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Understanding Korean Society through Popular Music

Today one of the most unique aspects of inter-Asian cultural sharing is the *hallyu* wave. This social phenomenon began in Seoul, South Korea and today accounts for the all pervasive nature of Korean popular entertainment dominating the airwaves of nearly every Asian country. From Japan to Thailand, “K-pop” has conquered the Asian market, and is now turning its attention to the rest of the world. In order to illustrate this current social phenomenon, I have found many sources that all point to the same aspects in K-pop which have allowed one small country to make their entertainment business one of its most lucrative exports. The *hallyu* wave as a whole has become a blending of uniquely Korean culture with aspects of Western and other Asian cultures which has created a style unique to this particular moment of history. In the words of Sun Jung, author of the article “Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, *Oldboy*, K-Pop Idols,” “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” (Jung 166). This combination has allowed the music and film from Korea to be extremely accessible to a wide audience of various nationalities and languages.

In order to clearly illustrate the international success of *hallyu*, I will focus on one specific aspect of current Korean popular culture: music. By investigating what has received international popularity, I will show that the largest international successes of Korean entertainment have

included elements of fusion and hybridity. In Jung's words: "This is Chogukjeok (cross or trans-nationality), or the tendency to retain national specificity while deploying it as a part of a trans-border and multinational cultural figuration" (163). The growing *hallyu* wave has gained international popularity only through its elements of hybridity which fuse aspects of Korean culture and values with Western stylistic approaches to entertainment genres like music and cinema. Discussing the music business of Korea, I will not solely focus on the songs of the groups. To do so would be to ignore nearly seventy five percent of what actually makes up a successful K-Pop group. Not only do these idols have to be attractive looking, they must dance, act, make funny jokes, be athletic, and, oh yes, sing. Singing has become less than half of the package for a successful idol, thanks to technologies like auto-tune and auto-correcting mikes. In fact, S. H. Lee says this about the Korean entertainment industry: "These days, one can easily find idol stars from various media channels all around the year . . . idols used to be considered as singers who simply depend on their appealing appearances. Today's idols, however, have been significantly upgraded being armored with the well-trained singing and dancing skills which have been carefully developed under the systemized [management] system" (qtd. in Jung 169). So, as I look into the hybridity of K-Pop, I focus on not just the music but what makes up the complete idol package.

The clearest example of fusion within the Korean entertainment industry is Korean idol groups. Dubbed as K-Pop by the legion of international fans, the idol groups have accumulated in the past ten years, this conscience exportation of culture is truly unique to South Korea. Taking three of the most internationally popular groups in K-Pop, we will explore the elements of fusion that have led to their success as global stars. When determining what groups to study, it was decidedly difficult to narrow it down to four. There is such a wide variety of groups that have achieved popularity outside of South Korea that it would be easy to write a twenty page paper entirely on these idol groups. Finally, after much deliberation, my study was narrowed down to two girl groups and two boy groups, each of which has achieved unprecedented levels of popularity in the Asian market, and love from fans spread across the globe. As Shin Hyun Joon (Sin Hyŏn Chun) explains, "Since the mid-2000s, as Korea increasingly casts its outlook on foreign markets, "Asia" and "Asia networking" have become buzzwords in the Korean music industry and the cultural industries in general . . . this process is closely related to the

transformation of Korean popular music into “K-Pop” and how the new terms are more and more organized and localized along the lines of a corporate imagination of Asia” (116). Korean artists are not out to conquer Korea, they already have. Korean artists are out to conquer the world.

Within the ranks of K-pop boy idols, there is one group that stands out in their level of intercultural fusion. From their very debut they had an advantage in the international markets over their competition of newly debuted and previously established groups. JYP debuted his group 2PM with seven members from completely different backgrounds and nationalities. The former leader, Jay Park, is Korean American from Seattle, another member Taecyeon (Taegyōn) is Korean but lived in Boston for much of his up-bringing, and finally Nichkhun is American-born Thai-Chinese. The other four members are Korean-Korean but have received years of training in international marketing skills like foreign languages. In particular, according to D. H. Hong, “Thai people rather easily accept 2PM because of their own Nichkhun. Currently, 2PM is one of the top idol groups in Thailand” (Jung 166). The international nature of 2PM has allowed fans not only from Thailand to relate to them, and therefore become extremely attached to the members, but also from the United States. Having worked in the United States, JYP knew that if he focused his new group on a niche of the K-Pop genre he could draw in a new fan base. One of the reasons Jay Park was brought in from Seattle was for his b-boy skills. Korea is slightly behind the United States and Great Britain in adopting the fad of hip-hop and break dancing but in the past years it has come to embrace both. Korean hip-hop is still in its early years and JYP has used this newly introduced genre as a way in which to fuse the traditional pop sound of K-pop with the dancing style of hip-hop. 2PM differentiated itself from the very beginning by their acrobatic dancing style and their hip-hop look. No other Korean idol group performs the stunts that 2PM has made a part of their normal stages. Their music is comforting to the Asian audience due to the familiar sounding upbeat pop song about the stereotyped boy meets girl scenario, but JYP made it equally accessible to American audiences or even just hip-hop fans by creating a powerful image for his group.

2PM in appearance is decidedly different from the standard K-Pop group. Since the debut of the first idol group HOT, the look preferred by fans and producers alike is one of almost unnatural beauty. Through auditions held around the country and globe, companies like SM Entertainment

and JYP recruited pretty boys. The early 2000s were dominated by groups such as G.O.D., SS501, Super Junior, Dong Bang Shin Ki (TVXQ), and Shinee, not to mention the solo artists like Se7en and Rain, all of whom can be accurately described as being unnaturally pretty for men. The model for a male idol was firmly established as being feminine, pretty in face, slender in features and small in stature. 2PM on the other hand is made up of boys that have “Versatile masculine features” which are “not only culturally odorless but also culturally transformable” (Jung 167). Very quickly after their debut they were given the title of *chimsŭngdol*, or beast idol, a reference to their more masculine looks and physically fit bodies (which they incorporate into their stages as often as possible much to the delight of females around the world). They also chose to create images of themselves going wild on stage, JYP having given 2PM songs and choreography that is “wild” in the emotional abandonment expressed by both the lyrics and the movements. 2PM’s look both physically and on stage is a fusion of the normal idol look, not one of the 2PM members is unfortunate to look at, and the passion of a more expressive culture. Korean idols were previously encouraged to only portray a perfect *idolized* version of themselves to their fans, but 2PM became famous for the exact opposite image. Instead of perfectly beautiful boys they presented themselves to the world as normal young men, who at times act entirely stupid on national television, which just happen to be all talented singers/dancers. This successful hybridization of two genres can only be credited to JYP’s knowledge of what sells both domestically and internationally.

2PM is unique in its very international makeup, though incorporating international members is quickly becoming a vogue for all the new idol groups, but it is not unique in its success internationally. Another group that has gained global attention is YG Entertainment’s boy group BIG BANG. BIG BANG is a group composed of all Korean nationals, who have not lived abroad and are still in the process of mastering foreign languages. In these categories, they are decidedly behind groups such as 2PM. Yet, around the globe they have amassed a devoted following that is even larger than JYP’s *beast idols*. How is it possible that YG’s group of single nationality young men are more popular with foreign fans than JYP’s ethnically diverse group? The answer boils down to one very simple answer: YG created a group of talented musicians that through their artistically unique approaches to music have gained a varied group of fans. A very large group of fans to be sure, but still the reason they have these fans is not because they

fluently speak to them each in their own language, but because they have created a fusion of different genres within their music that allows people from all walks of life to appreciate them. In Korea, “The musical influence of Big Bang in K-Pop cannot be denied. This is why Big Bang is deemed as K-Pop royalty and never defined by formulas and trends” (Sunskyivee).

BIG BANG does an excellent job of creating a fusion in style in everything they do, famous for the uniqueness of their music, fashion, looks, attitude, and stage performances BIG BANG makes their career out of being outside the status quo. They have managed to remain outside the usual K-Pop idol model while still maintaining enough mainstream appeal to hold the loyalty of nearly every Korean woman under twenty. This, however, is not surprising when one looks at the company behind the group. YG Entertainment is created by Yang Hyun Suk (Yang Hyŏn Sŏk) of Seo Taiji (Sŏ Taeji) and the Boys. It makes sense to see the legacy of Seo Taiji’s musical innovation in his friend and fellow member Yang Hyun Suk. YG Entertainment has produced several very successful hip-hop groups, but the most successful has been BIG BANG. As a group and as individuals they have received global praise for their innovation musically by their fellow artists and by their fans. Fusion is a key component of BIG BANG’s style. In fact I would go so far as to say that without their fusion of different genres they wouldn’t have made it even in Korea. BIG BANG is not as pretty, funny, personable, or visible as other idol groups. Without their unique fusion of styles they would be normal to the point of obscurity. Much like Seo Taiji, BIG BANG takes a previously existing genre and makes it their own. As one commentator notes, “The song [Classroom Ideology] can be categorized as rap-metal. . . . Efforts to fuse the two genres together tended to focus not on rap’s linguistic and rhythmic complexity, but on the intensity achieved by shouting the lyrics” (E. Jung 114).

International fans respect BIG BANG for their artistry and their attempts to make their music accessible to everyone not just those who speak Korean. As a group, “Big Bang is largely credited for reinventing K-Pop music through their use of innovative electronic influences in hip-hop and R&B back in 2007. When others were afraid of using technology, Big Bang used it unashamedly. G-Dragon, the leader of Big Bang, is revered as a songwriting genius able to create music that transcends the usual” (Sunskyivee). BIG BANG is known for being unique and trendsetting, but beyond that individual members like G-Dragon are known to have been the

talent behind the group's hits like "Lies", "Haru Haru", "Last Farewell" and "Tonight." Though K-pop includes many groups of varying levels of pop music, few to none write their own material. BIG BANG is one of the only groups that include all of its members in the production of their albums, and this inclusion of five very different artists has lent itself to the hybridity that is synonymous with BIG BANG. Simon from K-Pop review site EatYourKimchi says, "We've been thinking a lot about what K-Pop is as a genre lately, and it doesn't really seem like you can say that K-Pop has a genre of music, the way rock or hip hop is a genre, every K-Pop song seems to take from different genres. On that note, you can really say the same about Big Bang as well. What is their genre, really? What is their sound? They're clearly distinguishable by their voices, sure, but could you really listen to a beat and say that it has a Big Bang vibe to it? Anyone? Compare this song to Tonight, Baby Goodnight, VVIP, and High High. Aren't they all totally different songs?" (Simon and Maritina). Fans across the world must be in agreement with Simon, as BIG BANG won the European MTV Worldwide Act this past November. Fusion has allowed BIG BANG to become the most widely recognized K-Pop group yet.

It is not just been the boy idol groups who have managed to use the hybridity of style and music to cultivate an international followings. One of the more recent girl groups to gain popularity in Korea and around Asia has been SM Entertainments' F(x). Composed of five members, Victoria, Amber, Luna, Sulli (Söllli), and Krystal, F(x) represents four different nationalities. Victoria comes from China, Krystal is Korean-American and Amber is Taiwanese-American, the remaining two members are Korean-Korean. From their very debut, this group was promoted internationally due to the potential popularity each member would draw from their own ethnic backgrounds. This has resulted in an almost simultaneous rise in popularity for the group in four different countries: Korea, Japan, Taiwan and China. F(x) was created to appeal to largest percentage of the popular musical audience as they possibly could. In fact most K-Pop groups focus the first years of their careers on solidifying their position in Korea, but F(x) has almost spent more time outside Korea since their debut in 2009 than they have in Korea. SM Entertainment has the group promoting in Korea, Japan, China and Taiwan simultaneously. It should be said that F(x) has been packaged by their company as the *international* group, with their songs, outfits, and mannerisms being a bit foreign in comparison with other Korean girl groups. One of the best indicators of how strongly SM is pushing F(x)'s image of

international-ness is the Korean television show they placed Victoria in. A popular Korean show titled “We Got Married” places two celebrities together in a fake marriage; basically they are doing an entire show of fan service. Victoria was placed in a fictitious marriage with 2PM member Nichkhun, and they were instantly dubbed the “foreign couple.” For months, once a week devoted fans could tune in to watch both foreigners try and complete stereotypical activities for a Korean couple. The entire premise and popularity of the couple was their appeal to multiple nationalities and their uniqueness within an otherwise homogeneous program of Korean-Korean couples.

F(x) can be said to have the concept of hybridity; they dress in a fusion style of punk rock/pop princess/avant garde, their songs are combinations of techno/electro/dance/pop, and as explained before their members are drawn from four different ethnicities. This group is a physical proof of what Stephen Epstein calls “Globalization producing hybridization” (112). F(x) is the next generation of K-Pop idol. Five years ago Korean idols were focused on who could look the most beautiful and who could appear on the most variety shows. Now the primary focus of idol groups is on attracting an international audience. It would seem that SM Entertainment has realized, along with JYP and YG Entertainment, that the world has discovered K-Pop and that now is the time for them to push their ways into larger markets. Today more than ever, “These idol boy (girl) bands can be an exact embodiment of the well-planned South Korean popular culture products that are carefully manufactured to target a broader consumer demographic. The culturally mixed and versatile features of idol boy (girl) bands enable them to travel easily across cultural and national borders” (Jung 170). F(x) is leading the way in girl idol groups towards a time when it is quite possible that the title Korean/Japanese/Chinese star is replaced by the title Asian star.

In the past decade, South Korea has become the center of the Asian entertainment market. Korean artists dominate charts in China, Japan, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Thailand. MTV’s Jessica Nam says, “Korea is like the epicenter of pop culture in Asia.” What is the reason behind these countries choosing foreign artists over their own pop stars? The answer is very simple: South Korean entertainment companies have perfected the combination of ingredients needed in a pop group in order to make them appeal to the largest demographic possible both domestically and internationally. YG, SM, and JYP have created extremely successful idol groups from members

that before their years of training had absolutely nothing in common. “[K-Pop] is multi-layered, culturally mixed, simultaneously contradictory, and most of all strategically manufactured” (Jung 165). It would seem that the fans are following the example of their idol group of choice and are crossing borders both musically and physically in pursuit of the Korean stars they idolize. In some ways it can be viewed that Korean pop stars have done more in sharing their culture and in getting different nationalities to cooperate in a common cause than any form of diplomatic mission ever could.

Hybridity is the glue that holds the Korean entertainment industry together. Every successful K-Pop group has elements of international fusion within their make-up. Even groups that came before the *hallyu* wave really caught on were being trained in how to sell themselves internationally. The trends of international fusion began slowly but the founding groups of the current trends of hybridity in K-Pop were: Shinhwa, BoA, Dong Bang Shin Ki, Park Ji Yoon (Pak Chi Yun), Se7en, and of course Rain. The author Macintyre says this about the early signs of what would become an invasion of Korean idols to surround countries: “K-Pop has broken across borders: teenagers from Tokyo to Taipei swoon over performers such as the singer Park Ji Yoon and the boy band Shinhwa, buying their CDs and posters and even learning Korean so that they can sing along in karaoke” (qtd. in Shin 513). There is no debate that Korean idols are the new trend in Asia, and if the EMTV awards can be believed the world, but there should also be no debate in what is making these idols so commercially successful in countries other than their own. Korean idols are internationally hybridized. Their groups are international in make-up, their music is written and produced by people from around the world, their choreographers are more often than not foreign, their outfits are unique at best, outlandish at worst but never homogeneously alienating and within their groups four to five languages are present. The very essence of a successful K-Pop group is their overarching international characteristics.

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