

# Envisaging the Sociocultural Dynamics of K-pop: *Time/Space Hybridity, Red Queen's Race, and Cosmopolitan Striving*\*

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## Abstract

*The success of K-pop's global drive has provoked scholarly interests from various perspectives and disciplines. The multidisciplinary interest in K-pop reflects the wealth of K-pop success factors that are either exogenous (i.e., emphasizing global factors) or endogenous (i.e., highlighting Korean factors). This article focuses on the endogenous factors of K-pop's success, given the fact that the majority of the extant studies on K-pop analyze the impact of global factors on K-pop's popularity in different regions of the world. Thus, this study seeks to find if non-stereotypical Korean particularities that cannot be accounted for by exogenous explanations exist within the K-pop industry. We posit that the Korean peculiarities in the K-pop industry can be traced back to time/space hybridity, the "red queen's race," and cosmopolitan striving. This article finds that these three specific features within modern Korean culture explain why K-pop songs are still different from American or European pop music, despite their similarities due to the globalization of pop music. The differences between K-pop music and their counterparts in America and Europe are: the contemporaneity of the uncontemporary, the synchronized dancing to melodic music (vis-à-vis beat music), and the multi-top dancing formation. We conclude that the aforementioned Korean factors are responsible for these musical variations in K-pop.*

**Keywords:** K-Pop, time/space hybridity, cosmopolitan striving, red queen's race

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## Introduction

SM Entertainment,<sup>1</sup> the largest K-pop music producer and trainer, originally planned its Paris concert as a one-time event but had to offer an encore show after tenacious requests from K-pop fans in Paris who were not able to get tickets.<sup>2</sup> The following concert at Madison Square Garden in New York was also reported as “the Korean invasion with New Yorkers screaming for the new wave of pop stars.”<sup>3</sup> The reporter added that the audience members were mostly non-Asians.

Along with other similar sold-out shows in other parts of Europe and North America, it is safe to argue that K-pop’s popularity has now spread beyond Asia. The Korean media turned the Paris concerts, which drew 14,000 attendees, into a national euphoria, depicting K-pop’s recent global success as the birth of the “Hallyu Road,” a clever reference to the ancient Silk Road (Choi 2013). The mass media sensation was then fanned and fueled by government attention to this new global phenomenon, which apparently considered it a tool for boosting national pride (Ho 2012).

A myriad of scholars have advanced exogenous explanations for K-pop’s global fandom. The dominant explanation maintains that the spread of social network services (SNS), including YouTube, enabled K-pop to spread beyond national barriers without heavy distribution or promotion costs (Gilbert and Karahalios 2009; Elberse 2010). The success of Psy’s “Gangnam Style,” for example, highlights the importance of YouTube in the spread of K-pop (T. Lee 2013). However, most of these studies unevenly emphasize exogenous factors, while neglecting some, if not all, of the crucial endogenous factors of K-pop’s differentiation from its predecessors in Europe, America, and Japan. For one thing, the change of the music production system in Korea is an important factor that could explain

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1. S.M. Entertainment is an independent Korean record label, talent agency, producer, and publisher of pop music.
  2. “Extra K-pop Concert in Paris Sells Out in 10 minutes,” *Korea Times*, May 17, 2011; “K-pop Heat Moves to London, Jakarta,” *Korea Herald*, June 20, 2011.
  3. “The Korean Invasion: New Yorkers Are Screaming for the New Wave of Pop Stars,” *New York Daily News*, October, 23, 2011.

why Korean pop music, not Chinese, Taiwanese, Indonesian, or Thai, is the only Asian music genre that has garnered enormous global fandom all over the world. If global, and therefore universal, factors are important in the explanation of K-pop's global ascendance, so are domestic factors that can explain Korean particularities that distinguish K-pop from other similar music genres.

We posit that the Korean peculiarities in the K-pop industry can be traced back to what some scholars call time/space hybridity, the "red queen's race,"<sup>4</sup> and cosmopolitan striving (Chang 2010; Jang 2013; Park and Abelman 2004). Since Korea has developed from a traditional to a highly industrial society in less than five decades, Korean culture maintains the character of the traditional, modern, and postmodern (i.e., time/space hybridity). For example, it is not uncommon to find a family in Korea that has very patrimonial grandparents, divorced modern parents, and bohemian sons and daughters. With Korea's compressed modernization, education has been considered the most credible criterion to evaluate individual's ability (Chang 2010), which transforms Korean people into educational zealot. Since almost every Korean carries out educational competition, the hyper competition turns into a race that has no clear winners, or a "red queen's race." Cosmopolitan striving distinguishes Korean culture from its Western (e.g., American, European, and Australasian) counterparts. Due to Korea's heavy dependence on the West, especially the United States, both politically and economically, during her compressed modernization, cosmopolitan striving is a means of elevating one's social and economic status in Korea through excessive efforts at learning Western languages (e.g., English) and culture (e.g., attire, etiquette, food, music, etc.) (Pennycook 1994; Park 2010).

At a social level, Koreans' cosmopolitan striving is an expression of Korean nationalism, while also reflecting their desire for economic success despite limited resources. Considering all of these factors, our argu-

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4. The concept of the "red queen's race" is used to explain the situation where one runs fast but remains in the same place. It first appeared in the novel, *Through the Looking Glass*, a sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

ment is that these cultural specificities in Korea partially, if not fully, account for the success of K-pop on a global scale. We therefore pay attention to the excessive learning of Western music by Korean musicians (e.g., classic music training in Europe and America, both instrumental and vocal; and pop music and jazz training in the United States, both instrumental and vocal). The Korean music industry's obsession with Western music also runs in tandem with Korean nationalism in the sense that Korean musicians must be able to sell their music and dance back to the audiences of the West, from which they learn, in order to increase the profiles of Korean musicians worldwide. It is our intention to establish the fact that K-pop performers and producers created certain cultural specificities that can be found only in Korea in order to sell their Western music to global audiences (i.e., without such cultural specificities, it is impossible to sell their Korean-Western music to Western audiences). These cultural specificities of K-pop are: the contemporaneity of the unctemporary, the synchronized dancing to melodic music (vis-à-vis beat music), and the multi-top dancing formation.

To establish the linkage between Korean sociocultural factors and K-pop cultural specificities, we first delineate specific characteristics of K-pop music and idol groups. Second, we address the Korean cultural specificities of time/space hybridity, the "red queen's race," and cosmopolitan striving, stressing its cultural origins and modern ramifications. Third, we discuss how these cultural characteristics lead to the specific features of the K-pop phenomenon.

### **K-pop Music and Idol Groups**

Table 1 shows a partial chronology of K-pop's globalization drive from Asia, first to Europe and later to America (both north and south). It clearly shows that K-pop has surpassed the Asian pop market and successfully entered the global pop market. What is noteworthy in the K-pop chronology is that Psy's "Gangnam Style" genuinely attracted fans from all over the world, including North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, and

Table 1. Chronology of K-pop's Expansion from Asia to the World

Nation	Date	Significant Events
China	Feb. 2000	The first HOT (SM Entertainment) concert is held at Beijing Workers' Stadium.
Japan	May 2001	BOA (SM Entertainment) debuts in Japan.
Japan	Apr. 2005	TVXQ (SM Entertainment) debuts in Japan.
USA	Feb. 2006	Rain concert is held at Madison Square Garden in New York.
USA	Jun. – Jul. 2009	Wonder Girls (JYP Entertainment) performs as an opening act for the Jonas Brothers concert tour in the United States for 49 performances over 60 days in front of an overall audience of 1.5 million.
Japan	Aug. 2010	Girls' Generation (SM Entertainment) and KARA (DSP Media) debut and rank first on the Oricon Chart in Japan.
Asia / North America / Europe	Aug. 2010 – Oct. 2011	SM Entertainment singers perform in Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, LA, New York (Madison Square Garden 15,000 seats), and Paris (14,000 seats, sold out in 10 minutes).
United Kingdom	Jun. 2011	SHINee performs at the Abbey Road Studio.
Taiwan	Sep. 2011	Super Junior ranks first for a record length of time (63 Weeks) on the KKBOX chart.
Spain	Oct. 2011	JYJ concert is held in Barcelona.
Australia	Nov. 2011	"K-pop music festival" is held in Sydney (in front of an audience of 20,000).
Brazil	Dec. 2011	BEAST and 4Minute concert is held in Sao Paulo.
USA	Jan. 2012	SNSD appears on the David Letterman Show (CBS).
Worldwide	Sep. 2012	Psy's "Gangnam Style" is registered in the Guinness Book of World Records for the Most "Liked" Video in YouTube history.

Asia, whereas previous K-pop music had region- or country-specific fans.

To reiterate, both the exogenous and endogenous features of a particular music genre or a particular group of singers must be discussed in order to explain such massive success. Many scholars have underestimated K-pop's endogenous success factors, although they highlight the exogenous ones, such as globalization, regionalization, and the influence of J-pop and other Asian pop music on K-pop (Iwabuchi 2001; Chua 2004; Cho 2007; Allen and Sakamoto 2006). Even when endogenous factors were investigated, only the negative factors, such as the long-term contracts which were even referred to as "slave contracts," were unnecessarily highlighted (Ho 2012), without addressing the validity of the harsh training system based on such long-term contracts. This system has only been effective in Korea and is seen as largely responsible for the global success of K-pop, particularly because such intense training and long-term contracts in other countries, such as Japan, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, have not had any positive influence on singers in the long run. This section, then, attempts to shed light on the endogenous elements that are deemed germane in the formation of the global K-pop fandom. In order to do so, the reasons for K-pop's success should first be discussed before examining the negative endogenous factors that may cause its possible future failure. We suggest three specific features of K-pop that have been pivotal in K-pop's ascendance to its present global status: the contemporaneity of the unctemporary, the synchronized dancing to melodic music (vis-à-vis beat music), and the multi-top dancing formation.

### *The Contemporaneity of the Unctemporary*

The status of Korea as a semi-peripheral country, a middle point in the modern world system between the core (i.e., the world's most developed countries) and the periphery (i.e., newly developing and less developed countries), gives Korea the advantage of being able to offer both highly advanced and developing cultural elements to foreign visitors. For example, some visitors from G7 countries still perceive Korea as nostalgic, reminiscent of their immediate past, whereas some tourists from develop-

ing countries find it very modern, clean, and advanced (Oh 2009). This particular state of being in the middle of the world system reflects the “contemporaneity of the uncontemporary” (i.e., the coexistence of modernity and pre-modernity at the same time).

The ability to simultaneously appear both modern and premodern can translate into two completely opposite images to audiences in core and peripheral countries. To core country audiences, Korean singers appear innocent and pure compared to their own singers in Europe and America. This image is bolstered by the typical racialized stereotyping of Asians, without any real evidence as to whether singers from semi-peripheral countries really are innocent or not. Nusrat Durrani, general manager at MTV World, commented on the charming personality of K-pop stars, saying, “I think it reflects a certain innocence and naiveté missing from the American pop-culture scene. This is pop idols as they used to be, with a certain innocence about them that I think the audience misses.”<sup>5</sup> However, to peripheral audiences, who are mostly Asians, Korean singers do not appear pure or innocent; rather, they look sophisticated, modern, and polished—much akin to the “Western” idols they have stereotyped or fashioned themselves after (Cho 2005).

The managed use of male and female bodies is also very particular among K-pop idols. K-pop producers deliberately choose tall performers, both male and female, sometimes at least five to ten inches taller than their J-pop idol counterparts, which can be clearly seen in a comparison between K-pop’s Girls’ Generation and J-pop’s AKB48. By training Korean idols who are taller and thinner than other competing Asian groups, K-pop producers are establishing a new image of their singers as having both stereotypically Asian facial features (such as Asian complexions with black eyes and hair, etc.) and stereotypically European physiques (such as tall heights). The creation of such a stereotyped images results once again in opposite effects to core and peripheral audiences.

The combination of stereotypically “Korean faces” and “Western phy-

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5. “The Korean Invasion: New Yorkers Are Screaming for the New Wave of Pop Stars,” *New York Daily News*, October 23, 2011.

siques” plays an important role in marketing these artists to the global music industry. The dualistic effects of such images on core and peripheral audiences, respectively, are crucial. To many peripheral audiences, the modern and chic fashions of Korean idol stars have become culturally iconic, which in turn has pressured young fans from developing countries to rush to Korean fashion and cosmetic shops (Yin and Liew 2005). On the other hand, the stereotypical Asian look represented by “cuteness” and “innocence” has ignited the K-pop boom among young European followers.

Another example of the contemporaneity of the uncontemporary is that Korean boy bands tend to look soft and “feminine” but their bodies are extremely masculine. The following quotes from interviews conducted by Oh and Park (2012) with European K-pop fans indicate that Korean boy bands act “feminine” on stage, while taking off their clothes to show off their “six-pack abs.”

When I show other people video clips or pictures of K-pop stars (boy band members), people say they look gay, but when they listen to music, they all think music is good.

Western singers show sexy images but Koreans have a cuter image. . . . It was interesting to see male entertainers acting charming on show programs.

In Korean concerts, so many fancy performances and things girls would love to see (such as taking off their shirts, flying over the air with special equipment, and fireworks) happen. It is different from European concerts. K-pop singers also change clothes frequently during the show.

The combination mentioned in these interviews emphasizes the fact that the K-pop boy band members have both male and feminine qualities, which make them appeal to a broader audience.

#### *Synchronized Dancing to Harmonized Melodic Music*

The second K-pop particularity which seems to have helped facilitate the



global success of K-pop is its combination of synchronized group dancing to harmonized melodic music. Boy and girl bands all over the world usually dance to beat music in a synchronized fashion. However, the preference of harmonized melodies over beats in synchronized group dancing is not common, as it is hard to dance to certain types of trendy beats, while singing a song that incorporates complex harmonies. A common claim regarding the reason K-pop bands are able to master synchronized group dancing while singing complex harmonies is that these singers were harshly disciplined and carefully controlled by their so-called “slave contracts.”<sup>6</sup> For example, Nusrat Durrani of MTV World pointed out that the nine members of Girls’ Generation perform “every dance move in sync, every [melodic] note precisely hit.”<sup>7</sup> Durrani continues:

K-pop is very interesting because it comes from a place of great discipline. A lot of these acts have been professionally trained for years and years. A lot of K-pop acts actually have gone through very rigorous training, gone through a lot of discipline and have worked extremely hard. So the quality you see in K-pop is quite extraordinary.

Although the harsh training system and long-term contracts are indeed crucial in training boy and girl bands so that they can master synchronized group dancing to harmonized melodic music, it is also necessary to note the motivation for enduring such training. The concept of cosmopolitan striving, which we will explain in detail in the following section, must be included in any study of K-pop training. In a nutshell, the concept of strict “Asian” training is a stereotype held by American audiences and critics of K-pop, although this still begs the question of why such a training system (i.e., the obsessive learning of Western classic and other music, which requires tremendous effort) works in Korea. In an interview with SM Entertainment trainers, one interviewee explained that Korean trainees

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6. “K-Pop’s Slave Contracts—A Glance at South Korea’s Entertainment Industry,” *East Asia Gazette*, May 21, 2012, <http://asia-gazette.com/book/export/html/146>.

7. “The Korean Invasion: New Yorkers Are Screaming for the New Wave of Pop Stars,” *New York Daily News*, October 23, 2011.

were more willing to endure the harsh training of synchronized dancing while singing more successfully than their Chinese, Japanese, or European trainee counterparts. Instead of analyzing this statement as a prejudiced commentary, we argue that the cosmopolitan striving of Koreans is the explanation for this particularity.

### *Multi-top Dancing Formation*

Dance formations are another important element that distinguishes K-pop from J-pop or European rock and pop music. Existing dancing formations are usually designed to put the spotlight on one lead singer out of a group of backup dancers (i.e., the one-top dancing formation). However, in K-pop dancing formations, the one-top is replaced by multi-tops, as all members take a turn at receiving the spotlight during the natural course of singing and dancing in a song. In a Japanese TV show that carefully analyzed Girls' Generation dance formations, experts explained that the group's multi-top dancing formation is startlingly different from the Japanese one-top style where the group leader dances and sings in the middle much more than any other, subordinate, members.<sup>8</sup>

In K-pop, on the other hand, all members in some sense compete with each other to show their best in each performance. For example, although Girls' Generation has a main lead vocal, all nine singers get to take center stage at least once or twice during the length of any given song, exhibiting an equality in the importance of each member's role in the group. To the audience, the benefit of such a dance formation is that fans get to watch their favorite idols taking center stage at least once or twice per song. The reason why the multi-top dancing formation is more effective in garnering popularity for a group is twofold: first, in this case, fans tend not to get sick of the one lead vocal easily, since they are able to find and enjoy more or less equally talented singers in one group. Secondly, instead of individual singers singing and dancing alone, they are able to see several singers performing together at once. The analysis of the Japa-

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8. "Shabekuri (Light Conversation) 007," Nihon TV, May 23, 2012.

nese TV show suggests that fans prefer this more than one-top or single singer shows because they can then easily develop audience affection with the idol whom they particularly like, although who their favorite is may change over the course of time. Having discussed three characteristics specific to K-pop, we now turn to examine why these particularities are possible only in K-pop, using the sociocultural concepts of time/space hybridity, “red queen’s race,” and cosmopolitan striving.

## Sociocultural Characteristics of Korea

### *Time/Space Hybridity*

Compressed modernization allows the concomitant existence of the past and the present, or tradition and modernity (Chang 2010). The social phenomena that are typically associated with the past continue despite rapid modernization and development, creating a chaotic situation of living in two disparate time periods at once. Compressed modernization therefore leads Koreans and Korean society to experience a combination of elements from traditional, modern, and postmodern society. This can be seen in both the non-material domain and the material environment (Chang 2010). This phenomenon is not restricted to Korean society. Indeed, many rapidly developing countries have experienced similar patterns, although Japan and Korea have experienced the most advanced form of hybridity in Asia (i.e., their postmodernity is the most advanced among all Asian countries, whereas their traditional Confucian values are also strongly held on to at the same time). This is different from Hong Kong or Singapore, where traditional Confucian values have almost disappeared due to effects from British colonialism and other modernization influences from overseas.

Koreans therefore tend to possess traditional, modern, and postmodern values simultaneously, which can, at times, be contradictory to each other. This phenomenon is called “time hybridity,” when one person (or group) possesses a mixture of values and characteristics from different

time periods. This is different from the coexistence of different groups with different values (e.g., India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, etc.).

The term “space hybridity” refers to the mixture of values and characteristics from different regions, such as East Asian and European/North American, in one individual or group. As mentioned above, colossal influences from Japan and the United States during compressed modernization have made Koreans aggressively replicate American and Japanese cultural values. In this way, Koreans acquired both East Asian and European/North American values.

#### *“Red Queen’s Race” in Education*

Like in other societies, education has been the most credible tool for upward mobility in Korea. However, due to obsessive cosmopolitan striving, Koreans have turned into education zealots over the years. The state also played a crucial role in this obsession with education. Previous military leaders, who ushered in strong developmental governments, grabbed political power through military coups and suffered from low levels of political legitimacy. In a fashion similar to that of Meiji Japan (Silberman 1993), the Korean state had to use objective criteria for recruiting high-ranking officials to ameliorate its low legitimacy. Graduates from prestigious universities and those who passed national exams for high-ranking officials (*gosi* 考試) became the main pool for the state bureaucracy. *Gosi*, subsequently, made Koreans more dependent on education for their children’s future (Oh 2010). Figure 1 illustrates a drastic increase in university education in Korea with the highest enrollment rate in tertiary education (Chang 2010, 43).

The education craze in Korea has the particular characteristics of the “red queen’s race,” where everyone works hard but remains in the same place. In the novel, *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice is constantly running but remains in the same spot. Looking at Alice, the Red Queen says, “If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that” (Carroll 1872, 145). This is the situation in which most Korean students find themselves. They work hard but their rank on the test remains the same because everyone else is working hard. They know that they

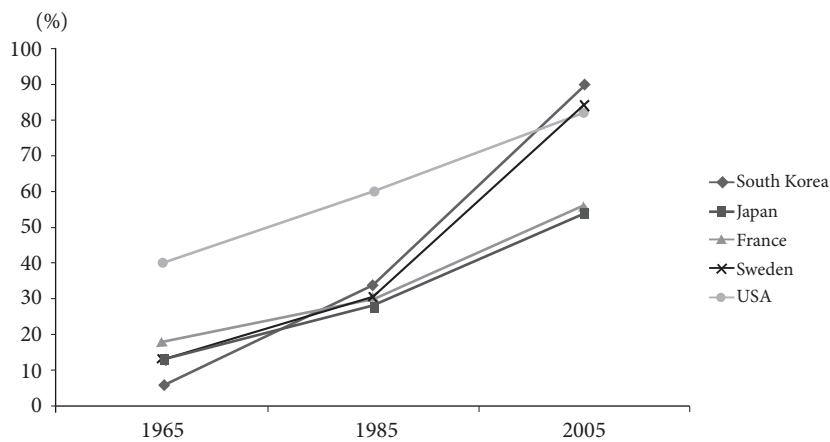


Figure 1. Tertiary Education Enrollment Rate

Source: Adapted from Chang (2010, 43).

have to work much harder than their competitors to move up (J. Lee 2004).

*Cosmopolitan Striving*

Cosmopolitan striving is a metaphor for a collective motivation toward upward mobility in a transitional society from Asian or developing economies to modern and Western economies (Park and Abelman 2004). In Korea, it is widely thought that learning English, for example, is a quick way to become rich and powerful, as English is thought to provide one with new cosmopolitan opportunities, such as studying in the United States and the United Kingdom (Park and Abelman 2004). Learning about Western culture is also considered to be an important stepping stone to advance one’s economic fate in society. Under this type of biased Western-centric, promodern social rubric, cosmopolitan striving motivates people to pursue what Oh (2009, 436) calls “forward learning.” However, this line of thinking becomes problematic in that it suggests that “modernization” equals “Westernization,” emphasizing the need to learn English and “advanced” European culture and/or North American

culture. In Korea, the obsession reaches a degree that is not easily observed in other non-European developing countries (Park and Abelman 2004; Oh 2010).

Park and Abelman (2004) contend that the obsessive nature of Koreans' cosmopolitan striving is derived from Korean-style ultranationalism. For example, if a Korean wins a grand prize in a renowned international piano contest, he or she becomes a national hero. The accomplishment is immediately featured in major Korean newspapers as a national, not an individual, achievement. This is remarkably different from European societies, where becoming Sumo champions in Japan or becoming Chinese calligraphy masters will not make them national heroes in their home countries. In Korea, cosmopolitan striving (i.e., learning Western culture and earning U.S. or U.K. titles for nationalism) is now expanding to golf and K-pop. World-class Korean LPGA players and internationally popular K-pop idols are the results of excessive cosmopolitan striving (Ho 2012).

Through her anthropological fieldwork, Ho (2012) carefully documents the cosmopolitan striving of Korean parents who invest time and money in order to groom their children to become K-pop stars. She contends that this investment has played a role in fueling Korea's "Global Dreams Factory" (Ho 2012, 485). It is said that more than one million Korean adolescents want to become idols, banking on their parents' financial and emotional support throughout the long period of hard training. The number of private K-pop academies for training these young people has increased ten times in less than three years.<sup>9</sup> Cosmopolitan striving drives these parents and young kids to accept the intense training based on long-term contracts that force them to work more than 12 hours a day, learning how to dance and sing, not to mention speaking English, Japanese, and Chinese. Young teenagers everywhere in the world may dream of becoming pop stars. However, it is unlikely that most of them would keep training themselves in singing, dancing, foreign languages, acting, and

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9. "Yeonseupsaeng 100 man 'aidol gonghwaguk,' gayogyehyeonjuso-neun?" (One Million Trainees, Idol Republic, What is Current Address of K-Pop?), MBC's Newsdesk, February 7, 2013.

other skills for more than ten years like Korean idol aspirants do, without any certainty of becoming a singer. BoA, the first major case of success for SM Entertainment, endured five to ten hours of training per day for three years without any holidays before she debuted in Japan.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, like Ho (2012) argues, the K-pop academy is another evidence of cosmopolitan striving by people who seek an alternative path to global success.

The obsessiveness of Koreans' cosmopolitan striving is derived partially from the country's small domestic market, which does not provide lots of opportunities for upward mobility. Such domestic restrictions, among other factors, including rampant music piracy amid the domestic music market, drove many K-pop idols (including idols-in-training) overseas. Indeed, the volume of Korean CD and DVD sales has decreased dramatically since 2000 (IFPI 2011b), the size of the Korean CD and DVD market in 2011 was still less than three percent of the Japanese market, as shown in Figure 2. The drastic downturn of the market in Korea eventu-

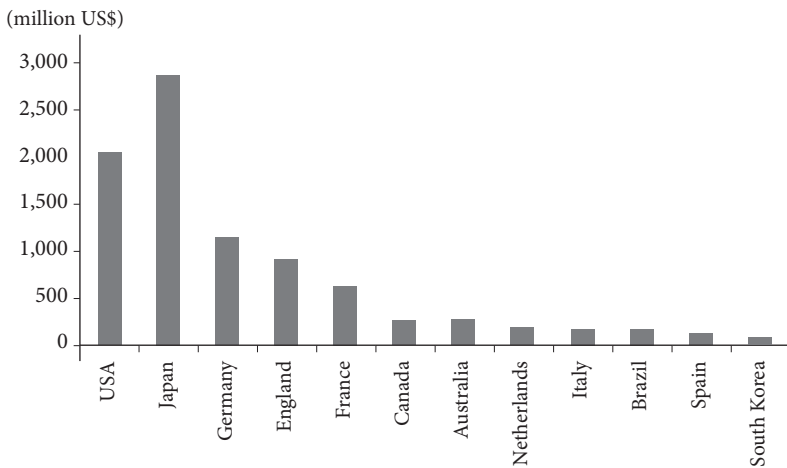


Figure 2. Comparison of CD and DVD Market

Source: IFPI (2011a).

10. "K-Pop Stars Rise on Rigorous Training," *JoongAng Daily*, June 13, 2011, <http://korea-joongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2937457>.

ally pushed Korean entertainment companies to explore export markets aggressively since 2000 (Jang, Kim, and Kim 2012).<sup>11</sup>

### **Influences of Sociocultural Factors on K-pop Specificities**

As explained above, K-pop has three specificities: the contemporaneity of the uncontemporary, the synchronized dancing to melodic music (vis-à-vis beat music), and the multi-top dancing formation. This section will explain how the aforementioned sociocultural factors (time/space hybridity, “red queen’s race” in education, and cosmopolitan striving) are related to these three K-pop specificities.

#### *Time/Space Hybridity and the Contemporaneity of the Uncontemporary*

The time/space hybridity manifested by compressed modernity is pivotal in the formation of the first feature of K-pop, the spontaneity of the unspontaneous. Even though idol groups exhibit postmodern taste and sensibilities in their music, the lyrics to their music cannot touch on certain topics such as violence, drugs, tobaccos, or sex, because public performances are still governed by Confucian values and traditional government regulatory agencies (Yim 2002). Korean pop songs have suffered from government censorship for decades, ever since the birth of the modern Korean nation (C. Kim 2009).

Furthermore, Korean idols are still very dependent on parental commitment and investment. This is why Ho (2012) highlights the fact that idol groups develop Confucian filial loyalty to their parents and their cultural and moral demands during the entire training period at private talent schools. She suggests that this is one of the reasons why Korean par-

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11. Scholars emphasizing hybridization argue that increasing cultural exchange in East Asia after the 1990s is the main cause for the exports of K-pop (Iwabuchi 2001; Chua 2004; Shim 2006). While the authors agree that increasing cultural exchanges certainly played a positive role in K-pop’s global drive, we consider the situation a background factor and less important than the direct push factor.



ents invest their money in their children's training at such schools in spite of high uncertainty. At the very least, their children develop a Confucian sense of filial duty.

Finally, the talent schools and music producers like SM Entertainment use authoritarian disciplinary methods to control and manage their young trainees. Music producers and idol managers often force male singers and dancers to acquire a feminine look while maintaining muscular body shapes. They also demand that female singers go through an extended period of dieting, and even force them to have cosmetic surgeries.<sup>12</sup> All of this is possible due to the traditional Confucian value of authoritarian employer-employee relationships that are still rampant in Korea. In a nutshell, idol groups have modern and postmodern appearances but they are still subject to Confucian managerial principles within their own production teams.

#### *"Red Queen's Race" and Multi-top Dancing Formation*

K-pop trainees receive hard training in the areas of singing, dancing, acting, and even foreign languages for more than six hours every day (and more than ten hours during weekends and holidays). In addition to singing, dancing, and language skills, etiquette and charm school as well as self-improvement education is also included in the program. Trainers at the entertainment companies strongly contend that their trainees try as hard as students who are fiercely preparing for university entrance exams and their success is not easily achieved. The reason this kind of Spartan-like training is possible at Korean entertainment companies is that all of the trainees are aware of the "red queen's race" in society (i.e., all Koreans are victims of hyper-competition). Just like students preparing for university entrance exams, these would-be K-pop singers also feel the pressure to practice harder than others in order to get selected as members for new idol groups.

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12. "The K-Pop Plastic Surgery Obsession," *Atlantic*, May 24, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/05/the-k-pop-plastic-surgery-obsession/276215/>.

Trainees are tested every month. Tests include the “team mission test,” the “individual test” (pronunciation, singing, and dancing), and the “personality test.” Evaluation results, which are revealed to every student, are detailed and ranked, in order to induce competition among the trainees. Trainees are asked to continue to get high scores in all evaluation areas in order to earn the right to join a project team who is close to debuting. If their scores are lower than those of the previous month, their name will be moved to the open retest list and they must go through extra weekly practices. In the worst-case scenario, they are pulled off the trainee track and demoted to the secondary group of trainees. It is clear that the pressure to do well on such tests forces trainees to practice until late at night in practice rooms or even on the rooftop of the training building.

The multi-top dancing formation of K-pop is an extension of the “red queen’s race.” Taking center stage at least once or twice in rotation during a song, idol group members not only have a chance to show their talents to their fans, but also to compete with other members in front of the audience. The multi-top formation basically invalidates the idea of one permanent lead singer per idol group, as all members can show off their talents in front of the audience as a temporary leader until they are replaced by another in a matter of seconds. Essentially, this system requires not just one star per team, but that all team members must be potential stars. The managerial reason for the multi-top formation is to increase enjoyment for fans, over that of a solo show. However, it is strenuous for each member of the same band and it also unnecessarily encourages competition among team members for both the leader position and fans’ attention and support. This system is possible only when cosmopolitan striving is obsessive like in Korea and the “red queen’s race” is necessary due to small domestic markets.

#### *Cosmopolitan Striving and Synchronized Dancing to Melodic Music*

As previously explained, synchronized dancing by a large group of performers who concomitantly sing melodic music is very difficult to learn and master, because high levels of ability in both dancing and singing are

required. Although many idol groups in different countries mimic synchronized dancing, they usually dance to beat music, most notably hip-hop and break dancing music, which is typically deemed as easier to master than dancing to and singing melodic music.<sup>13</sup> The secret to synchronized dancing is merely the relentless training of would-be idols over a long period of time. Without cosmopolitan striving, continuous training over such long periods of time would simply not be possible, especially when there are no professional teachers available. Golf practice can be taken as an example. According to Seri Park and K. J. Choi, who won the U.S. LPGA and PGA titles respectively, their secret to success during the early period of training was self-imposed training day and night.<sup>14</sup> This solitary striving was possible because they had a cosmopolitan dream of succeeding in the PGA world.

In an interview with SM Entertainment managers,<sup>15</sup> we found that they were surprised to see that only Korean students could endure the relentless dose of training without complaint, unlike SM's Chinese, Japanese, or European students. SM managers thought the reason was genetic, particular to Korean people. However, we contend that it was due to the cosmopolitan striving that was imposed upon them by their parents, the managers themselves, and Korean society as a whole, which considers cosmopolitan striving as a nationalist endeavor (Park and Abelman 2004).

Reports of the abuse and beating of trainees by managers are periodically reported in Korean newspapers (*East Asia Gazette*, May 21, 2012). Managers argue that the hazing and authoritarian control of pupils is necessary in order to teach young kids how to sing and dance in a perfectly synchronized fashion, just like the synchronized military drills that involve lots of hazing and physical abuse in Korea. Such abuse is more visible in Korea than in other Asian countries because cosmopolitan striving

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13. STV, "Katie Price: 'Singing and Dancing at Same Time is Hard,'" <http://entertainment.stv.tv/tv/188592-katie-price-singing-and-dancing-at-same-time-is-hard/>.

14. Mick Elliott, "Legends at Home: Se Ri Pak," LPGA website, <http://www.lpga.com/golf/news/2012/10/pak-legends-feature.aspx>.

15. The interview was conducted with a manager in charge of A&R and Production Team at SM Entertainment on December 21, 2012.

is more acute in Korea, where domestic opportunities for upward mobility are few and far between, than in Japan, China, or Indonesia, for example. Consequently, relentless training, cosmopolitan striving, and the small domestic market all contribute to the fact that only Korean idol groups in Asia could master the perfect synchronization of group dancing with melodic singing.

We have thus far discussed the impact of time/space hybridity, the “red queen’s race,” and cosmopolitan striving on the three K-pop specificities, namely, the contemporaneity or the uncontemporary, the multi-top dancing formation, and synchronized dancing to melodic music. Figure 3 summarizes the dynamics of the aforementioned sociocultural factors.

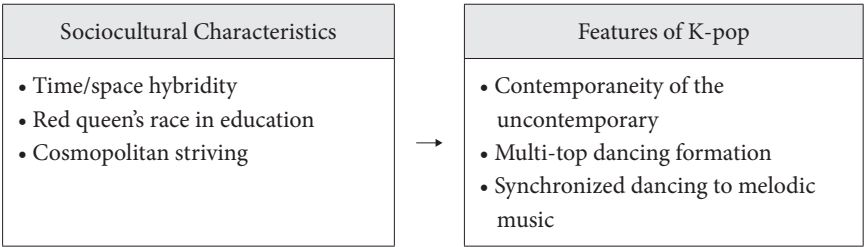


Figure 3. Framework of K-pop Sociocultural Dynamics

Conclusion

The success of K-pop in the global music market has aroused scholarly interest from various perspectives and disciplines. K-pop is indeed one of the most commonly searched keywords on YouTube. K-Pop videos were viewed a total of 2.3 billion times in 2011.<sup>16</sup> The multidisciplinary interest in K-pop reflects the wealth of factors that could explain its revolutionary success on a global scale. These diverse factors and causes can roughly be divided into two categories: exogenous and endogenous. For example, it is

16. “K-pop yutubeu dongyeongsang jangnyeon 235 gaeguk 23 eok beon” (K-pop Videos Viewed by 2.3 Billion Times in 235 Countries), *JoongAng Daily*, January 2, 2012.

obvious that the changing communication industry, especially the development of SNS, played a pivotal role in K-pop's spread to the world. The changing manufacturing structure of the music industry has also contributed to this new global phenomenon. These examples constitute important exogenous factors in K-pop's success.

Given the rich depository of studies on the exogenous factors of K-pop's success, this article attempted to delve into endogenous factors that contributed to K-pop's success. We wanted to find out whether sociocultural features, particular to Korea, had strong correlations with K-pop specificities, which have made the genre successful. The rationale behind this research design was derived from our scholarly desire to find the psychological (i.e., intrinsic) basis of motivation, which is different from the material (i.e., extrinsic) basis of motivation, for Korean creativeness and its commercialization. In so doing, we posited that endogenous factors were critical in the development of K-pop and can be traced back to Korean-style cosmopolitan striving along with time/space hybridity and the "red queen's race."

Although it is important to be cautious of gross generalizations, our research found that three specific features define the endogenous characteristics of K-pop: the contemporaneity of the uncontemporary, synchronized dancing to melodic music, and the multi-top dancing formation. We argued that these three K-pop specificities are relevant to time/space hybridity, the "red queen's race," and cosmopolitan striving that has been obsessively pursued by many Koreans, fueled by their ultranationalistic predilections toward success overseas. This analysis, however, is based on a sociostructural explanation using macro-level data. For further research, individual-level investigations regarding the motives and aspirations of idol groups and entertainment companies should be conducted.

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