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# K-pop in Korea: How the Pop Music Industry Is Changing a Post-Developmental Society

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## ABSTRACT

Korean popular songs, or *kayo*, are evolving from a musical genre created and performed only by Koreans into K-pop, a global musical genre produced and enjoyed by Koreans and those of other nationalities. This new development has revolutionized the perception of the popular music industry in Korea's post-developmental society, as Korean children dream of becoming K-pop idols rather than entering traditionally esteemed careers in politics, medicine, or academia. The Korean government is also actively promoting Hallyu and K-pop, as though they constitute new export industries that could feed the entire nation in the twenty-first century. While the K-pop revolution has a lot to do with YouTube and other digital means of distributing music on a global scale, Korean television stations are now eager to tap into the booming market by showcasing live K-pop auditions in order to circumvent declining television loyalty among K-pop fans, who prefer watching music videos on YouTube. K-pop in Korea therefore illustrates three important aspects of social change: changes in social perceptions of the popular music industry, massive government support, and television stations actively recruiting new K-pop stars. All three aspects of social change reinforce one another and fuel the aspirations of young Koreans to become the next K-pop idols.

KEYWORDS: South Korea, pop culture, K-pop, social change, mass media

## INTRODUCTION

Postwar Korea has been dubbed a champion of export-led economic growth, akin to the Japanese state following World War II, which espoused rapid economic growth through export of mass-produced industrial and consumer goods for global consumption (see, among others, Amsden 1992; Johnson 1994; Lie 2000; Minns 2001; Woo-Cumings 1999). Considering the economic development of South Korea (hereafter, Korea) alone, onlookers may not have expected that the country would become the next giant in the global popular music industry, following on the path of Hollywood (with its global music distributors, labels, and record companies) a mere two decades after becoming a member of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

While myriad studies have analyzed the success of Hallyu (the “Korean Wave”) and K-pop (for example, Cha and Kim 2011; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Lee 2005), few have focused on the social change aspect of Korea’s popular music industry (Jung 2011). Just as Korea’s economic development brought both affluence and social problems, K-pop has ushered major social changes into Korea’s post-developmental society (i.e., a society that has surpassed the stage of rapid economic development). This article explores the uncharted sea of social changes that the K-pop revolution has brought about in Korea, focusing on three realms: (1) perceptions of the pop music industry, (2) government policies regarding the pop music industry, and (3) television companies’ K-pop campaign in a YouTube-dominated market (radio stations are not included in this study, because they are not waging any K-pop campaigns similar to those of television companies).

We found that Korean students in primary and secondary schools no longer want to be salarymen for *chaebol* companies (South Korean business conglomerates), nor do they seek professions in medicine, academia, law, government, or executive management, in contrast to what their parents would prescribe for their future livelihood. Instead, many members of the school-age population in Korea aim to become the next K-pop idols (see survey data below). We also found that the South Korean government has drastically modified its policy regarding popular music since the burgeoning of the export of Korean popular cultural content, in general, and K-pop, in particular. During the developmental era, especially under the military dictatorship

(1960–1987), Korean pop music was severely censored for its melodies—which were considered “too Japanese” or “too Western”—and its lyrics—which were deemed “politically subversive,” “pro-North Korean,” or “containing improper cultural messages” (Lie 2012; Ryang 2010) (see table 1). Although democratization has clearly liberalized the censorship process, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family still censors pop music for “improper” lyrics and visual content in music videos.<sup>1</sup> Despite government censorship of pop music in Korea, the Korean government as a whole has reversed its policy and now supports the K-pop industry financially in its export efforts. We also noticed that recent presidential candidates have actively used K-pop songs in their campaigns.

Our findings regarding the television industry, which is losing fans to YouTube and other Korean social media sites for K-pop consumption, require some elaboration. As in most Western societies, the popular music industry in Korea has been dominated by radio and television stations that air a variety of Korean musical genres, including *t’ūrot’ū* (Korean-style soul music with a traditional pentatonic minor scale) and popular music, generally known as *kayo*. Like government censorship, radio and television worked as a gatekeeper for popular culture, determining which singers and songs would be openly promoted to the public and which would be banned from being broadcast at all (Lie 2012; Ryang 2010). In a country where music piracy has been a major economic and social problem, television and radio were the most important means of promoting singers and their songs for record sales, product endorsement opportunities, and other economic activities.

Government censorship, television and radio domination over singers, and outright piracy by back-alley distributors and audiences devastated the livelihood of many singers, both famous and unknown. Accordingly, none of the children interviewed in surveys in 1981, 1999, and 2012 (see below) openly hoped to become pop singers, although many of them said they wanted to become professional classical music players, singers, and composers. However, K-pop has revolutionized the often-tragic sagas of popular singers and artists in Korea. K-pop producers can now avoid worries about piracy by adopting a broadcast model of global music distribution through YouTube (Fox and Wrenn 2001; MBC 2012; Oh and Park 2012). They can bypass government censorship by posting new music videos on YouTube or exporting them to foreign countries, and they no longer have to beg Korean television

or radio stations to play their songs or feature singers on their programs. Facing this new development and losing the pop music audience to new social media, television stations now actively showcase new programs that openly advertise their novel role as future K-pop recruiters, without any proof that finalists on the live K-pop auditions will actually be hired by the three major K-pop recording companies—SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment.

To highlight how Korean society is changing in the wake of the K-pop phenomenon, this article examines first the Korean popular music industry before the rise of K-pop, and then turns to the three aspects of social change during the K-pop revolution in Korea: social perception changes, governmental policy changes, and TV stations' new K-pop campaign. Our study helps to explain why Korean children are now concentrating their educational efforts not in cram schools for college entrance exams, but in K-pop schools, golf schools, and other popular culture schools.

#### KOREAN POPULAR MUSIC INDUSTRY BEFORE K-POP

Traditional Korean *kayo*, or pop music, includes ballads, *chanson*, and most importantly, *t'ūrot'ū*, which were characteristically Western imports that came from either Japan during the colonial period or U.S. military bases during and after the Korean War (1950–1953) (Lie 2012). Two of the most popular singers during the *kayo* era were Lee Mi-Ja and Cho Yong-Pil, both of whom recorded and performed thousands of songs for Korean and Japanese audiences. Na Hun-A and Nam Jin were also very popular during this period, although they did not match the fame and longevity of Lee and Cho. All of these singers advocated *t'ūrot'ū*, despite the fact that they also dabbled in other Western genres—such as rock, rhythm and blues, and jazz—at various stages of their careers. For example, Nam Jin mimicked Elvis Presley's songs and his gyrating dance styles, bringing him instant fame, although the Korean government, like the early U.S. government, immediately banned Nam's Elvis-style dances from television (OSEN 2013; Park 2009).

Koreans' overall perception of *kayo* singers and the pop music industry more broadly was dominated by vulgar images of gangster agents; frequent night banquets and sex scandals between female singers and military dictators; bribery to composers, radio DJs, and television producers; the bleak

socioeconomic conditions of singers and bands; and sexual abuse and other physical and emotional exploitation of singers by their managers (Park 2009; *SportsKyungHyang* 2009). This does not mean that Koreans did not embrace *kayo* songs. On the contrary, most Koreans cherished listening to *kayo* songs by Lee, Cho, Na, Nam, and others, even though they knew that those singers' lives were less than idyllic.

Since it was virtually impossible to make money from record sales, due to rampant music piracy through bootlegged audio tapes and LP records, singers had to jump on buses that took them to remote cities and villages for live concerts in movie theaters and tented stages just to make ends meet. During their local concert tours, regional gang members also flocked to the scene to extort money from managers, unless the managers were linked to more powerful Seoul or Pusan mafia (*Segye Ilbo* 2013). Even worse, military dictators demanded regular sexual services from popular female singers. The case of Sim Soo-Bong, a popular *t'ürot'ü* singer who happened to witness the assassination of South Korea's former dictator, Park Chung-Hee, during one of his regular nightly parties is well known in Korea (Park 2009).

While government dictators demanded sexual services from *t'ürot'ü* singers, ironically, they censored and banned many of their popular songs. For example, twenty-five songs by Lee Mi-Ja were banned by the Cultural and Artistic Ethics Committee, the largest number of banned songs by one singer. Most of her censored songs were banned on the basis of the committee's judgment that "they sounded too Japanese melodically," such as her 1964 song, "Tongbaek Agassi" (Lie 2012).<sup>2</sup> Rock singers were not exempt from this crackdown on Japanese-style pop music. Shin Joong-Hyun's 1974 song "Miin"<sup>3</sup> was censored because of its strong Western influence, even as college students parodied the song with new lyrics that read: "[The President] wants to do [the presidency] once, twice, and endless times" (*Hankook Ilbo* 2012). Table 1 summarizes the categories of popular songs banned by the government during the dictatorial era. The 1975 crackdown on singers led to the prohibition of 222 songs, while a similar government ruling in 1983 proscribed 382 songs for social, cultural, ethical, political, and diplomatic reasons (Ryang 2010).

Even as *kayo* suffered from piracy and government censorship, people in the *kayo* business had to "entertain" television producers, newspaper reporters, and radio DJs to secure airtime for their singers. When piracy is rampant

TABLE 1. Sampling of Korean Popular Songs Banned by the Korean Government

<i>Period</i>	<i>Official Reason Given</i>	<i>Songwriters / Singers</i>
1950s–1960s	Defected to North Korea	Cho Myung-Am
	Pro-Japan	Nam In-Soo, Lee Nan-Young
	Japanese Style	Lee Mi-Ja, Jung Doo-Soo, Lee Han-Wook, Koh Sa-Nam
1970s	Unwholesome (Defiance to Governmental System)	Yang Hee-Eun, Song Chang-Sik, Lee Jung-Sun, Kim Min-Gi, Choi In-Ho, Baek Soon-Jin, Seo Yoo-Seok, Sha Green
	Vulgar and Degenerated	Shin Joong-Hyun, Kim Yong Man, Han Dae-Soo, Lee Cheol-Soo, Lee Jang-Hee, Kim Jin-Kyung, Patti Kim, Yoon Si-Nae
1980s	Defiance to Social System	An Chi-Hwan
	Diplomatic Friction	Jung Kwang-Tae
	Vulgar and Degenerated	Ha Choon-Hwa

*Sources:* Ryang 2010; Oh and Park 2012.

in the market, the only reliable means of vitiating copyright infringement is to deliver free music to a large audience through television and radio music programs (Fox and Wrenn 2001; Oh and Park 2012). Frequent media appearances result not only in income garnered by singers and their managing firms but also in additional product endorsement opportunities offered by large Korean *chaebol* companies. However, the road to stardom via television and radio was not always paved with good intentions.

First and foremost, radio and television stations in Korea demanded American-style payola bribery (see Coase 1979 on payola). Although the police and Korean National Assembly did not fully investigate Korean payola, Kim Ki-Dök, the most popular radio DJ during the 1980s and 1990s, along with other radio and television producers (or PDs), was charged with

taking payola bribes. Kim briefly resigned from his top-ranked music shows for receiving payola from recording companies, although in 1995 he was acquitted of all police charges (Choi 2012; *Kukmin Ilbo* 1995). Another powerful radio DJ was Lee Jong-Hwan, who ran his own downtown live music cafe in Seoul to recruit new singers and record their songs. He recruited Kim Se-Hwa, Namgung Okpun, Onions, Joo Byung-Jin, and other famous singers (*Dong-A Ilbo* 2013b) and either played or influenced other DJs to play his singers' songs on radio programs.

Under the Korean payola system, television producers and newspaper reporters who cover entertainment news wield more power and influence than radio DJs. Unlike U.S. television channels that no longer feature live shows by top rated singers and bands for high appearance guarantees, Korean channels frequently show either live or recorded music shows with popular singers and bands. Korean singers accept the low appearance fees afforded by these shows (roughly US\$400 per appearance in 2002) because they cannot make a decent income selling records, as a result of the rampant piracy described earlier. Television shows and newspaper articles are the only feasible and relatively inexpensive means of promoting singers and their songs in Korea, and they have the potential to lead to the entertainment industry bonanza: product endorsement opportunities for major *chaebol* companies.

Recording companies target particular television producers and newspaper reporters and provide them with “gifts,” such as cash payments ranging from thousands to tens of thousands of U.S. dollars; airline tickets and hotel rooms for family vacations; free drinks at upscale brothels with young hostesses and prostitutes; cash contributions to family occasions, such as weddings, birthdays, and funerals; and imported luxury sedans. In 2002, Yoon T’ae-Söp, then vice section chief of *Sports Chosun*, was arrested for receiving luxury golf clubs and US\$50,000 worth of cash and other gifts, while Eün Kyöng-P’yo, the former MBC producer, was charged with taking a foreign luxury sedan along with tens of thousands of U.S. dollars (*Weekly Dong-A* 2002).

In sum, *Kayo* was a popular music genre created under Japanese and American influence. However, some of the most popular *kayo* songs maintained a pentatonic minor scale, reflecting their Korean origin (Lie 2012). Even more important than its remaining Korean characteristic, hybridized with Western and Japanese influence, is the fact that *kayo*, unlike K-pop or



Japanese *enka*, was music for radio and television. Whereas K-pop is aimed mainly at the Internet-based audience, and *enka* targets the record and CD markets, would-be *kayo* singers from impoverished urban or countryside families dreamed of singing in front of a black-and-white television camera that would broadcast their songs to all corners of the developing nation. It was rare to find popular *t'ūrot'ū* or *kayo* singers in the 1960s and 1970s from middle- and upper-class families, except for a few early examples (e.g., Yoon Hyung-Ju, a Yonsei Medical School dropout). However, subsequent economic development in the 1980s ushered in a new group of young singers from middle-class backgrounds via a fresh genre called *taehak kayo*, or college-campus *kayo*.

#### K-POP ARRIVES IN KOREA

Precursors to K-pop began surfacing in the mid-1990s, with the advent of a new breed of young singers. These singers succeeded in becoming pop music stars despite their deviation from *kayo* conventions—singing in a pentatonic scale without much dancing on stage, hailing from poor family backgrounds, and susceptibility to all forms of social, emotional, and economic exploitation. These included the 1980s celebrities Park Nam-Jung, Kim Wan-Sun, and the first Korean boy band, Sobangcha. However, it was not until the 1992 debut of legendary boy band Seo Taiji and Boys that people realized that the *kayo* world (or *kayokei*) was going to change permanently due to the hegemony of dance music. Seo Taiji and Boys boldly introduced various new genres, including hip hop, electronic music, and reggae, that had previously been unfamiliar to the Korean audience. What was more shocking to the Korean audience than the group's radical experimentation with different music genres was their new style of dance and ruffian fashion, which contemporary *kayo* singers would have never dared to try. It is no coincidence that Korean people labeled Seo Taiji and Boys the “president of [popular] culture” (Lee and Sohn 2003).

Experimentation with different Western music genres continued with the arrival of other up-and-coming young artists who dabbled in rhythm and blues, jazz, rock, and modern folk, including Roo'Ra, H.O.T, Sechs Kies, god, and S.E.S. These singers achieved quick, if not overnight, success in Korea, in contrast to their predecessors, who were banned from singing

“improper” Western songs in public due to military censorship (Ryang 2010; Shin 2009). In this case, the impact of political liberalization and further Westernization of Korean society on the Korean pop music industry should not be overlooked. However, like their predecessors, these Young Turks in the Korean music industry faced the same problems of piracy, scarcity of economic opportunities other than television and radio appearances, and exploitation by politicians, managers, and patrons (i.e., rich and powerful sponsors who pay female singers a regular income for sex). Leaks or threats of leaks of several private sex videos allegedly taken by managers or ex-boyfriends (or sponsors) almost destroyed the career of Baek Ji-Yong and IVY (*Hankook Ilbo* 2000).

The increasing need for new markets and mass media for Korean pop music, other than Korean radio and television stations, drove Seo Taiji and Boys to an unintended, albeit brief, success in Japan. This was the first time that Japanese audiences were exposed to Korean music other than *enka* or *t'ūrot'ū* (Kim 1998). However, it was not Seo, but SooMan Lee, the founder of SM Entertainment, who realized the huge potential of Korean pop music, which he later called K-pop, in Japan and other parts of Asia (*Korea Economic Daily* 2011; Lie and Oh forthcoming; Shim and Noh 2012). The planned success of BoA in Japan by SM Entertainment triggered a revolution in the Korean pop music industry, and YG Entertainment and JYP Entertainment joined the bandwagon starting in the mid-1990s (Jang 2009).

While scholars have investigated the key causes of K-pop's unprecedented global success (see, among others, Ho 2012; Lie 2012; Oh and Park 2012; Russell 2008; Shin 2009), this article seeks to explain the social consequences of K-pop's success in Korea. Structurally, the K-pop movement is composed of three layers: (1) the opportunity structure, (2) internal conflicts and contradictions within the industry, and (3) K-pop's creativity and originality, which fostered its popularity.

First and foremost, the opportunity structure for K-pop's ascendance includes both endogenous and exogenous factors. Korean political democratization and economic development ushered in the Young Turks who wanted to experiment with Western music as military censorship was being rescinded. However, the most important global factor that shaped a new opportunity structure for K-pop was the birth of the digital music industry, with the invention of the Internet and video-streaming technologies (Son 2010).

Second, as explained above, piracy, limited media opportunities, and lack of government support drove many artists and recording companies to foreign markets. The Japanese market emerged as the best alternative for K-pop because of its strict antipiracy policy. Japan also vied with the United States for the largest music market (*Korea Economic Daily* 2013; Lie and Oh Forthcoming). If K-pop solidified its wide fan base in Japan and the United States, all of its internal problems would disappear, just as they did for the Korean automobile industry around the turn of the twenty-first century.

Third, K-pop's success also rested on its perceived creativity in Japan and elsewhere. K-pop's originality lies in its genre fusion and concurrent singing and dancing. K-pop embraces pop, R&B, rock, hip hop, electronic music, and even modern folk. K-pop also espouses regional product differentiation in order to target Western, European, and Asian markets (*KBS* 2012; Oh and Lee forthcoming; Oh and Park 2012; Park forthcoming). Synchronized dance moves among boy and girl band members contribute to K-pop's appeal for many non-Korean fans. K-pop group dances consist of many complex gestures and systematic formations, which are difficult for band members to master unless they exert genuine effort to learn each move and achieve harmony and perfect synchrony (Oh 2012). The beat, melody, and lyrics of K-pop songs are arranged to induce a viral reaction from fans, with catchy tunes containing repetitive chorus lines and simple Korean or English phrases (Lie 2012). The visual elements of K-pop are also significant in making the music popular to international fans. Because of this, entertainment agencies invest huge portions of their budget in managing their singers' physiques (*NewDaily* 2013; S. Oh 2012).

K-pop is a new genre that has defied outright piracy, government censorship or hostility, and rampant corruption in Korea's television industry. Its global success supplanted television with YouTube, while offering music free to global audiences. K-pop has also dramatically transformed Korean society.

#### FROM *DDANDDARA* TO K-POP IDOLS: SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF K-POP

As delineated above, *kayo* singers endured low social status throughout the postwar period, although their songs were popular among all strata of Korean society. The derogatory label *ddanddara* was given to those involved

in the music industry (especially singers and instrumental players) by adults and even children. *Ddanddara* literally means the sound of trumpets and similar horns and comes from the English word *tantara*, which has the same meaning (*Dong-A Ilbo* 2011; Park 2009). In Korea, however, *ddanddara* refers not only to the sound of the trumpet itself but to those who play the horns or are involved in the music business.

However, the new status of K-pop as an export commodity radically redressed the public's perception of singers, boy and girl bands, and the entire K-pop industry. K-pop stars are currently perceived as "sophisticated," "creative," and "professional," according to a recent survey (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism 2012). Against the wishes of their parents, younger Koreans defiantly hold positive images about K-pop stars. In a survey conducted in 1981 on the future goals of elementary school students, 21.2 percent said they wanted to be scientists, 13.1 percent doctors, 12.2 percent professors, and 11.0 percent public officials. None of the respondents wanted to become singers or entertainers. Starting in 1990, according to new surveys, children's career dreams began changing, first gradually and later drastically. In 1990, 27 percent of elementary school students surveyed answered that they wanted to become teachers, while the figures for doctors and entertainers were 13 percent and 9 percent, respectively. The numbers for 2012 reveal a shocking outcome: 42.5 percent of the respondents aspired to jobs as public officials, while 38.8 percent hoped to become entertainers (see figure 1).

The single most important factor behind children's increasing support for K-pop entertainers since 1990 is what some researchers call "cosmopolitan striving" or "*han*/melancholia."<sup>4</sup> Although seemingly different, the two concepts are interrelated, as Korean-style cosmopolitan striving derives from *han*/melancholia. The basic argument is that Korean society, which suffers from *han*/melancholia, awards more social legitimacy to those who achieve economic gain and sports victories overseas than to those who garner similar achievements in domestic competition. For example, a PhD degree earned from a Korean university is considered far less respectable than its American counterpart (i.e., Koreans believe that earning a PhD from Harvard, for example, relieves their *han* as an unknown small nation). Cosmopolitan striving, in fact, runs parallel to the ardent Korean nationalistic predilection, as it leads Koreans to believe that winning international sports games, earning PhDs abroad, and selling Korean products to foreign customers, among

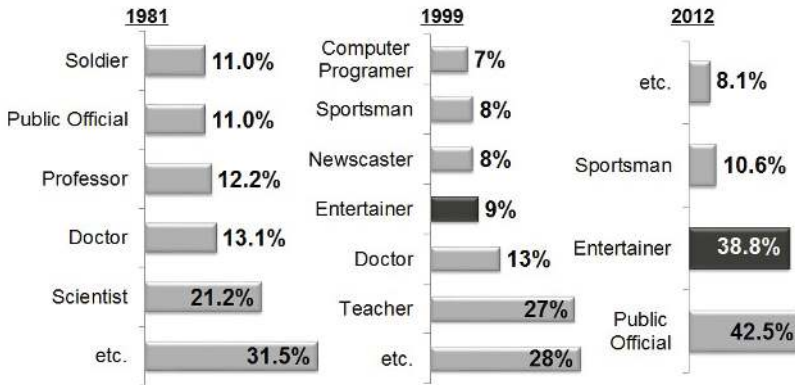


FIGURE 1. Future Goals of Elementary School Students (1981 vs. 1999 vs. 2012).  
*Sources: Maeil Business Newspaper (1981), sample size 3,800 students; Hankyoreh (1999), sample size 100 students; SBS (2012), sample size 1,000 students.*

other phenomena, raises the brand value and emotional superiority of the entire Korean nation (Park and Abelmann 2004).

K-pop’s increasing social legitimacy has evidently defused earlier political repression, and mainstream national-level politicians now openly embrace the new era of Korean popular music. For example, the 2012 presidential candidates, Keun-Hye Park and Jae-In Moon, both employed K-pop songs as their main campaign theme songs. The Park camp loudly played “Hot Issue” by the K-pop girl group 4minute and “Mr.” by KARA. In response, Moon camp followers frolicked on the street, dancing to “So Cool” by SISTAR. Along with the elevated perception of the K-pop industry among Korean children, politicians jumped on the bandwagon of supporting the new global music genre, both financially and politically.

#### GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF K-POP

Ironically, the same Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism that issued orders banning thousands of *kayo* songs from the 1950s to the 1990s is now pouring gargantuan amounts of cash into the K-pop industry. For the 2013 fiscal year alone, the ministry has set aside 319 billion won (or US\$280 million) for Hallyu assistance and grants-in-aid. This figure reflects a 2.4 percent

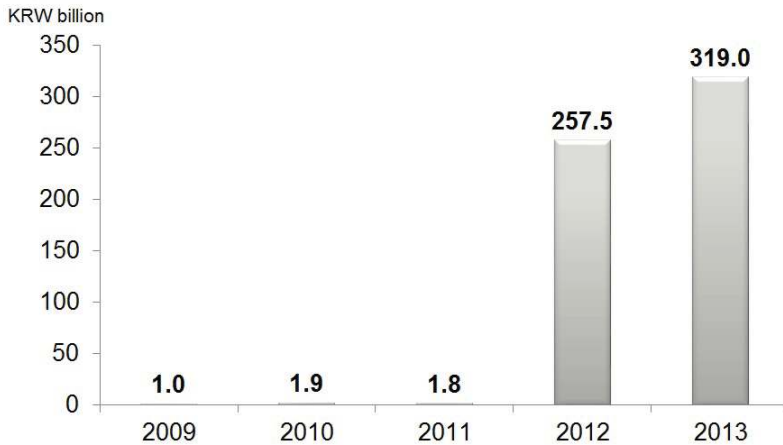


FIGURE 2. Government Expenditure and Budget on Hallyu (KRW billion).  
*Sources:* Revenue and Expenditure (2009–2011) and Budget Planning (2012–2013)  
of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, South Korea.

(61.5 billion won) increase over 2012 (see figure 2). The itemized budget for Hallyu indicates that the ministry will allocate 8.7 billion won for Hallyu promotion, 6.6 billion won for Hangeul (Korean alphabet) promotion, 10.8 billion won for supporting traditional cultural genres, including *gukak* (Korean classical music), and 9 billion won for supporting ancient palaces, history, culture, and tourism.

The line-item budget allocated to Hallyu is the single most important new budgetary item for the entire ministry, representing a major impact on the ministry's budget increase, given that the funding levels for extant budget items were either maintained or reduced. It is not readily known how much of the entire Hallyu budget the ministry has determined to devote to the K-pop industry (see figure 2). However, construction of the budget also means that people inside the Hangeul, *gukak*, and tourism industries have successfully persuaded the government ministry to include their business in the Hallyu category. In fact, the thorny issue of which industry should be included in Hallyu? has become an ongoing battle among concerned stakeholders in Korea. Simply put, the entire government policy-making appa-

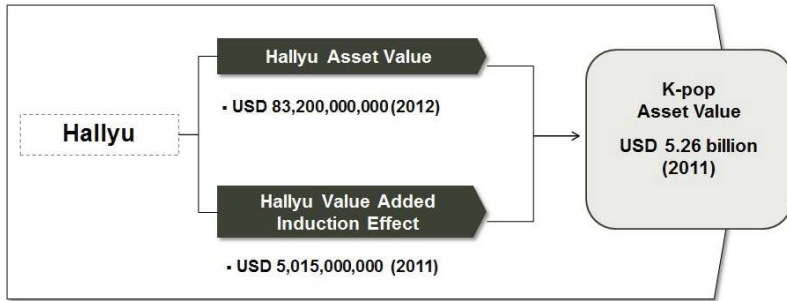


FIGURE 3. Economic Value of Hallyu. Sources: Hallyu Future Strategy Study Forum (2012) and Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange (2012).

ratus seems confused over what Hallyu is and whom they should support financially (*Hankukkyōngche TV* 2012).

Amid the confusion over what constitutes Hallyu, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism is nonetheless convinced of Hallyu’s monetary contribution to Korea’s “export-led economic development,” a catchphrase that the economic ministries use to justify their budgetary increase. The ministry has estimated that Hallyu’s economic asset value is US\$83.2 billion, of which US\$5.26 billion is thought to be attributable to K-pop (see figure 3).

The K-pop industry has criticized the ministry’s mammoth Hallyu budget, however, because K-pop firms do not actually benefit from it. Instead, politicians want to fatten “related” industries, promoting Hanguk along with Korean food (K-food), fashion (K-fashion), sports (K-sports), film and drama (K-drama), and traditional folk music (*Dong-A Ilbo* 2013a). In fact, K-pop managers often complain about the red tape involved in renting concert facilities from central and local bureaucracies. K-pop managers and government policy makers have obvious differences of opinion over what Hallyu is and who should be financially supported by the policy. The cleavages of opinions derive from the diversity of stakeholders linked to policy-making groups within the government, as well as the cluster of firms linked to the K-pop industry (Sohn 2011). Be that as it may, just like Korean youths, the government is also now clearly on the side of Hallyu and K-pop.



## LIVE AUDITIONS AND TELEVISION BUSINESS IN KOREA

As we outlined above, the advancement of K-pop has been a blow to television and radio, as the new songs are freely distributed to their worldwide audience through YouTube and other user-generated content (UGC) sites. To fight declining audiences for K-pop music, both television and radio have tried their best to maintain the necessary volume of high-paying commercial sponsors. Radio stations, for example, now broadcast visual images along with voices to smart phones via application programs. However, few young fans of K-pop download such apps these days, as they can readily enjoy free K-pop content on YouTube.

Television stations, especially cable channels, also face difficulties. Their live or recorded music shows have been losing enormous profits due to increasing appearance charges by K-pop idols and their managers, while commercial sponsors are threatening to withdraw sponsorship if they don't receive substantial reductions in rates (*SportsChosun* 2013). In order to fight the apparent and imminent death of television, show producers have introduced or even revamped new and old shows that announce weekly pop music charts, hoping that K-pop audiences will come back to television to check the weekly rankings of their favorite idol groups and singers. These shows also induce fans' participation by allowing them to vote for their favorite singers during live shows. However, UGC and portal sites also offer music rankings, while the music website Melon, launched by SK Telecom, dominates the Korean pop music chart market (Yoo, Lee, and Kim 2006).

To fight declining television popularity among K-pop fans, many networks and cable channels now offer a new type of program: live K-pop audition shows. These shows have been a sensational success. Since 2009, such live K-pop audition programs have increased rapidly, with many of them experiencing overnight success in terms of viewing rates and commercial sponsorship. CJ Entertainment broadcast the first of these live audition programs, *Super Star K1*, on its cable channel, Mnet, in 2009 (Kim 2011). Many people wrongly inferred from the name that the live audition was intended to recruit future K-pop superstars. As a result, a plethora of talented young people queued up to appear on this live television audition show. Despite the fact that none of the finalists of the *Super Star K1* audition actually became K-pop superstars or were hired by the big three K-pop recording companies,



1.34 million young talents lined up to audition for the show's second season in 2010 (Cho and Son 2011; Kim and Kang 2012). The average viewing rate remained 18.1 percent throughout season 2, which is a tremendous figure for a cable channel in Korea (Lee 2011).

Unlike in season 1, the winner of season 2, Huh Gak, and the first runner-up, John Park, became meteoric celebrities and secured their status as top-rated singers and musicians, although none of the big three K-pop companies offered contracts to them, either. These audition winners remained celebrities in Korea only, without any export potential. Be that as it may, season 2 engendered a new urban legend. Instead of revealing its real intention of making money using the global K-pop and Hallyu sensation, Mnet produced a heroic Cinderella story featuring Huh Gak, a middle-school dropout and ventilator repairman who became a singing celebrity by participating in a live audition show (Park 2011).

After the amazing success of *Super Star K2*, the number of broadcasting stations offering similar live audition shows quadrupled. For instance, a major network television station, MBC, aired *Star Audition-Wi Tae Han Tan Saeng*, while another network channel, SBS, programmed a new audition show with the more misleading title *K-pop Star*. The inventor of this new television business, CJ Entertainment, added *Voice Korea* and *Voice Kids* on its second cable channel, tvN. As is evident from this example, cable television companies do not want to experiment with new programs and ideas, but instead replicate the same programs that survived the test in the previous season (Lee 2011).

It seems that the audition show market is now fully saturated. Viewers have realized that these shows have little to do with the real K-pop industry and do not offer opportunities of getting contracts from the big three labels or going overseas. So far, only a few singers from the television audition programs—Lee Hi, Akdong Musician, and Bang Yedam—have secured such offers, and only with one of the big three, YG. Nonetheless, television stations keep diversifying the format and lengthening the season of audition programs, such as *K Pop Star Season 1 and 2*, which features BoA of SM Entertainment, Yang of YG, and Park of JYP.

K-pop has dramatically changed the fate of singers and idol bands in Korea, while simultaneously diminishing the power of television producers over the performers. These days, television entertainment programs cannot

survive without K-pop idols, and these stars routinely appear on Korean television dramas as main actors and actresses, threatening the niche market of trained actors and actresses. We take the gradual demise of television in Korea at the hands of YouTube and other new digital social media to be the single most important social consequence of K-pop. If television channels can no longer act as gatekeepers for the pop music industry, it means that the government will also soon lose its dictatorial grip on K-pop, because censorship would no longer work. However, the power of YouTube and the new social media in the pop music industry cannot be overemphasized. The decay of the television industry vis-à-vis the K-pop industry in Korea will shape how Koreans reorganize the entire music industry, as long as the big entertainment companies do not loosen their grip on the pop music business despite the apparent decline of their television apparatus.

## CONCLUSION

Korean popular songs, once part of a musical genre created and performed by Koreans only, have now become a global musical genre produced and enjoyed by Koreans and those of other nationalities. This new development, as presented above, has revolutionized the perception of the popular music industry in Korea's postdevelopmental society. Korean children now dream of becoming K-pop idols more than of entering traditionally esteemed careers in government, medicine, and academia. The Korean government is also actively promoting Hallyu and K-pop as part of an effort to reorient the entire Korean economy toward creativity and away from the previous emphasis on mass production of cheap goods.

While the K-pop revolution is largely a product of YouTube and other digital means of distributing music on a global scale, Korean television stations are eager to tap into the newly booming market. Many now showcase live K-pop auditions in order to circumvent declining television loyalty among K-pop fans, who prefer to watch music videos on YouTube. K-pop in Korea therefore ushered in three important, unintended social changes: social perception changes of the popular music industry, an increase in government support, and television stations that actively promote pseudo K-pop live audition shows. All three of these aspects of social change reinforce one another and fuel the desire of young Koreans to become the next K-pop idols.

We hope that further studies will investigate how the changing perception of K-pop, continued government support of K-pop as a new export industry, and TV stations' incessant obsession with K-pop audition programs work together to transform Korean postdevelopmental society. It is clear that Korean society is taking up a new national role of exporting popular culture, including such creativity-intensive industries as fashion, films and dramas, food, and sports. In 2013, President Park even created a new Ministry of Science, ITC, and Future Planning in order to foster her vision of transforming Korea into a hub of creativity. However, as we have shown, the success of the K-pop industry in the global music market defies the very idea of politicizing and targeting the entire creativity industry, as Korean pop music, not the government, is reshaping the postdevelopmental society.

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## NOTES

1. See [www.mogef.go.kr](http://www.mogef.go.kr).
2. Available on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBWLDhJJzEk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBWLDhJJzEk).
3. Available on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Igy88BMm5tA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Igy88BMm5tA).
4. For definitions of the concept *han*, see Ho (2012), Lie (2000), Oh (2011), and Park and Abelman (2004).

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