

# ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF ASIAN TRANSNATIONALISM

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## K-POP TRANS/NATIONALISM

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# K-POP TRANS/NATIONALISM

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## **Introduction: Rise of K-pop Trans/Nationalism**

South Korean popular music (K-pop) has emerged and evolved through continual transnational production and consumption for over 25 years. It is highly hybrid and trendy music that is especially popular among young people in and outside Asia (Fuhr, 2016a; Shin, 2017). As early as 1997, South Korean idol pop groups, such as H.O.T. (1996–2001), began to gain popularity in neighbouring Asian countries. Along with several South Korean TV dramas, such as *What Is Love All About* (1997), K-pop ignited the very concept of the Korean Wave (or Hallyu). Reportedly, the term “Hallyu” emerged in the Chinese press in 1997 to describe the surge of South Korean pop music and TV dramas in China. The term, which literally means “the Korean Wave” in Chinese and Korean, became popularized after 1999, when the South Korean government used the title *Hallyu-Songs from Korea* for a music CD to promote South Korean music overseas. While the CD’s English title was *Korean Pop Music*, its Chinese version used the term Hallyu (Yoon & Kang, 2017).

This cultural phenomenon, first witnessed in Asia and then more widely across other continents, reveals how media audiences have been increasingly accessing various cultural texts not produced in their own geo-cultural contexts. Undeniably, digital platforms and mobile devices that enable real-time sharing and translation of remotely produced cultural texts have contributed to shaping the transnational universe of K-pop, which would otherwise not have been possible (Jin, Yoon, & Min, 2021; Kim, 2018). Thus, several scholars have recognized the Korean Wave phenomenon is a “digital wave” (Jin, 2016; Jin et al., 2021). However, digital technology is not a deterministic force in the transnational flows of K-pop. Various stakeholders and forces have been involved in the transnationalization of K-pop. In light of the global rise of South Korean popular culture, represented by recent landmark cultural texts, such as the Netflix series *Squid Game* (2021), Oscar-winning movie *Parasite* (2019) and global hits of idol group BTS (2013–present), this chapter examines how the global flows of K-pop as a leading sector of the Korean Wave reveal cultural dimensions of transnationalism.

In September 2021, Chris Martin, frontman of the popular British band Coldplay, was invited to appear on an American talk show and began to sing the band’s new song, “My Universe.” To the audience’s surprise, Martin sang not only the English part of the song

but also its Korean verse part, which was written and featured by the K-pop group BTS, the collaborator on the song. The video clip posted on YouTube was flooded with favourable comments from the people of various national and cultural backgrounds (given their user names and languages). Many commenters expressed their surprise, joy and respect for this British superstar who learned to sing in Korean and collaborated with the K-pop musicians. After its release, the song topped several music charts, including its debut at number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart.

Meanwhile, also in September 2021, the South Korean government appointed the members of BTS as the country's special presidential envoy for future generations and culture. The members accompanied then President Moon Jae-in to a session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. During this session, where President Moon gave a speech on the topic of inter-Korea peace, BTS spoke about their views on the young generation's struggle and hope during the pandemic, while presenting their "Permission to Dance" music video that was filmed in UN Headquarters. In doing so, the group contributed to a transnational cause as a national representative (Westfall, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

As these two examples regarding BTS illustrate, K-pop has been transnational in diverse ways. The cultural genre has engaged with transnational collaborations and, thus, generated new, hybrid cultural forms. As seen in the British band Coldplay's incorporation of an Asian language into their song and performance collaboration with K-pop artists, rapid transnational flows of K-pop have ignited and facilitated moments in which cultural hybridity is conceived, thereby questioning Western, Anglophone music as the default of global media industries (Jin et al., 2021). Meanwhile, as illustrated in the second example, K-pop has sometimes been incorporated into nationalist discourses and practices instrumentalizing popular cultural content for the nation-state's desire to explore its soft power (Nye & Kim, 2013). In the soft-power discourse, K-pop idols are considered "national assets" (Fuhr, 2016b) and have received invitations to accompany the president and government officials to government-led, international events.<sup>2</sup>

As these examples demonstrate, cultural flows of K-pop involve both transnational and national forces. In this regard, this chapter explores how global cultural flows of K-pop are simultaneously transnational and national by analysing K-pop's production and consumption. The global K-pop phenomenon may effectively show cultural dimensions of transnationalism, referred to as *K-pop trans/nationalism* in this chapter. The framework of trans/nationalism is inspired by and further articulates Iwabuchi (2002)'s analysis of intra-Asian pop cultural flows, in which he examines the interwoven processes of cultural hybridization and nationalist discourses in the accelerated transnational cultural flows. The recent flows of K-pop that Iwabuchi's (2002) early study did not foresee require a further articulation of trans/nationalism framework by addressing transnational Asian popular cultural practices that are not necessarily limited to intra-Asian contexts but are globally widespread.

K-pop is a particularly significant cultural genre for the study of cultural trans/nationalism, as this genre simultaneously engages with transnational and national forces. In fact, the very term "K-pop" implies exportable music. The term does not mean South Korean music in general, referred to as *gayo* in Korean, but points to particular forms of South Korean music designed for the overseas market (Shin, 2017). Western news media coined the term in relation to an earlier boom of Japanese pop music, known as "J-pop." While J-pop refers to contemporary Japanese popular music, K-pop does not necessarily refer to contemporary South Korean music as a whole but, rather, exclusively denotes "[South] Korean popular music worthy of international export" (Shin, 2017, p. 116).<sup>3</sup> In this regard,

K-pop as a genre or system is inherently transnational in its origin. Thus, some argue that the K in K-pop does not necessarily signify Korea anymore (Lie, 2012; Shin, 2017). However, the global circulation of K-pop engages with nationalist discourses that draw on export-oriented economic development and post-colonial nation-state building. That is, as discussed in the remainder of this chapter, transnational and national forces are interwoven or are even in conflict in the evolution of K-pop on a global scale.

### **Transnational Cultural Production**

K-pop has evolved as a system that embodies transnational production and consumption. Since its coinage in the late 1990s, K-pop as a cultural genre has been transnational while reflecting a national desire to move beyond the domestic soundscape. Over the past 25 years, the South Korean music industry has rapidly expanded and its overseas markets have enlarged. According to the government's statistics, South Korean music exports soared to \$564 million in 2018 from 8.6 million in 1998—a 65.5 times increase in two decades (Jin, 2022). While this growth itself is remarkable, what might be even more significant is K-pop's global cultural influence, which far exceeds official market figures. In addition to increasing sales of music and related merchandise, fans have participated in various activities that may not be identifiable by the conventional market measurement criteria (Jin et al., 2021).<sup>4</sup>

The evolution of K-pop as a system (Shin, 2017) would not have been possible without transnational influences—especially its references to Western and Japanese pop music systems. The K-pop idol system is considered a localized yet advanced form of the Japanese idol management system (Shin, 2017). In fact, Lee Soo-Man, the founder of SM Entertainment and a pioneer of the K-pop idol system, learned J-pop's system by training and debuting SM's young idol BoA in Japan in 2000 (Shin & Kim, 2013; Yoon, 2017a). Moreover, K-pop's textual attributes, such as techniques and styles, reveal its reference to global music genres, especially hip-hop and electronica (Fuhr, 2016a; Shin, 2017). Owing to its traces of Western music, K-pop has often been considered a hybrid form of music and is subject to ongoing hybridization (Jin, 2016).

The transnational production of K-pop has undergone nearly three decades of evolution along with the expansion of South Korean markets and industries during the country's post-authoritarian periods and relatively fast adaptation to the emerging digital economy. According to data from the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (2007), South Korea had the first music industry in which digital music sales overtook physical music sales (Shin, 2017, p. 120). Major K-pop entertainment companies—especially the BIG 3 (SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment and JYP Entertainment)—initiated and led the transnational production of K-pop and developed a unique pop music production system, referred to as the in-house system (Oh & Park, 2012; Shin, 2017; Shin & Kim, 2013). The in-house system integrates the music industry's core functions, such as talent recruitment and training, production, distribution and management, while being physically located in creative clusters in a few areas of Seoul (Shin, 2017).

Thus, on the basis of heavy influences from Western and Japanese pop music, K-pop has developed its own system and explored transnational opportunities. The K-pop industry has sought international collaboration for global market expansion and its representation as “cosmopolitan pop music” (Shin, 2017, p. 119). While South Korea-based entertainment companies finally assemble the various components of K-pop in the country, the genre has increasingly incorporated global talent and, in doing so, reinforced its transnational

aspects. Major K-pop companies have recruited overseas composers, choreographers and producers. For example, numerous K-pop songs, from Girls' Generation's "Genie" (2009) to BTS's "Permission to Dance" (2021), were written by European, Japanese and/or American composers. Thus, Shin (2017) evaluated that "K-pop songs sound more and more global and metropolitan even with Korean lyrics" (p. 119). In addition to global producers and composers, K-pop idol groups have increasingly become internationalized in terms of the members' national and cultural backgrounds.

The development of outbound transnational strategies of the K-pop industry has sometimes been identified as three chronological phases (Yoo, 2018). First, until the early 2000s, which was also known as the K-pop 1.0 era, entertainment companies composed K-pop idol groups that included one or two foreign-educated, ethnic Korean members as initial attempts to penetrate overseas markets, as seen in several idol groups, such as S.E.S. (1997–2002) and Girls' Generation (2007–2017). Second, in comparison, several K-pop groups launched in the late 2000s (also known as the K-pop 2.0 era), such as f(x) (2009–2016), Miss A (2010–2017), 2 PM (2008–present) and Super Junior-M (2008–2015), included members of foreign nationalities (especially those of Asian or Asian American backgrounds) to appeal to more overseas fans. For example, Super Junior-M was launched as a Chinese sub-unit of K-pop band Super Junior (2005–present) to target the Chinese market. Third, as the K-pop industry's latest transnational market strategy, entertainment companies have undertaken several projects to recruit and train fully foreign members to sing in their local language by applying the K-pop industry's accumulated knowledge and skills. In this K-pop 3.0 era, for example, JYP Entertainment collaborated with Sony Music Entertainment Japan to launch a new nine-member Japanese female idol group NiziU in 2020 through an audition TV show that aired both in Japan and South Korea. NiziU successfully debuted at number one on the Billboard Japan Hot 100.

The K-pop industry's strategic transnationalism may be limited in scope and still emphasize Koreanizing its content through its in-house system. For example, in the K-pop system, most non-Korean members still conform to a particular, narrowly defined, beauty standard that the industry imposes on idols. As Shin (2017) argued, "Regardless of their actual ethnicity or nationality, bright-skinned, sharp-faced, and slim-bodied Asian boys and girls can earn the transnational citizenship of K-pop" (p. 118). As Fuhr (2016a) observed, the successful incorporation of foreign idols into the K-pop system and their popularity among local and global fans may show South Korea's increasing ethos of multiculturalism only on the surface, also known as "soft multiculturalism" or "cosmetic multiculturalism"; there is still strong encouragement for foreign talent in the K-pop industry "to adhere to a set of behavioral rules and cultural standards in [South] Korean society and the entertainment business that undermines the possibility of speaking from a critical distance" (p. 199). Arguably, the K-pop industry's pursuit of transnationalism does not necessarily remove the K (Koreanness) from its cultural texts but, rather, creates a nationalized mode of cultural hybridity.

### **Transnational Cultural Consumption**

The K-pop industry is not the only force driving transnational flows of K-pop; digital media platforms and overseas audiences also facilitate the flows. This is not surprising, since the value chain of cultural industries comprises various actors, including not only content creators and producers but also cultural intermediaries (e.g., digital platforms) and

fans (Khaire, 2017). In particular, as South Korean popular culture remained unknown to global audiences until the beginning of the 21st century (except for youth fans in Asia), intermediaries translating and valuating an emerging cultural taste have played a pivotal role in the recent global flows of K-pop. Digital media environments have accelerated the convergence of different forms of media, benefitting media producers and consumers (Jin et al., 2021). Indeed, media corporates and fans engage with the shifting media environments through practices that Jenkins (2006) has respectively referred to as “corporate convergence” and “grassroots convergence.”

On the one hand, the K-pop industry has taken advantage of music industries’ digital transition and, in so doing, has expanded its transnational scope. In response to the decrease in physical music sales, the K-pop industry adopted digital platform-driven business strategies, referred to as a business-to-business (B2B) model. This new model focuses on maximizing the industry’s profits, for instance, from commercials and royalties—that is, economic transactions between businesses rather than sales of music to audiences (Oh & Park, 2012). Due to the pursuit of the B2B model, K-pop music itself has been openly available online. Compared to music from other Asian countries (e.g., J-pop), K-pop has been extensively accessible and available to overseas fans through various digital platforms (Jin et al., 2021). Not surprisingly, K-pop’s global expansion has overlapped with the period of YouTube’s exponential popularity. The K-pop industry and its artists have utilized YouTube as a default platform for reaching global audiences.

Digital media environments have facilitated transnational media fans’ access to K-pop through transmedia activities (Kim, 2018), or “grassroots convergence” (Jenkins, 2006). In particular, YouTube’s digital video platform allows for “affective interface” between K-pop idols and their overseas fans watching the show in their respective locations (Kim, 2018). Digital media platforms’ affordances and functions, such as subtitling and live chat, also allow global fans to access and participate in this new cultural trend. As Suk-Young Kim (2018) aptly noted,

the pervasive use of technology in the K-pop industry conflates seemingly intertwined processes – digitized events actively pursue the aura of live events, while live performances rely heavily on digital technology and are eventually digitized for online consumption – to the point that genuine intimacy and the illusion of intimacy are not always clearly distinguishable. (p. 5)

Digital media platforms and their services, such as YouTube, Twitter and V Live<sup>5</sup>, enable global audiences to easily access K-pop content and generate their own paratexts that help others interpret this foreign cultural form (Cruz, Seo, & Binay, 2021). In the transnational circulation of K-pop, its fans, as early adopters of new technologies (Jenkins, 2006), do not merely consume the content but also participate in generating paratexts, such as reaction videos, fan-made subtitles, and dance cover videos (Liew, 2013; Swan, 2018). K-pop fan paratexts shared via digital platforms have contributed to a unique transnational and participatory culture in which fans share their sense of transnational belonging. As the global BTS fandom shows, the fans imagine themselves as a family intimately interacting with each other and often working together for collective causes, such as charity and social activist campaigns (Cho, 2022; Yoon, 2019). For example, in the summer of 2020, when North Americans were protesting the death of George Floyd, who died of asphyxia at the hands of a white police officer, BTS fans quickly raised \$1.3 million for Black Lives Matter campaigns and organizations to match BTS’s donation of \$1 million for the same cause (Zaveri, 2020).

Despite their different cultural backgrounds, K-pop fans move beyond their geo-cultural contexts to connect with their favourite idols and other fans while living in an imagined community of fandom (Jin, 2021). K-pop's global fans, who speak different languages, communicate with each other through linguistic and cultural translation facilitated by digital technologies (Yoon, 2017b). Furthermore, the fans' participatory culture through user-generated paratexts may contribute to challenging the Western-centric digital mediascape. In her analysis of K-pop reaction videos, Swan (2018) stated that "The K-pop reaction video is a creative intervention that resists the reproduction of Eurocentric ideologies in the digital realm" through the participation of global fans who "perform a wide variety of racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities" (p. 552).

Through corporate and grassroots media convergence, K-pop has expanded its global fan base. Digital media environments have allowed K-pop to move across national borders and to be translated easily. For example, YouTube introduced a new comment translation feature for its Android and iOS versions in September 2021 that offers an option to translate a comment written in another language into the user's default language. The digital platform's introduction of prompt, AI-assisted translation tools has reinforced global audience members' consistent interactions. In addition, global fans of K-pop have offered their time and labour to produce and share their knowledge with other fans. Especially in the nascent period of AI-led translation, fan-subbing (translation subtitles created by fans) and paratexts contributed to accelerating the transnational flows of K-pop.

Of course, digital media convergence is not solely responsible for the K-pop phenomenon, as the synergetic processes of various forces have facilitated it. Media researchers have endeavoured to determine the driving factors behind the surge of K-pop, which was once a domestic and local music genre. While Western critics have sometimes reduced the whole phenomenon of the Korean Wave to an ethnic (or at most) diasporic culture boom, an increasing number of surveys of global K-pop fans reveals that it is not only ethnic Koreans or Asians who consume K-pop and that the music genre further appeals to overseas audiences of various national, racial and ethnic backgrounds (e.g., McLaren & Jin, 2020). K-pop's styles and idols have explored transnational affinities through which overseas fans have been able to create an imagined community of pop cultural practices and move beyond the Western-centric mediascape. As several critics have pointed out, versatile and hybrid attributes of K-pop texts and idols may offer global fans room for access and emotional engagement (e.g., Jin et al., 2021; Jung, 2013; Yoon, 2019). Furthermore, ubiquitous, mobile and haptic digital technologies facilitate a sense of being together regardless of the fans' everyday situations. By transnationally accessing the networked universe of K-pop, local youth may express their desire to escape their restricted material and social contexts (Ko, Kim, No, & Simoes, 2014) and question the dominant socio-cultural order (Jin et al., 2021).

For a better understanding of the transnational consumption of K-pop, it is worth noting that recent audience studies have explored *transcultural* experiences and affinities between media and fans beyond national differences (Annett, 2014; Chin & Morimoto, 2013; Han, 2017). These studies have sometimes used the concept of "transculturalism" to further articulate the cultural dimension of transnationalism (Annett, 2014), which in their view may still be an extension of a nation-based framework, by addressing the "extranational subject positions" of media fans and audiences (Morimoto & Chin, 2017, p. 176). According to Morimoto and Chin (2017), media fans do not engage with fan objects (i.e., cultural objects and stars in which they emotionally invest) through exploring

cultural affinities—thus moving beyond a national frame. Indeed, as several empirical studies have uncovered, overseas K-pop fans do not necessarily receive K-pop as emerging, foreign cultural content through their *national* frames of reference. Yoon's (2017b) study on Asian Canadian youth revealed that ethnic or racial identity was an influential frame of reference in overseas fans' consumption of K-pop. Meanwhile, McLaren and Jin's (2020) study on K-pop fans of various backgrounds in Canada showed that national or ethno-racial difference might not be necessarily considered as a restrictive factor by the fans in their engagement with transnational participatory culture; this study even suggested that "regardless of" their subject positions, fans invest in an imagined K-pop fan universe (see also Jin, 2021). In comparison, Yoon's (2019) study on K-pop fans of white and Asian backgrounds revealed potential racial tensions between K-pop fans. Despite some differences in detailed findings, these empirical studies drawing on the transcultural approach contribute to questioning the relevance of national identity and nationality in media audiences' experiences. For example, for fans in certain socio-cultural contexts, such as Canada, which is considered a highly multi-ethnic country based on settler colonialism and migration, the audience's sense of nationality may not be a highly influential frame of reference compared to other factors, such as gender and race, in their transnational consumption of K-pop.

As shown in the empirical studies, overseas fans and audiences engage with grassroots flows of K-pop that embody everyday experiences of transnationalism. The cultural dimension of transnationalism, observed in K-pop fan practices, challenges the dominant media discourse around K-pop, which has often attributed the cultural trend to its national origin (the "K") and, thus, questions the nation-statist approach that remains pervasive in media studies.

### Nationalization of K-pop

The global rise of K-pop has not only served to facilitate transnationalism. The phenomenon has also served to rejuvenate its cultural nationalism as something represented not only through traditional cultural customs (e.g., *pansori*, the traditional Korean music genre) but through youthful, contemporary and digital cultural forms (e.g., K-pop, Korean dramas and e-sports). Moreover, the transnational production and consumption of K-pop have undeniably offered young South Korean fans a cultural resource for affirming their national and ethnic pride (Berbiguier & Cho, 2017). This rejuvenation of cultural nationalism, which is sometimes sceptically considered blind nationalism with a disapproving Korean slang term *gukbbong* (literally meaning "a state of being intoxicated with nationalism"), may not be substantially different from older forms of nationalism (Kim, 2021), and thus, may still reproduce an essentialized, self-Orientalist notion of Koreanness.

Policy discourses have also evinced the incorporation of this rejuvenated cultural nationalism through K-pop. In particular, the discourses have related the Korean Wave to South Korea's soft power as the ability to acquire political power by attracting international audiences (Kim, 2013). While the *gukbbong* mentality is more about South Koreans' self-assurance and pride, the soft-power discourse aims to systematically instrumentalize the Korean Wave for political and economic gains. For the past 25 years, numerous scholars and policymakers have examined the Korean Wave phenomenon as a process that demonstrates South Korea's soft-power development (e.g., Kim, 2022; Kim & Jin, 2016; Nye & Kim, 2013). As Youna Kim (2022) defined,



A country's popular culture, as a soft power resource, can increase its overall attractiveness and its potential influence on the global stage, albeit in unquantifiable, often commercial, capitalistic, unpredictable and even paradoxical ways, involving both state and non-state actors and international networks in a digitalizing world. (pp. 3–4)

Indeed, state and non-state actors (as well as international networks) have made use of the Korean Wave as a means and signifier of national cultural power. Although K-pop is an undeniably hybrid form of cultural trend, it is often signified in relation to the K (the country of origin) in several different yet potentially interwoven ways.

First, acknowledging the importance of popular culture as a tool of soft power, the South Korean government has diligently promoted popular culture as a primary means of the country's soft power and for cultural diplomacy. The government has treated K-pop as a core sector of its national branding and cultural diplomacy. Consecutive presidents have often celebrated K-pop artists' global popularity and cited them as examples of the country's burgeoning creative industries (Kim & Jin, 2016). Indeed, the government has often invited South Korean celebrities to diplomatic events. In the age of the Korean Wave (since the late 1990s), it has been common for South Korean celebrities to accompany presidents to overseas government events as part of national branding and cultural diplomacy. Former Presidents during the era of the Korean Wave, including Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013), Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) and Moon Jae-in (2017–2022), visited foreign countries along with K-pop or Korean drama celebrities on some occasions (Keith, 2022; Kim & Jin, 2016). The instrumentalization of K-pop and, more widely, the Korean Wave for cultural diplomacy tends to define popular cultural practices as essentialized national culture under the K brand. This discourse of Korean Wave-driven cultural diplomacy treats K-pop stars as “agents through which state power is translated and disseminated to publics” (Keith, 2022, p. 159).

Second, in addition to the government-led cultural diplomacy and soft-power discourse, the South Korean news media and public have engaged with a nationalist conception of the Korean Wave and K-pop. The global K-pop phenomenon has often been celebrated as a symbolic example of excellence in the national culture and, thus, as a booster of a public sense of national pride. News on K-pop artists and industries has continuously appeared in mainstream South Korean media. For example, BTS's U.S. billboard rankings have been reported in South Korea almost in real time.

The overseas recognition of K-pop and the Korean Wave may have fulfilled South Koreans' desire to overcome the post-colonial inferiority complex with which they often considered their pop music and culture as knock-offs of Western (or Japanese) counterparts (Yoon, 2017a). The nationalistic celebration of the global K-pop phenomenon has often occurred through South Korean news media's horse-racing style reports on Western media's recognition of K-pop. That is, the nationalization of K-pop is not free of the Western gaze that essentializes or exoticizes the K in K-pop. The observable pop culture-driven national pride in the South Korean media and public sphere may be a discursive construct that reproduces self-Orientalism. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Korean news media are increasingly referring to South Korean music (*gayo*) as “K-pop.” The increasing use of the term K-pop in public discourse in South Korea implies that the public has internalized the ways in which the Western gaze categorizes and stereotypes South Korean music.

Third, the celebratory discourse of the Korean Wave seems to reveal how popular culture can serve to reinforce nationalism and, thus, interpellate domestic audiences as national subjects who constantly associate their identity with the nation-state as an imagined community. The sense of national pride associated with the Korean Wave is also observable among South Korean fans of K-pop. As Berbiguier and Cho (2017) found, South Korean fans feel proud of their favourite K-pop idols' success in overseas markets, which serves to reinforce their national pride. According to their study, while interacting and connecting with overseas fans, South Korean fans sometimes treat the foreign fans as "the other" of authentic K-pop fandom. In so doing, South Korean fans reduce the multiple and transnational meanings of K-pop to a proud export of South Korea. The nationalistic desires among some South Korean fans may not be different from the public's celebration of the global rise of South Korean pop culture.

Overall, the global surge of K-pop reveals the tensions behind transnational cultural flows. That is, transnational and national forces may often be interwoven yet in conflict with each other. The K-pop industry's endeavour to explore transnational markets has reinforced transnational production practices, as the industry's vast multinational talent evinces. However, the K as a geo-cultural and national identifier is not necessarily erased or hidden but is increasingly utilized for South Korea's soft power. The global K-pop phenomenon has dialogically evolved while involving various stakeholders, such as the state, the cultural industry and the audience.

### **Conclusion**

The discourses and cultural practices around the global rise of K-pop show how pop culture-driven transnationalism evolves in relation to nationalizing forces and the Western-centric mediascape. The transnational flows of K-pop have not been free of national forces operating respectively in the location of origin (South Korea) and various overseas reception points. In South Korea, the global success of K-pop may have served to reaffirm the national identity and pride of South Koreans who have struggled to redefine their national identity for decades of the post-colonial period. In overseas reception points, K-pop has also encountered national forces. In particular, in Asian reception points, such as Japan and China, where the Korean Wave emerged early and has long been relatively popular, anti-Korean Wave campaigns have emerged along with nationalistic sentiments (Ahn & Yoon, 2020; Chen, 2017). In Western reception points, K-pop has also encountered cultural barriers. In comparison to Asian contexts, where cultural nationalism was a primary force in restricting the transnationalization of K-pop, racial frameworks have been a major barrier in Western contexts. As Jin et al.'s (2021) global ethnography revealed, the Korean Wave and K-pop tend to be commonly racialized in non-Asian contexts, including North America, Europe and Latin America.

Popular culture-driven transnationalism may diffuse with relative ease compared with other forms of transnationalism, such as those led by political and economic interests. However, as K-pop trans/nationalism evinces, popular cultural flows are not free of power relations between various national and transnational forces. Moreover, K-pop trans/nationalism reveals a dilemma of the K-pop industry and artists who must meet the needs of national, regional and transnational fans (Fedorenko, 2017). While K-pop stars have often been portrayed as cultural ambassadors representing their country, they also make a pledge to intra-Asian and global fans and capital (Fedorenko, 2017). In this regard, K-pop trans/nationalism is an interesting phenomenon that demonstrates contradictory yet

interwoven forces of cultural globalization. As implied in its name, K-pop is a national or ethnic cultural form (the K) that targets a global and universal music genre (pop). Industries and policymakers of the country of origin have attempted to make use of the K as a way of branding the country. However, the increasing political-economic process in which K-pop is signified and commodified as a “proud” export of South Korea does not necessarily determine the ways in which global audiences engage with K-pop.

K-pop trans/nationalism implies that transnationalism is a process involving different forces and stakeholders, such as the state, industry, digital technology and audiences. These forces often move in different directions, thus complicating the meaning of transnational cultural flows. The global K-pop phenomenon illustrates how transnational and national forces interweave in popular cultural practices and how the tensions of these two vectors may entail unexpected cultural flows and hybridization. As addressed at the beginning of this chapter, a British band singing in Korean and English along with a South Korean band singing in Korean and English might provide a snapshot of the ways in which cultural globalization evolves. Increasing transnational flows of South Korean pop music and other media forms reveal that the Western-centric framework of cultural globalization may no longer offer high explanatory power. To understand the unexpected transnational surge of BTS, Blackpink and many other K-pop groups among overseas audiences, it may be necessary to move far beyond the dominant conceptualization of cultural globalization that still draws on the dichotomy of Western centre and non-Western periphery.

## Notes

- 1 Interestingly, while the government assigned BTS as cultural ambassadors who supposedly represent the nation-state, global fans enthusiastically responded to the group’s speech without associating it with any national meanings (ABC News, 2021). As discussed later in this chapter, fans do not see K-pop artists as national representatives but rather consider them as global figures who encourage the fans of various cultural backgrounds to connect and share with each other (McLaren and Jin, 2020; Yoon, 2019).
- 2 K-pop artists have often been mobilized to represent Korea, and the government has sponsored events and promotional activities related to K-pop, such as the K-pop Academy, a popular educational programme that targets global audiences. Organized by the Korean Cultural Center, an affiliate of the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, this one-month cultural programme offers lessons on K-pop dance and singing as well as Korean culture. The programme was held regularly at 25 locations worldwide as of 2019 (Kim & Lee, 2019).
- 3 It is known that the term K-pop first appeared in a Billboard magazine article in 1999, in which the magazine’s correspondent Cho introduced a Korean music producer Kim Chang-Hwan’s comments that compared “melody-oriented Korean pop music” with “rock-oriented J-pop” (Japanese pop music). When translating this interview, Cho used K-pop as a concise term to refer to Korean pop music (Herman, 2019). Similar to the term Korean Wave (or Hallyu), K-pop was coined not by the Korean news media or music industry but by overseas journalists. That is, the term K-pop reflects a way for overseas media to try to categorize (or even stereotype) Korean pop music as the “other” of mainstream global music. However, due to the increasing global currency of the term, K-pop has also been used in the Korean media and music industry.
- 4 A few national or international studies have identified the demographic of K-pop fans. One of the most extensive surveys would be the ARMY census, which draws on 402,881 responses (BTS Army census: <https://www.btsarmycensus.com>). According to this extensive survey conducted in 46 different languages, global fans of BTS truly are from various countries, including such major fan bases as Indonesia (20%), Mexico (10.6%), the United States (8.4%) and South Korea (3.7%).
- 5 V Live is a South Korean live video streaming service operated by search portal company Naver. V Live, which offers numerous live video channels of K-pop idols, through which the idols and their global fans develop an interactive sense of community. Since its launch in 2015, the V Live platforms have been especially popular among global K-pop fans.

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