

Cultural hybridity of K-Pop music: From the west to South Korea,  
from South Korea to the globe

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### **Abstract**

Ever since the Asian financial crisis, one of the most totemic signs of South Korea's economic and cultural recovery has been the phenomenal success of the K-Pop music genre. This influential cultural export has helped South Korea to become established as one of the most powerful countries in Asia. K-Pop music has a hegemonic status, associated with the nation, and has always had its roots in the unchallengeable post-war Americanization, emphasizing the dependency of South Korea's rise in status on the US. However, this article argues that the genesis of K-Pop music is not directly a consequence of the expanding Americanization, but is rather a result of South Korea's network of transnational relationships and interactions with the many disparate actors. All of these have contributed to the emergence of the cultural hybridity of K-Pop music. This is illustrated by the examination of five contributory examples including: (1) The emergence of the global "fandom", (2) The critical role of the YouTube platform, (3) The success of Korean songs in international music charts, (4) Collaborations between Korean and Western artists, and (5) K-Pop plagiarism. What lies behind K-Pop music growth is not American cultural imperialism but instead the transnational hybridization of many global cultural inputs. Considering that it is this hybridization of myriad competing cultural influences that is the main essence of K-Pop music rather than the hegemonic or imperialistic explanation which views K-Pop as an imitation of American pop music, this situation could possibly lead to the decolonizing of K-Pop music eventually.

**Keywords:** Americanization, cultural hybridity, globalization, K-Pop music, mimicry, orientalism

### บทคัดย่อ

นับตั้งแต่วิกฤติการเงินในเอเชีย ความสำเร็จของเพลงป๊อปเกาหลีสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงการฟื้นฟูเศรษฐกิจและวัฒนธรรมเกาหลีได้ได้อย่างเด่นชัด การส่งออกสินค้าทางวัฒนธรรมได้ส่งเสริมให้เกาหลีได้กลายเป็นประเทศมหาอำนาจที่สำคัญประเทศหนึ่งในเอเชีย เพลงป๊อปเกาหลีสถานภาพอำนาจนำซึ่งผูกโยงเข้ากับชาติรวมถึงหยั่งรากลึกลงในกระแสการกลายเป็นอเมริกันในช่วงหลังสงครามเกาหลี ซึ่งตอกย้ำให้เห็นถึงการที่เกาหลีได้ต้องพึ่งพาสหรัฐอเมริกา อย่างไรก็ตาม บทความนี้มุ่งนำเสนอว่าต้นกำเนิดของเพลงป๊อปเกาหลี มิใช่ผลโดยตรงจากกระแสการกลายเป็นอเมริกัน หากแต่เป็นผลมาจากเครือข่ายความสัมพันธ์และปฏิสัมพันธ์ข้ามชาติของเกาหลีใต้ที่มีต่อตัวแสดงที่หลากหลาย ซึ่งส่งผลต่อการถือกำเนิดของความผสมผสานทางวัฒนธรรมของเพลงป๊อปเกาหลีทั้งสิ้น ดังที่เห็นได้จากตัวอย่างที่สำคัญ 5 ข้อ ดังต่อไปนี้ (1) การกำเนิดแฟนด้อม (2) บทบาทของเว็บไซต์ยูทูบ (3) ความสำเร็จของเพลงเกาหลีในการจัดอันดับเพลงสากล (4) การร่วมสร้างสรรค์ผลงานระหว่างศิลปินเกาหลีและศิลปินตะวันตก และ (5) การคัดลอกผลงานเพลงป๊อปเกาหลี ทำยที่สุด การพิจารณาว่าการผสมผสานอิทธิพลทางวัฒนธรรมที่หลากหลายเป็นหัวใจสำคัญของเพลงป๊อปเกาหลี แทนคำอธิบายแบบจักรวรรดินิยมซึ่งมองเพลงป๊อปเกาหลีในฐานะการลอกเลียนแบบเพลงป๊อปอเมริกัน จะสามารถนำไปสู่การถอดรื้อความเป็นอาณานิคมของเพลงป๊อปเกาหลีได้

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## **1. Introduction**

Along with Thailand and Indonesia, South Korea was one of the countries most severely damaged by the Asian financial crisis of 1997 (The so-called “Tom-Yum-Koong Crisis”). K-Pop has been a crucial and visible part of the nation’s recovery ever since. From the late-1990s onwards, the country has risen to become one of the most powerful in Asia. This has been true in terms of technology, the economy, and most particularly, its cultural influence. This is because the South Korean government has acted simultaneously to encourage the growth of both highly technological manufacturing industries and cultural exports such as K-Pop music in order to advance the growth of economic and trading trends of a burgeoning export-oriented industry (EOI) that is exporting ever more of goods across Asia and the rest of the world so as to rebuild the country’s economy. Due to this symbiotic relationship between manufactured exports and the spread of K-Pop music, it can be said that the genre is not just vapid entertainment for mass consumption by the people but also a remarkable and unique feature of the modern nation of South Korea.

Due to its close and ongoing relationship with the US since the Korean War in the 1950s, Korean pop culture has often been denigrated as being merely a resulting by-product of Americanization. While it is undeniable that the US music industry influenced the inculcation of the K-Pop phenomenon in a top-down manner throughout the post-war development of South Korea, (see Hahm, 1986; Cohen, 2002; Park, 2009; Bandow, 2014; Bondaz, 2018) both the K-Pop music industry (as producers) and K-Pop songs themselves (as products), have clearly demonstrated that they are not merely the result of America’s monolithic and inescapable influence but are instead both (re-)produced as results of the (re-)combination of many factors drawn from the eclectic *mélange* of transnational relations involving innumerable and disparate actors. This occurred at all levels from, but not limited to, government-to-government relations down to individuals interacting within and between states. The K-Pop music industry has both assimilated American cultural influences and then successfully hybridized them with local factors and the distinct national culture, emphasizing the transnational relationship between the two cultures.

In order to prove that popular forms of culture are not always American-dominated in a top-down manner nor separately unique across the globe but culturally hybridized and transnationally intertwined, this paper emphasizes the transnationality of the K-Pop music phenomenon and its wider implications as shown in five cases, including: (1) The global emergence of the K-Pop fan-club community (so-called “fandom”), (2) The prominent role of the YouTube

video sharing platform among K-Pop fans, (3) The rising success of Korean language songs in international music charts, (4) Collaborations between Korean and Western artists, and (5) Cases of K-Pop plagiarism. Starting by discussing how the “Korean Wave” [known in South Korea as “Hallyu” (한류)] became a truly global cultural project or phenomenon and how such cultural hybridization began with interactions between Korean actors and their international counterparts, the claim that this was driven by a top-down, American neo-colonization expressed through music can be re-assessed or refuted as it becomes apparent that the American imperialist culture is, more or less, influenced reciprocally by the emerging Korean Wave. Therefore, it is necessary for the American pop music industry (as producers) and American pop songs (as products) to gradually adapt themselves to the emergence and growth of K-Pop in the global music market. American pop culture, which has previously been thought of as the pre-eminent source of global pop culture, can at last be effectively debunked.

## 2. Korean wave and the K-Pop industry

The K-Pop music industry together with other related industries such as Korean film, TV series, fashion and cosmetic products rapidly became prominent in the global cultural and pop music markets in the late 1990s and 2000s. This was due in part to the government’s policy of supporting the so called “Korean Wave”, which came to be a crucial part of the neoliberal economic-reform policy in the late-1990s (Kim, 2017a, p.2369). Meanwhile, the South Korean government needed to respond to the challenge of another big wave of cultural output originating in Taiwan [known as the “Taiwanese Wave”, or “Tairyu” (다이류)] and building its reputation chiefly via cultural products (e.g. film, drama, song, etc.), made available across Asia in the early-2000s in the same way as those from South Korea. For example, in 2001, after being broadcast in numerous Asian countries, the Taiwanese TV series “Meteor Garden” (流星花園) amassed a huge Asian fan-club, and this was in turn used to launch the careers of the four main actors as a real boy-band known as “F4”. Meanwhile, existing Taiwanese music bands (e.g. 5566, 183 Club, S.H.E, and Fahrenheit) were widely and warmly welcomed by audiences across Asia. However, in 2004, South Korea mounted a challenge to Taiwan’s cultural pre-eminence and resulting wealth by successfully exporting a famous South Korean TV series entitled “Winter Sonata” (겨울연가). This earned about \$3.5 million in Japan alone (Lee, 2011 cited in Sinsomboonthong, 2020, p.121). This cultural export duel between Taiwan and South Korea was eventually brought to a conclusion when South Korean bands

such as TVXQ, Big Bang, Super Junior, etc. came to dominate the attention of audiences across the US, Asia, Europe and even Latin America.

It was not only the South Korean government but also the private sector which were keen to promote their cultural output to out-compete that of Taiwan. The first and largest K-Pop music company, “SM Entertainment”, was first established as “SM Studio” in 1989 and only later renamed officially in 1995. It was led throughout by its founder, “Lee Soo Man” (이수만), and prominent CEO, Kim Youngmin (김영민), who used it to firmly establish the nascent K-Pop music industry. The most notable contribution of this company to the narrative of the K-Pop phenomenon is the way it changed the Korean business acumen by introducing the “idol system” as the company entirely molds its cohorts of trainees to go on to become artists and creatively develops and integrates various products to support their sales of music. The K-Pop idol system, which was derived and developed from the pre-existing “J-Pop” music industry of Japan, has been systematically adapted and refined. It led to the distinctive sound of K-Pop music, making it a genre that is now recognized in the global music market. According to Oh (2013 cited in Sinsomboonthong, 2020, p.122), K-Pop music is exceptionally distinct and can easily be recognized by its focus on the following elements: (1) the number of singers on stage at a time and the systematic choreography they adhere to, (2) image and height of artists, and (3) vocal harmony and fixed roles for each member. Characteristically, each member is instructed to exchange their dance position predictably and systematically on stage. Also, they are required to have a “perfect” body shape, whitened skin and to be at least 160 cm in height. Finally, the main vocalists in particular are required to sing in harmony while dancing, and each member has their role in the group (e.g. a leader, the main vocalist, a dancer, a “Maknae” [the youngest member (막내)], etc.). Due to these remarkable distinguishing characteristics, the K-Pop music industry has earned its audiences’ attention across the globe in recent years and has made K-Pop an integral part of the country’s economy, indeed Bloomberg claims that it earned 4.7 million KRW in 2016 (Kim, 2017b).

This format allowed the Korean Wave to rapidly flow across the region and later the world in a short period due to its finely honed online marketing strategy initiated by Kim Youngmin, who harnessed the synthesis of the producers SM Entertainment and the YouTube platform, making the rapid success of the genre possible (Oh, 2013). Due to this meteoric rise, K-Pop music productions, their distribution, advertising and marketing have swiftly evolved. Meanwhile, consumers’ behaviors have changed from the era of accessing their favorite songs solely through radio broadcasts, scheduled MV on broadcast TV shows or purchasing their

preferred cassettes or VCDs. After SM Entertainment reoriented their strategy toward online marketing, consumers found that they could more easily get access to their favorite songs and more freely explore new songs at any time. This proved to be one of the most effective ways to popularize the K-pop music genre in the late-2000s, and this could be considered as the driving force behind South Korea's revival of its economy after the crisis and distinguishing itself on the global stage.

### 3. Orientalism, cultural hybridity and US-South Korea relations

South Korea has been interacting with other states in different ways on the global stage in the decades since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, most notably in its relations between South Korea and the US. The country has been an ally of the US since the Korean War. The President of South Korea, Lee Myung-Bak (이명박), wrote on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Korean War that:

*“... About 37,000 Americans lost their lives. They fought for the freedom of Koreans they did not even know, and thanks to their sacrifices, the peace and democracy of the republic were protected. ... I firmly believe that future generations in both countries will further advance the strong Republic of Korea-U.S. alliance into one befitting the spirit of the new age.”* (Myung-Bak, 2010)

However, this partnership is not on an equal basis but is highly asymmetric in terms of power as Korea has depended on the US economically, politically and culturally in the decades following the partition of North and South Korea. The K-Pop music industry has been extensively influenced by the expanding American cultural hegemony which has been extant since the end of the Cold War. One of many examples of this dominance is that most of the American army bases served to proselytize and popularize American pop music in South Korea following WWII and the Korean War. It gradually replaced the distinctive, repetitive, indigenous Korean genre known as “Trot music” [“Ppongjjak” (뽕짝)] and led Korean listeners to the easy-listening pop ballad music produced in the 1980s, turning the Korean society toward the melodramatic and romantic vibes of the era (Shim, 2006). It seems that American pop-culture has been an immensely powerful influence throughout the post war cultural history up until the present. American pop music and American pop fashion are still seen as the dominant influences on the K-Pop music industry. Due to this perception, Americanization is considered

as acting in a top-down manner, influencing the cultural output of South Korea and dominating K-Pop music production, advertising and marketing.

The relationship between the dominant extant American culture and the emergent South Korean K-Pop might best be understood in terms of the relationship between “the West/ Europe” and “the East/ the rest/ the Orient” or rather “the colonizer” and “the colonized”. This polarization is not predicated on an equal basis nor externally determined by one or other power but is determined organically by the interaction of the Western influences with Eastern cultures, based on imaginative geography, not geo-political ones. So, the meaning and representation of Oriental influences are shaped by the hands of the Western observers (Said, 1978, p.43) in a colonial discourse, which is defined as “*the ways that representations and modes of perception are used as fundamental weapons of colonial power to keep colonized peoples subservient to colonial rule.*” (McLeod, 2000, p.17) Meanwhile, the orient is represented and stereotyped as an object of domination, longing for the West’s conduct and supervision (Hiddleston, 2009). This is what Said (1978) calls “orientalism”<sup>1</sup>, or “*the systematic body of theory and practice that constructs or represents the Orient*” (Said, 1978, p.6 in Kapoor, 2008, p.6), and can be principally understood as the way in which the West’s Others or the Orient are located and defined. It this is reproduced by academics and the body of modern knowledge, enabling the West to assume its exceptional status based on the intellectual division between “the West/Europe” and “the East/the rest/ the Orient”, and leads to the inevitable Othering of the Orient (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001, p.48). It can be said that orientalism is what lies behind the bifurcation of “the West/Europe” and “the East/the rest/the Orient” in the South Korea-US relations.

However, even though the Saidian framework described above is necessary to understand the importance of colonial discourse for understanding how postcolonial cultures first emerged and were subsequently sustained, it is not enough to identify the ambivalences and internal inconsistencies within the colonial discourse (Bhabha 1994 cited in Go, 2016, p.42). It would be misleading to claim that the colonial discourse is uncontestable. The discourse is, in fact, clearly refutable as American pop music can be seen to be influenced in return by the rise of K-Pop music in the global market. According to Bhabha (1994), the colonial discourse is both incomplete and inherently unstable, while its internal tensions and ambivalences open windows of opportunity for disruption and subversion from within. One particular and distinct concept to be discussed here is “mimicry”, proposed by Bhabha (1994), who claims that as the colonized people are directed by the colonizer to become “civilized” like the West, or



simply “Westernized”, they feel the need to mimic their masters. However, paradoxically, once the colonized become more Westernized, the boundary between the colonizer and the colonized becomes less clear and is indeed no longer identifiable. The colonizers become reluctant to continue to be restricted to their order; on the one hand, they urge the colonized to emulate them and but on the other, they have to rescind their order to leave their perceived superiority intact. The ambivalence concerning the dominance of colonial authority is possible in this sense as Bhabha (1994, p.140) claims that “*the ambivalence of colonial authority is repeatedly turned from mimicry – a difference that is almost nothing but not quite – to menace.*” The claim of cultural domination acting exclusively in one direction and in a top-down manner is, then, possibly challenged by the fact of K-Pop’s bottom-up genesis. The previously clear boundary between the two paradigms, arising as it does as a direct result of such a questionable law of division, seems irredeemably blurred now as American pop culture can no longer be differentiated from that of K-Pop.

Due to this, it is important to note that it is not only the law of division that should be questioned and investigated, but also the ways in which such a law, created by “the colonizer”, is inevitably contested by “the colonized”. Contrary to the Saidian framework, it can be argued that K-Pop music is not merely a consequence of the assumed discourse made by the American cultural expansion, but it is rather an unintended by-product of American cultural expansion interacting with South Korean cultural responses simultaneously.

#### 4. The transnationalization of K-Pop

Globalization is often seen solely as a natural process of furthering Western cultural domination (e.g. fashion, music genre, etc.); however, it only connects local particularities. Globalization in this paradigm is, then, a self-contradictory process in the sense that as it adopts new localities within its process while it is expanding itself across borders. So, it does not simply replace localities but instead links them together into a dynamic network (Held & McGrew, 2003, p.3). Due to this interconnectivity, it becomes apparent that “the global” does not exist separately and discretely from the “glocal” or indeed from within “the local” but sustains itself within both (Robertson, 1992 cited in Roudometof, 2015, p.2). Hence, globalization is *ipso facto* “glocalized” as this term signifies the particularization of universalism and the simultaneous universalization of particularities. In other words, globalization is not an absolute homogenizing process nor a uniquely Western project of domination. It is a (transnational) heterogenization driven by the organic process of cultural hybridization.

Considering K-Pop songs in particular, Yoon (2017a) claims that, even though Asian Canadian fans have to deal with geographic and linguistic barriers in their K-Pop music enjoyment, they could simply engage with K-Pop music without its literal translation nor geographic benefit by strategically using existing social media platforms. However, the cultural implication of K-Pop Music in Yoon (2017a) does not work, does not show enough cultural hybridity in K-Pop music itself nor the K-Pop music industry. The use of social media platforms in his work does not sufficiently question the power relations nor interactions between the global and the local.

Both general Western styles and unique aesthetic and performative elements of Korean popular culture – which is distinguished from the Western ones – are interdependently contained in K-Pop music (see Fuhr, 2016). Hybridization of English language and Western style in Japanese songs (see Moody, 2006) and Hindi songs (see Kachru, 2006) demonstrate how transnationalized popular forms of culture re-adjust the power relations between the global and the local. So do K-Pop songs [as noted in Jin & Ryoo (2014)]. The use of English mix in with K-Pop lyrics shows that the notion of cultural uniqueness can be contested as it demonstrates the process by which popular forms of culture – like music – are culturally hybridized at a transnational level. These three papers, then, share the same basis that globalization does not discourage the power of the local but empowers and strengthens it instead. The power of the local is vital for the flow of cultural globalization as it connects the whole world together. Therefore, the single hegemonic power, which is American cultural imperialism, cannot fully control the process of hybridization in a top-down manner but is contested, negotiated, and dispersed by it (see Bhabha, 1994, pp.214-216; Kraidy, 2005, pp.75-76, both cited in Jin & Ryoo, 2014, p.115).

Mainly focusing on the K-Pop music industry instead of the K-Pop songs, Shim (2006) presents fruitful information on the history of the K-Pop music industry and shows the way in which the K-Pop music industry has grown in the 1990s due to the interactions between South Korea and Western values of democracy. However, Shim (2006) lacks theoretical engagement in explaining the cultural hybridization of the K-Pop music industry. This paper only claims such cultural phenomenon on the basis of historical facts without consideration of power relations in the cosmo-political level.

As a result of the Korean Wave or any globalizing cultural project run by post-crisis South Korean governments and the K-Pop industry itself, K-Pop songs (as the product) and, especially the K-Pop music industry (as the producer), are transnationally connected with

many and various actors across the globe as shown in the selected five cases: (1) the emergence of the K-Pop fan-club community (the so-called “fandom”) across the globe, (2) the use of YouTube by K-Pop fans to upload their videos to the internet, (3) the rise of Korean songs in international music charts, (4) several successful collaborations between K-Pop artists and famous Western artists, and (5) plagiarism of renowned K-Pop songs.

Firstly, the panoply of diasporic K-Pop fan-club communities (the so-called “fandom”) formed as cultural communities emerged and interacted with each other to form a dynamic network of localities created by globalization in the form of the Korean Wave. A number of distinct overseas fandoms have been investigated explored, the study by Sung (2013) for example, study of the reception of K-pop and interactions between local private and public sponsors as well as communities of fans in Austria, and Trzcińska’s (2018) research on the formation of Polish K-Pop fandom, and the establishment of structures and communication networks within this community. Another research project in the Philippines was conducted by Jang & Song (2017), focusing on the participatory efforts and fan activities of Filipino K-Pop fandom to promote cultural contact between the two countries. Last but not least, Yoon (2019) conducted a research project investigating how young Asian Canadian fans negotiate their cultural distance, stereotyping by non-fans as well as the emergence of a particular sense of belonging in Vancouver, Canada (see also Yoon, 2018; Yoon, 2017b; Yoon & Jin, 2016).

According to Choi and Maliangkay (2015), and later Yoon and Jin (2016), K-Pop fandoms across the globe are constituted as a result of the struggle for cultural recognition in the Western cultural landscape. K-Pop fans are, then, defined as “cultural subaltern” groups (or subordinate social groups) on the basis of “minority solidarity” (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015, p.14). This claim is supported by Yoon (2017b, p.117) who explains that *“young Asian Canadian fans seemed to feel good about themselves and their ethnic backgrounds by being connected with other Asian youth.”* Because of this, K-Pop fandoms can be considered as a resistance to the Western hegemony and its apparent cultural imperialism while challenging the universal idea of musical aesthetics through their K-Pop practices and the ensuing record-breaking performance in international music charts, which are discussed in the following cases.

Secondly, the YouTube video sharing platform was created in the West to act as a universal media platform, however, it would be overstating the case to propose that this platform was created explicitly to expand the sphere of influence of Western pop culture as it functions neutrally. That is to say, Youtube.com does not limit its support to particularly Western genres or content originating in particular areas or genres of music, but instead it

provides access to all genres, from any geographical origin and any individuals from anywhere in the world. Although Youtube.com was created in the West, the use of this platform does not preferentially serve any imperialist purposes that may be held by the West. It has instead been used to undermine the perceived hegemonic status of the Western music industry in the global music market.

According to Yoon (2017b), reaction videos and K-Pop cover dance records on YouTube platform have been used by Asian Canadian youths to emphasize their unique cultural identity quite apart from their cultural origin and to challenge the Western-oriented music market on the global level. This supports the findings of Ono and Kwon (2013) who claim that Western-owned media platforms, as exemplified by YouTube.com, can be used to effectively respond to postcolonial objectives that may be held by postcolonial media producers and audiences. This case demonstrates that cultural hybridization and transnational interactions occur between various actors on social media, such as members of the same fandom living in different countries, different fandoms in the same country, different fandoms in different countries, and so on, and is expressed through their creation and uploading of reaction videos and K-Pop cover dance records.

Thirdly, many K-Pop songs have reached surprisingly high positions in international music charts compiled at the global level. Even though initially, back in the 1990s, K-Pop adopted the Western hip-hop music style into its mainstream pop songs – as seen in the case of Seo Taiji and the Boys (서태지와 아이들), one of the most powerful K-Pop bands responsible for introducing hip-hop and rap to the Korean society (see Shim, 2006; Lie, 2012; Yoon, 2017b) – it seems that since the 2000s, K-Pop has not limited itself to following trends and shaping itself to conform with its domestic market. Instead, the K-Pop music industry, together with its associated K-Pop fandoms, have pushed their K-Pop formula out onto the global music market. As a result of this, several K-Pop songs have become globally recognized, and some are even globally favored as seen in the case of PSY (Park Jae-sang: 박재상) who made pop music history in 2012 when his single “Gangnam Style” (강남스타일) interestingly won numerous awards<sup>2</sup>, while its MV became the most-played video on YouTube.com for five years, exceeding the maximum possible number of views and leading to a necessary code change in the site’s software to expand the limit of views. (Savage, 2017).

Another interesting case is that of the top K-Pop girl group, “Girls’ Generation (소녀시대)”. On November 3, 2013, their single, “I Got a Boy”, won the Video of the Year Award at the 1<sup>st</sup> YouTube Music Awards (YTMA) as SONEs, fans of Girls’ Generation, shared, commented on,

and/or liked the MV, counted in the YTMAs' voting system.<sup>3</sup> It utterly surprised the Western media and most Western audiences and succeeded in drawing their attention to the girl group ever since (see Holpuch, 2013; Rothman, 2013). Moreover, this song successfully reached number one on both Billboard's Korea K-Pop Hot 100 at the end of January 2013 and the Gaon Digital Chart from December 2012 to January 2013.

Similarly, BTS, also known as the Bangtan Boys (Bangtan Sonyeondan: 방탄소년단), made history when their single "Mic Drop" made them the first K-Pop group to receive a hat trick of new certifications from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) in 2018 (Herman, 2018). They also won Top Social Artist in 2017-2019 as well as Top Duo/Group at the 26th Billboard Music Awards in Las Vegas on May 1, 2019, releasing three number one albums in less than a year with Love Yourself: Tear (2018), Love Yourself: Answer (2018) and Map of the Soul: Persona (2019) – an achievement that equaled the long-standing record held by The Beatles. As a result, the band was celebrated as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2019 by Time Magazine and were ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> in Forbes Celebrity 100 in the same year as one of the world's highest-paid boy bands (Mercuri, 2019). Also, the band was even proclaimed by Bang Si-Hyuk (방시혁), Big Hit Entertainment CEO and founder, to be "The Beatles of the YouTube Generation" at the ASEAN-ROK Culture Innovation Summit on November 25, 2019, in Busan, South Korea (Benjamin, 2019). Due to their fame, the band partnered with UNICEF to establish their "Love Myself" anti-violence campaign, which gave them a special opportunity to speak at the 73<sup>rd</sup> United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on September 24, 2018.

Considering that K-Pop music has grown to reach such high rankings in international music charts and received many international awards, this demonstrates what Bhabha decries as "mimicry" since K-Pop music appearing at high rankings in international music charts would seem to defy the accepted law of division between the West (as the colonizer) and the Orient or the K-Pop (as the colonized). Also, as K-Pop itself is fundamentally a product of cultural hybridity, it not only disproves this law of division, but also empowers itself to become puissant enough to challenge the assumed superiority of Western music. Furthermore, its exceptional reach has allowed for its success in international music charts, a feat previously reserved exclusively for Western songs over the decades. The ever-increasing success of K-Pop songs in international music charts confirms K-Pop's global recognition, and its world-wide popularity, and this further demonstrate that the supposed superiority of Western music and its position in the global music industry is not a given.

Fourthly, although the US music market, which has become the global and universal standard and is the product of cultural imperialism, it is now itself influenced by the emerging Korean Wave. Meanwhile, K-Pop music does not always imitate Western influences in the global music market in a unidirectional way, but rather the Western music industry is simultaneously influenced by the rise of K-Pop music, as witnessed in collaborations or tracks characteristically “featuring” world-class Western artists working alongside K-Pop acts. In September 2018, BTS collaborated with Nicki Minaj on the English version of “Idol” for their repackaged album “Love Yourself: Answer”<sup>4</sup>, while Blackpink (블랙핑크) and Dua Lipa co-created an electro-pop song, “Kiss and Make up”, released on October 19, 2018. On the same date, an entirely English language R&B ballad, “Written in the Stars”, was released on YouTube.com as the fruit of a collaboration between Wendy (Shon Seung-Wan: 손승완), [the lead vocalist of Red Velvet (레드벨벳)], and John Legend as part of SM Entertainment’s Station x 0 (Station Young) collaboration project.

While the first four cases refer to the positive aspects of South Korean interactions with Western acts at the global level, this last case focuses on the other side of the same coin. As some K-Pop songs became more popular and were succeeding in the global music market, there was no guarantee that these successful K-Pop songs would received a positive response. In other words, the popularity of K-Pop songs does not always equate to high numbers of sales or downloads, but instead can sometimes lead to copyright infringements in the form of plagiarism. Some famous K-Pop songs have been plagiarized and translated into local languages. For example, 2NE1’s “I’m the Best” (내가 제일 잘 나가) in 2011 was copied and released as “Chipi Cha Cha” by a Spanish band called La Materialista in 2013, and in another such case, T-Ara (티아라)’s 2009 hit “Bo Peep Bo Peep” (보핍보핍) was plagiarized by the Mexican girl group TBC Girls in “their” 2011 song “Papi”. Lastly, unlike the first two cases, the lyrics of the internationally popular “The Boys” by Girls’ Generation in 2011 were not plagiarized. Instead, the singers’ costumes, background, video sequence and storyline of this MV were all copied by Indian girl group Santokh Singh in their song “Ring Diamond Di”, released on YouTube.com in 2015.

Although these five cases might not be directly and causally determined by one another, they should be reassessed as representing how the first and the second cases refer to ways in which the unique (transnational) identity is made outside of South Korea. The global diasporic community of K-Pop aficionados is almost a requirement for global K-Pop consumption and production, directly impacting on the K-Pop music industry as the producer. Without these two cases, the status quo of the Western music industry and its superior position might never have been contested. However, as the transnational links and the distinctive K-Pop cultural identity are

both made possible by today's information technology, the West's colonial discourse and its representation of the subservient Orient has clearly been undermined by the success of K-Pop music from within as the West couldn't contain or restrain the rise of the K-Pop phenomenon. Lastly, the fourth and last cases emphasize that the rise of K-Pop music does not challenge the West's superiority in a confrontational manner; but instead, constructs a new kind of aesthetic that stimulates the Western music industry to re-evaluate its perception of the relationship between the Western culture and K-Pop differently by overturning K-Pop's position from trend follower to trendsetter. Ultimately, K-Pop has achieved recognition as a *bona fide* influence on Western cultural output in its own right.

## 5. Conclusion: reconceptualizing the "Koreanized" American culture

As the K-Pop music industry is now fortified by the global profits generated by the global K-Pop fandoms and attention from other producers in the global music market, it has influenced the Western-oriented music market at the global level in some ways, forcing the market to adapt itself to this ongoing cultural change. As K-Pop gradually becomes a global trendsetter in terms of music and fashion, the cultural landscape of the global music market is no longer the same.

Although the country highlights cultural hybridity in its K-Pop music, which is exported across Asia and the rest of the world as one of the most profitable products of South Korea and represented as a remarkable nationed feature in the global music market, it does not simply mean that Koreanness will disappear or even be replaced by transnationality. Instead, global recognition of K-Pop and its transnational linkages are both utilized to reconstruct its own identity following the Korean War (as the US's proxy) and the Asian financial crisis (as one of the most affected countries). The transnationality of K-Pop music is considered as the key to the national identity. Then, it can be alternatively understood that, instead of being determined and influenced by the US, this country's nationalism is formed in response to international recognition and transnational linkages.

The emergence of K-Pop fandom, and the use of Youtube.com among Asian Canadian youths highlighted in Yoon's work (2017b), the rise of K-Pop songs in international music charts, the multiplicity of collaboration between Korean and Western artists, and the cases of K-Pop plagiarism emphasize that globalization might not always be a hegemonic top-down Imperialist project of the American pop culture industry but rather a process of empowering and linking localities as well as undermining the law of separation, which once discrepantly demarcated

the meaning of the colonizer and the colonized. It can be argued that explaining the making of South Korean cultural identity only as a consequence of the Americanization is equivalent to the maintenance of colonial discourse, limiting understanding of the making of K-Pop culture and the country's (postcolonial) cultural identity in the wake of the Korean War and the Asian financial crisis.

Due to this, a neat consideration on its cultural hybridity and its (transnational) cultural politics in the global music market is needed for rejecting the imperialistic framework and colonial discourse, both once subordinating K-Pop culture on an inferior position for so long. However, as the Korean government and the K-Pop music industry realize that the more they emphasize the K-Pop's cultural hybridity and maintain its transnational linkages, the greater amount of benefits they can gain economically, politically, culturally and discursively. Considering cultural hybridity as the main essence of K-Pop music rather than the imperialistic explanation that it imitates American pop music, this could possibly lead to an eventual decolonization of K-pop music.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is not simply an idea but a discourse systematically functioning to represent and re-present the rest of the world as 'the Orient' through the Western notion, idea and paradigm (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Including the Best Video award at the MTV Europe Music Awards in Frankfurt; the New Media Honoree at the American Music Awards in Los Angeles; the Best Video and the Song of the Year at the Mnet Asian Music Awards in Hong Kong; and the Best Song at Melon Music Awards in Seoul. In the following year, the song won the Digital Daesang (Grand Prize in Digital Releasing) at the Golden Disk Awards in Kuala Lumpur; the Song of the Year and the Best Dance and Electronic Song at the Korean Music Awards in Seoul; and the Top Streaming Song at the Billboard Music Awards in Las Vegas.

<sup>3</sup> As a result of this, this MV could win other nominees, for example, Demi Lovato, Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus, One Direction, Justin Bieber feat. Nicki Minaj, or even PSY.

<sup>4</sup> Nick Minaj posted on her personal Instagram ("nickiminaj") about their collaboration on August 28, 2018.

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