

K-POP FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL: A STUDY ON CULTURAL NATIONALISM IN KOREAN POP CULTURE

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Introduction

When K-pop's first-generation soloist BoA made her first debut on stage approximately 20 years ago, people never imagined Psy's Gangnam Style would create a viral sensation with its unique horse dance, chalking up 1 billion views on YouTube. Nor did people even think that a K-pop boy band would rank first on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. K-pop today has undoubtedly developed into a global pop culture phenomenon, with fans all over the world. In the past, Koreans had always trotted out cliched questions like "Do you know Kimchi?" and "Do you know Park Ji-Sung?" to all foreign visitors to check and recheck South Korea's international profile. However, Korea has outgrown its relative obscurity in the realm of global popular culture. Now, global fans voluntarily consume K-pop and visit Korea, its birthplace. Moreover, as it is forming positive first impressions of South Korea worldwide, K-pop is not merely a cultural phenomenon but also a robust soft power asset, boosting national competitiveness and diplomatic power.

One of the common characteristics of K-pop today is the growing number of non-Korean members in K-pop music groups. It is widely accepted among music agencies that to receive global attention, they must scout for talents abroad. Park Jin-young, the founder of JYP Entertainment, once mentioned in his keynote speech how "blending in international members into a K-pop act" has been a vital step in K-pop's internalization.¹ JYP's popular nine-person girl group TWICE, for instance, includes four members from Japan and Taiwan. Foreign members not only present a different glamour which catches the eyes of Korean fans, but also captivate non-Korean fans, especially those from their homelands, with their mother tongue and ethnic familiarity. Yet, there are clear downsides to this trend. Among Korean fans, many controversies have come about because certain K-pop group members' have different national identities. On April 30th, 2019, TWICE's Japanese member Sana faced backlash over

¹ Kim Young-dae et al., "What the Rise of Black Pink and BTS Says About the Future of K-pop", *Vulture*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/08/bts-black-pink-and-the-continued-success-of-k-pop.html>.

her Instagram post. While she plainly confessed her personal thoughts on the transition from the Heisei era to the Reiwa era along with the change in imperial throne, her words unfortunately triggered an unintended response, stirring up anti-Japanese sentiment among many Korean netizens. Some criticized Sana for lacking sensitivity for Koreans and their history, as the Japanese era and Tenno institution are deeply related to Japanese militarism and imperialism. As a result, Koreans who still bear the historical colonial scars could not possibly accept the Japanese celebrity's short post with optimism. Meanwhile, there were others who claimed that it is too much to connect Sana's post to the bygone imperialism and that the Japanese today find the era as nothing but "a periodic division natural like air."²

A similar incident occurred with Chinese K-pop members. When the Permanent Court of Arbitration(PCA) in 2016 adjudicated that China's claim over the South China Sea lacks legal basis, Chinese stars including EXO's Lay, Fiestar's Cao Lu, Miss A's Fei simultaneously posted on their social media the well-known phrase "China cannot become any smaller,"³ expressing dissent over PCA's ruling. Chinese fans supported their patriotic deeds, while fans from Southeast Asian countries and Korea harshly criticized their actions. The latter group were enraged at the overt show of unilateral jingoism that did not consider the emotions of Southeast Asians, whose lives are directly affected by the maritime dispute, and Koreans, who themselves have their own experiences of historical distortions and territorial disputes with China and Japan.

In short, both incidents portray nationalism hidden beneath the seemingly unrelated realm of K-pop. Sana faced public hostility due to Japanism represented by the Tenno institution and Korea's long-standing nationalistic animosity against Japan, an emotion proper to Koreans. On the same line, the unified actions of Chinese K-pop stars also reveal strong nationalism present in China. This article aims to examine how K-pop and nationalism are intertwined and eventually suggest what K-pop should consider for it to truly develop into a constructive global pop culture.

Development of K-pop

To further investigate how K-pop and nationalism are related, we must first look back on how K-pop has developed over the past three, four decades. In the 1970s, Koreans had access to largely three types of music. Traditional folk song, or *minyo*, remained popular in the countryside, while few urban elites enjoyed listening to

² Chŏng Hyŏn-mok, "T'waisŭ sana ūi yŏnho nonlan yi nach'i chosŏn ūi p'asijŭm irago?" 트와이스 사나의 연호 논란이 '나치 조선'의 파시즘이라고? [TWICE Sana's era controversy is 'Nazi Joseon's fascism?], *JoongAng Ilbo*, May 7, 2019, <https://news.joins.com/article/23460114>.

³ 中国一点都不能少 can either be translated as "China cannot become any smaller" or "China cannot spare one dot." A hashtag and an image bearing the same phrase widely spread among Chinese after PCA's ruling. China stakes claim to almost all of the South China Sea, basing their statement on their historical rights to the nine-dash line(南海九段线). Thus, the hashtag signifies China's unified resolve to never concede their claim.

Western classical music. Meanwhile, the most popular was *trot*, a unique genre recognized most often as the oldest form of Korean popular music today. During the Japanese colonial period, a lot of Japanese culture was introduced to Korea. For instance, formal education including music education was modeled on the Japanese system. Naturally, traces of Japanese influence were easily found among Korean culture even after Korea regained sovereignty. However, after the fall of the Japanese empire, Korean culture started to undergo changes because of the United States' influence over the newly independent nation. Schools taught music courses based on Western classical music, and so music from the West began to occupy a significant part of Korea's mass culture. Therefore, while the elite minority appreciated classical music in the 1970s, soon it was hard to find any Korean who had never heard of classical music. Yet, as the Park Jung-hee regime prohibited hip hop and rock music, claiming that such genres coaxed people into sex, drug abuse and sociopolitical deviance, non-classical music with strong American colors could not easily find a place in Korean mass culture.⁴

Nonetheless, government censorship could not reverse the growing tidal wave of non-classical American popular music. People quickly showed affinity towards tabooed music. In the early 1990s, Korean popular music witnessed a "quantum leap" with the rise of Seo Taiji and Boys.⁵ Widely known today as the pioneer of present-day K-pop, the boy band was one of the first in Korea to incorporate hip hop and rap into Korean music. Indeed, the band was the leaven of cultural, musical innovation. Ironically, their songs garnered great success because they *deviated* from the norm. Naturally, there were those who found them awkward and uncomfortable. The group was criticized for being overly non-Korean. The young generation, on the other hand, welcomed the change.⁶ After all, Korea embraced the new trend and started to actively utilize this change to promote its own cultural industry. The immediate result was the establishment of several entertainment agencies, which began to hunt and foster talented youths. This led to the advent of what people recognize as K-pop today.

Experts divide the history of K-pop into three distinct periods.⁷ The first ranges from 1990s to early 2000s during which the first idol group of K-pop powerhouse SM Entertainment, Highfive of Teenagers(HOT), made its debut and remained active. There were cases in which K-pop entered the global market in this period, but most of the activities and strategies were focused on the domestic market. The second period, represented by groups such as Wonder Girls and Girls' Generation, is when K-pop began to receive outside attention and therefore venture out of Korea. From then on, K-pop employed various globalization and localization

⁴ John Lie, "What Is the K in K-pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity," *Korea Observer*, vol.42, no. 3 (September 2012): 347.

⁵ *Ibid* at 349.

⁶ *Ibid* at 349-350.

⁷ Yi Gyu-t'ak, *Galdŭng hanŭn k'e'i, pap* 갈등하는 케이, 팝 [K-pop in Conflict] (Seoul: Threechairs, 2020), 13-16.

strategies, reflecting the tastes of global consumers. As a result, the pop culture gave birth to groups such as TWICE and BTS, opening the third and current period.

It is important to realize that this stream of cultural development was not achieved solely by the public sector. From early 2000s, the Korean government, which had been seeking new sources of power for future growth, recognized K-pop's potential, and extensively promoted it as a means of introducing the country's cultural excellence to the international community. For instance, as mentioned in Roh Moo-Hyun Administration's "Policy Vision Report on Cultural Industry" published by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (present-day Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, MCST), the Korean government designated *Hallyu*, the Korean Wave, as one of its major strategic industries to raise Korea's profile as a global cultural powerhouse. In 2005, the Prime Minister's Office held a meeting and set comprehensive measures that transcend the administrative boundaries of the MCST to make Hallyu a pan-governmental project. Follow-up policies were prepared accordingly. In other words, K-pop could grow into Korea's representative contemporary mass culture due to the agencies' efforts as well as the government's full support and guidance. Because of government intervention, K-pop did not only become a culture attractive to both Koreans and non-Koreans but also turned into a national strategic product. Consequently, it further evolved into an item of cultural nationalism that "exerts a certain amount of political, diplomatic hegemony on East Asia."⁸ K-pop, a result of public-private collaboration, "received attention as an important driving force of the Korean economy," and, moreover, became "a social phenomenon that displays Korea's cultural excellence and imbue Koreans with nationalistic pride."⁹

An interesting point about K-pop is that it is difficult to find Koreanness within the culture. To begin with, it is hard to pinpoint commonalities between K-pop and traditional Korean music. While the latter is based on the pentatonic scale, coarse voices, and melismatic melodies, the former utilizes a diatonic scale and includes a lot of English words in its lyrics, with powerful dance moves often accompanying thunderous drum beats as well.¹⁰ Furthermore, the word *K-pop* itself was not coined nor first used in Korea. The expression was first introduced and generally used among the Chinese-speaking countries in the late 1990s, and it was not until late 2000s that the word became well-known in Korea. Thus, K-pop, which in essence means Korean popular culture exported overseas, is a genre defined *abroad*. Surely, this does not mean that there are simply no signs of Korean identity found in K-pop. Park Sang-jin, a professor emeritus for traditional Korean music at Dongguk University, believes that

⁸ Yi Dong-yŏn, "Hallyu munhwa jabon ūi hyŏngsŏng gwa munhwa minjok ju'ui" 한류 문화자본의 형성과 문화민족주의 [The Formation of Hallyu Cultural Capital and Cultural Nationalism], *Munhwa Gwahak* (2005): 184.

⁹ Chu Sŏng-hye, "Hallyu, uri munhwanŭn segyerŭl ōttŏk'e mannaya halkka?" 한류, 우리 문화는 세계를 어떻게 만나야 할까? [Hallyu, how should our culture meet the world?], *Ch'ŏrhakkena hyŏnsil* (2016): 114.

¹⁰ Lie, "What Is the K in K-pop?...", 360.

Psy's Gangnam Style received global attention because "there is something peculiar about it that cannot be found in western music."¹¹ He claims how Gangnam Style is in fact a piece based on *Hwimori jangdan*, a traditional *janggu* (double-headed drum) rhythm known for being "fast as a whirlwind." Interestingly, the sonic waves of Gangnam Style's main melody closely resemble those of *Hwimori jangdan*. While Park admits that it is unlikely that the composer intentionally based the music on Korean traditional rhythm, he speculates that such a surprising similarity might not just be a mere coincidence but rather a natural consequence of the Korean "cultural, artistic DNA."¹² Furthermore, the fact that Korean stars still hold the absolute majority, the use of Korean lyrics, distinctive stage performance, dance style, costume, the local incubating system and *Kalgunmu* (perfectly synchronized dance) clearly separates it from other world music. Still, because it is difficult to say that K-pop has truly inherited the elements and values of traditional Korean music, it may be somewhat misleading to state that K-pop is indeed native to Korea or representative of Korea's cultural excellence. So, if K-pop is not fully Korean to the core, what was the factor that made it represent Korean pop culture? In other words, how was Koreanness inserted into K-pop? This article believes that nationalism has played a crucial role. Yet, nationalism here does not merely indicate the national pride that has arisen from K-pop's development and success. Nationalism within K-pop is much more complicated than it seems. In this sense, the answer to the question above may be related to the unique double-sidedness of K-pop explained below.

K-pop's Unique Double-Sidedness

Over the past decades, K-pop has rapidly developed into a transnational mass culture, which not only represents Korea but also East Asia. The surge in foreign member recruitments, establishment of overseas fandoms, and numerous world tours manifest that K-pop now identifies itself as a global music genre. However, the unique aspect about K-pop is that while it looks transnational and universal, it is in essence nationalistic and state-centric. K-pop clearly transcends cultural, geographic barriers and boasts both fans and stars of diverse backgrounds, but at the same time, there has always been some "Korea" in its roots. This deeply rooted Koreanness is linked to the strong sense of nationalism found in the country. Nationalism has buttressed K-pop's growth, yet as the culture grew out of its cradle, the stout pillar has also become a factor of discord and controversy that the K-pop industry ought to consider. On the whole, Korean pop culture has presented three benefits to Korea as a country: (1) K-pop functions as a strategic soft power asset that has helped South Korea's position on the world stage, as argued above, (2) K-pop's profitability and global marketability has brought capitalistic success to the country, and (3) the implicit Koreanness of K-

¹¹ "MBC net'uwö'k'ü t'üksön 'p'ungnyu'" [MBC 네트워크특선 '풍류'], MBC, video, November 3, 2014, 39:10-39:23.

¹² Ibid at 39:24-42:34.

pop and its success abroad offer Koreans a point of national pride. Greater success led to higher expectations. Fortunately, K-pop has lived up to those growing hopes. Yet, nationalism in Korea does not simply reflect the pride of Korean people. It is a *national, political, and historical heritage*. Koreans share a heartbreaking history of colonial rule, a painful lesson that teaches that one must strengthen national power for history to not repeat itself – a self-conscious belief that their country should not lag behind culturally. All these elements are intertwined with nationalism.¹³ Koreans have formed a single discursive ideology because they share such critical elements. This may be the reason Koreans so desperately tried to prove their excellence to the world. Therefore, it is only natural that there has always been patriotic interest in K-pop, spirit of national prestige among K-pop officials, and national pride among Koreans behind K-pop.¹⁴ In short, nationalism in K-pop is both the cause and effect of a complex system of bilateral translation that, for one, translates aspects of Korean identity into a digestible cultural product for the global audience and, for another, translates the ever-globalizing K-pop back into Korea's national culture. Such a cyclic system constantly reminds Koreans of their national identity deeply rooted within K-pop, while they, the Korean government, and agencies quench their nationalistic thirst and experience a boost in self-esteem, eventually seeking for even greater cultural globalization as K-pop receives more spotlight overseas. Simultaneously, Koreans and K-pop fall in a paradox, as its efforts to *denationalize* by creating a cultural product for a globalized market only makes them further realize the true nature of K-pop – how it is an utterly regional culture inseparable from Koreanness. Thus, K-pop eventually “finds itself *renationalizing* back to its birthplace.”¹⁵ Just as K-pop seems to become more non-Korean, so is it becoming more Korean due to the rise in patriotism and nationalism.

K-pop in Dilemma

Until now, K-pop's double-sided nature of denationalization and nationalism has been helpful in achieving its success. K-pop became a viral sensation because the industry could firmly establish a solid foothold in Korea and confidently step out into world markets, thanks to domestic and foreign fans. However, the double-sidedness has backfired, putting the K-pop industry in a serious dilemma. Agencies incorporate transnationalism to meet the demands of fans abroad and ultimately maximize their profit. In this process, patriotic nationalism that develops along with it is becoming a drag on its growth. One of the most successful globalization strategies is to recruit talents from foreign countries and train them into idols. Most foreign members present in K-pop today are from East Asian countries such as China, Japan, and Thailand, as K-pop is especially a megahit in those regions. Once a member from a certain country

¹³ Yi Dong-yŏn, “K'eip'ap(K-pop): sinjayujuŭi sidae ch'ogukchŏk kungmin munhwa ŭi aik'on” 케이팝:(K-pop) 신자유주의 시대 초국적 국민문화의 아이콘 [K-pop: Icon of transnational national culture in the neoliberal era], *Naeirŭl yŏnŭm yŏksa*, vol.45, (Winter 2011): 237.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Yi G., *Galdŭng hanŭn k'ei, pap*, 127.

makes a successful debut, K-pop can address the country's fans in a more friendly manner, while those fans in turn feel a sense of pride and satisfaction. The buildup of congenial atmosphere allows agencies to further prosper abroad. Thus, multinationalization has become necessary for K-pop to solidify its position as the popular culture of East Asia. However, cross-cultural ventures do not necessarily bring about positive results. While Koreans regard non-Korean stars as K-pop celebrities and public figures, the stars prioritize their identity as nationals of their home country. At the same time, agencies constantly request those stars to keep and display their national identities, as there is constant need to maintain and raise popularity overseas. This clashes with the Korean way of thinking. Conflicts further intensify as Koreans are filled with pride at K-pop's achievement. Agencies do provide their foreign members with education, raising them as stars with Korean mentality, yet there clearly are limitations to those efforts to Koreanize since the members have already grown up in different environments and received different educations. Moreover, agencies cannot force their foreign stars to only embrace the Korean perspective and identity as they are the ones who have strategically decided to transnationalize and multinationalize.

Controversies over Sana's comment on Japan's era transition and the patriotic posts made by Chinese celebrities on the South China Sea dispute are all incidents that signify the dilemma K-pop is currently facing. The former is an example of cultural nationalism as "a counter-concept of cultural inferiority complex built up since the colonial period."¹⁶ The historical legacy that Koreans must *never* lose to Japan, a sentiment most evident in the ever-intense *banil-jeon* (Korea-Japan football rivalry) matches, plays an important part. From the Korean viewpoint, no matter how important the member is to K-pop's globalization strategy, Koreans almost instinctively turn away from the idol if he or she crosses the "wrong" line. This demonstrates that K-pop can never be detached from Korean nationalism no matter how transnational it becomes. As for the latter, the incident arose as an example of territorial dispute between countries. Border disputes are concerned with physical national boundaries, one of the most basic elements in defining a nation. Therefore, such disputes are likely to develop into discords between nations, or the people of each nation, as most countries today are essentially modern nation-states. It is only natural that K-pop fans from Southeast Asian countries especially the Philippines, the claimant of the court case, harshly criticized the Chinese idols. Furthermore, Koreans, who themselves are in ongoing historical, territorial disputes with China and Japan, sympathized with the Southeast Asians. As witnessed through these controversies, East Asia lies amid acute and chronic tensions between countries. Furthermore, economic, political, social, historical conflicts in East Asia are intricately connected and therefore inseparable from each other. Political conflicts are linked with historical issues, which are associated with larger social problems. Again, such comprehensive

¹⁶ Yi D., "K'eip'ap(K-pop)...," 185.

conflicts are closely related to nationalism. Thus, East Asia, where nationalism tends to appear strongly in each country, has always been a powder keg full of potential sparks. Culture is never free from this reality, and nationalistic clashes among fans and celebrities will continue to arise in the future. The K-pop industry is currently facing an unavoidable fate of having to pursue both local and global goals.

K-pop and Cultural Imperialism

In addition, as nationalism in Korea consolidates, it gives rise to perilous values - those reminiscent of cultural imperialism. During the colonial era, empires meticulously used culture as a means of legitimizing and stabilizing their rule. Not only did they boast their superiority by enrooting their own culture in colonies, but also justified their deeds, praising their lopsided, violent acts as the white man's burden. In other words, empires drew a line between the west and non-west, created cultural hierarchies, and established an asymmetrical composition of power. The cultural "illusions" concocted by the Western powers were solidified in each colony, and they have had an immense impact on people ever since. Vestiges of Western-centrism still remains undiminished in majority of countries.

Korea is no exception. The so-called "west complex" is prevalent in Korea. For instance, Koreans show different attitudes toward people who come from Western Europe or the United States and those who come from Asian countries. Such a gap is evident in K-pop as well. Whenever K-pop successfully hosts a concert in the United States or Europe, journalists flood the Internet with gushing articles, commenting how K-pop has finally "hit the world stage, the home of pop music."¹⁷ As for Koreans, they share a belief that stems from the desperate loss felt during the Japanese colonial rule, a strong will to modernize, and an understanding that modernization basically means westernization.¹⁸ The west complex is founded on this belief and has a great influence on Koreans. To the contrary, Koreans do not necessarily respond to East Asia, more specifically Southeast Asia in the same manner. Although K-pop boasts a greater market share in this region, Koreans often assume an attitude of superiority or even look down on fellow Asians. For instance, Koreans have shown opposite reactions to the all-foreigner K-pop groups EXP Edition, Z-boys, and Z-girls depending on their racial composition.¹⁹ Furthermore, a Korean netizen's remarks on BLACKPINK's Thai member Lisa – "with makeup on, she totally looks like a Russian elf ... but with darker hair and no makeup, she looks like any average Thai woman ..." – enraged both Korean and global fans.²⁰ All these incidents clearly exemplify the racist attitudes certain Korean fans have based on nationalism and their admiration of the West. Moreover, when NiziU, JYP

¹⁷ Chu, "Hallyu, uri...", 121.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Yi G., *Galdŕng hanŕn k'ei, pap*, 103.

²⁰ Dong Sun-hwa, "BLACKPINK's Lisa victim of online racial remark", *The Korea Times*, January 16, 2019, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2019/01/682_262177.html.

Entertainment's all-Japanese girl group, made its first appearance on stage, some Koreans were displeased at K-pop's "superior" skills being shared with and leaked to Japan.²¹ Such behaviors are the outcome of over-excessive national pride, and manifests how Koreans are creating their own cultural hierarchy, placing K-pop – and Korean culture itself, by extension – on the top.

After witnessing K-pop's global success, Korean politicians have advocated to "make Korea the world's cultural hub," as if it is Korea's destined goal.²² However, as speculated above, such desires can both solidify the already present hierarchy between the West and the non-West and even establish a new hierarchy within Asia. An asymmetric cultural power structure may form once people are enraptured by their own cultural supremacy. The Economist had once explained Hallyu as an ostentatious act of "showing off soft power to poor countries and performing sub-cultural imperialism."²³ K-pop already shows signs of becoming a culture that actively internalizes the "logic of cultural dominance and imperialism, away from excessive counteraction on its own cultural inferiority complex."²⁴ In short, cultural imperialism that once took power under the Western logic of delivering superior culture to the inferior non-West is now being *inversely* reproduced in Korea.

Some may argue that it is too early to criticize and dismiss K-pop, which is still struggling to find permanent ground in the global market. In comparison to other major popular genres, it cannot yet be considered a global cultural hegemon. The term "cultural imperialism" might be a misnomer too grand for the still growing popular culture. However, it is important to recognize that cultural imperialism mentioned in this section is a probable future that K-pop should work to avoid, rather than the status quo. After all, the young culture, along with the nationalism associated with it, is currently showing ominous signs of delinquency reminiscent of cultural imperialism that did occur in the past. While K-pop might be relatively small and young compared to other cultural hegemons, it is surely not a newborn. Without doubt, it does boast a large share in the global market, especially in Asia. If K-pop does grow into a major global popular genre in the future overlooking the current warnings, it will be practically impossible to fix the problem then. The stable should be closed before the horse flees.

Suggestions on K-pop

²¹ Yun Gwang-ün, "K'eip'apüi segyehwaga bijönaen hösang" 케이팝의 세계화가 빚어낸 허상 [Illusion made by the globalization of K-pop], *Mediaus*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.mediaus.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=169780>.

²² Chu, "Hallyu, uri..." 122.

²³ Kim Myöng-su, "Hallyu' chejohagi: yöksajedojuüi jök haesök" '한류' 제조하기: 역사제도주의적 해석 [Manufacturing 'Hallyu': a Historical Institutional Analysis], *Han'guk saböe hak*, vol. 49, no. 2, (2015): 43.

²⁴ Ibid.

Koreans' pride-filled love towards K-pop is totally understandable, and it has long set the foundations for cultural development. However, K-pop today finds itself on the verge of falling into the trap of cultural nationalism and imperialism. Thus, Koreans must ask themselves the introspective question: do we really want our treasured culture to become the hotbed of nationalistic conflict and the symbol of cultural imperialism in Asia?

It is imperative that K-pop finds ways to defuse nationalistic conflicts for it to further prosper as a truly global culture. Problems associated with nationalism are not easy to solve. In essence, nationalism is irrational based on commonly shared sentiments and is linked with politics, society, and history. Furthermore, humans are born with the natural inclination to believe *ours* to be better than *theirs*. As a result, situations can only exacerbate when left alone, driving the culture into an even deeper pit of imperialism. People must make painstaking efforts to fully comprehend and overcome the status quo.

Then, how should K-pop cope with the dilemma it is facing? First, K-pop celebrities should take a more considerate and restrained attitude toward other cultures. The more attention K-pop draws, the greater the influence individual idols hold. Then, their voices can easily bring about change in behavior among fans. For example, when BTS donated in support of the Black Lives Matter campaign, a huge number of fans joined the cause, sharing the news on social media via #MatchAMillion. BTS and its fans raised more than an astounding \$190,000 in just 6 hours.²⁵ Likewise, depending on how individual idols act, their words may trigger nationalistic conflicts, or spark changes toward peace. Just as BTS's actions lead to a positive movement towards the universal value of human rights, other stars can also motivate people to alleviate conflicts in East Asia. If fans witness their idols respecting and considering others, they will naturally adopt their behaviors. Hence, celebrities must take responsibility for what they say and should especially be cautious when making comments on sensitive issues. They must remember that they are role models to numerous people.

Next, Koreans must realize that K-pop is no longer the preserve of Korea. K-pop cannot just be seen as a lucrative money-making business nor a strategy to enhance national prestige. It has already crossed Korean borders and has flown to a wider world. It cannot only respond to Korea's demands. K-pop today is a mass culture mixed with the diverse colors of East Asia. This diversity and vibrance is essentially the source of Korean pride, and these values are the reason K-pop has experienced constant change and development without stagnation. Yet, if Koreans, dazzled by K-pop's glory, only view the pop culture as a purely Korean product and

²⁵ Ko Gyöng-sök, "BTS ami, hügin in'gwön e 't'ong k'ün kibu'... haeoe öllondo nollatta" [BTS 아미, 흑인인권에 '통 큰 기부' ... 해외 언론도 놀랐다 [BTS Army, generous donation on black human rights ... alarmed foreign media], *Hankook Ilbo*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/202006091893745285>.

perceive other people as subordinate objects, not as autonomous subjects, true trans-cultural communication cannot be achieved. Without communication, not only will nationalistic conflicts remain unsolved, but K-pop's globalizing efforts will also reach its limit. If K-pop only pursues economic profit and focuses on national pride, it will degenerate into "a manneristic cultural product devoid of diversity and communicative abilities."²⁶ To the contrary, once Koreans boldly confront its own Korea-centric, Korea-first mindset and open their ears to diverse voices, they will be able to shed their cultural, nationalistic superiority. For K-pop to further thrive in the global market, Korean fans must boldly face the fact that the culture must actively embrace the unfamiliar heterogeneity.

Lastly, appropriate education should be conducted accordingly so that all people develop a balanced view on different cultures. Respect toward others is not a virtue only celebrities must embody. All people, including K-pop lovers, must understand and cherish differences in gender, country, and race. Moreover, education addressed here is not just limited to conventional classroom-based courses. Heated online arguments that arise from nationalistic conflicts can also become an effective educational venue if discussions proceed in a constructive manner. Some may argue that it is extremely unlikely that constructive debates would take place in such a haphazard, arbitrary setting. However, that may not be true. In September 2020, Bella Poarch, a Filipina TikTok star, unknowingly posted a video that revealed her tattoo depicting the Rising Sun Flag of Japan. This enraged a lot of Korean netizens. Poarch immediately issued an apology, explaining that she was unaware of the history behind the flag. However, anger among Koreans did not subside, and a few users went on attacking the 19-year-old girl with racial slurs. Malicious comments such as "uneducated short people" and "poor country" sparked anti-Korean posts among Filipinos, which aggravated the already bitter situation. Some even fought racism with racism, mocking Koreans of their "plastic surgery faces."²⁷ Surprisingly, Koreans and Filipinos did not part with unresolved malice in their hearts, but rather worked toward a mature finish. Koreans offered apologies, emphasizing the friendly ties between the two countries. Filipino netizens replied with their apologies. As shown, mature dialogues are indeed possible on the Internet even amid hostile circumstances.

Conclusion

The nationalistic conflicts East Asia face today is a natural consequence of the cultural bonds formed among different nations. Sharing a common mass culture, countries have bridged gaps and have come across the heterogeneity that had not been fully realized before. In this sense, K-pop may be seen as the catalyst which caused the

²⁶ Chu, "Hallyu, uri..." 124.

²⁷ Lee Hyo-jin, "Filipinos angered by racist comments from internet users in Korea," *The Korea Times*, September 10, 2020, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/09/113_295819.html.

ever-present, latent conflicts to rise. East Asia is currently undergoing a transition period.

As experienced through controversies over Sana's Instagram post and Chinese idols' unified dissent over PCA's ruling, K-pop will witness similar heated arguments in the near future. Nevertheless, such debates are *not* negative nor undesirable. While conflicts may worsen situations and bring about hostility, K-pop may also preferably create opportunities for greater mutual understanding, depending on which course people choose to take. K-pop *has* the potential to overcome nationalistic conflicts and promote a more respecting community. Although K-pop has not always taken the smoothest route going through turbulence, the transnational bonds it has formed can certainly be seen as a huge step forward. K-pop's response to its current dilemma may suggest possible clues for resolving deep-rooted conflicts in East Asia.

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