

**Asia and Beyond: The Circulation and Reception of Korean Popular Music outside of Korea**

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For the last two decades, K-pop—and in particular, its success along its Asian trajectory—has been portrayed as a national triumph for Korea and a blockbuster case of commoditizing its soft culture. However, the transnational flow of Korean popular music should not be thought of as just a recent or contemporary phenomenon, nor is confined to the regions in Asia. From the perspective of music and historical studies, the circulation and consumption of Korean popular music outside its own geo-political and cultural boundaries is long-established, tracing as far back as the turn of the twentieth century, although its reach, meaning, and modes of production and consumption were divergent at different times and contexts. With the presumption that music crosses borders for one or more reasons, even in times when border crossing is restricted and inconvenient, this chapter traces the transnational flow of K-pop from the early twentieth century, and discusses what enabled the circulation and reception of K-pop in different contexts and epochs of world history. Diverging from K-pop as a label of contemporary music, in this chapter K-pop encompasses various sounds of popular music made in Korea from the early twentieth century to today. The two authors call attention to “musical transnationality,” the particular elements and ability of which fulfill the needs of audiences residing, in this case, outside Korea. By exploring the power of musical transnationality in history and in contemporary global soundscape, this chapter argues the need of investigating K-pop as to what the music offers to its audiences and the reasons why particular groups of people become adherents and fans of certain types of music. Despite differences in style,

ideology, and the relevant industries and technologies of K-pop, the range of distinct cases discussed in this chapter will complement the existing knowledge of contemporary K-pop studies.

The first part of this chapter is a discussion of the early twentieth-century circulation of K-pop in China and Japan, followed by a brief sketch of its connection to local popular music scenes in each different place in later time period. Then, the second part focuses on two distinctive case studies on the reception of K-pop, in Taipei, Taiwan, and Vienna, Austria. Although Taiwan and Austria are geographically far apart, both places have played an important role in instigating K-Pop popularity and consumption in Asia and Europe, respectively. By combining ethnographic data with archival research on Korean music in various regions in Asia and Europe, this chapter illustrates how local contingencies such as internal desires of and attractions to Korean popular music have much affected the types of both circulation and reception of K-pop in transnational spaces.

### **K-pop at the Turn of the Twentieth Century**

From the beginning of the twentieth century, music for mass circulation and consumption emerged in Korea, first with the introduction of the gramophone in 1907, and then expedited with the establishment of Kyōngsōng Radio Broadcasting Station in 1927. However, the concept and usage of “popular music” in Korea was still at its inception, and the lack of semantic rigidity distinguishing between *being popular* and *popular music* in those early days requires this study to straddle two musical categories—*sinminyō* (popular folksongs) and *yuhaengga* (popular music, literally “fashionable song”)—in its discussion of the dawning of K-pop music. Even *yuhaengga* itself had very contestable boundaries at the time, since it

comprised a variety of tunes with foreign or indigenous origins combined with vernacular texts. Both music categories were similar in terms of their production, circulation, and consumption. While *sinminyo* was seen as “traditional” in sound but “new” in its means of production and circulation, *yuhaengga* represented the “new,” “western,” and “modern” in both style of music and its production modes. Considering the ambiguous and contested terrain of popular music at its early stages in Korea, *sinminyo* may be viewed as exhibiting the ideological and practical characteristics of popular music as much as *yuhaengga*, even if it stands for very different sounds from those that today’s audiences may imagine as the sounds of popular music.

### **K-pop in China**

Between the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, sizable groups of Koreans emigrated to China, Russia, Japan, and different parts of the Americas. Of all the overseas Korean communities in the early twentieth century, the largest was in northeast China, bordering Korea and Russia (Koo 2015). The Korean emigrants brought with them cultural knowledge, practices, customs, and a number of commodities that they valued in their home country; Korean indigenous popular music was certainly one of the distinctive ethnic cultures that they relocated. Beginning in the 1920s, many performing arts troupes visited northeast China from Korea and presented music, dance, and theatrical works for diasporic Korean audiences. The troupes presented a range of vocal music, including *sinminyo* and *yuhaengga*. While performance tours by popular singers were one of the primary mediums for the spread of Korean popular songs, the rise of the recording industry back home also contributed greatly to the transnational dissemination of K-pop. In the middle of the 1930s,

Shenyang (Simyang) City in northeast China developed into a trading center for Koreans in China. Its Xita (Sötap) Street was not only decorated with numerous colorful posters of Korean singers from Columbia, Victor, and OK recording companies, but the air was also filled with Korean popular songs playing in music stores (Koo 2010: 15–16). Some of the representative Korean hit songs which were popular in northeast China at the time were “T’ahyangsari” (Living Oversea), “Hwangsöng yett’ö” (Trace of the Imperial City. 1932), “Hongdo ya ujimara” (Don’t Cry, Hongdo), “Purhyoja nün umnida” (Undutiful Son’s Cry), “Tchillekkot” (Baby Brier), and “Nunmul chöjün Tumangang” (River Tuman Drenched with Tears).<sup>1</sup> Among these, “Nunmul chöjün Tumangang” is known with its special relationship to the region, since the lyrics speak of a couple’s separation at the Tuman (Tumen in Chinese) River, which forms the border between China and Korea. The song was composed by Yi Si-u, who was inspired by the true story of a couple separated when the husband left his family to participate in the Korean independence movement in Northeast China and died after being arrested by the Japanese imperial army. Yi heard the story when his troupe visited Longjing (Yongjǒng), where many diasporic Koreans lived at the time. After his return to Korea, this song was released with singer Kim Chöng-ku (1916–98); it was well-received both at home and in China (Kim 2010: 435–36). Due to their diasporic situation, Koreans in China consumed popular songs from their homeland, particularly songs set to melancholy melodies bearing lyrics of nostalgia and longing for home and family. Although dark and sentimental songs seemed to predominate throughout East Asia in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, Korean popular songs that depicted homesickness, family separation, and displacement appealed to diasporic Korean communities in particular, since the music was especially resonant with their life experiences.

The songs evoking nostalgia and separation continued to be popular, even when Chinese Koreans began to compose their own locally-produced popular music. With the

economic reforms following the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China began to consume popular music imported from other parts of Asia, and then produced its own local pop songs as competition against the domination of the Mandarin and Cantonese pop music coming out of Hong Kong and Taiwan. Subsequently, Chinese national minorities began to produce their own commercial songs. In the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, Chinese Korean popular songs were produced and broadcast widely by state owned recording and broadcasting stations, such as, the Jilin Nationality Audio-Visual Publishing Company and Yanbian TV and Radio Broadcasting Station. Among many Korean minority nationality singers representing their community, Kim Sǒng-sam (1971-2006) was considered to be one of the most prominent Chinese Korean singers in Yanbian from the 1990s until his death in a motorcycle accident in 2006. He sang songs that reminded his listeners of early twentieth-century Korean popular songs in terms of melody and lyrics. One of his 1990s hits was “T’ahyang ũi pom” (Foreign Land Spring), which speaks of a man’s inability to return home, even though his wife is waiting for him to come back (Koo 2010: 27–28).

Such a text certainly appeals to both older and younger Koreans who either had the memory of migration as Korean expatriates, or who had “nostalgia without memory” as descendants of the expatriates (Appadurai 1996: 30). The idea of a distant homeland, as well as memories of living in rural hometowns, has continued to be among the major themes of younger-generation Chinese Korean singers into the 2000s (Koo 2010: 30). The local inclination toward nostalgic songs clearly reflects the particular experiences of those Koreans in their migration to China, thereby demonstrating how the local reception of transnational K-pop is closely tied with the semiotics of sound, and especially of content that resonates emotionally with the particular local audience.

## **K-Pop in the Early Twentieth-Century Japan**

If the early circulation of K-pop in China was linked to Koreans' overseas migration and the formation of diasporic Korean communities, the flow and reception of K-pop in Japan presents quite a different picture. Japan's colonial rule over Korea and its execution of power led its colony to perceive Japan as an ideal and a window on modernity, despite persistent resistance throughout the colonial period. From a macro-level view of the trajectory of popular music between Japan and Korea, Japan seems to be the winner in terms of industrial, commercial, and cultural impact, especially during its colonial period. However, Japan could not entirely evade the influence of and cultural flow from its colony, since Japanese musicians and singers who experienced Korean songs, adapted and commercialized them for Japanese consumption.

E. Taylor Atkins illustrates how "Arirang," a traditional yet popular Korean folksong, has been remade multiple times in Japan, and had been embraced into the J-pop scene as the sound of the other (2007). As previously mentioned, the ambiguous boundaries of popular music invited the intersection of traditional and modern musical ideas in early twentieth-century Korea; "Arirang" is a clear example in which traditional sound was refurbished with new idioms of technology and style, and made a commercial hit in its own native and transnational contexts, especially during the second half of the colonial period. The fact that fifty-plus versions of "Arirang" were issued by Japanese recording companies illustrates the market demand for, and ready supply of this music. So popular was "Arirang" that, in the 1930s, several famous Japanese singers recorded their own versions of the song, using both Korean and Japanese language (Atkins 2007: 658).

While the flexibility of the melody and rhythm of "Arirang" enabled Japanese musicians to exploit the song and re-create it multiple times for the pleasure of Japanese

audiences, it was perhaps chiefly the lyrics and portraying emotion in the song that fascinated those audiences. Love, broken hearts, betrayal, tears, and separation were common sentiments in Japanese *kayokyōku* (popular songs) of the time, and the major sentiment of “Arirang” resonated with the prevailing mood of early twentieth-century Japanese popular songs. If, to greater or lesser extent, some sonic components of “Arirang” were remade for Japanese singers and audiences; what remained unchanged, however, was the sentiment that sang of love, abandonment, and heartbroken separation.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, postwar Japan again embraced and lent space in its popular music to Korean musicians who specialized in the sentimental Japanese songs known as *enka*. While the presence and commercial success of Korean singers in Japan was otherwise of little note until the late 1990s, Korean *enka* singers such as Yi Sŏng-ae, Kye Ŭn-suk, Kim Yŏn-cha, and Cho Yong-p’il enjoyed fame and popularity beginning in the 1970s (Shin 2009: 109). There is no doubt that K-pop circulated in postwar Japan—if not prominently, then at least on a minor scale. A number of non-*enka* Korean singers released albums in Japan or worked as underground musicians in the 1980s and 1990s (Shin 2009), but the public recognition or reception of those musicians was far less than that received by Korean *enka* singers in Japan. If the proliferation of pre-1990 K-pop was confined to, and closely related with *enka* scenes in Japan, then why?

Christine R. Yano explains that the major attraction of *enka* is neither its sound nor its image, but instead the music’s ability to evoke sentiment and thus bring tears to Japanese audiences who imagine themselves as part of the nation with a communally-broken heart (Yano 2002: 3). Ironically, Korean singers whose rusty voices are often attributed with *han* (unresolved suffering or pain), the psychological myth that Koreans discourse as a national ethos emerged out of colonial suppression, have been embraced in a very essentialized Japanese pop, in which tear-shedding is consumed and practiced as what it means to be “Japanese.” If

today's K-pop appeals to transnational audiences as a package of visuals, sounds, and various other elements, the transnational circulation and reception of K-pop from the early twentieth century to the 1990s was thanks instead to its sound and lyrical evocation of sentiment that both transnational and international audiences sought, helping them to construct who they are as diasporic and modern individuals.

### **Global Reach of K-pop and Its Reception among Transnational Fandoms**

The study of K-pop, as part of the study of *hallyu* (the Korean Wave), has expanded for the past several years. Earlier studies dealt especially with the mechanisms and factors by which the Korean government used K-pop as soft power to conquer new markets, as well as its successful marketing strategy and high quality of music production and recently expanding its research focusing on the reception and localizing process of K-pop in the global platform. From this section on, the discussion on the transnationality of K-Pop focuses on the reception and localizing process, according to the local environments of Taiwan and Austria. The transnational recognition of K-pop in East Asia started with the unexpected popularity of Korean popular culture, known as *hallyu*. When *hallyu* began to be recognized by Asian fans for its trendy TV dramas, K-pop started to become more appealing to these Asian consumers through the form of soft ballad songs and OST albums as reminders of the sentimental scenes in the dramas. Because of strategic promotion, the growth of social media, activities of fan culture, and other factors, K-pop has become a prominent part of East Asian popular culture reaching global audiences, including the US and Europe. Its rise can be traced back to the late 1990s, when H.O.T. and CLON gave successful concerts in Taiwan and China, but a few other Korean musicians also had success performing outside Korea. Around 1995, just before



CLON's debut, Korean singer Kim Wan-sŏn had presented herself in the local media, and during the 1970s and 1980s, Cho Yong-p'il, Kim Yŏn-cha, and other Korean singers had worked in Japan as *enka* singers. Even before that, many experienced Korean singers who had previously performed on the US military club stages had gone to Europe or the United States (Shin 2013: 34).

Its significant popularity outside Korea, however, started in Taiwan with the debut album of Korean dance duo CLON and spread to other Chinese-speaking areas, together with Korean soap opera, attracting fans in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, the United States, and Europe. Its fast and sudden transnational spread attracts scholars' attention because it reverses the earlier cultural flow, which had been from West to East, and it raises new questions about subjects such as transnationalism, globalization, glocalism, de-Westernization, hybridity, and so on. Comparative fieldwork in these locations will permit the exploration of factors that are contributing, more generally, to the success of non-Western cultural products in Asia and Europe. The local media has played an important role in distributing and selecting the products in Taiwan. Therefore, this research considers the role of media in the reception of K-pop, such as interviews with music companies, TV producers, and people in the entertainment business. In contrast, there is no media contact or direct communication with Korean entertainment companies in Austria. Therefore, it naturally focuses and explore on local fan activities.

### **Taiwan: Springboard of K-pop around East Asia**

The global rise of K-pop is easily traceable to origins in Taiwan, from which it spread to other Chinese-speaking areas. Taiwan was then acting as the springboard of popular music in the Mandarin-speaking region, influencing the musical taste of Chinese audiences (Moskowitz

2011).

Beginning with cover music<sup>3</sup> and OST albums of popular Korean television dramas in the late 1990s, K-pop has had a consistent presence in Taiwan. Eventually, music companies began bringing Korean artists to Taiwan. Rock Music Taiwan took a chance on promoting the Korean duo CLON with great success: CLON set a record for the highest sales rate in Taiwan, selling more than 40,000 CDs (Sung 2006). The Taiwanese music companies ROCK, Avex Taiwan, Sony Music, and Alpha started to compete in the market of importing K-pop. According to Li, who was working at ROCK Music Taiwan and had made the decision to release CLON's album, CLON's success in Taiwan was due to two main reasons:

First, CLON's masculine image and advanced choreography were well received by many Taiwanese music fans. When we first thought of introducing CLON to Taiwan, we did not want to let the people know that CLON is from Korea. We just wanted the audience to see them dance and sing, because there was no one like them in Taiwan at that time. . . . So I just made the stage and let them sing at Ximending, the most crowded place in Taipei. At that time, there was nobody who knew them. But after they performed, we introduced them as Korean singers, and they started to buy the CDs. The CDs we brought on that day were sold immediately. So we knew they had potential. Second, Korean artists had a different strategy from Japanese artists. CLON came to Taiwan every two months and stayed pretty long in Taiwan. So people started to feel very comfortable having more contact with them. The way they promote artists is different from in Japan. They are promoted like local artists as though they were living here. (Interview with Li, Taipei)

After the success of CLON, many music companies competed to import Korean pop artists to Taiwan. Alpha released OST albums, and around 1998, Avex Taiwan worked together with SM Entertainment and promoted many K-pop stars, such as H.O.T., Shinhwa and S.E.S. According to Liang, who used to work for Alpha Taiwan, “after having success from Korean idol stars in Taiwan and Hong Kong, Avex Taiwan and Avex Hong Kong together proposed that Avex Japan should work with SM Entertainment” (interview with Liang, Taipei). Since then, Avex Japan has had a relationship with SM Entertainment; they both created singer BoA with a special contract, which asked that she work half her time in Japan and the other half in Korea, though later on she spent most of the time in Japan and acted as though she was a Japanese local artist. The popularity of K-pop not only spread fast among Chinese-speaking audiences, but paved the way for K-pop to enter the Japanese market. In 2002, BoA topped the Oricon Music Chart in Japan, and since then, Korean pop musicians have been pursuing music careers in Japan.

In the early 2000s, K-pop’s popularity decreased for being less novel and too predictable; however, it reached another peak around 2008, with the emergence of a unique new style. In 2009, the Korean male idol group Super Junior’s song “Sorry, Sorry” became tremendously popular in the Mandarin-speaking region, remaining at number one for a record-breaking 37 weeks on Taiwan's K-pop singles chart. Later that year, it achieved Internet fame in a YouTube video showing inmates in a Philippine prison dancing to it; that video soon garnered more than 4.6 million hits (Jung 2011). In the second week of October 2010, Super Junior was ranked as the number-one worldwide trending topic on the Twitter weekly chart. Another noticeable result of K-pop’s rise was the popularity of the Korean girl group Wonder Girls’ song “Nobody” (2008) which entered the US Billboard Hot 100 music chart as a single; Wonder Girls’ music and choreography soon gained enormous attention among Asians all over the world, surpassing 50 million views on YouTube. In the spotlight of a rising pop trend, K-

pop gained even more popularity in Taiwan. More music companies focused on signing contracts with Korean artists, searching for more chances for those artists to tour in Taiwan for concerts and fan-meeting events.

Many music companies, such as Avex Taiwan and Rock Music Taiwan, place K-pop in their foreign music branch, alongside J-pop. As it has increased in popularity in Taiwan, these companies have competed to import more K-pop musicians into the local music industry. Its sales in Taiwan now exceed those of J-pop, making up more than 60 percent of all foreign music sold. The popularity of boy/girl K-pop groups such as Super Junior and SNSD, beginning around 2009, has increased Korean influence on the Taiwanese music scene. Many local artists now imitate Korean music, dance, fashion, and music videos, as a Korean-styled appearance has become one of the most important factors in being competitive locally. The local Taiwanese music industry, struggling to survive, has developed a love-hate relationship with K-pop: on the one hand, it often imitates K-pop, but on the other hand, it uses K-pop as a standard for cultural rejection. Many Taiwanese young people enjoy K-pop, but a growing number prefer Taiwanese musicians who promote a local style that they call “natural.” Without a doubt, K-pop has become the most successful and visible player in the region since the late 1990s, creating many new phenomena, such as “trans-Asia cultural traffic” (Iwabuchi *et al.* 2004) and “East Asian pop culture” (Chua 2004). K-pop’s transnational growth, however, has not been limited to the regional context, but has spread globally, attracting fans all around the world, leading to complicated and multidirectional cultural flows.

### **K-pop Reception in Austria**

K-pop fandom and its participatory culture—such as auditions, dance festivals, and cover

dance competitions—have spread fast in Europe, boosted by social media and Korean pop singer Psy’s video “Gangnam Style” (2012). K-pop fans in Europe, including Austria, had already been increasing in number for several years, but the sudden popularity of “Gangnam Style” sharply increased their participatory culture and increased their familiarity with Korea and its popular music. K-pop fans in Austria are not as significant as those in France or the UK in size and Austria is a small country, with roughly 8.47 million people, surrounded by eight different countries: the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Italy, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein. This geographic situation, according to many fans, makes Vienna an international center, easy for K-pop fans in neighboring countries to reach (Interview with Schleining, Vienna). Many K-pop fans not only travel to participate in fan events, but have strong connections with each other. Therefore, though this study focuses on Austria specifically, because many different Europeans live there and European K-pop fans share similar K-pop fan sites, such as [Kpopeurope.com](http://Kpopeurope.com) and [eatyourkimchi.com](http://eatyourkimchi.com), it naturally branches out to a broader examination of K-pop reception among Europeans. Also, fans in Austria are not necessarily Austrian in origin: many attendees at shows are from Germany, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland, with a high number of second-generation East and Southeast Asians. So the study of K-pop fandom in Austria is not limited to Austrian K-pop fans.

After the video topped the Austrian chart in October 2012, K-pop events sharply increased and began to be eagerly supported by fans and private institutions such as the Korean embassy, the Korea House of Culture, the Korean Association of Austria and private businessmen (Sung 2013a), all of which continue to cooperate to create a more dynamic K-pop scene by providing venues or finance. Before “Gangnam Style”, most Viennese K-pop fans were East Asians, and their cultural consumption was mostly through the use of social media (Sung 2013b) so they were not so much visible. K-pop remains something that East Asians share commonly.

Most recently, the trend has changed to attract more local European fans to participate in K-pop. Those who have been long-time K-pop fans have evolved from being consumers to being providers for the next generation; together with the Korean private sector (for example, Korean businessmen and Korean professional singers), they are now acting as cultural intermediaries between Korean institutions and the K-pop fan community. Without their constant efforts, K-pop events would fade away; however, because of their interest in spreading K-pop and communicating with K-pop fans, they have helped create a special K-pop scene in Vienna. It remains small, but it is growing fast and enthusiastically. Its fans are intimately intertwined with the global reaches of the Internet. They seek to serve as cultural intermediaries for K-pop in their homeland and—more broadly—in Europe as well.

The circulation of early K-pop was primarily limited to Asian countries and overseas Asians (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Sung 2013b). Korean mass media emphasized the global influence of *hallyu*, but most of its audience consisted of East Asians or East Asian immigrants in Western countries. Now that K-pop fandom has increased in Austria, Asian K-pop fans there are comparatively few, and most of them are second-generation Austrians born in Austria. If East Asian K-pop fans were strongly connected to their home culture and attached to trends in their home culture through social media (Sung 2012, 2013b), Austrian K-pop fans are closely linked to each other through community and local events.

## **Conclusion**

Music crosses borders for many different reasons, including the increasing mobility of people and cultural goods, the expansion of markets, shifts in cultural policy, change in modes of production and circulation, and the evolution of consumer tastes and behaviors, as well as

technological advances, as seen in the recent impact of social media. Tracing the musical transnationality of Korean popular music from early twentieth century to contemporary K-pop scenes illustrates that older instances of transnational music flow were much dependent on the movement of people who physically crossed geo-political borders and displaced musical commodities for the consumption of diasporic Koreans and international audiences, whereas contemporary K-pop reflects transnational dialectics of the global popular music industry from the beginnings of its production, resulted from various social and cultural shifts that emerged particularly over the last two decades. Musically speaking, the salience of early Korean popular music was in some way confined to its musical ability to evoke and convey a range of sentiments that both Korean and foreign audiences could relate to themselves, reflecting their own experience and memory. Post-*hallyu* K-pop demonstrates how Korean popular music has reshaped itself as a form of cultural bricolage filled with various sonic and visual signifiers, inviting the active participation of much broader audiences to engender its global consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> It is often the case that the release year of each song is not clear. But it is certain that they are produced during the 1930s.

<sup>2</sup> See the transcriptions and lyrics included in Atkins (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Many Taiwanese local singers, such as Yuki Hsu (徐懷鈺), sang Korean pop translated into Mandarin without letting the audience know it was originally from Korea. Music companies were recognizing the quality of K-pop already in the early 1990s, but they did not import it directly from Korea because of the negative image of Korea at that time.