
It has been 15 years since the term “hallyu,” representing the big bang of Korean popular culture exploded in Asia. However, is it still vital? Some dismiss hallyu as nothing but an imagined signifier without specific meaning, and for that reason, it was and is a mere signifier representing cultural nationalism (Lee, 2007). Others argue that nothing else in Korean history has made such a global impact, and they insist on the Nationalistic perspective that Koreans should produce competitive cultural products (Park, 2005; Hyun, 2004). Still, there are those who contest that hallyu should not be seen as a mere tool for the cultural industry, but considered as a juncture in cultural traffic (Baek, 2005). Furthermore, foreign scholars and cultural industry insiders also have various opinions about hallyu. Some evaluate hallyu positively as a new cultural phenomenon within Asia that can challenge the American cultural hegemony (Chen, 2001). Others see that hallyu, especially Korean TV dramas, distinguish the differences within Asian popular culture, and also show us how the flow and exchange of popular culture in East Asia is connected to socio-politics (Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008). In journalism, hallyu fever in Japan, extending beyond TV dramas and movies to popular music and online games, indicates that Korea is in the leading position of Asian pop culture.¹ Some even say that hallyu fever in Japan lessens the discrimination against zainichi (Korean Japanese) (Brasor, 2004). Recently, Korean media emphasizes on the focus of hallyu from TV dramas to pop idols and insists that cultural and economic impact of hallyu is still valid. We also can witness the influence of hallyu in the United States and Europe from East Asia.²

People have various opinions about hallyu, however, they can agree on one thing: the system of ‘production-distribution-consumption’ of Korean popular culture has been able to strengthen its global position—developing from the cultural phenomenon of hallyu and accumulating a cultural capital. For that reason, the perspectives about hallyu have changed in the cultural discourse. In the early discourse hallyu was seen as a replacement for Nationalism. The Korean media coverage of fanatical fans of Korean dramas and pop music in Asia rushed to publicize that they have infiltrated American and Japanese cultural hegemony. Korean contemporary culture seemed to have started wielding strong influence all over Asia with self-
motivated cultural product system and narratives. The articles simply focused on the fanatic East Asian fandom of certain hallyu stars and evaluated hallyu unreasonably based on these phenomena. However, it piqued the interest of many readers and viewers. The Korean government started to work on a policy to support hallyu, and stimulated cultural nationalism in 2002; and the rest is history.

Oddly, the humanities and social science scholars were among those who benefited the most through the commercial journalism of media in the early and mid-2000’s, instead of those directly involved in hallyu cultural industry. Those intellectuals emphasized the positive aspects of hallyu in the major publications, participated in the government project for hallyu promotion and superficially judged hallyu with vague knowledge and hunches about the industry. Korean intellectuals eventually earned economical and symbolical profits as the result of the intellectual business. This does not imply that there were no intellectuals who tried to keep an objective and critical distance with cultural characteristics of hallyu. However, most intellectuals had an optimistic view of the international status and the industrial prospect of Korean popular culture, and its opportunity to subvert the Western cultural hegemony within Pan-Asia based solely on the sensation of the TV drama, Winter Sonata (Kyóul yônga) and The Jewel in the Palace (Tae Changüm) in the early 2000’s. Contrast to this conjecture, there was a pessimistic conclusion about hallyu saying, they were ‘the end of hallyu,’ but this was myopic as well.

The cultural characteristics of hallyu have become clearer after calming down the overwhelming discourse on hallyu without objective analysis and perspectives in the early 2000’s. The international identity of Korean popular culture satisfies the logic of the cultural industry rather than the logic of theoretical discourse such as cultural nationalism. The cultural enterprises which produced hallyu cultural contents have actually focused on the production system that has been competitive in the global cultural industry for the last 10 years. They not only wanted the production of hallyu culture, but also, its reproduction.3

For Korea, a nation with regional limitation, it was necessary to change the circulation structure of ‘production-distribution-consumption’ to a transnational system in order to maintain and enlarge one’s own business models within the global cultural industry. This is the logic of hallyu cultural industry. It was the reliable transnational system of Korean popular culture industry which the people in the Korean cultural industry had tried to put into practice since the great success of The Jewel of Palace - the peak of hallyu. In order to establish the transnational system, one should increase the size of capital; reliably produce a killer content; and build and set up the distribution net to localize the contents to fit into the regional characteristics. Since The jewel of Palace, hallyu clearly relies more on the logic of cultural capital than it has ever
done so before, and this is the crucial difference between the current and the early *hallyu* that possessed strong ideological emotion.

I would like to explain these new aspects of *hallyu* in terms of ‘post-*hallyu,*’ ‘K-POP,’ and ‘transnationalism.’ As I mentioned, we can see the present *hallyu* as ‘post-*hallyu*’ since it has changed from the perspective of ‘discourse-phenomena’ to ‘capital-production’. The ‘post-*hallyu*’ does not indicate a time period, but it indicates the new stage of *hallyu*, or the extinction of *hallyu* as a signifier. The term *hallyu* is not sophisticated enough to encompass all of its phenomenon in the transnational situation of global cultural topography. The term seems to emphasize or get internalized nationality excessively even in an era when regional popular cultures are crossing borders freely. A situation in which an Asian country consumes Korean popular culture without endorsement makes *hallyu* extinct as a signifier. It is Asian people’s daily life consumption of contents within the Asian cultural topography which prompted Americanization in the Third World, and Korean cultural enterprises are able to accumulate capital due to the expansion of consumers.

We must focus on what kind of cultural capital *hallyu* produces now. In this sense, ‘post-*hallyu*’ indicates moving from discourse to capital; and from production to reproduction. Generally, people thought the identity of early *hallyu* was about Korean capital and labor force creating their own competitive cultural commodities, distributing them to multi-national markets, and established a privileged position. However, the current formation of ‘production-distribution-promotion’ in Korean popular culture depends on multi-national system in the global market which includes Asia. In case of dramas and movies, there are collaborations from the pre-production stage to share the market, and often, directors, actors, and producers are from different nations. In the case of idol groups, foreign national members are scouted from auditions, and they use local agencies for showcases, TV appearances, and album releases. Now, we cannot find pure “Koreanness” in the popular cultural commodities of so-called “*hallyu.*” For that reason, ‘post-*hallyu*’ presupposes the extinction of *hallyu* as a signifier.

The term, ‘K-POP’ marks the end of *hallyu* as a signifier. It translates the global position of Korean popular music. Officially, ‘K-POP’ meant Korean Pop Music, but in a broad sense, it also means Korean popular culture. ‘K-POP’ as Korean popular culture in general can be replaced with ‘*hallyu*’ as a signifier. Moving from ‘*hallyu*’ to ‘K-POP’ can be seen as ‘K-POP’ becoming most influential in ‘*hallyu*’ for now, but it also means that the regional utterance, ‘*hallyu*’ is becoming a global one.

‘K-POP’ is the most suitable word to interpret the trans-nationality of ‘*hallyu.*’ ‘K-POP’ actually refers to the Korean popular music. The regional terminology for Korean popular music
is ‘kayo,’ but the usage of ‘K-POP’ indicates that Korean popular music being consumed in the global market. It implies that K-POP obtains its own transnational position in Asia just like ‘J-POP,’ Japanese popular music, and ‘Canto-POP,’ Hong Kong popular music. ‘K-POP’ is used in the context of discussing a Pan-Asiatic pop artist like ‘Rain’ or Korean idol groups, and thus, signifies Korean popular music as whole in Asian or elsewhere. Therefore, ‘K-POP’ represents the impressive transnationality of ‘hallyu’ and deconstructs the old usage of ‘hallyu.’ Then, what makes ‘K-POP’ transnational? I will discuss this part later, but for now, I will talk about the paradoxical relationship between ‘K-POP’ and transnationality.

‘K-POP’ has a regional identity different from the First World pop music of America or England which is the mainstream of the world. The music style, the peculiarity of planning and production of K-POP, and the way it has been consumed represent the anthropological and geo-cultural specificity of a regional music production. No matter how K-POP has been used in terms of global image, it contains regional particularity of Korean popular music. However, it is questionable whether K-POP has its own aesthetic identity. We probably limit this term to refer to idol groups’ music that has a distinct international competitive edge, or certain Korean musicians who are reproducing the music style of American pop artists like Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, Usher and Lady Gaga for regional consumption. Even though the global term K-POP has situated Korean popular music in the transnational market, it must be viewed in context of its situation in Korean popular music. This is why we need to distinguish K-POP from the global characteristics of American and British pop when we talk about the transnationalism of K-POP. It was response to a need and situation in the global market. It possesses certain goals and the need to overcome geographical, cultural ethical border of nations. It is the opportunity to overcome colonialism through the formation of modern culture, producing capital and a referential system. Ironically, such goal makes transnational discourse of K-POP more regional or re-national*, but this psychological dilemma is the subconscious of K-POP’s transnationality.

2. Dual Positions of K-POP in the Topology of Global Culture

According to Yonhapnews in Korea, in the current affairs program, Monocle of Bloomberg TV in USA introduced Korean music market under the title, “How K-POP became economical potential power in Korean industry.” This program explains, “Samsung, Hyundai and LG are the strongest export brands in Korea, but to many people, the actual power brands are K-POP singers like BoA, Girls Generation, Epik High and Super Juniors.” We usually
mention Samsung, Hyundai and LG as transnational global enterprises of Korea, but the program states that K-POP singers are more powerful brands. Here, we can guess that K-POP is the hottest global cultural commodities of Korea.

K-POP becomes the cultural icon that designates Asianized or globalized Korean popular music. Now it fits the slogan, ‘regionalized production and globalized consumption.’ The process of production and consumption of K-POP implies that, according to Shin, “It is the international proper noun that refers to the popular music produced by Korean music industry and consumed in East Asian region including Japan, and the culture that is associated with it. But we still need to take a look whether we should limit the geographical influence of K-POP to East Asia or expand to other region as well. The general understanding of K-POP is that it is hard to see K-POP as influential in other cultural regions. K-POP has gained great popularity and has been recognized as an independent musical genre in Japan, China and Southeast Asia, and the international recognition of Korean pop artists and idol groups are not just limited to East Asia, but also extends to the Middle East, Africa and South America, and even to the USA and Europe. The selling power of idol groups that are leading K-POP has expanded the geographical borders from East Asia to other regions.

Rain, known as the Usher or the Justin Timberlake of Korea, was introduced to the American pop market and Hollywood in 2008, and the moment is when K-POP crossed the East Asian region border as transnationalism. Wonder Girls who joined Jonas Brothers Concert as the opening act increased the recognition of K-POP. The group’s song “Nobody” ranked 76th in the US Billboard single chart in 2009. Recently, JYP Entertainment, Wonder Girls’ management company, opened management office in New York to engage in US activities. SM Town event which was held in L.A. Staple Center in September of 2010 also attracted many Asian American fans who really love idol group belongs to SM Entertainment although Korean media exaggerated the statistics. 400 British young boys and girls gathered at the First K-POP Festival held by British Cultural Center in Korea in February 2011, and according to Korean reporters, they sang along to the tunes of idol groups such as Big Bang, 2NE1, and Super Juniors. One should not misuse K-POP like Korean media does as in the headline, the ‘invasion of K-POP.’ However, it is true that K-POP fan base has extended beyond East Asia.

Korean popular music that can be interpreted as K-POP, international signifier, is a flexible phenomenon, but it has left tangible trace in the US and Europe pop market. And it is the result of ambivalent and hybrid flow of cultural globalization. Cultural globalization is ambivalent just like economic and political globalization. Whether one should understand cultural globalization as a global phenomenon of the ‘Americanization of culture’ or the
weakening of American cultural hegemony, resulting in the rise of regional culture of the Third World, the ambivalence of globalization is just like in the case of political or economic globalization (Lee, 2009). The globalization of political and economic structure is a complicated hybrid which cannot be determined by ambivalence of fallen and re-rising of American hegemony. The globalization of culture also contains complexity that cannot be simply divided into the ‘Americanization of culture’ and ‘cultural diversity.’ American popular culture has been internalized by the entire world, especially the Third World, after post-colonial and post-cold war period, and this is the Americanization of culture as phenomenon. However, it is different from the domination and subordination in cultural imperialism since it does not completely destroy regional culture. Actually, it re-constructs them in terms of globalization (Won, 2008). The Americanization of culture in the Third World means everyday life consumption of American movies, popular music, sports, dramas and urban lifestyle, and at the same time, they are re-processed and transformed into regional cultural resources by the people in the cultural industry of that region. Americanization reinterprets local culture globally. Cultural diversity also does not completely rule out Americanization, rather it internalizes it as a constituent although the two may be contradictory. Even world music, the alternative by the Third World cultural diversity, is influenced by American and Europe pop music and transferred to that market. Regional popular cultural products such as popular music, movies, dramas, fashion and food has established their own positions in the global cultural topography and has become the objects of international cultural consumption. The result is from the utilization of regional resources of Americanization. Cultural diversity is like a two-sided mirror. The ambivalence of globalized culture and regional culture translated into hybrid culture is called ‘global culture.’ The attempt to escape culture from globalization produces a new type of ethnoscape (Appadurai, 1996).

K-POP is the proper example from the perspective of ambivalence of ‘global culture.’ The music style, fashion, and dance of pop artists and the management system of K-POP are largely influenced by American and Japanese pop music. BoA, Rain and Lee Hyori (Yi Hyori) who raised global cultural index of early K-POP also adopted American pop artists’ style. For instance, BoA was known as the Korean Britney Spears, and Rain, the Korean Usher. They were not only analogies, but they had actually borrowed the American artists’ styles. Such epithets can be understood as them being regional imitators, but paradoxically, it also can be stated that K-POP singers’ global position is recognized. Most of K-POP singers’ songs are written by Korean composers, but musical resources are adopted from American R&B and European techno music. Occasionally, K-POP singers’ songs are accused of plagiarism, sampling from American or European music, and it hints to us
that the original songs or samplings are often borrowed directly or indirectly. The music style of Idol groups of major entertainment management companies has its own unique rhythm or melody, but if we look at the musical origin, the songs cannot be free from the influence of American hip hop, R&B, and European techno. Some idol groups request their songs directly from American composers. The idol groups' music style tends to be more global compared to Japanese idol group music which strongly exhibit regional characteristic.

Even though we witness this kind of borrowing in music production, the K-POP entertainment companies do not agree that K-POP imitates American and Japanese pop music. The companies insist that Korean pop music has its own production and management system, and for that reason, it is self-sufficient in the market. Furthermore, they argue that K-POP is balanced by not only borrowing from American and Japanese pop music, but also from European electro sound, making a unique music style. They believe that K-POP is totally different from Japanese pop music in terms of musical and dance style. They also mention that powerful sound, strong melody, and danceable rhythm make K-POP different from American and Japanese pop music. Their focus on the ‘distinctive qualities’ of K-POP shows us that they want to declare its culturally dominant position in Asia. They want to have a competitive yet compromising relationship with other Asian pop music, rather than a symbiotic relationship.

Let’s analyze the music styles of BoA and Rain that can prove the ambivalence of K-POP. BoA is definitely a Korean national, but most of her musical acts take place in Japan. In Asian and European markets, her albums are usually categorized under J-POP rather than K-POP. She was trained to debut in Japan with a long-term management plan from the start. She had lived with a Japanese family for 8 months while she was trying to break into the Japanese market and sign a contract with one of the biggest management company in Japan, Avex. Most of BoA’s early songs were written by multi-national song-writers, who were involved in producing her later hits. Avex was only in charge of styling her image and promotion. We can say BoA has faithfully followed the Japanese local management system, but interestingly, her music style never completely overlapped with the characteristic of J-POP.

Whether BoA’s music style is Korean, Japanese or American surpasses the question of whether she has imitated certain artists. One might think that BoA has imitated Amuro Namie or Hamasaki Ayumi who are the paragons of Japanese female pop idols because she is a Japanized pop star. However, her music and fashion style are closer to American pop star Britney Spears than Japanese female solo singers. However, there is an emotional reluctance among BoA’s fans to compare her to Britney Spears. Interestingly, BoA’s management system
is Asian although her music style and cultural sentiment are closer to Western pop style. Kim Yŏngmin, CEO of SM Entertainment states that:

Some say BoA imitated Amuro Namie or Hamasaki Ayumi, but that is not true. Amuro Namie’s popularity was on decline when BoA debuted, and Hamasaki’s dance skill was far inferior to hers. When we look at back at the time Amuro and Hamasaki debuted, when they were 15 and 17 respectively, their dance skills could not surpass BoA’s. BoA had a goal to Asianize Western pop music, and Japan was the stage she had to pass through to get there. If she measured herself against anyone in the process of production, it was Britney Spears. (Lee, 2006:228)

The cultural identity of BoA who mainly performed in Japan as an important J-POP artist despite her Korean nationality with borrowed American female pop music style is clearly a hybrid. And it can understood as Post-Colonialist Homi Bhabha describes the “desire of mimicry” saying, “it is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.” (Bhabha, 1994:86) The ambivalence of BoA produces hybrid culture of K-POP’s subject, place, and style.

We can also witness the ambivalence of K-POP’s musical production and consumption through Rain’s Pan-Asian popularity. Rain has the most wide Pan-Asian fandom as a solo singer in Korea. He rose as a top pop artist across Asia after he performed sold out concerts in Tokyo National Forum (July, 2005), Hong Kong (October 8 and 9, 2005), Beijing (October 24, 2005), Taiwan (December, 2005) and Bangkok (February, 2006). He also won the Most Popular Singer Award at “MTV Asia Aid” (2005), Asia Korean Singer at “MTV Music Award Japan 2005,” and Top Korean Singer Award at “Mandarin Music Award” and became an Asian pop star representing Korea. His steppingstone success in Korea and Asia led him to the American pop market and Hollywood with a New York concert in February 2006.

We can value Rain and his former management company, JYP Entertainment which had first envisioned a global market beyond Asian market among K-POP singers (Shin, 2009:508). If so, how should we define the music style of Rain who expanded K-POP into the global market? His music style was strongly influenced by his former producer, Park Jin Young (Pak Chinyŏng). Park Jin Young’s music is based on R&B style. After Park was recognized as a producer in the U.S., he once mentioned in a radio program interview that his music has its roots in the Motown of the 1950’s. Motown Record is strongest record label that primarily featured African-American artists. Artists like The Supremes, Stevie Wonder, and the Commodores, and the Jacksons, represented the Motown Sound. Park wrote and produced music for Rain. However, Park wrote music for Rain with hip hop beat instead of Park’s signature funk beat. Rain’s hit songs like “Bad
“Boy,” “Running Away from the Sun,” “I Do,” and “Rainism” are based on soul rhythm with addition of blues and hip hop elements. Rain’s musical origin is closer to soul music, compared to major forms of Koreanized pop that are R&B with strong modulation and danceable hip hop. Therefore, Rain’s music is a form of K-POP that is a Koreanized transformation of music--Koreanized pop music transformed by hip hop with groove beat. Rain, unlike BoA who was influenced by J-POP, was not influenced by J-POP and directly transformed American major pop into Korean style. Asian music fans who found Rain’s music familiar, and at the same time, they did not recognize that it was modeled after American pop. This is because Rain’s music borrowed American major pop forms but translated into Korean style music. Some American pop music experts criticized that Rain’s musical performance was trite and mere imitation. On the contrary, some experts stated that it was a new phenomenon of cultural fusion (Shin, 509).

The ambivalence of K-POP appears not only in music style, but in physical hybridity in Rain. His sexy physical appearance and dazzling performance have perfect condition to make Asian women fanatic about him. Especially, physical particularity of Rain is different from Asian male pop stars or American male pop stars. According to Hong Kong Entertainment business people, Rain has a face of innocent and naïve look, and at the same time, he has a healthy and powerful appearance. And it gives ambivalent image of him. Unlike famous Hong Kong stars such as Leslie Cheung, Andy Lau and Leon Lai who have calm and quiet image, Rain has innocent image and powerful masculinity at the same time which cannot be found in Hong Kong stars.

The ambivalence of K-POP appears not only in music, but it is embodied in Rain’s physique that reflects hybridity. His and dazzling performance have perfect condition to make Asian women fanatic about him. Especially, physical particularity of Rain is different from Asian male pop stars or American male pop stars. According to Hong Kong Entertainment business people, Rain has an innocent and naïve face attached to a powerful physical appearance. It creates an ambivalent image. Unlike famous Hong Kong stars such as Leslie Cheung, Andy Lau and Leon Lai, whose image is quiet and serene, Rain’s is a combination of innocence and powerful masculinity that has not been seen in Asian male stars.

Rain’s Asia concert tour in 2005 was a success that maximized his talent and appeal. His stage ritual of tearing off his costume, powerful dance number, and the special effects of him getting drenched and defying gravity dazzled the audience. The mass of white balloons as props, his invitation of audience on stage added romantic ambiance to the show. Rain’s physical strength, which most Asians do not possess is that he can perform dynamic dance with his physical bone structure like western pop singers and has eastern sentiment that western pop
singers do not have. The ambivalent style of ‘sexuality’ and ‘sentimentality’ imprinted Western and Eastern images in Rain, and it is “Bad Boy” Rain’s secret just like his song title. Rain’s ambivalent image of sexually appealed masculine physical look and pretty boy like face with modest mind is his charming point that strongly attracted female fans in Asia. Ambivalence of K-POP that is represented in Rain is exposed in full-scale through transnational style of Korean idol groups.

3. Transnational Phenomena of Idol Pops

“Korean idol pop is K-POP itself” is not an overstatement, and it monopolizes Korean popular music. The regional monopoly of idol pop becomes material base for practicing transnationality. It would be impossible to expand globally if cultural capital of idol pop did not monopolize Korean popular music. This is the main reason why Japanese idol pop is not able to obtain international popularity beyond the regional consumption. Transnational condition of idol pop was formed by the circulation of regional material base and global reproduction based on regional material base. The music style of idol pop, nationality of group members, multi-national fandom who are fanatic about Korean idol pop and firm global system that produces idol pop are important condition for transnational idol pop. Then, what is the transnational condition of idol pop?  

The first is the hybridity of music style. Korean idol pop’s music style borrows from American hip hop or European techno sound, but it does not completely copy them. Therefore, it has a regional particularity. The first generation idol groups, H.O.T., sang rap-core resistant songs based on rap and dance that were popular in the 1990s and switched to bright and lively European techno songs. Sechs Kies, a group that was a rival of H.O.T. was also based its music on hip hop, but it was not a typical hip hop, but rather, it consisted of Koreanized disco and electronica as well. 

Shinhwa, TVXQ, Shinee and Big Bang who debuted later based their sounds on hip hop as well, but mixed them with different styles and created hybrid sounds. Recently popularized girls groups also based American hip hop music and European techno sound, but it is mixed with musical resources and popular musical forms of contemporary sound created mutant music. Korean idol pop is neither American style, nor Korean style. It surely is hybrid music style.

Japanese idol pop, especially girl group’s music style uses Japanese indigenous enka melody, Japanese style funk rock beat or sample speedy metal sound, so Japanese listeners can identify with the unique Japanese regional sound. On the contrary, music style of Korean
idol groups mostly uses strong dance beat, powerful rap flow and knotty electronic elements, so the national identity of their music style is ambiguous compare to Japanese idol pop. In terms music style, Korean idol pop has a global sound and produces transnational image of ambiguous national identity compared to Japanese idol pop.

Second is the multi-nationality of idol group members. Korean idol group members in 1990s were either Koreans or Korean Americans. However, recent idol group members are diverse from Korean Americans to Chinese and Thai. Many Asian teenagers join idol groups without giving up their national identity. Han Kyung, who left the group now, is a Chinese. Jia and Pei of Miss A are Chinese, and Nichkhun of 2PM is a Thai.

Now big entertainment companies are conducting auditions not only in Korea, but in major countries in Asia and U.S.A. JYP Entertainment, a major entertainment company, selects trainees who want to be idol stars auditioned about 50,000 people per year in 10 major cities in America, China and Southeast Asia. Korean management companies run international audition market to find idol stars based on their 15 years of experience and know-how and try to cast idol stars in Asia as localized plan. The tendency of multi-nationality of idol group members is not a random choice to invade the market; rather it is a consequence of transnational phenomenon of K-POP and natural phenomenon of Korean idol pop production itself. It can also be understood that cultural communication of Asia became natural regardless of language barrier. Language problem is not a decisive factor in idol pop compare to other popular music genre that requires singing, and it can be solved within entertainment production system of idol pop.

Last is the transnational phenomenon of fandom who likes idol pop. Idol pop has fandom not only in China, Japan and Southeast Asia, but in South America and Africa as well. It covers broad area and represents transnationalism of K-POP. Super Junior of SM Entertainment has more fans in overseas than Korea. TVXQ, who is not together as a group now due to the contract problem with the management company, once officially had 800,000 fans that joined fan club, “Cassiopeia,” and it was listed in the Guinness Book of Records in 2008. TVXQ fandom spreads out to all the continents of America, Europe, South America and Africa. When TVXQ’s disband was officially confirmed, fans from Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Myanmar, England, Germany, Greece, Austria, America and Peru joined together and made fan song, “Don’t Say Goodbye” and uploaded the video clip on YouTube in October of 2009. Stating from Wonder Girls’ move to American pop market in 2008, Korean girl groups such as Girls Generation, Kara and After School advanced to foreign market in 2010. As a result, number of multi-national fans increased as many as boy groups have. The fandom of Korean idol groups is forming international followers beyond Asia just as American famous pop singers have been.
However, interestingly, while we witness transnationality of cultural topography of idol pop, incidents relate to idol pop in Korea are not free from geographical, ideological and cultural realm of Korea. Cultural phenomena relate to idol pop and mass’ reaction to that still wander in cultural nationalism even though idol pop’s music style is hybrid, group members have multi-nationality, and fans are beyond Korea and Asia. For instance, we find subconscious of cultural nationalism that tries to re-nationalize transnational conditions of idol pop in dispute between fandom and anti-fandom regarding 2PM’s Park Jae Bum (Pak Chaebŏm) incident\textsuperscript{14}, in complicated confrontation between Korean fandom and Chinese fandom about Han Kyung’s withdraw from Super Junior\textsuperscript{15}, and in media’s overstatement headlines about girls groups’ advancement to Japan and response.\textsuperscript{16}

It is similar to interpreting the transnational phenomena of hallyu from cultural nationalism perspectives, and it is resulted from the unique response of Korean people and media who ‘consume’ transnational ‘production’ of idol pop with nationalism. Actually some Korean fans think they are harmed in good sense because of the groups’ multi-nation fandom. They have victim mentality that the management company consider foreign fans way too much when they book concert tickets, or when they have a chance to see stars at the showcase or open recording stage. Some of fans are favorable to foreign fans, but they exhibit, without realization, nationalistic conscious that they are superior to foreign fans since they have same nationality with stars they like.

General netizen apply strict standard of nationalism if they face the incident of K-POP stars relate to national particularity.\textsuperscript{17} Such hostility can be seen as over- reaction to resolve individual social frustration, but primitive sentiment of nationalism is basically inherent in them. Idol pop is characteristically transnational, and time to time, exceptional cases that cannot be understood in terms of theory of nationality of a homogeneous country are happening. However, Korean netizen show exclusiveness of nationalism in such cases. ‘Re-nationalization of transnational phenomena’ is regional particularity of idol pop or K-POP that started from the Third World.


The transnational conditions of K-POP reflect cause-and-effect. Major Korean popular music productions require huge investment. It cannot survive alone on regional profits. In order to gain profit on what entertainment companies have invested, they have no choice but to plan spreading their market from the beginning of production. The popular music industry was
reorganized centering on idol pop, and naturally, the production capital and experience were accumulated. In the Japanese popular music industry, the share of idol groups is not very high, but in comparison, the share of Korean idol group in Korean music industry is much greater. Labor power, capital, and media concentrate on the production of idol pop, and for that reason, Korea is able to obtain a higher position in international standard. Such is the current reality of K-POP.

The cultural capital of K-POP based on idol groups has the competitive edge to continue, but at the same time, it is also risky since we do not know when it will extinguish due to the internal limitations such as the production system of K-POP that is monopolized and idol-centered, and the production process that is not clearly defined. What are the serious problems of idol pop production? The first thing is the unfair exclusive contract of idol groups. Most Korean idol group members sign a contract when they are teenagers. The demand for idols is booming due to the efflorescence of idol culture, but it is the production companies that stand in superior position since there are many more trainees who are dreaming of being stars than star-like idol groups. It is impossible to have authorized representatives in an exclusive contract between the entertainers and production companies. For that reason, an exclusive contract with a production company for a trainee will be solely to the advantage of the production company. A trainee’s future is uncertain, so the contract is obviously biased against the entertainer. The problem with contracts is that they continue to be valid even after the entertainers become superstars. Such cases caused feud between idol groups and production companies. This custom of unfair contract caused the members of TVXQ and Kara to leave the group or disband when they were at the peak of their careers.\(^\text{18}\)

Second, it is the problem of production capital formation’s change and the connection of structured cultural capital followed by. Korean entertainment capital is premodern, and it is intensified by feudalistic cultural practice and unfair connection. These are evidence of that Korean cultural capital and entertainment capital are difficult to secure autonomy and difficult to be legalized. Feudalistic contract custom by production companies, improper symbiotic relationship production companies and broadcasting companies, unfeasible business expansion to raise the stock value by production companies and capital integration of entertainment-production are main causes that intensify the structured harmful effect of Korean cultural capital.

Therefore, entertainment capital and financial capital have close connection, but due to the management company’s structure, such financial connection result in fierce struggle for control among production companies, tactical merger and acquisition, conflict over changing the management companies and formation of improper relationship to raise the stock value. For
instance, Promotion Fee incidents\textsuperscript{19} of music industry in 2002 and 2007 showed us new connection between entertainment companies and broadcasting companies from improper entertainment promotion method. In the past, entertainment companies offered cash or cars to broadcasting companies’ producers requesting frequent appearance on TV of their own entertainers for the initial public offering, but in 2002, they offered stock option in presupposing the initial public offering or provided trading stock and shares to producers. Broadcasting companies’ producers who had stocks of certain entertainment company would exclusively expose entertainers from the same company on their programs to increase the star-recognition, and as a consequence, the value of stock would rise as well. The close symbiotic relationship was formed between entertainment capital and broadcasting companies’ producers in this process. In case of drama production, many big subcontract production companies emerged recently. These companies went directly or indirectly public using broadcasting contents, and CEOs or members of board of directors of these subcontract companies who were former TV drama producers kept close relationship with broadcasting companies, for the same reason, after they left. In early 2009, major executives of entertainment division of broadcasting companies were arrested one after another accepting briberies, and it was not coincident that most of them had stocks of entertainment companies that went public in KOSDAQ.

The entertainment production of idol pop cannot be yield simply by management companies’ sales capital. The idol pop has actual economic profits, and the effect of symbolic capital of idol pop is great, too. For that reason, it is big possibility getting intangible asset. One of the representative one is stock capital that is related idol pop. The last goal of the entertainment companies’ profit structure is going public in KOSDAQ after the recognition of secured company with production sales. The idol star-recognition is proper opportunity for initial public offering, and based on their recognition, the company can tactically collect investors and raise the value of the stock. And it is a typical form of union of entertainment production and stock capital of idol pop. Lee Soo Man (Yi Suman), CEO of SM Entertainment that is a leading idol pop management company, became most stock holder in entertainment business field in 2008. He had surpassed the Pan Asia hallyu star Bae Yong Joon (Pae Yongjun) and Rain with the stock value of around 16 million dollars and became the richest person in entertainment business. In 2010, his stock value reached 83 million dollars with popularity of Girls Generation and other idol groups of his company. Recently, JYP Entertainment reunited with Rain, and it can be seen as a tactical reunite for JYP’s indirect initial public offering through merger with Rain’s management company JTune Entertainment which went public already.
Lastly, the insecure finance structure of idol pop entertainment production is problematic. Idol entertainment production is not a goose that lays golden eggs—not all investment is successful. As we can see in the chart, they are encountering difficulties if we look at the sales profit of the representative management companies of Korea. Yedang lost 27 million dollars in 2008, and SM also lost about 3 million dollars. Externally, the numbers are not acceptable, but the high expense structure of entertainment production, the additional risk elements in investment, and unfeasible investment in new fields are the possible causes of loss. The reason why entertainment producers continue their work is because they can instantly recuperate their loss if they produce another superstar or sensational content. The entertainment production of idol pop is managed with systemized and reasonable management, but everyone has primitive desire to win the jackpot—having a smash hit.

If the internal problems are not resolved, K-POP cannot continue to develop even though the cultural capital of K-POP that produces idol groups has a transnational business system and fandom. The transnational situation of K-POP that is not transparent threatens the diversity of Korean popular music. The failure of the system has already been witnessed in several cases. The geographical circumstance of K-POP is transnational, but K-POP might end as a temporary regional pop culture if the actual producing system remains in the premodern era. The uneven human resource of K-POP and the management system can predict the fate of K-POP. The fate of K-POP’s continuity depends on a radical innovation of producing system.

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1 “South Korea, historically more worried about fending off cultural domination by China and Japan than spreading its own culture abroad, is emerging as the pop culture leader of Asia.” “From well-packed television dramas to slick movies, from pop music to online games, South Korean Companies and stars are increasingly defining what the disparate people in East Asia watch, listen to, and play.” (“South Korea Adds Culture to its Own Export Power” in *New York Times*, 2005(6/25).)


3 People in Korean popular culture industry such as movies, pop music, drama and games requested cultural industry business manuals for each country to make good progress in sales and distribution at the conference for hallyu support system by the government.

4 Aired on 2/22/2011

5 The official term of ‘cultural diversity’ is based on UNESCO Cultural Diversity Agreement (10/2005). The agreement was written by Canada, EU and the Third World due to the response to cultural globalization of U.S. It protects language and indigenous cultural heritage of the Third World and resolves problems of monopoly of popular cultural industry and information culture gap.

6 Mimicry is borrowed from post-colonialist Homi Bhabha. Mimicry by colonized people produces difference, but it can be threatening. (Bhabha, 1994)
Lee Hyori is representative in this category. Please consider “I’m Back” (Lil Precious, “So Inane?”), “How Did We Get” (Jason Derulo, “How Did We”), “Get Ya” (Britney Spears, “Do Something”). There are also some cases that foreign musicians are plagiarizing K-POP artists’ songs these days.

SM Entertainment’s idol groups use to rely on composers attached to their own company, but they are receiving songs from many domestic and foreign composers. According to SM Entertainment Producing Business team manager Pak Munyong, their music sources are not limited to domestic composers; rather they are receiving music from pop markets all over the world. They are receiving about 50-200 songs per week, or 2000-3000 songs per year. From 2008 to now, they are keeping 7000-8000 songs. Foreign song writers are from not only America and England, but there are some Northern European writers from Norway and Sweden. “Run Devil Run” by Girls Generation was co-written by Bushee (America), Alex James (England) and Kalle Engstrom (Sweden), and “Mirotic” by TVXQ is done by producer/writer Remee (Denmark). He also wrote BoA’s first song released in US “Eat You Up” and Shinee’s “Love like Oxygen.”

K-POP has been classified as important aspects of cultural traffic in Asia beyond general characteristic of ‘regionalized global culture. Then, the core of cultural politics of K-POP would be change or re-function of Korean identity through communication, competition and compromising at sites of cultural traffic in the region. (Shin Hyun Joon: 9)

It is revised version of my article, ‘Transnationalism of Idol Pop,’ a section in “What is Idol Pop – Comprehension of Symptom” in Idol: from H.O.T. to Girls Generation, forthcoming in April of 2011.

H.O.T. means High Five of Teenagers and Sechs Kies means six crystals in German.

2NE1 represents girls low culture style unlike other girls groups of Korea. Their debut song, “Fire” produces hybrid rhythm with hip hop, electronic sound and Indian World Music sound.

Korean girl groups and Japanese girl groups are big different not only in music style, but in promotion image, costume and choreography as well. Korean girl groups promote sexy image, and Japanese girl groups promote cute image. One can imagined sexy showgirls from body action or fashion style of Korean girl groups like Girls Generation, Brown-Eyed Girls and After School. On the contrary, Japanese girl groups produced cute girl image wearing school girls’ uniforms and loose socks.

Park was a leader of 2PM who was a Korean American from Seattle. He was B-Boy with rebellious image and exceptional dance performance. He also had biggest fandom among 2PM members. His criticism about Korea and Korean people that he posted on My Space before his debut was revealed by a netizen, and it became a huge dispute about personal quality of a ‘succeed Korean American young man’ among Korean netizens. Park eventually left the group and went back to the US after this dispute. He now debuted as a solo working with Sidus HQ, a major entertainment production company, but cannot appear on TV.

Han Kyoung is the only Chinese among 13 members of Super Junior. He left the group saying that the contract with the management company is unfair. He insisted that the number of contract year is exceptionally long, and the management company forced him to work when he requested for a rest when he was sick. Chinese media reported this issue with great interest and highlighted brutality of Korean idol production system. Some media reported that Han Kyoung left the group because he was humiliated by members of Girls Generation, and this report stimulated anti-Korean sentiment of Chinese netizens. Interestingly, most of Chinese netizens supported anti-Korean sentiment, but some of fanatic fans of Super Junior in China, “Elf” members criticized Han Kyoung being rash. They claimed that they support Han Kyoung in Super Junior, not because he is a Chinese. The paradoxical response of Korean fandom, that supported Han Kyoung’s decision, and Chinese fandom, that criticized Han Kyoung, shows us that fandom has nothing to do with nationalism.


Tablo, a leader of Korean famous hip hop group Epik High’ got caught up in dispute over his educational background by some netizens. Some of them created an internet site titled, “We want the truth from Tablo,” and spread out rumor, without any basis, about his educational background and private life. Tablo came out on TV
program and visited Stanford University with a reporter to prove that he had Bachelor and Master Degree at Stanford, but netizens claimed that even the TV program was fabricated. It implies the some Koreans’ repulsive sentiment against a succeeded hip hop musician who graduated well-known American private university.

Contract period of idol groups of major entertainment production companies is following (Lee, 2010:251). (S.J. (Super Junoir), G.G. (Girls Generation), W.G. (Wonder Girls), O.T. (One Time), B.B. (Big Bang))

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Promotion Fee is bribe that presented to broadcasting companies’ producers for broadcasting promotion for entertainers.