

The Good Boy's Pop: How K-Pop is Putting the Culture back in the Pop Culture

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Abstract:

Music is the rhythmic expression of the origins and culture of one's country. Since the Hallyu Wave of the 90s, K-Pop (Korean Popular) as a form of music has overwhelmingly captured the minds and hearts of youth worldwide. Consequently, South Korea has benefitted both culturally and economically by exporting K-Pop to the world.

K-Pop has elements of genres like Hip-Hop and Blues, all derivative of Black Music produced in America. Today, K-Pop is ruling the charts and has successfully captured a multi-billion-dollar industry across the globe. Interestingly, despite the significant impact that American Pop has had on K-Pop, it is observed that K-Pop, while appropriating the musical components from American Pop, has managed to keep clear of American cultural imports. A general overview of the top Pop artists in the US and Korea reveals that Koreans have little love for drugs, tattoos, and nudity, unlike Americans. The K-Pop songs also feature modest and cultured themes, appropriate for a wider audience than its American equivalent. This paper aims to study the historical influence of American culture on K-Pop and also understand how K-Pop presents itself as closer to the traditional culture, a more family-friendly and decorous alternative to American Pop through content analysis. The method of study is qualitative.

Keywords: Appropriation; Hallyu; Pop.

An Introduction to Korean Music: Tracing the roots and recording the evolution

Music is the most feasible form of instrument that can be used for cultural fusion across borders than any other popular culture genre. Tracing the history of Music in Korea, it can be said that music composers in 20th century Korea were divided into two different groups: - The first group was kugak, who produced traditional music. The second group, known as yangkak, subscribed to western-style music with western musical instruments. Despite the distinction between the two, a strict dichotomy never existed. The yangkak composers have attempted to use elements of traditional music style in their compositions and vice versa.

For Koreans, Music was defined in terms of 'individual composition.' The concept of 'composition' was inherited under western influence. Traditionally, Music in Korea was autonomous in the hands of the performers who passed it from one generation to another without adding anything 'new.' Therefore, the traces of the traditional pieces of Music in Korea cannot be clubbed into specific periods. There was no scope for musical innovation in the Traditional Music of Korea, be it folk or court music. The composers of these kinds of music are not known.

'Composition' of Music as a concept grew later. Western-style composers like Kim In-sik and Yi-Sang-jun are known to add western notes to traditional Korean pieces in the 1920s. The role of a 'performer'

got restricted with the introduction of Western Music. With this, an evolution happened - the idea of isolated preservation of the past as a concept became limited and musical organizations were created instead to 'exhibit' the past. From the ideas like 'preservation' to 'exhibition'- The Korean musical outlet saw a significant quantum shift in its approach. So, suppose there is a consensus in the narrative that 'composition' as a work in music is inherited from the west. In that case, it can be said that musical composition in Korea began with the introduction of Western influence. Hong Yong-hu sang the first art song "Pongsonhwa" (Balsam flower), in 1919. However, in 1885, Christian missionaries from America brought hymns to Korea, out of which 'Ch angga' songs emerged. These songs were played explicitly as an expression of nationalism against the Japanese invasion of Korea. These songs had a western melody with Korean lyrics. An attempt was made by the Japanese colonizers to 'Japanize' the 'Ch angga.'

Different genres emerged in the mid-1920s, like the *kagok* (art song with Korean text and Western-style music, unlike the traditional genre with the same name), *yuhaengga* (popular), and the tongue (children's song). Eaktay Ahn remains the first Korean composer to study cello in the United States in the mid-1920s and subsequently to the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest to study musical composition. The national anthem of Korea, 'Aegukka', is derived from his work Korea fantasy (1936) which had a fusion of Korean folk song melody with the western symphony. Unfortunately, until Korea was under Japanese occupation, they had no choice but to consume the 'Japanised' music. Korea's core culture got killed in the Japanese colonization. The Korean folk song called 'Arirang' had anti-Japanese solid sentiments. The Japanese colonizers censored traditional Korean music in the 1930s. The Office of the Police Matters (Kyongmuguk) promulgated the Disciplinary Rules to censor patriotic songs the Koreans sang under Japan's colonial regime.

The 1950s and '60s saw American influence in Korean music due to the Korean War and the stationing of American troops in Korea. The 1970s and 80's also created hurdles in the growth of the music industry because of the authoritarianism of Park Chung-hee's regime. It was only in the early 1990s that the government lifted emigration bans. In the later part of the 90s, when the Asian financial crisis hit Korea, President Kim Dae Jung decided to export the Korean cultural product driven by the neo-liberal world order.

The Internet Infrastructure Project launched by the government in the late 1990s did not have the K-Pop wave in mind. However, due to the project launch, Korea saw significant growth in K-pop idol firms. Internet accessibility made possible the permanent 'visibility' of K-Pop entertainment performances through websites such as YouTube and Twitter. Not just this, K-Pop Industry has got the backing of the state with numerous tax evasions and support for expansion in the overseas markets. The period from the late '90s to the mid-2000s can be called the rise in the Korean wave, also known as Hallyu, which saw a lot of local Korean artists making their international debuts, contributing to the flourishing Korean economy.

Influence of America on the K- Pop music

Historically, a large part of American influence on Korean Pop music can be attributed to the American presence in the Korean War. The radio broadcasting by the US troops during the war proved to be the beginning of a prospective cultural fusion that manifested over the years.

The scholarly debate around various 'influences' on K-Pop has emerged from time to time. Critics argue that K-Pop is a mere reproduction of western-style music. At the same time, the other narrative sa

s that although inherited from the west, K- pop music presentation has its own ‘spin’ despite the transnational fandom it enjoys. A dominant part of the K-Pop remains exclusive to the ‘Korean’ culture. A culture-related explanation is driven by the indication of a concept called cultural diversity which emphasizes on the Korean culture to assimilate western values. Another explanation talks about the idea of ‘cultural hybridization’- that demonstrates that local culture’s continuous interaction with foreign culture and hence generating a new globalized local (“localized”) culture. K- Pop’s popularity can be attributed to the process of hybrid genres and glocalization (Cicchelli 2021).

The pop Music of Korea has features like Rap and hip-hop musical styles. The origins of Rap and Hip hop can be attributed to Black American Music. The blues, spirituals, jazz, and dance were the only aesthetics the Blacks in America enjoyed before they tasted political and social freedom. The hip-hop movement also emerged from the famous Black movement. These genres were a part of their folk songs and reflected their desire to secure civil rights in a segregated America. Genres like rhythm & blues and rock & roll are known as secular tracks during the Civil Rights Movement. Blues were the deep-south spiritual songs sung in the 1860s, and Black popular Music has served as a bridge between the political and the Black popular culture in America. Between 1945 to 1965, Classic Rhythm and Blues revolved around the narrative of ‘*We can implicitly sing what we cannot explicitly say.*’ The Black ‘oriented’ music in America derives its origins from gospels and hymns. Brown Eyed Soul, a Korean R&B group’s founder Anderson says that K- pop artists have chosen hybrid music as opposed to many white music producers who did not give the black artists their due credit for making original music. K-pop does not omit citations. It acknowledges its origins in the R&B genres.

The influences of America on Korea can be seen by analyzing a colorful district called Itaewon in Seoul, a foreign centre in Korea. It is home to most of Korea’s foreign population and has a history of being the place for some twenty thousand American troops and associates. It is a classic example of cultural hybridization in Korea. The Young Garrison is still a US military base since 1957. The exit of the Japanese forces from Korea on August 15, 1945, was superseded by the American occupational forces after that. The American Forces Korea Network (AFKN) has infiltrated western music through radio broadcasting. The Japanese tyranny used radio broadcasting for organizational purposes. Still, America used it for ‘Americanizing’ Korean Music, which is how the charismatic American pop reached Korean homes, creating a new standard of Korean Pop Music. Moreover, the United Service Organizations (USO) stationed in 200 locations worldwide has a history of doing live shows during the Korean War to entertain the American troops. Many renowned American artists like Marilyn Monroe and Louis Armstrong visited South Korea to do live shows through USO.

The onset of modern mainstream Korean music can be attributed to the exposure that the ‘8th division entertainers’ called Kim Sisters – Korea’s first girl group who got the opportunity to release their album in the US market. These entertainers borrowed genres like Pop, Jazz, and Blues from America and combined them with popular rhythms from swing–slow rock. They did not bring just the music but also the American ways of life to Korean homes; hence, the 1960s saw a new style of Music in Korea where Korean artists aped not just the musical genres from America but also their standard of living.

Music and Fashion are the two things that resonate with the youth across cultures. Itaewon became the new cultural capital and a place for exercising ‘freedom’ where the child from the universities gathered in go-go clubs and smoked marijuana while engaging in exotic conversations. They were consumers of rock music and weed, which is how American hippie culture assimilated into Korean pop music. The story did not end here. A conservative backlash awaited Korea when Park Chung-hee came to power.

The first thing he did was ban more than three hundred ‘unhealthy’ pop songs. He wanted to subtract the American hippie elements from Korea, which got assimilated with time. He arrested the ‘Godfather of Korean Rock’- Shin Jung-Hyeon, for alleged use of marijuana in his song videos. He also imposed curfews, a ban on wearing mini-skirts, and keeping long hair. He was uncomfortable with the youth smoking marijuana and entertainers using English stage names. He wanted to detoxify Korea from American influence. However, after Park Chung-hee’s assassination, Chun-Doo hwan came to power through a military coup and initiated the 3S policy in Korea i.e. Screen, Sports and Sex that legitimized the government’s control over the media (Park 2010). Adult films were promoted. It is said that this policy was started to divert the attention of the public from keeping an eye on his political activities. International attention was again garnered through the Asian Games and Olympics in the late 1980s. The government wanted to distract the global audience from seeing Itaewon as a service station for the US army. Instead, it tried to promote it as a commercial capital. Earlier, bars and clubs meant for US soldiers were isolated from the native Korean population. In the early ’90s, the government desegregated these spaces; hence, cultural exchange could not be stopped again in Korea. This had a significant impact on the music, too; therefore, the commercial restructuring of the government made American pop again a thing in Korea. The moonlight clubs incorporated K- pop entertainment moguls like Hyun Jin-young, who also became the first face of Korean hip-hop.

K- Pop music – The ‘glocal’ healthy alternative

It is more favorable for a K- Pop firm to go global from an economic point of view as a K-pop song fetches 20-30 times the price in a US or EU market. As a result, K – Pop producers are more compelled to go global than their foreign adversaries.

The visual element in the K- Pop music makes it different from other pops. It has more emphasis on dancing than singing. Also, the songs are primarily fast-paced. Choreography is a crucial aspect in the K- Pop songs. G. S Park (2013) argues that the Korean music industry relies on inherently ‘local’ tunes. They do not blindly copy the global pop melody composers. Rodnae ‘Chikk’ Bell, a Korean songwriter, argues that average American tunes are of four to five melodies, whereas K- Pop consists of at least eight to ten. They are also heavy in harmonies.

Rob Wilson (1994) describes Korea as a victim of Western orientalism, where its image was damaged in the past. Hallyu has successfully created an image of Korea and linked it with prosperity and cosmopolitan life (Seabrook 2012). The commercial and cultural interests are entangled with the national image of Korea.

The global cultural industry has seen the domination of the United States and Western Europe. While the US has monopolized the movies, music, and television industry, European countries have done the same in fashion, luxury, art, and artistic cinema. The entry of Japan into anime and video games gave rise to the concept of The Big Three. This again showed the power asymmetries with the Global South and the flow of global goods in the culture industry. The rise of Hallyu is challenging the hegemony enjoyed by the dominant nations. Hallyu is often credited for Korean mercantilism – It proved that a regional trend could become a national sensation and transcend international borders. Fans across Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia had enough violence saturated through movies, video games, and music in the United States in the name of aesthetics.

Moreover, conservative societies like those in the Middle East have little respect for the US nudity and violence in the name of soft power. The global south was a ‘consumer’ of the culture industry. The

Korean cultural industry provided a clean alternative to the hegemony. The consumer nations devoid of quality entertainment became subscribers of Korean entertainment for its ethical and ideological soundness and the mocktail it produces by mixing the elements of all Big Three nations. Because of this, there are also apprehensions about K- Pop fans being marginalized and boycotted. Many fans in the Middle East and Western Europe have hidden their love for K- Pop for fear of getting ostracized. The rise of K- Pop manifests a shift in the power dynamics of the global cultural supply. In 2012, Psy's 'Gangnam Style' penetrated the US market and became the maiden video to top a billion hits on YouTube in less than eighty days of its release.

Gangnam Style had a unique choreography and great visuals, which differentiates K- Pop from American Pop. They create a sensory experience with their fashionable clothes and elaborate storyline—the culture K- Pop endorses is usually integrated. Drawing from Euro techno, pop, rap, and hip-hop and combining it with contemporary synchronized choreographies, acrobatics with substantive story-telling to create a visual effect in the minds of the target audiences across the globe is something that makes K- pop a suitable alternative to the violence and nudity to the American pop. In American Pop, the vocal abilities of an artist are prioritized over acting or dancing skills. Still, K- Pop idols cannot debut without proper training in working and hosting. Looking good is also essential for them. The 'visual' effect is vital in K- Pop as there are efforts to create a healthy family environment among entertainment companies. The K- Pop artists are associated with many brands. Hence good looks and 'image' becomes essential factor.

K-Pop- An 'Oriental' Music for the Cultural Subalterns

The debate around the cognitive biases concerning cultural creativity creates certain dichotomies- The 'Productive' North and the 'Consumerist' South, the 'artistic –original' North v. The 'aping- derivative' South. This narrative has also been extended to fandom, like the Meta fandom v. Bipartisan fandom. The former expresses political correctness, whereas the latter shows affinity-based empathy. The Hallyu wave challenges the layered cultural disdain that comes along with the glamour and glitz of the global popular culture. Psy's mega-hit, "Gangnam Style," came from the traditional horse dance found on the murals from the ancient Shilla dynasty. Americans seem to enjoy Psy's song because it is goofy and it was also shared by popular artists like Tom Cruise and Britney Spears. It is also assumed that K-pop's presentations of their artists in groups are nothing but an attempt to copy Michael Jackson's singing and choreographic styles. This confirms the ethnocentrism of the global North that Michael Jackson is the gateway to becoming an international pop icon. This argument is far from true because the 'localization' element has always been present in K- Pop. The stage formation and the presentation of many singers and dancers in Girls' Generation, Big Bang, and 2 PM make it uniquely distinctive.

K- Pop, despite being a global success, has been a victim of the soft racism of the Euro- American fans. They patronize and often use it to exhibit their political correctness for culminating their cosmopolitan tendencies. The cultural superiority makes them marvel at the performances of the exotic 'other.' At the same time, K- Pop also enjoys the minority solidarity of the Non- Asian ethnicities of people from North Africa, the Middle East, and Latin American countries against over-consumption of American cultural products that are more a result of an imposition than their preferred choice. Since the 90s, the popularity of the Korean wave has boosted the sales of Korean brands like Hyundai and Samsung. South Korea's largest beauty company, AmorePacific, ranks 7th on the global Women's Wear Daily (WWD) list. As of August 2020, 32 Korean Cultural Centers have been set up in 28 countries by the Korean government to

promote Hallyu. The sudden rise of Hallyu is a ray of hope amidst the global cultural hierarchy. The popularity of K-Pop is an excellent opportunity to decolonize and diversify the global cultural industry.

Conclusion

The title of the paper is suggestive of the major findings of this research assignment. Korean society has always been shy of modernizing too much. Albeit modern in terms of infrastructure, technology and business, culturally, Korea still very much retains its past. Recent surveys also bolster the findings of this research paper that Korean society has been reluctant to accept the American Pop culture and that K-Pop, a culturally conservative brand of pop culture, is the dominant one. A survey by local a local pollster KSTAT reported in 2022 that Korean youth who identify as conservative outnumber the liberal youth by more than 7%. Using qualitative research methods like content analysis and discourse analysis, the authors conclude that K-Pop has established itself as a worthy alternative to the American Pop and has challenged the unrivalled reign of the western Pop Culture for decades. K-Pop has emerged as cleaner, healthy alternative to the American pop culture. Korean TV dramas, music videos etc., have minimal or no nudity, making it a healthy alternative for conservative countries. Countries like India, Morocco, and UAE are largely conservative societies, and research suggests that such countries have quickly accepted the K-Pop.

Apart from that, the meteoric rise in popularity of the K-Pop is a welcome phenomenon that breaks with the traditional cultural product market, which was dominated largely by western countries. K-Pop, the researchers argue, is here to stay and has a tremendous appeal, not only in Asian society but worldwide.

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