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An Introduction to K-Pop and BTS

Hybridity and Transcultural Reimaginings

Joanne Miyang Cho
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For Henrik
For Tobin

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Introduction: Locating K-Pop in K-Wave and Organization

Abstract This introduction explores K-pop as a genre within the *Hallyu* movement. It reflects the global popularity of mostly South Korean entertainment and encompasses a wide range of genres, but K-pop is still considered the preeminent manifestation of K-wave. K-pop's high reputation is primarily due to its flawless idols, who undergo years of rigorous training. While many K-pop idol bands have helped K-pop to become a globally recognized brand, one band, BTS, has contributed even more to the genre's success than its contemporaries through their powerful personal messages, outstanding performances, and connection with their fans. Part I of this introduction examines K-pop within the context of the broader *Hallyu* movement. While K-drama initiated and dominated *Hallyu* 1.0, K-pop led *Hallyu* 2.0 and *Hallyu* 3.0 (along with K-webtoons and K-games). Part II explains this book's unique contributions to the study of K-pop and BTS and provides the major arguments of the book's five main chapters. Although written as a scholarly work, this book is also useful for general readers, due to its effort to provide concise overviews of K-pop and BTS, as well as more concrete examples than is common in more specialized works on K-pop.

Keywords *Hallyu* • K-wave • K-pop • K-drama • Soft power • Transnational proximity

In recent years, many people in the world have become familiar with the K-wave or *Hallyu* movement through media like Psy's song "Gangnam Style" (2012), the boy band BTS (2013–), the K-film *Parasite* (2019), and the K-drama *Squid Game* (2021).¹ This introduction explores K-pop as a genre within the Hallyu movement. The word "Hallyu" was coined by Chinese journalists in the late 1990s, and the South Korean government adopted it beginning in 1999.² It reflects the global popularity of mostly South Korean entertainment and encompasses a wide range of genres such as popular music, dramas, films, webtoons, video games, beauty, and fashion. Nevertheless, K-pop and K-drama remain the most popular of these genres, and K-pop is still considered the preeminent manifestation of K-wave. K-pop's high reputation is primarily due to its flawless idols, who undergo years of rigorous training. While many K-pop idol bands have helped K-pop to become a globally recognized brand, one band, BTS, has contributed even more to the genre's success than its contemporaries through their powerful personal messages, outstanding performances, and connection with their fans. Part I of this introduction examines K-pop within the context of the broader Hallyu movement. While K-drama initiated and dominated Hallyu 1.0, K-pop led Hallyu 2.0, and it, along with K-webtoons and K-games, is leading Hallyu 3.0. Part II explains this book's unique contributions to the study of K-pop and BTS and provides the major arguments of the book's six chapters. Although written as a scholarly work, this book is also useful for general readers, due to its effort to provide concise overviews of K-pop and BTS, as well as more concrete examples than is common in more specialized works on K-pop.

LOCATING K-POP IN K-WAVE

A variety of sources portray South Korea in the 2020s as a powerhouse of soft power, a concept first articulated by Joseph Nye. Nye defined it as "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment."³ He and his co-author Youna Kim later applied the idea of soft power to K-wave, highlighting the latter's appeal "across borders, in particular among younger people in neighboring Asian countries and beyond."⁴ Nora Samosir and Lionel Wee (2024) viewed Hallyu as soft power since it is "a form of artistic citizenship" in which individuals in the creative sector recognize and support the importance of promoting the nation's image.⁵ The head of the creative economy section of the United Nations Conference on Trade & Development in 2024 identified South

Korea as “an inspiring model” for nations seeking to leverage their cultural assets and creative sectors as catalysts for economic development.⁶ Likewise, several leading mass media sources in the 2020s noted South Korea’s effective use of soft power. France’s leading newspaper, *Le Monde* (2025), portrayed South Korea as “the model to follow,” as Hallyu “conquered the planet” in a relatively short span of two generations.⁷ The UK’s leading newspaper, *The Guardian* (2022), portrayed South Korea as “a powerhouse ... in economics, technology and especially culture.”⁸ An article in *The New York Times* referred to South Korea as a “cultural juggernaut” (2021), noting how its cultural entertainment has “mesmerized” international audiences.⁹ Given these portrayals of the K-wave movement, it is not surprising that the ranking of South Korea’s cultural influence globally has rapidly risen in just six years, from no. 31 in 2017 to no. 7 in 2024.¹⁰

Since the Hallyu movement provides a broad cultural context for K-pop, it is helpful to understand its three phases and K-pop’s place in its evolution. Hallyu has received a lot of scholarly attention in recent years, as reflected in the many publications on the phenomenon.¹¹ During Hallyu 1.0 (late 1990s–2008), the phenomenon’s dominant genre was K-drama. It was popular among East Asians and ethnic Korean communities in the West. While *What Is Love All About* (1997) and *Stars in My Heart* (1997) became popular in China,¹² *Winter Sonata* (2002) and *Daejanggeum* (2003) each received a favorable reception in Japan and Hong Kong.¹³ K-drama later spread to Southeast Asia during the mid-2000s. In Hallyu 2.0 (2008–2017), even as K-drama expanded from East Asia into Southeast Asia, K-pop emerged as “the most distinctive force in the late 2000s.”¹⁴ Led by Psy’s global sensation “Gangnam Style” (2012), it became “the driving force of the New Korean Wave.”¹⁵ Its areas of influence were mostly limited to Asia, Europe, and North America, and its popularity was closely connected to the rise of social media and smartphones, which played key roles in promoting K-pop and other cultural forms.¹⁶

During Hallyu 3.0 (2017–present), although K-drama is still popular, K-pop is clearly leading the K-wave movement, along with webtoons and mobile games.¹⁷ A South Korean government report (2022) confirms that K-pop is “the driving force behind the growth of the Hallyu,” and its fandom plays a crucial role through fan clubs, which develop around specific celebrities and groups.¹⁸ Janga, Kimb, and Baek have noted that these K-pop fans adopt “missionary roles” in spreading Korean culture. BTS’s fandom has been particularly influential in this capacity. As a result, K-pop’s

popularity has helped elevate the popularity of K-drama.¹⁹ Another government report (2025) shows that, based on data from 26,400 respondents in 28 countries, 70.3% of participants reported having a positive perception of Korean cultural content while 37.5% expressed unfavorable views, led by India (52.7%) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (52%).²⁰ In the survey, the respondents associated Korean culture most often with K-pop (17.8%), followed by Korean food (11.8%), K-drama (8.7%), and beauty products (6.4%).²¹ In contrast to Hallyu 2.0, in Hallyu 3.0, K-wave's impact has become truly global.²² Compared to K-cinema and K-drama, the K-pop industry has been more focused on appealing to global audiences from the start and has therefore been more strategic about it.²³

The current global popularity of K-wave has challenged existing assumptions about transcultural influence among East Asian countries, as well as the significance of cultural proximity. First, the Hallyu phenomenon has reversed the direction of traditional cross-cultural relations among East Asian countries. Prior to K-wave's popularity, Korean culture was considered a "satellite culture," influenced by "Chinese culture in pre-modern period, and then Western/Japanese culture in the modern period."²⁴ However, in the Hallyu era, the direction of cultural transmission has been reversed, with South Korea exporting multiple K-wave genres, especially K-pop and K-drama, to Japan and China. Second, K-wave's global penetration reveals that transnational transmission is not necessarily dependent on cultural proximity, as many assume, although that can be helpful. Several genres of K-wave are currently popular among viewers and listeners in North America, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, regions whose cultural backgrounds are quite different from that of Korea. Rather than cultural proximity, Dal Yong Jin proposes that "transnational proximity" be used to explain K-wave's global appeal. He describes the phenomenon as rooted in shared sociocultural experiences, such as "social inequality, youth culture, and fascinating choreography in the late-stage capitalist society."²⁵

The global spread of K-wave has been chiefly driven by the popularity of K-pop, and the latter's global influence has been noted recently through mass media and statistics. The title of an article in *The Times of India* (2025), the most circulated English-language daily in the world, is quite telling: "R Madhavan baffled by India's growing K-pop obsession: 'Kids are learning Korean ... How did we lose our audience?'" (2025). Despite its critical tone toward K-pop, the article nevertheless documents the

growing popularity of K-pop among young people in India,²⁶ a relative latecomer to K-pop compared to Southeast Asia. According to an article in *The Washington Post* (2021), “How K-pop Conquered the Universe,” “the genre’s catchy songs, savvy use of social media and dedicated fans are a formula for global success.”²⁷ Moreover, several statistics quantify the rising popularity of K-pop globally. According to the 2023 Statista survey of 26 nations, nearly 50% of participants indicated that K-pop was “very popular” in their countries.²⁸ And 27% of the respondents in the 26 countries attributed its success, first, to the high quality of the music and then to the exceptional performances associated with the genre, combined with the attractive fashion and looks of its artists.²⁹

There are some key characteristics of K-pop responsible for its global popularity. First, while K-pop’s worldwide popularity is largely unrelated to any uniquely Korean aesthetic values, because of the obvious influence of American pop music, the K-pop industry has added local elements and created an attractive hybrid musical product. Lee Hark-joon, co-author of *K-pop Idol*, has noted that Korean creators are skilled at “quickly copying” appealing foreign trends and transforming them into something uniquely their own by “making it more interesting and better.”³⁰ Second, K-pop is more than just music; it is a kind of *Gesamtkunst* (total art). In K-pop, dancing is just as important as singing. Visuals and fandom are also important. Also, many K-pop groups have concepts and themes informing their music and performances.³¹ Third, the most important reason for the success of K-pop is its idols. Due to its rigorous multi-year training regimen, the K-pop industry has produced flawless performers. Some well-known groups are Big Bang, Girls’ Generation, Blackpink, SEVENTEEN, and Stray Kids, but the best well-known is still BTS. Songs by BTS play on the universal theme of the underdog and mobilize popular tropes in their performances on stage as well as off. Their bond with their fandom ARMY (Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth) is legendary.

The global spread of K-pop has become an important financial consideration for the K-pop industry. The combined revenue of the four largest K-pop agencies grew threefold from 2019 to 2023, to \$3 billion.³² It has also contributed to the South Korean economy. According to the Hyundai Research Institute, while the industry contributed 0.3% of South Korea’s GDP in 2009, it contributed approximately 1.7% in 2018 and was projected to reach 3.0% in 2020.³³ Korean music export figures, most of which are connected to K-pop, show a rapid increase beginning in the mid-2000s: \$22.28 million (2005), \$512.58 (2017), and 1.2 billion

(2023).³⁴ K-pop music album export figures show a similar dramatic increase; they grew sixfold in just five years, from \$40 million (2017) to \$231.38 million (2022).³⁵ Surveying its export markets in 2024, Japan, the US, and China collectively accounted for “72.8% of all K-pop album exports in 2024.”³⁶ Several leading idol bands have made particularly significant contributions to the South Korean economy. BTS reigned over the highly competitive K-pop industry until their military conscription.³⁷ Other groups such as Blackpink, Stray Kids, SEVENTEEN, and New Jeans (new name: NJZ) have also contributed to the South Korean economy. In addition to their music, they increase their earnings by serving as ambassadors for global luxury brands.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book offers a compelling exploration of the rise of K-pop and its leading idol band, BTS, from a local phenomenon to a global cultural powerhouse. Although written as a scholarly book reflecting recent scholarship on K-pop and BTS,³⁸ it should also be appealing to general readers as it provides a succinct and concise overview of both topics, as well as many concrete examples. Another advantage of this book is that readers can discover key details about both topics in a single volume. Moreover, the book’s interdisciplinary approach provides multiple, complementary perspectives on the topics. A historical approach has been adopted in tracing the genre’s five generations through its music, idols, digital innovations, and geographical expansion, and in analyzing the glocalization of K-pop through its parallel globalizing and localizing strategies, resulting in the “K-pop formula.” A literary approach has been adopted in examining BTS’s unconventional path to stardom through their authenticity, social media, and transmedia storytelling. Their music broke from industry norms by addressing mental health and social inequities while embracing self-love. ARMY, their passionate fan base, emerged as a powerful agent of social change. Their creativity, activism, and cross-cultural engagements helped elevate BTS into global icons. Together, they forged a new fan culture transcending borders, musical tastes, and generations. Whether you’re a longtime fan or new to the genre, this book offers an insightful look into the forces reshaping the global music landscape.

The rest of the book is organized in two parts. Part I (“A History Analysis”) examines K-pop through two broadly framed chapters. Chapter 2 is an introduction to K-pop’s main characteristics and leading bands

across five generations, from 1997 to the present. At the beginning, its primary audience was limited to East Asia, but by the fourth and fifth generations, it had conquered the globe. Chapter 3 presents K-pop as a deeply hybridized project by analyzing the K-pop industry's efforts to simultaneously globalize and localize. Part II ("A Literary Analysis") explores BTS across three chapters. Chapter 4 traces BTS's extraordinary journey through their own words, identifying their innovative and sustained communication with their fans as one of the three key factors fueling their meteoric rise. Chapter 5 highlights BTS's diverse soundscape and positive messaging as the second essential factor in their global resonance. Chapter 6 examines the pivotal role of ARMY in transforming BTS from K-pop underdogs into one of the most influential music acts in the world today.

Chapter 2 ("A Short History of K-Pop: Five Generations") consists of five main sections, each examining a generation's main characteristics and leading idols. During the first generation (1996–2003), the K-pop industry focused on the domestic market, but it still made inroads into other East Asian countries. Leading bands include H.O.T., Sechs Kies, S.E.S., and FIN.K.L. This generation also produced well-known solo singers—BoA and Rain. During the second generation (2004–2011), some idol groups expanded into Southeast Asia. They also quickly took advantage of social media platforms. Leading bands include TVXQ, BigBang, Girls' Generation, and Wonder Girls. The third generation (2012–2017) marked a time of rapid global expansion. It penetrated the US market, in which BTS played a vital role, and global fandom grew exponentially. Leading bands include EXO, BTS, Seventeen, Blackpink, Red Velvet, and TWICE. The fourth generation (2018–2022) made strides in furthering their global reach digitally, partly in response to the physical lockdown of Covid-19. New social media platforms enabled bands' increased online presence. Leading bands include aespa, New Jeans, Le Sserafim, Stray Kids, Ateez, and ENHYPEN. Lastly, the fifth generation (2023–present) prefers easy listening and comfort. Leading bands include Babymonster, Kiss of Life, BoyNextDoor, Zerobaseone, and Plave.

Chapter 3 ("The Glocalization of K-Pop: Hybridizing the Global and the Local") examines K-pop as a glocalized product, exploring both the global and the local dimensions and aspirations of the K-pop industry. On the global front, the K-pop music industry has collaborated with Western songwriters in making its music more globally appealing. It has also actively encouraged K-pop idols to collaborate with Anglo-American singers to raise their visibility among global audiences. Finally, it has

increasingly favored English lyrics as a strategy of making its music more accessible to global audiences. A growing number of K-pop songs are now entirely in English. On the other hand, the K-pop industry has adopted specific locally targeted measures highlighting its more traditional elements. First, one can observe a Confucian ethic of hard work and social hierarchy in the K-pop industry's idol training and management style. Second, the industry has preserved unique features of K-pop music and dance despite the heavy influence of American pop music. Third, the industry has integrated traditional cultural elements into its music videos (MV's) since the 2010s. As a result of these parallel globalizing and localizing impulses, the K-pop industry has produced a hybrid product called "the K-pop formula." The conclusion will briefly assess the industry's newest globalizing measure, "localized" K-pop groups.

Chapter 4 ("BTS, the Outsiders: They Had a Blog") traces BTS's extraordinary journey through their own words, identifying their innovative and sustained communication with fans as one of the three key factors fueling their meteoric rise. When the septet debuted in 2013, they faced daunting challenges. Their agency, Big Hit Entertainment, was small, unknown, underfunded, and lacked the industry connections that more established K-pop labels relied upon. Rather than pursuing traditional media exposure through television or radio play, BTS adopted an unconventional and innovative strategy: they connected directly with fans via digital platforms. Starting with blogs and video diaries, and later, livestreams, they shared personal moments and experiences. In addition to their prolific musical output, BTS captivated their growing fandom with a wealth of self-produced variety shows and documentaries, showcasing their entertaining yet authentic personalities. By offering intimate glimpses into their lives and candidly revealing their vulnerabilities and flaws, they reinforced their relatability, despite their rising stardom. Through trans-media storytelling, BTS created a cohesive narrative arc—both professionally and personally—positioning themselves as underdogs with whom global youth could deeply identify. Their journey was not just about music but building a shared story that transcended geographical boundaries.

Chapter 5 ("BTS, the Outliers: They Had a Message") highlights BTS's diverse soundscape and positive messaging as the second essential factor in their global ascent. While typical K-pop songs often focused on themes like teenage crushes, breakups, or partying, BTS's lyrical content stood out for addressing pressing issues such as mental health and social

inequities. Across their extensive discography, they gave voice to the emotional toll of having to conform to societal norms and the precariousness of young adulthood. Their music reflected their own anxieties and frustrations as they found themselves at the crossroads between adolescence and adulthood, both professionally and personally. Unafraid to experiment with new sounds and blended genres, they delivered empowering messages of self-love and youth advocacy through upbeat acoustics and energetic choreography. This chapter focuses on seven of their most socially critical songs, which draw attention to the socioeconomic discrepancies their peers face today. These tracks urge listeners to move away from externally imposed goals and the pursuit of validation, encouraging instead a turn toward self-acceptance and personal growth. BTS's consistent narrative of resilience and overcoming adversity further authenticated their underdog identity. By challenging systemic injustices and championing marginalized voices, their lyrical honesty resonated not only with global youth but also exerted transcultural appeal across generations, extending beyond the K-pop genre.

Chapter 6 (“They Had an Army: Reimagining Fan Culture”) examines the pivotal role of ARMY in transforming BTS from K-pop underdogs into one of the most influential global music acts. It explores the evolution of their unique, symbiotic relationship, revealing how ARMY nurtured and championed BTS through unwavering loyalty, creativity, and collective action. This unique fan-artist bond helped BTS rise from industry outsiders to cultural outliers, achieving record-breaking success and unparalleled prestige. The chapter also investigates how this partnership fostered cross-cultural hybridization, positioning ARMY as active agents of transcultural change. BTS's rise was driven not only by their music but also by their unconventional approach to fan engagement. Through direct, sincere communication and behind-the-scenes content shared on digital platforms, BTS cultivated a sense of intimacy and community, consistently crediting fans for their success. They positioned themselves not as untouchable idols but as companions on a journey of growth—building a fan culture rooted in reciprocity and mutually positive influence. In turn, ARMY actively promoted BTS across the globe: organizing streaming campaigns, leading social media trends, and supporting philanthropic efforts in the group's name. This cycle of mutual inspiration and empowerment propelled BTS to new heights, resulting in a cultural movement that transcends music, borders, and generations.

CONCLUSION

In the 2020s, K-wave or Hallyu has become a truly global force, reaching into Asia, the Americas, and Europe, as well as the Middle East and Africa. While its various genres have become well known, K-pop has been leading the Hallyu movement since the late 2000s, and its popularity is also positively impacting the popularity of K-drama and other Hallyu genres. In examining the global appeal of K-wave, there are at least two implications at the global level. First, as Dal Yong Jin suggested, the K-wave is “the first non-Western cultural content [that has] penetrate[d] global cultural markets.” Notably, he did not consider Japan as having secured a similar claim to global popularity. While anime has achieved global influence, “other cultural forms such as J-pop and dramas” have been less successful.³⁹ South Korea reaching that milestone is significant because K-wave represents an alternative to the American pop culture which has dominated global cultural flows since the end of WWII. It is important, however, to note that while some areas of Hallyu, such as food, literature, and drama, have been less influenced by the US, others, such as K-pop and K-games, have been obviously influenced by American pop culture. In the latter cases, their success has been due partly to the South Korean entertainment industry’s attractive hybridization of American popular culture and local elements. Secondly, as Hahm, Heo, and Song have pointed out, despite its lack of hard power, South Korea has succeeded in establishing a leading global identity through K-wave. This shows that, in theory, any country could potentially become a soft power leader, even without substantial financial resources, by creating cultural products which resonate with global audiences.⁴⁰ This argument is particularly empowering to non-Western cultures: just as the South Korean entertainment industry has succeeded in the global market by combining modern and traditional, or rather Western and local cultural elements, other non-Western cultures could do the same by merging global cultural influences with their local cultural elements. In this respect, the success of K-wave and K-pop is not just about South Korea but instead sets an important precedent for other countries.

NOTES

1. Cf. Youna Kim, ed., *The Soft Power of the Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2021).
2. Seok-Kyeong Hong et al., “Geography of Hallyu Studies: Analysis of Academic Discourse on Hallyu in International Research,” *Korea Journal* 59, no. 2 (summer 2019): 113.