and Rosé). Stray Kids, Fifty Fifty, NewJeans, TWICE, LeSerafim, Illit, and even Psy (in a collaboration with Suga of BTS) made appearances on the charts. However, outside of BTS or their members’ songs and with the exceptions of Fifty Fifty’s “Cupid” (#17 and a total of 25 weeks on the charts), “One of the Girls” by The Weeknd, Jennie, and Lily-Rose Depp, Rosé (#51 with 15 weeks on the charts), Blackpink and Selena Gomez’s “Ice Cream” (#13 with 8 weeks on the charts) and Rosé and Bruno Mars’s “Apt.” (#8 with 6 weeks on the charts), NewJeans’s “Ditto” (#85 with 5 weeks on the charts), and NewJeans’s “Super Shy” (#48 with 8 weeks on the charts), most non-BTS (and even some BTS) K-Pop songs that appear on the charts stay for no longer than one or two weeks. Still, many of these songs have some Korean content, although a few are also only in English (“One of the Girls,” “Cupid,” “Money,” “Rock Star,” and “Mantra”), besides many of BTS’s top-charting songs. In fact, of the 97 K-Pop songs that have ever appeared on the US Billboard Hot 100 Charts, 58 are from BTS or its members (RM, Jin, Suga or Agust D, J-Hope, Jimin, V, and Jungkook). Only Jungkook and Jimin have had #1 songs as solo artists, and only BTS and its members have had #1 songs.

US radio is not ready for non-English songs, but that has not prevented K-Pop fans from making up for it in terms of streaming and sales. As with

all of the most popular K-Pop artists, BTS's position on the charts is due, in part, to fans buying multiple copies of their records. According to Wallace (2023), in Spring 2021, when "Butter" hit Number 1 while Olivia Rodrigo's "Good 4 U" hit #2, the ratio of sales to streaming is notable. For the charted date of June 5, 2021, "Butter" debuted at #1 with 248,800 pure sales and 32.2 streams, while "Good 4 U" had 19,000 sales with 62.3 million streams. In other words, "Butter" owes about 68% of its ranking points to sales, while the record sales of "Good 4 U" only accounted for 7% of its ranking points (Wallace 2023). However, Wallace does not mention the importance of YouTube streams, where K-Pop fans are stellar in their use in promoting their favorite groups.

According to the IFPI's Global Albums Sales Charts, including sales from all physical formats and album downloads, nine of the top 10 albums sold were K-Pop albums. Looking at the Top 20 albums, 19 were by K-Pop artists. The only exception was Taylor Swift's 1989 (Taylor's Version), at #6. The top 10 albums sold were Seventeen's *FML* (6.4 million units sold), Stray Kids's *5-STAR* (5.3 million), and NCT DREAM's *ISTJ* (4.6 million sold), down to #10 (V's *Layover* with 2.2 million sold) (IFPI 2024).

Why is this the case? In part, K-Pop groups release multiple versions of the same album. They often provide different photocards and other memorabilia. If fans want to collect a variety of merchandise, they have to buy multiple copies of the same album. Moreover, fans believe that they must support their artists. According to an article in the *Korea JoongAng Daily*, pre-order sales from GS25's mobile app suggested that foreign buyers bought 47 albums each (Kim 2024). For example, Seventeen's *FML* has 19 versions of the same album (Photobook, 3 versions; Carat Class, 13 versions; Weverse, 1 version; Deluxe, 1 version, and KIT, 1 version) (allkpop 2023). NMIXX's *A Midsummer NMIXX's Dream* includes one random polaroid card and one random photocard. According to an article, there are more than 150 photocards per member, which means that with six members, there are more than 900 possible photocards to collect (Koreaboo 2023).

What does this all mean? Given the number of views on YouTube, album sales, and other streaming data, K-Pop groups, and especially BTS, are doing exceptionally well. Without clear data and information on the formulas used to calculate positionality of songs on the Billboard charts, it is reasonable to suspect that radio plays are the primary culprit behind why K-Pop groups do not appear on the US charts more often. However, this

has not stopped K-Pop groups from pursuing the US Billboard Hot 100 Charts. It is now commonplace for music videos to be released on Thursdays at midnight US Eastern time in order to accommodate the timing of when Billboard Hot 100 Charts begin tracking for the following week.

7 VALUE AND IDENTITY

Given that the power of the Hallyu is that it transmits Korean cultural products across its borders, is it still part of the Hallyu if the product has no Korean content? What counts as Korean content? Certainly, most of us would agree that having Korean language, Korean members, Korean locations, Korean objects, Korean references, and Korean songwriters would qualify. In Youjeong Oh's book, she also argues that "Korean television dramas and pop music not only project an international image of Korean consumer goods and services but brand Korean cities by cultivating and displaying their images and meanings therein" (Oh 2018). She states that this is what attracts Korean tourists to Korea. Until recently, BTS served as brand ambassadors not only for large companies like Hyundai and Samsung, but also in tourism campaigns for Seoul. However, if music videos are increasingly shot in Los Angeles or New York, how does K-Pop continue to promote Korean content and places? In contrast to BTS's "Dynamite," which appears in a fictional Los Angeles of the 1980s, compare their song "Paldogangsan" (or Satoori Rap), which is literally about the provinces of Korea, or RM's song "Seoul."

In the case of K-Pop, is it enough that there are Koreans involved? There is no doubt that BTS members are Korean. But Lisa of Blackpink is Thai. If her solo work, as evidenced by "Rock Star," is not produced by a Korean entertainment company, nor is it in Korean, does that still count as K-Pop? The video also shows scenes of Bangkok, and none of the songwriters are Korean. Still, she was trained by YG Entertainment in Korea, and she was part of the most popular K-Pop girl group of all time, and I think this is enough to claim her songs as K-Pop. However, it would be reasonable to disagree.

Companies like HYBE are pushing the boundaries of K-Pop. Bang Si-hyuk has claimed that he does not believe K-Pop is a genre and instead argues, "K-Pop has to drop the K and become 'just pop' if it wants to become the true mainstream genre of the world" (Yoon 2024). Yoon also argues that Lee Soo-man (founder of SM Entertainment) predicted in 2011 that Hallyu 3.0:

or the third phase of the Korean Wave, or Korean content export – follows the first phase in which Korean content is simply exported to foreign markets, and the second where overseas companies or celebrities collaborate with Korean content, finally ending at a point where Korean companies export the ‘culture technology’ of Korea by establishing joint ventures with overseas companies in a true realization of localization. (Yoon 2024)

New groups such as KATSEYE (a HYBE and Geffen Records collaboration) or Dear Alice (an SM and Moon&Back Media venture) further question the boundaries of K-Pop. KATSEYE includes one Korean member and one multiracial Chinese member, but their songs are not in Korean, and the members are not trained there.

Dear Alice is a British group whose debut was the subject of a six-part documentary, titled *Made in Korea: The K-Pop Experience*. There are no Korean or East Asian members. They were trained for 100 days by SM in Korea—compare this to the many years that K-Pop idols work as trainees before their debut. Along with the title of the show, they once performed live at the British Embassy in Korea. They are clearly being marketed as a novelty act. From my views of their videos, their dance choreographies pale in comparison to any current K-Pop boy groups. Would anyone view them as a legitimate K-Pop group? It is doubtful. Still, they represent the export of the Hallyu and perhaps work to highlight the high level of skills necessary to be in a K-Pop idol group.

With the exception of the large entertainment companies such as HYBE, SM, JYP, and YG, others are promoting more traditional K-Pop idol groups, whose members are primarily Korean ethnics and whose songs are sung mostly in Korean. Their identities as K-Pop artists from Korea are fully intact.

For the most successful groups, such as BTS, hitting #1 and staying there seems to require Americanization—although this Americanization can be conceived by non-Americans.

8 CONCLUSION

What does this suggest for the future of K-Pop? As it becomes globalized, one strategy is to localize it so that it is accepted by other non-Korean markets (a process sometimes referred to as glocalization). For songs to appear on the US Billboard Hot 100 Charts, especially via radio play, K-Pop songs are compelled to be performed solely in English. Not only that, when examining songs like “Dynamite,” “Butter,” or “Permission to

Dance,” BTS’s number one songs on the US Billboard Hot 100 Chart, they seem to eliminate all traces of Korean-ness in its lyrics and visuals in the music video. These songs appeared despite BTS’s leader RM stating that they are a Korean band and that, through their United Nations appearances, young people must “Speak Yourself” and his earlier claims for maintaining their identity and their genuineness.

BTS clearly battles against these pressures. Their most successful songs were ordered by HYBE and had no participation by the members in terms of its composition or production. There were no Korean lyrics. However, for all of the other BTS songs and in most of the members’ solo work (with the exception of Jungkook’s 2024 singles), their songs were composed with the input of the members and contain primarily Korean lyrics and often about Korean subjects. For RM, K-Pop is Korean because it requires its idols to reach perfection. He states in a 2023 interview:

Korea is a country that has been invaded, exploited and divided in two. It was a country that had nothing 70 years ago. Nowadays, the entire world is looking at Korea. How do think it was possible? It’s because people are working [expletive] hard to improve themselves. (RM, in Korea JoongAng Daily, 2023)

Currently, K-Pop has expanded such that there are groups that fit many definitions of what the “K” means in K-Pop idol groups. For most, it requires that one has participated in the trainee system and heavily choreographed dance numbers. The other elements may include Korean members, Korean producers, Korean lyrics, Korean cultural content, or Korean visuals. Some might insist that it should be made in Korea. What happens when one or all of these elements are absent? Would that group or song without these characteristics still be considered K-Pop?

Ideally, the Hallyu should work to expose other countries to Korea, and by doing so, increase the cultural impact and soft power of South Korea. By extension, when the Hallyu reaches the West, it can promote the acceptance of East Asia and also East Asian Americans or other East Asians in the diaspora. However, if the characteristic of the Hallyu simply emulates those of the West, what are the values and identities that are transmitted from Korea to other countries? For the Korean or Asian diaspora, many of us hope that some element of Korean-ness is maintained in K-Pop. It is clear that while market-driven forces are driving K-Pop songs toward a generic Westernization, many fans actually enjoy the Korean content found in K-Pop.

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INDEX¹

A

Anand, N., 22, 23
Ansan, 16, 142, 147, 249, 250, 258,
258n2, 258n3, 259, 263n6
Danwon High School, 16, 250,
258–260, 258n3
See also Sewol Ferry Disaster
Anti-Cult Movement (ACM), 104,
104n9, 109, 110
Anti-Discrimination law, 74, 75n1,
76, 85, 93
Aum Shinrikyo, 104, 125

B

Bacchi, Carol, 77
Bainbridge, William Sims, 121
Barker, Eileen, 103, 103n7, 110
Bell, Catherine, 227, 229
Benjamin, Walter, 266

Bible (Hebrew Bible), 63, 64
Deuteronomy, 63
Genesis, 65, 66
Leviticus, 63
Bible (New Testament)
Acts, 65
Galatians, 65
Joshua, 237
Branch Davidians, 103, 125
BTS, 1, 8–10, 21, 22, 25–44
Buddhism, 2, 3, 7, 16, 110, 112, 114,
167, 168, 209–212, 211n3, 215,
216, 225, 231, 233, 234,
236, 239
Buddha, 16, 110, 233, 237
Buddhists, 15, 16, 87, 102,
137, 168n1, 204–206,
210–212, 210n2, 214, 225,
231, 233, 235, 236, 239, 240,
255, 256

¹Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.

Buddhism (*cont.*)

- Jogye Order, 211, 239
- ochetuji* (five-body prostration), 15
- samboilbae* (three-step one-bow), 15
- Seon* (Zen), 211, 212
- Templestay*, 15, 204, 205, 211–214, 211n3, 216–218
- Busan, 27, 133, 254
- Bystander-survivors, 251, 260, 266, 267, 269

C

- Castells, Manuel, 6, 7
- China, 27, 31, 105n12, 146, 153, 167, 206, 223
- Choi, Byung-Doo, 138
- Christianity, 2, 64, 75, 76, 101, 106–108, 110, 117n41, 122, 167, 173, 210
- Catholic Church, 13, 134, 145–147, 151, 154, 155, 158–160
- Catholicism, 3, 65, 113, 114, 148, 149, 154, 158, 236, 239
- Catholics, 2, 65, 148, 149, 154, 206, 208, 210, 210n2
- Protestantism, 3, 11, 12, 73–79, 75n1, 81, 81n2, 82, 86–88, 90, 92, 93, 101, 108, 112, 114, 116, 116n36, 120, 125, 150, 206, 208, 232, 236, 237, 239, 242
- Protestants, 2, 10, 11, 76, 90, 206, 210
- Cold War, 7, 140, 254
- Coleman, James, 23
- Colonial period (1910-1945), 2, 115, 140, 168, 210, 251, 252, 254
- Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), 76, 78–81, 83, 91
- Confucianism, 2, 102, 113, 173, 205, 209, 216

- Contemporary Korean Studies Project, Seoul National University, 8, 17
- Cosmopolitan, 8, 14, 168, 169, 187, 189, 193, 194, 196, 198
- Cosmopolitanism, 168, 169, 190
- COVID-19, 28, 31–42, 118, 118n45, 148, 148n16, 169, 182–184, 192, 224, 265
- Cresswell, Jamie, 102n4, 103n7

D

- Daegu, 5, 10, 27, 50, 52–57, 52n1, 60n4, 61n5, 66, 68, 156, 223, 225, 255, 256
- Dachyeon-dong, 5, 10, 50–57, 52n1, 58n3, 61, 62, 64, 66–68
- Daoism, 168, 215
- Derrida, Jacques, 240
- Diaspora, 31, 44, 132, 175n3, 193
- Divination, 172, 176, 180, 181, 191, 196
- Douglas, Mary, 67
- Durkheim, Emile, 226, 227, 242, 257

E

- Eagleton, Terry, 5, 7, 50, 69
- East Asia, 22, 27, 43, 44, 167, 255
- Eliade, Mircea, 2, 238
- Employment Permit System (EPS), 132, 133, 133n2, 133n3, 137, 140, 141, 146, 159
- Ethnic enclave, 134, 137, 141, 147, 154

F

- Facebook, 178, 180, 181, 184, 189–191
- Feminism, 74, 76, 80, 87
 - feminist reboot, 88
- Fetman, Lisa J., 86

G

- German, 14, 176, 184–189,
187n8, 196
Globalization, 14, 131, 169, 175, 190
Graeber, David, 4
Gwangju, 27, 225, 249, 263

H

- Habermas, Jürgen, 244
Hall, Mitchell, 23
Hallyu (Korean wave), 9, 22, 30,
42–44, 175, 195
Hannerz, Ulf, 168–170, 187,
194, 198
Hayes, Christine E., 64
Healing, 172, 176, 183, 185, 187,
193, 196, 197, 213, 215–217,
237, 238, 258
Heaven's Gate, 103, 103n5, 125
Hebrew Bible
Ezra, 64
Heo, Gyeong Yeong, 100, 122
Heresy, 7, 11, 99, 122
Hwang, Merosé, 1, 16
Hyehwa-dong Cathedral, 12, 13, 134,
142, 142n11, 145
Hypermodern, 14, 168–171, 174,
175, 185, 188, 189,
193–195, 197
Hypermodernity, 167, 188, 196

I

- Idan*, 11, 100, 105, 106, 107n17,
109–111, 115–117, 119,
122, 125
See also Saibi
Immigrants, 134–136, 136n5, 156
Impurity, 10, 51, 52, 63–68
See also Pollution
In-betweenness, 1–3, 17

- Incheon, 16, 137, 140, 250, 256
Chinatown, 137, 140
Islam, 3, 53, 53n2, 57, 59–62,
60n4, 68, 114
mosque, 5, 10, 50–57, 52n1, 53n2,
59–63, 60n4, 61n5, 66–69
Muslims, 5, 8, 10, 11, 49–69, 52n1,
53n2, 58n3, 137
Quran, 56, 63, 63n6
Itaewon Disaster, 1, 5, 6, 15, 16, 224,
225, 230–235, 237, 239, 240,
250, 250n1, 251, 253, 254,
256, 262–269

J

- James, William, 204, 213, 214n4
Japan, 27, 132, 136, 167, 175, 175n3,
179, 211, 223
Jeju Island, 16, 64, 193n10, 249, 250,
254, 260, 263
Jo, Hyun-Beom, 115
Johannemann, H., 73
Joseon Dynasty, 2, 65
Josephus, Flavius, 66
Judaism, 3
Jews, 63–66, 102
Jung, Hyeonjoo, 1
Jung, Myung Seok, 100n2,
100n3, 122

K

- Kalff, Andrea, 184–189, 196
Kao, Grace, 1, 9
Kim, Chong-suh, 115,
115n33, 115n34
Kim, Geum-hwa, 14, 169, 172, 173,
176, 184–187, 197, 256
Kim, Hong-Jung, 4
Kim, Jae Young, 117
Kim, Jennifer, 189–194, 195n11, 197

Kim, Minah, 5, 15
 Kim, Soo-Ah, 5, 10
 Kim, Sou-hwan (Cardinal), 147, 151,
 152, 152n18, 154, 159
 Korean War, 172, 197–198, 251, 254
 K-Pop, 21, 22, 24–32, 37–44
 HYBE, 21, 28, 32, 42–44
 JYP, 21, 25, 28, 43
 SM, 21, 28, 31, 42, 43
 YG, 27, 28, 42, 43

L

Lee, Jeong Eun, 116
 Lee, Song Chong, 5, 11
 Lefebvre, Henri, 139n7
 Lewis, James R., 104, 104n10
 LGBTQIA+, 5, 8, 10, 11, 74–76,
 78–83, 85–87, 89–91, 93, 244
 Lichtheim, Miriam, 65
 Little Manila, 12, 13, 134, 139,
 139n8, 140, 142,
 145–159, 148n16
 Lived religion, 168, 170

M

Mbembe, Achille, 253
 Meditation, 15, 181, 204, 205,
 211–218, 218n6
 Melton, J. Gordon, 103, 103n8
 Migrants, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 49–52,
 52n1, 55, 62, 66, 132, 134–137,
 140–142, 145–151, 148n16,
 151n18, 153, 155, 157–160,
 253, 267
 See also Immigrants
 Migration, 1, 3, 69, 131, 132, 134,
 136–141, 146, 148, 148n16,
 157, 158, 160, 167, 252
 Mindfulness, 204, 215
 Mnemocide, 251, 258, 269

Mobility, 14, 133n3, 137, 139n8,
 140, 141, 151, 235
 Multiculture, 1, 7, 12, 13, 49, 69, 114,
 131, 134–140, 139n8, 142, 145,
 147, 148, 151, 154, 156–159
 K-multiculturalism, 136, 156,
 158, 159
 multiculturalism, 1, 13, 69, 132,
 135–140, 158, 159, 253

N

Namyong Ferry Disaster, 249,
 254, 263
 National Assembly, 76, 79, 231, 235,
 237, 239
 Necropolitics, 253
 Negative eugenics, 251–253
 New religious movements (NRMs), 2,
 3, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, 99, 101–125,
 103n7, 111n20, 210
sinjonggyo, 117, 118n44

O

Oh, Youjeong, 42
Otherizing, 49–52, 61, 101–105

P

Pang Eun-mi, 179–184, 196
 Park, Geun-hye, 235, 266
 Parker, Robert, 64
 Peterson, Derek R., 62
 Philippines
 Filipino community, 13, 142,
 145–147, 154–155, 158
 Filipino migrants, 12, 134, 142,
 145, 146, 148, 153, 159
 Tagalog, 13, 134, 142, 147,
 148, 150
 See also Hye-hwa-dong Cathedral

Pickard, Joseph G., 122, 122n47
 Pollution, 64, 65, 67, 68
See also Impurity
 Psy, 22, 25–27, 29, 30, 39, 40

R

Raphael Clinic, 13, 148, 151–154, 159
 Rational Choice Theory of Religion
 (RCTR), 119–125
 Religion, 2–4, 9, 11–13, 15, 50, 51,
 56, 59–62, 65, 74, 99, 104,
 108–112, 112n24, 114–117,
 119–125, 137, 148, 172, 176,
 194, 197, 198, 203–214, 216,
 217, 226, 228, 236, 238–240,
 243, 244
 Religious freedom, 53, 74, 76, 100,
 102, 112, 120, 122, 210, 215
 Religious nones, 8, 15, 203–205, 207,
 209, 217
See also Spiritual but Not
 Religious (SBNR)
 Richardson, James T., 103, 103n7

S

Saibi, 11, 99, 105, 107, 107n17,
 109–111, 115–117, 119,
 122, 125
See also *Idan*
 Sarfati, Liora, 7, 14, 168, 173, 196
 Secularization, 119, 120, 203, 205,
 209, 211, 215, 216, 244
 Seo, Young Chae, 7
 Seong, Hae-Young, 2, 15
 Seoul, 12, 13, 15, 17, 27, 39, 42, 76,
 79, 86, 89, 91, 107, 133, 134,
 137, 140–142, 144, 144n12,
 145, 147, 147n15, 151–154,
 152n18, 159, 169, 170, 174,
 177n4, 178, 179, 181, 184, 189,

192, 193, 196, 212, 213, 223,
 224, 231–233, 235, 250n1, 256,
 260, 262
 Daehangno, 12, 134, 142–145
 Gwanghwamun Plaza, 233, 256
 Hyejwa-dong, 12, 13, 134,
 142, 142n11, 144, 145, 147,
 148, 150, 151, 153, 155,
 158, 159
 Itaewon, 1, 5, 6, 15–17, 140,
 223–225, 227, 228, 230–235,
 237, 239–242, 244, 250,
 250n1, 251, 253, 254, 256,
 262–269, 265n7
 Jayang-dong, 141, 145–147
 Sewol Ferry Disaster, 16, 223, 225,
 233, 249–251, 250n1, 253–261,
 258n2, 263–266
 Shamanism, 2, 3, 14, 168, 170, 172,
 173, 181, 187, 189, 190, 192,
 194, 205, 209
 Korean shamanic ritual (*gut*),
 170–172, 175, 176, 178,
 256, 257
 Korean shamanic ritual space
 (*gutdang*), 16, 257
 Korean shamanism (*musok*), 14,
 168–171, 173, 175, 178, 184,
 185, 187, 189–198, 193n10
 Korean shamans (*mudang-mansin*),
 168–176, 168n1, 177n5, 179,
 182–185, 187, 189, 190,
 193–198, 193n10
 Korean shamans
 (*mudang-mansin*), 14
 Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the
 Temple of the Tabernacle of the
 Testimony, 107, 109, 116,
 116n39, 118, 124, 124n48
 Smith, Jonathan Z., 3, 4
 Solidarity, 4, 7, 119, 154, 158, 226,
 228–230, 232, 236, 239–242, 244

Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR),
208, 209, 213, 214, 214n4

See also Religious nones

Spirituality, 14, 16, 171, 181, 189,
191, 213, 214, 216, 217

Stark, Rodney, 121

T

Tanslocality, 149

Turner, Victor, 228, 229

U

United States (U.S.A.), 2, 8, 9, 14, 22,
23, 26–28, 30, 31, 37–39, 91, 93,
103n8, 105n12, 120, 133n3, 140,
169, 175–177, 189–193, 197,
206–209, 215, 223, 253, 267

US Billboard, 9, 22–28, 30, 32,
37–41, 43

V

Vener of Democracy, 84–86

Vernacular religion, 167–170

W

Walhof, Darren R., 62

Watts, James W., 51, 64, 65

Wilson, Bryan, 102n4, 103, 103n6,
103n7, 103n8, 104n9

Won Buddhism, 113, 114, 215,
236, 239

Y

Yi, Hae-gyeong, 171, 176–179, 196

Yoo, Yohan, 2, 5, 10, 227, 230, 232,
233, 238, 242, 243

Yoon, Suk-yeol, 224, 231, 262

YouTube, 31, 38, 39, 41, 60n4, 180,
183, 196