

K-POP IDOLS

DAL YONG JIN AND
HARK JOON LEE

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE EMERGENCE
OF THE KOREAN MUSIC INDUSTRY

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PREFACE

When BTS's *Love Yourself: Tear*—an album released in May 2018—took the number one position on America's Billboard album chart during that month, many popular magazines, music experts, and K-pop fans were frenetic. Since winning the top social artist at 2017's Billboard music awards, BTS—a seven-member boy band from Korea—has been muscling into America's consciousness with its genre-hopping music and intricate visual narratives and finally achieved a top position in the largest music market (Glasby, 2018). As BTS was also sitting on the Top 10 UK album chart as of early July 2018, and its song “Boy With Luv” released in 2019 made another global phenomenon, it is not dicey to claim that BTS has successfully penetrated the West. From a tiny and peripheral country, BTS, and in general K-pop, has gained global popularity, encompassing Asia, Latin America, North America, and Western Europe.

What is significant is that BTS could not achieve this global stardom without previous K-pop idols. K-pop, starting in the mid-1990s, originally penetrated a few Asian countries; however, it has rapidly gained worldwide fame in the early twenty-first century. Several idol groups (musical artists signed under a mainstream entertainment agency in Korea), such as Girls' Generation, BLACKPINK, EXO, TWICE, SHINee, and BTS have gone beyond Asia to become among the most wanted international music that many global youth enjoy. Whenever Korean idol groups offer music acts, hundreds and thousands of fans,

mainly teens and people in their twenties, get together to cheer for their favorite idol members and musicians.

As several K-pop idol groups and solo artists have continued to appear in many parts of the world, both music producers and academics in many countries are looking more closely at the K-pop phenomenon. What they are also interested in are the reasons for the rapid growth of K-pop and the formation of idol groups, differentiating these from other countries' music and musicians. They especially pay attention to the star making system characterizing the Korean music industry. In fact, as *The Guardian* (Glasby, 2018)—a UK newspaper—reported, there are various reasons for the success of K-pop in the global scene; however, one major element is certainly the increasing role of entertainment agencies, such as SM Entertainment, JYP, YG, FNC, and Bit Hit Entertainment. They audition and train hundreds of teenagers before placing only a select few into new idol groups. These entertainment agencies also do everything in-house: management, training, production, concerts/events, and public relations.

However, people do not know much about the star making process, which is fiercely competitive and grueling even as K-pop idol groups are becoming globally popular. In the Korean entertainment industry, hundreds of thousands of young people, even those in their early teens, knock on the door to lead them to K-pop stardom, spawning countless wounded souls as a result. Since the entertainment industry is always about money and popularity, the trainees and later idol members are mainly treated as commodities. This means that they must follow highly strict guidelines and training schedules organized by entertainment agencies to become K-pop stars. This star-making process has not been revealed because the images of idol trainees and members are everything in the music industry.

This book started with Hark Joon Lee's ambitious participant observation of Nine Muses, which was a girl idol group that Star Empire—an entertainment agency—trained. Based on his observations during the period of one year, he published the outcome as a book in Korean. Later, Lee wanted to translate it into English and spoke of it with Dal Yong Jin, a media scholar known for his expertise in the Korean Wave and globalization. We (Hark Joon Lee and Dal Yong Jin) discussed the possibility and decided to add academic and analytical frameworks in

order to appeal to people who study K-pop as well as the general readers.

In this English version, by observing K-pop trainees (Nine Muses members) in Star Empire and reality competition shows, in particular, *Produce 101* and *Produce 102*, we see first-hand the process of how the idol group has been formed and how its members have developed their skills. We go beyond mere reportage as we contain the raw stories of myriad trainees who offer up their sweat and tears on the altar of stardom while their worried families watch from the sidelines. Many idol trainees are used to 10 hours of grueling practice during the day because they hope to edge out the competition.

We not only chronicle the everyday lives of trainees, but also discuss how they become commodities and the inner workings of the byzantine K-pop world, which is rife with jealousy, mud-slinging, competition and shifting alliances. Nine Muses especially provided an excellent perspective into the world of pop music stardom because they opened people's eyes to the underside of the K-pop industry.

Since this book is distinctively converging theory and practice, which has not been done in previous works, this book will be a fascinating look into this particular showbiz industry. By analyzing their attempts to become global celebrities, we expect this well-documented research will shed light on our debates on the growing K-pop phenomenon, which is rapidly becoming part of global media systems and culture. Throughout the discussion, we hope to shed light on current developments and place them in a perspective that has relevance for future K-pop studies and production.

We convey our thanks to the Nine Muses members, CEO Shin Joo-hak and the managers of Star Empire who gave a great opportunity for us to observe the training process. We also want to express our appreciation to stall members, including producer Kim Min-chul and Lee Suk-kee from the documentary film *Nine Muses of Star Empire*. As talked, Parts II and III of the book were published in Korean first; therefore, we slightly updated and changed the format and text, while heavily retaining the original context. Therefore, we thank Hyejin Jo who initially translated the Korean version into English. Meanwhile, Courtney McLaren as an avid SHINee fan herself reviewed the translated manuscripts. Both are graduate students at Simon Fraser University. These

K-pop fans turned into future academics are some of the most significant assets for the growth of K-pop, both academically and practically.

I

Emergence of K-Pop

EMERGENCE OF K-POP AS TRANSNATIONAL POPULAR CULTURE

During the 2017 American Music Awards (AMAs) held in November 2017, global K-pop (Korean popular music) fans anxiously paid attention to BTS's appearance in this music event. Psy already performed on the American Music Awards stage with his signature song "Gangnam Style" in 2012, and therefore, it is not new for K-pop fans to watch K-pop musicians' appearance on AMAs. However, BTS's performance made another history as the seven-member boy band idol group broke a chart record by climbing to the top of the US iTunes, for the first time, for K-pop musicians.

The group are having a right old time of it at the moment, having caught everyone's attention at the AMAs earlier this month. And now, having dropped their Steve Aoki remix of Mic Drop, fans have gone wild. So wild in fact, they've been pushed to the top of the iTunes chart—they are the first K-pop band to score a number one on the Apple download service. They previously charted at number four with *DNA*, which was the highest chart for a K-pop band, and follow in Psy's footsteps, who topped the chart with "Gangnam Style." (Baillie, 2017)

More significantly, BTS bumped from No. 4 to No. 1 on the Billboard Artist 100 chart (dated June 2) to become the top musical act in the US for the first time, fueled by the arrival of the group's new album, *Love Yourself: Tear*. The seven-member boy band is the first K-pop act—and

first act that records primarily in a language other than English—to lead the list since the chart's July 2014 inception (Zeliner, 2018). After their first ever US TV performance at the AMAs, later including on *Saturday Night Live* on NBC in April 2019, BTS has continued to drive fans crazy with their eye catching clothing and amazed young crowds with the quality of their dances and vocals, resulting in their reigning supreme in the global music market.¹

As these two recent events prove, BTS's appearance on the American music program, and therefore, K-pop's global presence has been sensational; however, it does not mean that it happened suddenly. Instead, it is nothing but the continuation of the global penetration of K-pop as several K-pop idol groups or solo artists have gained global popularity in the 2010s. When *Billboard* announced its "100 Greatest Girl Group Songs of All Time: Critics' Picks" on July 10, 2017, Korea's famous Girls' Generation made the 21st spot with "I Got a Boy" (2012), followed by Wonder Girls ("Nobody," 2008), f(x) ("Rum Pum Pum Pum," 2013), Red Velvet ("Dumb Dumb," 2015), and FinKL ("Now," 2000) (*Billboard*, 2017a). Since *Billboard's* chart mainly includes American and a few European girl groups, the inclusion of five Korean girl groups in this prestigious list clearly shows the recent global popularity of Korean female idol groups and K-pop in general.

As partially indicated in the *Billboard* chart, K-pop has become one of the most popular cultural forms in the global music markets. K-pop started its regional penetration in East Asia in the late 1990s; therefore, its global presence has been relatively new, mainly since the early 2010s. Right before and after Psy's "Gangnam Style" became a global sensation in 2012, K-pop has experienced substantial global popularity and become one of the most important local cultures driving the Korean Wave, referring to the rapid growth of Korean popular culture and its Asian, followed by global appearances. Local popular music created from a small East Asian country has witnessed tremendous growth, as several K-pop musicians, whether solo artists or idol groups, have appeared in many parts of the world, including North America, Europe, Latin America, and even Africa. Global youth, from the US to Chile, chant for K-pop and local musicians. The recent flows of K-pop around the world in the 2010s suggest that K-pop exists as a local-based type of music in the global markets, including the Western markets. In other words, it seems to be increasingly becoming a unique local culture,

distancing itself farther from Western culture and representing more of Korea's youth culture (Jin, 2016).

Many media scholars and music critics in many countries, as well as global fans of K-pop are keen to learn the ways in which Korean popular music provides a significant site for cultural production and consumption. While enjoying K-pop, they want to explore not only the reasons for the growth of local popular music in the global markets, but also the major characteristics of Korea's booming music industry. In particular, not only music industries but also academics in many countries are looking more closely at the K-pop phenomenon. They desire to explore the rapid growth of K-pop and idol groups, which are selected and trained by entertainment houses, including SM Entertainment, JYP, and YG, and how the local music industry has developed the globally renowned local musicians and music.

CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF A STAR SYSTEM IN THE KOREAN ENTERTAINMENT HOUSES

Contemporary K-pop arose in the late 1990s when a few entertainment houses, in particular SM Entertainment, started to introduce and develop the idol star system, which originally developed for the film industry,² in the Korean music industry. Although music groups existed before the turn of the millennium, their musical performance abilities, in particular dancing skills, were not comparable to the current K-pop idol groups;

Until the early 2000s, the dancing and singing skills of idol groups did not match their outstanding looks, and there were huge gaps between the abilities of the group members. However, after the early 2000s, with the rise of idol groups such as TVXQ, Girls' Generation, and Big Bang, each individual member of these groups began to earn their own fan bases with their unique characteristics and remarkable singing and dancing skills. This change was a result of the unique star-making system created by Korea's entertainment and management companies. (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, 2012, 114).

SM Entertainment headed by Lee Soo-man has especially developed an in-house training system in order for idol groups to successfully make their debuts. Several entertainment agencies have consequently

selected young trainees, even those in their lower teens, through a competitive audition and/or street casting. These young trainees underwent fierce competition in the form of an intensive training program that would turn them into K-pop idol members. The training program consists of singing, dancing, and foreign language lessons targeting global music markets, such as Japan and the US. These entertainment houses conduct weekly evaluations to determine the trainees' progress, and when the trainees survive this intensive training program, they are organized into idol groups (Hong, 2014). The K-pop star factory system requires entertainment agencies to invest a lot of money up front for a very distant return. "It's a paternalistic system that disciplines its stars. This is not just a matter of ensuring that band members get along; it also means steering them away from drunk driving, drugs, or sex scandals. K-pop star training is an education of the whole person" (Hong, 2014).

Most of all, it is crucial to understand stardom from a structural approach instead of an individual approach, because "stardom is a relatively coherent system that influences and is influenced by other elements of social structure" (Marshall, 2013, 579). As Lee Marshall (2013, 579) points out, "stardom is not merely the aggregation of individual stars." Instead, "stardom is patterned. It structures (and is structured by) regularized practices and intersects with other social structural elements such as gender and ethnicity." Of course, this does not mean that we simply eliminate the significance of individual stars. What we need to understand is that one should focus on the overall structural and systematic star-making process, which has eventually influenced both musicians and music industries. As Adorno (2001, 87, cited in Marshall, 2013) discussed, we have to comprehend the ways in which the star system functions for the cultural industry. However, as Kim and Oh (2011) clearly indicated, in Korea there was no particular academic work on the star system in tandem with idols as the reflection of the rapid growth of the K-pop phenomenon starting in the late 2000s.

The star system in Korea's entertainment agencies has been controversial since its inception. For some, it has created new kinds of pop stars that people had never seen in previous decades in terms of their singing and dancing abilities. The star-making process has been severely criticized by others, however. Some Western press even alleged that it "amounts to modern-day slavery" (Hong, 2014). Consequently, critics

argue that idol stars have become cultural commodities to be sold. Indeed, partially because of the lack of agency during the workings of this star system, idols have been seen as manufactured commodities that lack authenticity. “Here, authenticity refers to non-commercialized talent—idols are planned from the beginning to be consumable products and clearly lack the artistic autonomy that is important for singers” (Kang, 2017, 137).

As Lee Marshall (2013, 578) argued, “it is impossible to conceive of popular music without stars;” therefore, the star system has been necessary for this particular small industry to make profits. However, Marshall (2013) points out that popular music stardom as a system needs to emphasize the ideological functions over the economic functions. As Negus, (1999, 169–70, cited in Marshall, 2013, 590) argues, “ideology emphasizes the cultural element of popular music and disguises the process of commodification inherent within it, providing the impression that music is created and then commodified. However, commodification is an inherent part of the production of popular music; competition and commodification are essential elements of the conditions of creativity within popular music.”

For Korea’s entertainment industries, “the idol trainee system has become widely known to the public, which threatens the balance between artistry and commercialization of popular music by emphasizing the commercialized aspect” (Kang, 2017, 137). Regardless of its necessity to build a pop industry in Korea in which the human resource pool is relatively small, it is also true that the local music industry recruits budding stars and trains them through rigorous and systematic processes (Hong, 2014). As the *New York Times* (Caramanica, 2011) explained, “the production, the management, the vocal training, the choreography, the swagger coaching—all that effort to create one teen-pop star in a country that is still starving for them. Korea has no such drought, thanks to several companies that specialize in manufacturing a steady stream of teenage idols, in groups of various configurations.”

Another major difference characterizing the K-pop star system has been transnationality targeting global music markets. As SM Entertainment and other agencies knock the global music markets, they teach foreign languages to their own trainees and/or recruit ethnic Koreans or foreigners who are able to speak English or Japanese. In this process, local entertainment agencies have developed transnational pop stars

beyond Korea's own national boundary, which has not been seen in other countries. As Sun Jung (2010, 166) argues, "transcultural hybridity is one of the most significant aspects of contemporary South Korean popular culture in the postmodern era and is the main driving force behind its overseas popularity." Of course, this implies that Korean entertainment agencies and pop idols do not care much about their own nationality and/or uniqueness. Instead, they have strived to be global entertainers, not only singing and dancing, but also engaging with global fans.

As such, the star system in the Korean music industry has developed its own unique process. Through rigorous training programs, entertainment agencies have rationalized the necessity of star-making in the cultural industry; therefore, what we emphasize is that we should understand the star-making process, not only from cultural studies perspectives but also from critical political economy perspectives due to the dual nature of the "K-pop machine" (Caramanica, 2011; Hong, 2014). As Keith Negus (2002, 115) aptly puts it, "the practices of industries, audiences and artists are shaped within a broader cultural context." In other words, the inside story of the K-pop star system should be understood through the convergence of cultural studies, mainly through participant observation as used in our book and critical political economy emphasizing the commodification of K-pop musicians through the star system. Through our explanations and analyses of Nine Muses—one of the famous female K-pop idol groups—as well as the star making system through reality competition shows, including *Produce 101*, we hope that this well-balanced study will shed light on the current debates on the star system in the Korean music industry, which itself is rapidly becoming part of the global music industry.

METHODOLOGIES

The unique and representative method for this book is participant observation, which was conducted over the one-year period between March 2010 and February 2011. While there are several major dimensions of this particular methodology, "participants are at the center of participatory research. The aim is to maximize the potential of bottom-up research. The line between those who are researchers and those who

are participants is blurred. The goal is to break free from the hierarchy that traditionally exists between the different people involved in the research process” (Wurm and Napier, 2017, 107–8). What is significant for participant observation is that

this is the basis for the creation of an atmosphere that enables a co-learning process, and an exchange of knowledge among the participants, requiring an open-mindedness and a willingness to learn and re-learn. In practice this looks as follows: rather than involving participants as (passive) informants at a later stage in the research process, leaving the design, contextualization and interpretation of the findings to the researcher, the idea is to put those who are most closely related to the object of study at the center of the enquiry and work alongside those with a research background. Rather than participants acting as mere informants who provide data to be analyzed by the researcher, knowledge production by researchers and participants is synthesized. (107–8)

More specifically, Hark Joon Lee—one of the authors of this book—joined Star Empire, a large Korean entertainment agency, as a self-professed “manager” between March 2010 and February 2011. Some researchers used to conduct ethnographic fieldwork for a limited time period, perhaps a few months; however, Lee spent the entire 12 months as the road manager in order to closely observe Nine Muses’ daily activities, which is the foundation of the book. He came to Star Empire at 10 a.m. and left the entertainment agency at 2 a.m. every day and recorded the trainees’ daily activities. Two types of records were used: one was a written diary and the other was videotaping. He spent a year working there with the permission of the CEO, Shin Joo-hak, while taking a leave of absence from *Chosun Ilbo*. During that time, he went from journalist to music group manager, because he wanted to see the hidden reality behind the glamorous facade of K-pop.

Since it was a very unique experience for the journalist, when he told his journalist colleagues about his new job in the pop music industry, they were shocked. His male colleagues joked, “You must have done something really special in a past life!” They were envious that he would get to spend time with young beauties, but in reality, the honeymoon didn't last long. Although the girl group goddesses on TV seem divine, backstage the reality is not so glamorous. In fact, their lives were rather

pitiful. Girl group trainees were often hospitalized as the result of extreme dieting. These inside stories cannot be observed since entertainment houses have strictly controlled their trainees, and therefore, information revealed is very limited. Although several previous works (Kim and Yoon, 2012; Ryu and Jin, 2012) tried to make ethnographic approaches, as Kim and Yoon's (2012) work exemplifies, they used to conduct interviews with managers and reporters who cover the Korean music industry, or they (Ryu and Jin, 2012) conducted interviews with K-pop fans, instead of idol members and/or trainees. In contrast to this, when the previous works (e.g., Lee, M. H., 2011) analyzed entertainment houses, they solely focused on the structural change in these entertainment agencies. This implies that the previous works mainly analyzed either K-pop fandom from a micro perspective or the systematic change in K-pop from a macro perspective due to their limited access to idol members and trainees. Unlike these previous works, the current study combines a year-long ethnographic field study with a critical political economy emphasizing the macro-level analysis, which makes a meso-level approach.

MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BOOK

Unlike other existing books, mainly focusing on solely academic analyses or industrial perspectives of K-pop, the book combines theory with industry and musical aesthetics. This unique approach has not been seen in other publications as the two authors of the book have combined their expertise for this project. The manuscript has been divided by several distinctive characteristics. To begin with, section one includes theoretical and methodological perspectives explaining the emergence of K-pop and its global popularity. As already discussed, we identify the star system as one of the major theoretical frameworks to critically and culturally analyze the construction of idol groups and the local music industry. This part also discusses the emergence of Korea's music industry, which has been one of the most active and noticeable in the global markets.

Then, section two analyzes the factors conditioning the success and/or failure of idol groups with the case of Nine Muses, which has been a famous but not the top girl group, based on our ethnographic and

participatory observation. Section three offers aesthetic analysis of both successful and unsuccessful global penetration of K-pop groups and musicians to serve as an example of the creation of a new transnational third culture. These two sections go beyond mere reportage and read like a collection of essays delving into the essence of modern life seen through the struggles of young women trying to achieve fame in the music industry. They contain the raw stories of myriad trainees who offer up their sweat and tears on the altar of stardom while their worried families watch from the sidelines. For example, we recount one story of a trainee who practices dance steps in the vacant lot near her house in the early hours of the morning despite having already completed 10 hours of grueling practice during the day; all this just so she can edge out the competition.

Since this book is distinctively converging theory and practice, we may need to explain the kind of synopsis of our observation of Nine Muses. In other words, other than developing our theoretical analyses, with the case of this particular idol group through a year-long chronicle, we also follow the journey of an all-girl pop group. We portray the everyday lives of nine young girls relentlessly pursuing happiness, satisfaction, and the consummation of their dreams in a world of jealousy, betrayal, and scandal. As we gained extraordinary access to the inner workings of K-pop agency Star Empire, and spent a year observing the casting, training and attempted launch of the new girl-group Nine Muses, the readers of this book may be surprised to see just how “manufactured Nine Muses are”: the (very) long hours of rehearsals are beyond physically demanding, and the upper echelons of management don’t seem to have any scruples about dehumanizing the girls. But once people have got used to seeing young women treated as robots, they will find the course of events fairly predictable: there are betrayals, rivalries and injuries, and there’s the hushed-up scandal of an illicit sexual relationship between the manager and a band member. Still, nothing beats seeing it for themselves, and this offers what must be definitive insights into the processes that keep K-pop going.

Since Nine Muses is a Korean girl group aspiring to perform on the national stage and gain world-wide fame, from an early age the girls have sacrificed personal interests and even their identities to become one of the Muses, members of a slickly produced pop group created by an entertainment company which coordinates the girls’ every move.