

## K-Pop: Expanding Horizons of Korean Music

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### Abstract

K-pop (Korean Pop) is a genre of popular music originating in South Korea. While the modern form of K-pop can be traced back to the early 90s, the term itself has been popularized since the 2000s, replacing the term *Gayo*, which also refers to domestic pop music in South Korea. The term is often used to describe a modern form of South Korean pop that is influenced by experimental, rock, jazz, gospel, folk, R&B, country and other forms of music from around the world. While expanding the horizons of Korean music, K-pop has become a global phenomenon that is here to stay.

### Keywords

K-pop, music, South Korea, global, popular, fans, idol, dance, song, Hallyu, choreography

### Introduction

*From one single hit to several chartbusters. A few curious fans to thousands of admirers. A thin cry of music to a boom of solos, dances and idol bands. A few tentative notes to stage rocking music! The deafening applause is just one of the indications that K-pop has taken the world by storm.*

### Opening Notes

They call it *Hallyu*, the Korean wave: the idea that South Korean pop culture has grown in prominence to become a major global force, seen in everything from Korean dramas to skincare regimens to delicious Korean snacks and *ramyeon* on your favorite menu. The audience is spread over not only in Asia but also in Latin America, Africa, Europe, and the US. A commentator from the University of California, San Diego, analyzed this vision of modernization and said, 'Contemporary Korean pop culture is built on transnational flows taking place across, beyond, and outside national and institutional boundaries.' At the heart of this *Hallyu* wave is the ever-growing popularity of K-pop, owing to its distinctive blend of addictive melodies, slick choreography and production values and an endless parade of attractive South Korean performers who spend years in gruelling studio systems training

alongside one another to sing and dance in synchronized perfection. For some, the transnational values of K-pop are responsible for its success.

### Going Global

This genre emerged with the formation of one of the earliest K-pop groups, *Seo Taiji and Boys*, in 1992. Their experimentation with different styles of international music helped reshape and modernize South Korea's contemporary music scene. Soon there were other bands emulating attempts at going global. Increasingly, foreign songwriters and producers were employed to work on songs for K-pop groups and solo artists alike, and a rising interest to join hands for music collaborations can now be seen on both sides. Modern K-pop has a fair sprinkling of English phrases that piques the interest of youth worldwide. A lot of Korean artists make deliberate efforts to learn English or East Asian languages such as Japanese, for these act as a bridge to cross language barriers. Similarly, increasing numbers of K-pop groups use English names rather than Korean ones.



**Image 1: EXO performing at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, 2018**

### Rigorous Training

Management agencies in South Korea offer binding contracts to potential artists, most often at a young age. Trainees live together in a regulated environment learning music, dance, foreign languages, and other skills in preparation for their debut. The training necessary for them to metamorphose into successful 'idols' in the competitive music industry is intense to

say the least. Training centres like Seoul's Def Dance Skool focus not only on dance skills but physical training as well. In 2012, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the cost of training one Korean idol under SM Entertainment averaged US \$ 3 million. Dance is an integral part of K-pop involving vigorous routines like 'formation changing' (*Jaribaggum*) or the famous 'point dance' consisting of hooking and repetitive key movements that match the song. While choreographer May J. Lee focuses on 'feeling' the lyrics, artistic director Rino Nakasone lends insight into the process of creating routines that are not only flattering for the dancers but are also complementary to the music.

### **Innovative Marketing**

Many agencies present new groups through a 'debut showcase' which consists of online marketing and television broadcast promotions. Bands are given a name and a concept, along with a marketing hook, which further becomes synonymous with their identity. Music videos are posted on YouTube to reach a worldwide audience. Prior to this, teaser photos and trailers are released. Attractive albums, complete with aesthetic photobooks and other merchandise that can be ordered online, are now in great demand around the world. 'K-Pop is more global than ever, helping South Korea's music market grow into a 'Power Player', comments Arts journalist Caitlin Kelley.

### **Fashion**

The adoption of Western styles in music also extends to the fashion sported by the artists. Teenage idol groups began debuting in the mid and late '90s, wearing coordinated costumes that reflected current hip-hop aesthetics among youth at the time. Female groups wore homogeneous costumes, often styled identically. As K-pop became a modern hybrid of Western and Asian cultures, fashion trends like Street, Retro, Black & White, Futurism and others reflected diversity and distinction. Now fashion trends started by idols such as *G-Dragon* and *CL* are followed by young fans globally. Professor Ingyu Oh remarks, 'K-pop emphasizes thin, tall and feminine looks with adolescent or sometimes very cute facial expressions, regardless of whether they're male or female singers.'

### **Sweet Success**

South Korean artists have hit the Billboard Hot 100 chart at least eight times since the *Wonder Girls* first cracked it in 2009 with their crossover hit *Nobody* released in four

languages. The export of K-pop has ballooned South Korea's music industry to an impressive \$5 billion. Popular idols and groups that have shaped the industry and continue to do so in the current scenario include Super Junior, Big Bang, EXO, 2NE1, Girls Generation, Red Velvet, BTS, and Blackpink among others. Upcoming groups include NCT, ASTRO, and Day6. A young Indian fan or 'Exo-L' comments, 'Over the years EXO has become synonymous with K-pop itself. I think if there is one single group that can currently define an entire industry of all-round talent, it would be EXO.' Some well-known and up-coming solo artists are PSY, BoA, Taeyeon, IU, EXO's Chen, and Gugudan's Sejeong. Sejeong released her first mini-album *Plant* in March this year in which she beautifully demonstrates heartfelt lessons about life.



**Image 2: Gugudan's Sejeong at her debut showcase for her first mini-album, 'Plant'.**



**Image 3: EXO's Chen for his second mini-album, 'Dear my Dear'**

In 2018, the South Korean music market experienced a 17.9% increase in revenue gains. Last year too, the K-pop industry experienced significant growth, according to IFPI's Global Music Report 2019.

### **The Flip Side**

The 'robotic' system of training is often criticized by Western media. The entertainment labels are highly selective, so few potential artists rise to fame. The system is also intensely gruelling, often critiqued for being the reason so many artists assert that it takes a toll on their mental well-being. A testimony to this is that a lot of artists have been vocal about not wanting their own children to step into the 'idol life'. There have also been critical responses in South Korea regarding the identity of the genre since its ascendance. Some notable music critics have termed K-pop 'an industrial label mainly designed to promote the national brand in the global market'. They also allege the genre has practically no ties with traditional Korean identity.

But, for most fans, it's about watching their beloved groups or 'idols' retaining the essence of K-pop while simultaneously being a global phenomenon. Western validation is not of importance as both artists and fans have often emphasized how music is a language in itself, as are all Art forms.

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