

# Ten Things to Know about K-Pop

by Wonseok Lee and Rita Rongyi Lin



## Abstract

How do we understand K-pop? What elements should we look at in grasping K-pop's rich history? What makes K-pop distinct from other popular music? The authors explore the multifaceted evolution and global phenomenon of K-pop, tracing its origins from early twentieth-century musical adaptations to its current status as a sophisticated multimedia industry. Beginning with historical factors, including the emergence of modern Korean popular music during the colonial period, the impact of the U.S. military, and the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, this article addresses how these factors catalyzed the genre's development and forced a strategic shift toward international markets. The authors then question the meaning of K in K-pop by examining how K-pop's diversification of ethnic, national, and musical boundaries is bound up with its distinct and rigorous trainee system that produces versatile entertainers and transnational identities. Finally, the article highlights the role of highly organized global fandoms, the importance of complex choreography, and the utilization of diverse media platforms to maintain artist-fan connections.

**Wonseok Lee** is a cultural musicologist specializing in Korean popular music and culture, transnationalism, musical identity, digital media, and posthumanism in music. His work can be found in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *Korean Journal of Popular Music*, *IASPM Journal*, *Journal of World Popular Music*, and *Rock Music Studies*. Lee is currently a postdoctoral associate at the Council on East Asian Studies at Yale.

**Rita Rongyi Lin** is an interdisciplinary film theorist and historian whose research and teaching are in the areas of transnational cinema, cultural studies, feminist and queer theories, with a focus on contemporary East Asian media cultures. She received her PhD in Screen Cultures from Northwestern University.

## 1. Korean Popular Music Is Not New

The astonishing popularity of “Golden” (2025) from the *K-Pop Demon Hunters* soundtrack demonstrates that K-pop is not a transient phenomenon. The first K-pop group to appear on the US Billboard Hot 100 was Wonder Girls in 2009 with their song, “Nobody,” reaching no. 76. However, it does not mean that they were the first Korean group to enter the US market. Fifty years earlier, in 1959, the Kim Sisters—Aija, Sookja, and Minja—achieved remarkable success, appearing on the *Ed Sullivan Show* more than twenty times—even more than the Beatles! When did Korean popular music emerge? Given that popular music is deeply tied to technology, it is safe to say that modern Korean popular music emerged in the early 20th century. The phonograph was introduced to Korea in 1899, and the first commercial record album of modern Korean popular music was recorded in Japan and released by Columbia Records in 1907. During the Japanese occupation era (1910–1945), there were four categories of Korean popular music: *yuhaengga* (song in fashion), *sinminyŏ* (new folksong), *manyŏ* (satire/comic songs), and *jazz songs* (a term referring to all Western popular music including American blues, French chanson, and Latin salsa, among others). It is hard to explain Korean popular music without examining foreign musical influences. For example, Yun Sim-deok (Yun Sim-dŏ)’s “The Hymn of Death,” often considered the first Korean modern hit song released in 1926, is an adapted version of “The Waves of Danube” (1889) by Romanian composer Ion Ivanovici, with the Korean lyrics by an unknown writer. As such, modern Korean popular music emerged by embracing foreign musical elements and reinterpreting them.

## 2. The U.S. Military Played a Role in K-Pop’s Development

Following liberation from Japan in 1945, the southern half of the Korean peninsula was occupied for three years by the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK). Since the Korean War (1950–1953), the US has stationed military bases in South Korea. This has played a significant role in introducing contemporary American popular music to Koreans. US military base shows and clubs provided the foundation for the Korean popular music industry, with several important figures—such as Shin Joong-hyun who is considered “the Godfather of Korean Rock”—beginning their musical careers there. While the United Service Organizations (USO) brought several well-known entertainers, such as Marilyn Monroe, Nat King Cole, and Louis Armstrong to South Korea to perform for American GIs, they could not meet the huge demand coming from more than 150 camps and bases across the country. The US Army therefore hired talented Korean musicians to perform in front of American GIs. These were high-paying jobs that required auditions, and Korean musicians practiced and worked hard to pass the auditions. The radio broadcasts of the American Forces Korea Network (AFKN) were instrumental (and probably the only way) for Korean musicians to learn about contemporary American pop music. The music of these forerunners became the foundation for Korean popular music in the 1970s and 80s, which, in turn, influenced K-pop producers, CEOs, and musicians in the 1990s.

## 3. The Asian Financial Crisis Sparked K-Pop’s Globalization

To comprehend the globalization of K-pop, it is imperative to examine the transition of Korean society in the 1990s. With the 1993 establishment of the Kim Young-sam administration, South Korea’s first civilian government, Korean society faced dramatic changes. Unlike the previous authoritarian regimes, which controlled and heavily censored popular music, the Kim administration considered popular music—and popular culture more broadly—an important source of the nation’s economic prosperity. As a result, the Kim administration established the Globalization Promotion Committee in 1995. While globalization was influencing many aspects of Korean society, the Asian Financial Crisis (or IMF crisis) hit the Korean economy in 1997. The Korean government eventually had to declare national bankruptcy and seek financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In response, K-pop management companies shifted their focus to foreign markets, such as China and Japan. Several K-pop acts achieved notable success overseas, such as H.O.T. in China and BoA in Japan. Since then, K-pop companies—including SM



Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and HYBE—have had foreign markets in mind when producing new groups. To be clear, the term “K-pop” was not widely used until the late 2000s, as Koreans use a different term—*daejung gayo* or *gayo*—for popular music. Some argue that the term “K-pop” was first coined in 1999 by Korean journalist, Cho Hyun-jin, in an article for *Billboard* magazine, while others claim that “K-pop” was coined outside of Korea and first used by the Hong Kong media network Channel V in 1995. While there is no definitive consensus on the origin of the term, it is clear that K-pop reflects Korean music’s desire for global popularity, which began in the 1990s.

#### **4. K-Pop Idols Go Through a Rigid Trainee System**

What makes K-pop special? Among many characteristics that distinguish K-pop from other popular music genres, the trainee system is particularly notable. Almost all K-pop groups today are meticulously produced by their agencies through the trainee system. The trainee system is a rigorous, multi-year training program offered by entertainment agencies to develop trainees’ skills. Given that the trainee system offers lessons, such as singing, dancing, acting, hosting, and even foreign languages, it is safe to say that the goal of the system is to produce a versatile entertainer. Trainees are selected through (un)official auditions. Although the trainee system sometimes causes (un)expected social issues, such as sexual harassment and contract fraud, derived largely from the imbalanced relationship between the trainees and the agency, the system has become a norm in the industry because of its effectiveness. There are strict rules and timetables provided by the agency—such as no dating, specific weight standards, and sometimes no internet access—that trainees must follow. During the training period, trainees must demonstrate improvements at periodic evaluations. The system contributes significantly to K-pop’s globalization and transnationalism, as it functions as a steppingstone for both Korean and non-Korean hopefuls. For non-Korean trainees, the trainee system offers time to learn the Korean language and become accustomed to Korean culture and society. Similarly,

for Korean trainees, the system provides foreign language instruction for global promotions. As such, besides honing musical skills, the trainee system serves multiple roles. One might think that the trainee system deprives trainees of creativity as the trainees are forced to follow what the company decides, which used to be true. However, K-pop companies today provide and strategically adjust the program depending on trainees' strengths, including songwriting and producing.

## 5. The “K” in K-Pop is Difficult to Define

As the industry becomes more racially and ethnically diverse by recruiting non-Korean K-pop aspirants, one wonders: what is still Korean about K-pop? For those who debuted in the past decade or so, it has become less common for K-pop groups to consist solely of Korean nationals—such as BTS, ATEEZ, Itzy, and Red Velvet whose members are all Koreans. Part of the reason for this diversity goes hand in hand with the industry's globalization efforts: for instance, Super Junior (2005–) and EXO (2012–) debuted with a significant number of Chinese members in order to appeal to Chinese-speaking markets, and have released Chinese-language songs as subunits Super Junior-M and EXO-M (the M here stands for Mandarin). Groups like TWICE (2015–) and Treasure (2020–) include Japanese members to cater to the Japanese market. While most foreign nationals in K-pop groups are either of Korean descent (including half-Koreans) or come from other parts of East Asia and Southeast Asia, EXP Edition (2017–) and Black Swan (2020–) have been noted for *not* containing any members of Korean heritage anymore. More recently, groups like XG (2022–) further destabilize this association between K-pop and Koreans, since all of the XG members are Japanese, but release songs exclusively in Korean, and the group bases most of its activities in South Korea. Similarly, KATSEYE (2023–) only has one Korean member and releases songs exclusively in English but is produced by HYBE Labels and went through K-pop's training system. 1Verse (2025–) is also noteworthy as the first K-pop group with North Korean defector members. With these recent changes, it is becoming increasingly difficult to pinpoint exactly what the “Korean” aspects in K-pop are.

## 6. There Is No Single K-Pop Musical Style

K-pop is musically diverse. Unlike other popular music genres, such as rock, hip-hop, R&B, and reggae, it is hard to pin down K-pop's musical characteristics. For example, BTS debuted as a hip-hop-oriented boy group, but their other songs are not categorized as hip-hop. Some K-pop groups, such as CNBLUE, Day6, and Onewe, are not dance-oriented groups. Given that, most people agree that K-pop is not a music genre, but rather a style of production characterized by the unique trainee system. However, there have been major musical styles that dominate the K-pop industry. For example, K-pop was heavily influenced by hip-hop in the 1990s and the 2000s. Many of the first-generation K-pop groups introduced hip-hop-inspired songs, such as H.O.T's “Age of Violence” (1996). In the late 2000s, the hook-song style, exemplified by Wonder Girls' “Tell Me” (2007), SHINee's “Ring Ding Dong” (2009), and Psy's “Gangnam Style” (2012), dominated the K-pop industry. Since the 2010s, K-pop groups have actively referred to and integrated other music genres, such as British New Wave, Japanese city pop, and even traditional Korean music, which examples include TXT's “LOSER=LO♥ER” (2021), Brave Girls' “We Ride” (2020), and BLACKPINK's “Pink Venom” (2022), respectively.

## 7. The Fans are Indispensable

In June 2020, BTS fans made headlines by matching BTS's \$1 million donation to the Black Lives Matter Movement in less than 24 hours. In reality, this didn't happen overnight. This remarkable act of solidarity is the result of *years* of trust and connection built between K-pop artists and their fans, as well as among the fans themselves. Although fandoms are not exclusive to K-pop, and indeed many of its fan-related practices borrow from other fandoms (for instance, some have linked idol groups' photocards to baseball cards), fans play an indispensable part in K-pop's development and popularization, both as targeted individual consumers and self-organized communities. The industry actively addresses fans—both current and

potential—in its marketing strategies by assigning designated fandom names for artists: for instance, the fans for BTS (Bulletproof Boy Scouts in English, later relabeled as Beyond The Scene) are called ARMY (an acronym for Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth) to signal how they will stand together and protect each other, and their respective logos constitute a shield shape together. Fan participation is also highly encouraged at events like concerts and broadcast tapings, where scripted fanchants—such as each member’s name in order of seniority, or lines from the song—are cheered in unison. K-pop companies also create opportunities for fans to interact with artists through fan meetings, which take place in person as well as online. At these events, artists may engage in “fan service,” ranging from cute gestures like winks and heart signs to more suggestive actions like showing muscles or displaying “skinship” (physical intimacy) with fellow members. Fans themselves voluntarily engage in acts of community-building, such as uploading high-definition photos of idols, translating idols’ social media posts and livestreams, and advertising for idols’ birthdays on subway billboards. Fans have also demonstrated positive social influence by donating to charitable organizations and political causes in the name of their idols.

## 8. K-Pop Is a Multi-Media Industry

As a form of popular culture, K-pop employs a variety of media genres and technologies in its production, exhibition, and circulation. Special visual effects are widely used in music videos to add to their spectacular appeal, and futuristic themes have been invoked from as early as S.E.S’s “*Dreams Come True*” (1998). Dance choreographies often self-consciously address the fact that our everyday life is saturated with media: in IVE’s “*Love Dive*” (2022), for instance, the line “narcissistic, my god I love it” is paired with the gesture of taking a selfie. In recent years, groups have also played with virtual avatars or virtual reality concepts, including aespa and PLAVE (pronounced as Play-ve). Besides these newer forms of media, K-pop also nods towards older media culture. Album merchandise includes Polaroid photocards and CD players; music videos like Wonder Girls’ “*Nobody*” (2008) and BTS’ “*Dynamite*” (2020) pay tribute to Motown and disco, and NewJeans’ “*Ditto*” (2022) spearheads the current wave of Y2K (or the Year 2000) nostalgia. In terms of how K-pop reaches its audience, social media platforms—in addition to legacy media like television and radio—are particularly important as channels that not only increase the visibility of groups but also maintain a personable presence for the artists. Companies upload artists’ behind-the-scenes footage, reaction videos, variety shows, dance challenges, and vlogs on their official YouTube channels and TikTok accounts, and many artists have personal Instagram accounts where they post a mix of sponsored and everyday photos. Apps like Weverse (and V Live, before its integration with Weverse) create forums where fans show their support and artists selectively respond to fans’ comments. While these platforms can be accessed for free, there are also paid platforms like Bubble that monetize the emotional value in these interactions by allowing fans to subscribe to artists’ real-time text messages.

## 9. Choreography is Crucial in K-Pop Culture

K-pop has given rise to a vibrant and evolving dance culture. Early K-pop groups like H.O.T. (1996–2001) and TVXQ! (2003–) are known for their complicated and well-executed dance choreographies, and the dance practice video allegedly became its own genre after SHINee’s “Lucifer” (2010) was leaked and went viral. K-pop choreographies draw their movement vocabularies from a range of street and concert dance styles, including hip-hop, jazz, waacking, and contemporary. Because of this hybridity, K-pop dance can hardly be described as its own dance style, but it has certain recognizable characteristics and emphases, such as a close connection between movement and lyrics, a high level of synchronicity between members (*kalgunmu*, uniform dance with knife-like precision), memorable point choreography, and constantly shifting group formations to make sure each member gets exposure when it comes to their line. To best showcase a group’s execution of a choreography, companies often release multiple versions of music videos in addition to the official video, including the aforementioned dance practice video, the performance video, and the Studio Choom video, which can include different versions of fixed or moving camera



positions. More recently, K-pop dance challenges have become particularly trendy. These videos typically consist of 20 or 30 seconds or so of the main “point choreography” from the song’s chorus. As another subgenre of official “content” and social media presence, these challenges are often filmed backstage in between broadcast recordings and allow artists from different groups to collaborate with each other. Fans, of course, are highly encouraged to participate in these challenges through TikTok and Instagram Reels, and sometimes the artists themselves may give tutorials to help explain the choreography. Besides these individual efforts, fans have also engaged in more collective efforts like *Random Play Dance* and *K-pop in Public*, where they may bond over each other’s knowledge of the newest “point choreographies” or perform a full-length cover of the dance by taking on the part of a preferred member.

### **10. A K-Pop Concert is an Experience Like Nothing Else**

For K-pop lovers, concerts can be acts of pilgrimage. To begin with, they wait for hours in online queues trying to get tickets, constantly refreshing the page for available seats. After they secure tickets, fans purchase official lightsticks and plan their travels across town or countries, looking forward to the day of the concert when their lightsticks glow in the darkened stadium among countless others. But once you make it to the venue, everything is worth it. From the stage, the sea of lightsticks from the audience seats can look like a galaxy. Sometimes, concert organizers will sync the lightsticks at the event so that they flash in uniform color and pulse. And sometimes, the fans take it upon themselves to create waves with the lightsticks from one side of the concert hall to the other. This aspect of participation and reciprocity has become a crucial part of K-pop performances. Second, the fans cheered at the beginning of songs

are an important sonic component of the concert. To maximize this sense of presence, artists will also try to make each concert unique. While the set list for a world tour is more or less the same, artists may have different versions of songs, depending on where they are performed. For instance, if a hit title track has been released with both Korean and English versions, artists will most likely perform the English version in English-speaking countries, whereas Japanese-language albums (including but not consisting only of Japanese *versions* of the original Korean songs) are solely performed at concerts in Japan. In between songs, concert-exclusive VCR episodes are played on the big screen, or the artists may deliver a short-prepared-speech, commonly known as 멘트 (or *ment*, short for “comment”), that addresses the city or country in which they are performing. These sections can vary from the artist saying “I love you” in the local language or performing a cover of a song well-known by local fans. For instance, at the Taipei leg of NMIXX’s 2025 tour, the members sang a cover of Taiwanese band Mayday’s iconic “Love-ing.” Besides interactions between fans and artists, fans also make concerts a fun experience for bonding with other fans by sharing handmade gifts like self-printed photocards and banners around the concert venue.