

Appropriating *Gugak* and Negotiating K-Heritage

K-Pop's Reconstruction of Korean Aesthetics in the Age of Digital Globalization

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This paper explores global K-pop's negotiation and reconstruction of Korean aesthetics via the dismantling, adoption, appropriation, and transfiguring of central elements of Korean traditional culture. Recently, K-pop groups have been incorporating traditional music and dance (*gugak*), traditional attire (*hanbok*), traditional houses (*hanok*), and old palaces (*gogung*) into music videos disseminated globally over digital platforms like *YouTube*. In their efforts to incorporate more 'Korean-ness' into their musical productions and neutralize criticisms of their use of the 'K' prefix as inauthentic and unconnected to Korean aesthetics, groups like BTS and BLACKPINK are redefining 'K-heritage' for music consumers worldwide. Along with other globally consumed *Hallyu* productions like K-movies, K-dramas, and K-games, K-Pop is in the process of reconstructing Koreans' and the world's view of the meaning of Korean-ness. | *Keywords: Korean Traditional Music, K-heritage, K-pop, Korean Aesthetics, Digital Globalization*

1. Introduction

The label 'K-pop' currently refers to globally consumed popular music produced by the Korean entertainment industry. Even though it originates in Korea, there are two dangers in talking about Korean aesthetics in the context of K-pop. First, many will argue it is improper to discuss Korean aesthetics in a popular music context in the same way Korean aesthetics are discussed in the realm of 'traditional music', which is thought by essentialists to constitute the core of Korean-ness. Second, deep-rooted doubt exists about whether there can be any value in including global popular music in a discussion of cultural or national aesthetics.

As Lee Su-wan (2016, p. 79) observes, "the key point in understanding K-pop lies in the tension between 'K', which signifies Korea, and 'pop', which signifies

'American popular music'. There is no apparent Korean identity corresponding to the K in K-pop". Lee goes on to question whether K-pop is even 'genuine Korean' music.

At the opposite pole, Korea's mass media often cites the global success of K-pop as proof of the superiority of the Korean people, directly associating it with strong nationalism, much like the media's past treatment of *Hallyu* ('Korean Wave'). Nationalistic assertions are also sometimes made by scholars, some of whom seek to authenticate K-pop's immanent roots by tying it to elements of *gugak* and others suggesting that K-pop is inherent in the "DNA of the Korean people" (ChoHan, 2003, p. 22). But many also warn against asserting a strong nationalistic perspective when analysing the global success of K-pop.

Either way, in contemplating K-pop's 'Korean aesthetics', it is important to distinguish K-pop today from its earlier iterations, as groups like BTS and BLACKPINK have begun to incorporate traditional arts and culture, including *gugak*, Korean traditional performing arts, and various other elements of K-heritage, into their videos, disseminating certain images, sounds, and sentiments of contemporary Korea globally over digital platforms like *YouTube*. This new phase raises fresh issues concerning 'Korean-ness' and Korean aesthetics in K-pop.

This paper examines K-pop's negotiation and reconstruction of Korean aesthetics in its dismantling, adoption, appropriation, and transfiguring of Korean heritage, including elements of traditional music. I begin by reviewing earlier debates over the degree of Korean-ness in K-pop, then move to an analysis of current examples that reveal K-pop's efforts to lay claim to its Korean aesthetics and the resulting emergence of K-pop/*gugak* hybrids.

2. Three Common Views on the Degree of 'Korean-ness' in K-pop

Since its inception, the question of Korean-ness in K-pop has given rise to disputatious exchanges revolving, for the most part, around the relationship of 'K' to 'pop'. The debate exhibits the inherent tensions between globally standardized pop music's cosmopolitanism and local music (Lee, S., 2016) or between 'pop internationalism and *gayo*¹ nationalism' (Shin, 2013). Arguments over the degree of Korean-ness in K-pop can be grouped into three points of view:

2.1. K-pop is Local Commodity created for Global Consumers

First is the assertion that K-pop, as a global commodity manufactured in Korea, should be treated as other Korean products like Hyundai automobiles or Samsung mobile phones, which are not normally associated with 'Korean-ness'. In musical terms specifically, K-pop is considered a variant or local

¹ *Gayo* is the term used since the 1950s to indicate Korean popular music, including several genres like trot, folk, ballad, rock, dance music, and others. K-pop is used today to specifically indicate 'globally consumed idol dance music' with Hip hop, R&B, electronic, rock-based dance music produced by the Korean entertainment industry since the 1990s while *gayo* refers solely to locally produced and consumed Korean pop songs. Each term signifies its historical context and differences of cultural context within Korea.

imitation of global music genres, including pop, rock, electronic, dance, and hip hop, none of which, whether measured by a Western or global standard, is specifically Korean. Further, K-pop is but a perfectly recognized local transformational example of globalization led by Western music, such that the 'K' in K-pop signifies merely a marketing brand of Korea's "export-oriented cultural economy" (Shin, 2013, p. 31; see also, Lie, 2012; Lee, S., 2016; Jeong, 2013; Lee, D.Y., 2006, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Yang, 2011).

In addition, although K-pop is a product of Korea, it is created for global consumption. This trait of K-pop underscores its 'nationless-ness' or global 'cosmopolitan' utility, under which 'Korean flavour' tends to get erased. Adhering more to global music conventions and employing collective production systems involving agencies of various nationalities ensures K-pop's success on the global market. The signifier 'K' in K-pop does not function as an imperative and cannot be taken to signal anything about ethnically 'Korean' identity.

Lie (2012, p. 361) goes further, asserting that K-pop actually forfeits and disrupts Korean culture and tradition. Among his arguments are that the singing style and major scale of K-pop do not match *gugak*; K-pop fandom does not embody traditional Confucian values, and the physical appearance of K-pop's idols is far from Korean people's traditional appearance and aesthetics. Notably, Lie's location of the roots of Korean-ness in the Joseon Dynasty has itself been severely criticized (Lee, K., 2016; Kim and Kim, 2015).

2.2. K-pop's Success Flows from its 'Korean-ness', including its *Gugak* Roots

The second point of view attributes K-pop's global success not only to its inherent 'Korean-ness' but to the innate superiority of the Korean people. Though this view is most often found in Korean media, it also has its proponents in academia, where scholars have asserted that, musically, K-pop is based on *jangdan* (rhythmic cycles) and that it bears traditional Korean characteristics, like *hon* (spirit/temperament), collectivism, and Confucianism. It has been argued that many *Hallyu* products feature the aesthetics of other Korean arts, like *sinmyeong* (cheerfulness) (ChoHan, H., 2003, p. 22; Lee, D-S., 2011). From this perspective, K-pop should seek to reinforce its existing cultural connections by incorporating more *gugak* elements, so the criticisms of those like Lie (2012) who accuse K-pop of existing outside of and even corrupting Korean traditions might be put to rest.

2.3. K-pop Embodies Cultural Traits of Korea

The third view asserts that K-pop is 'Korean' in various cultural dimensions, even if it is a musical variant of Western popular music. The 'K' in K-pop from this perspective is a signifier of cultural distinction. The studies enquire into the elements of Korean-ness in K-pop, while taking caution not to fall into culturally essentialist theory or claims of national superiority. In assessing the Korean-ness signified by the 'K' in K-pop, scholars in this group look beyond the music itself to the Korean-ness in the internal culture of the bands and their production companies, marketing strategies, and fan relations.

Lee Gyu-tag (2020) contends that all local variants of pop music possess both the universality of global pop and certain local characteristics, making K-pop 'Korean' music. His analysis of the 'K' in K-pop takes into account a variety of elements, including Korean lyrics, modes of musical hybridity, stage designs, group dancing and costumes, music video production qualities, the idol system of entertainment companies, an emphasis on moralistic principles, and fandom culture, in addition to its traits as local pop music. Similarly, Shin and Kim (2013, pp. 258–259) note that K-pop has a contemporary Korean origin in which Korean-ness indicates the very Korean production strategy of a 'systematic recipe'. Further, the business of K-pop incorporates a Korean *jaebeol* (conglomerate) business approach, as vertically integrated organizations build a brand identity with global business market directivity, all features of K-pop entertainment corporations' in-house systems.

Kim Sujeong and Kim Sooah (2015, p. 18) find Korean-ness in the culture surrounding K-pop's artists and their fans, e.g., in the borrowing of expressions of Korean ethos, specifically naming 'collective moralism', an important ethic of contemporary Korean culture, as an organizing principle. Their analysis cites K-pop's educational system for trainees as the key component of K-pop's in-house production systems and its emphasis on good behaviour as reflective of Confucian values. Some point to the lyrics of K-pop love songs, which exclude the sex, violence, and drug subject matter commonly found in American pop, and in the humility and sincere gratitude K-pop's idols consistently communicate to their fans.

The above three existing views on Korean-ness in K-pop all acknowledge that, while the degree of 'Korean-ness' in K-pop may be debatable, K-pop does possess and project certain Korean aesthetics. But the recent phenomenon of K-pop groups incorporating more *gugak* and K-heritage elements into their performances signals a new K-pop phase that requires a reframing of the discussion around its Korean-ness.

3. K-pop's Recent Negotiation of Tradition and Reconstruction of 'Korean-ness'

3.1. *Gugak's* Ambiguous Status in Modern Korea

Before analysing the implications of K-pop's recent incorporation of *gugak* into its performances, the ambivalence and isolation of *gugak* in modern Korean society should be mentioned. Literally 'national music', *gugak* refers to all the transmitted musical genres from the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1919), including royal court music, elite music, professional folk music and folk community music. During the Japanese colonial period, the term denoted Korean music, differentiating 'local' music from 'foreign' music. Among the music and other media popular in that period, *gugak* was considered 'pre-modern' compared to Western and other foreign and local contemporary musical forms. After independence from Japan in 1945 and establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, *gugak* became 'national music' symbolizing Korea's spirit, history, and culture (Kim, 2012a, p. 9; Kim, 2022, p. 119). *Gugak* began to be seen as 'museum' music, valuable to keep as a heritage but not for everyday

enjoyment by modern Koreans. For a long time, *gugak*'s location in modern Korean society has thus been ambiguous, i.e., culturally valued but socially marginalized.

3.2. K-pop's Appropriation of *Gugak*, 2010 - present

The earliest attempts at integrating *gugak* and K-heritage into K-pop occurred in the early 2010s. An impressive early piece, 'No Mercy', was released in 2012 by boy group B.A.P. (TS Entertainment). The piece climaxes with *gugak* sounds produced by various traditional instruments: *kkwaenggari* (small gong), *jing* (large gong), *buk* (drum), and *gayageum* (12 string zither), with the *chuiimsae* (exclamation, vocal encouragement) 'eolssu' (which appears in traditional folk music) as part of the lyrics. *Bullandan-ga* from the Korean hip hop crew BULLHANDANG, released in 2013, begins with an excerpt from the *pansori* (narrative singing) *Jeokbyeokga* (The Story of the Red Cliff). In 2014, boy group Topp Dogg released *Arario*, where even the title of the piece is borrowed from the famous folk song *Arirang*. The piece begins with an intro by *gayageum* ensemble and incorporates various *gugak* sounds, including *buk*, *taepyeongso* (conical double-reed oboe) and *pungmul* (farmers' band music), along with *chuiimsae* 'eolssu' and 'jota', and various folk plays like *talchum* (mask dance), and *sajachum* (lion dance). The group's official music video is filled with various K-heritage signifiers, including *hanbok*, *gat* (traditional horsehair hat), *byeongpung* (folding screen), *mapae* (King's medal), *buchae* (traditional folding fan), and *gisaeng* (female entertainers). *ANTHEM* by boy group iKON (YG Entertainment) is a 2015 single by members B.I. and BOBBY. The Korean title of the piece *Irioneora* (Call for admission) is a traditional entry greeting for the elite *yangban* class; the lyrics include 'eolssu' and 'deonggi deok kung deoreoreoreor' (oral mnemonic of the *jangdan* rhythm). Boy group VIXX (Jelly and Fish Entertainment)'s *Shangri-La* in 2017 inserted the sound of *gayageum* and images of *buchae* fan and *hanbok* attire to express a dreamlike oriental fantasy. SM Entertainment's boy group TEN's 'Dream in a Dream' from 2017 employs various images from K-heritage. The most impressive attempt was made by the world-renowned BTS (HYBE Entertainment)'s 'IDOL' (BTS, 2018a), the official music video for which includes various Korean images of the pavilion, *hanbok*, *buchae*, pine tree, and tiger, with *chuiimsae* 'eolssu'. Further, BTS's 2018 MAMA stage performance begins with a long intro section with traditional performance of *samgomu* (three drum dance performance), *pungmul*, *talchum*, *sajachum* with *gayageum*, and *taepyeongso*, while members wear *hanbok* and hold *buchae* fans (BTS, 2018b). 'FIANCE', a piece released by idol rapper MINO (YG Entertainment) in 2018, also incorporates various K-heritage images of court, the musical instrument *bipa* lute, *buchae* fan, and *hanok*. In 2019, the boy group ONEUS (RBW Entertainment) released 'LIT', utilizing various traditional sounds and images, including *hanbok*, *minyo* folk songs, a traditional rope-walking performance scene, *daegeum* (transverse bamboo flute,) *buk* (drum), pavilion, *daego* (large drum), and *taekwondo* (Korean martial art); their stage performance shown on the Mnet TV program 'Road to Kingdom', also incorporated *taekweondo*. 'Follow', by boy band MONSTRA X in 2019, shows traditional *hanbok* in the music video. The girl

group Oh My Girl's cover of 'DESTINY' (originally released by the girl group Lovelyz) transformed the piece with full *gugak* sound.

In 2020, K-pop's appropriation of *gugak* and K-heritage was put in full view with the release of two major global hits from the idol groups BTS and BLACKPINK. The first was BTS member Sugar's 'Daechwita' (August D, 2020), a single released under his artist name August D. The title borrows that of a representative *gugak* form, the court military marching band music for the King's leaving and return to the palace during the Joseon Dynasty. The music begins with the original soundtrack of 'Daechwita' from the National Gugak Centre with the full sound of *gugak*, continuing and blending with August D's rap and electronic sound. The music video captures various scenes from the palace and marketplace overlapped with contemporary scenes; most of the scenes evoke a historical K-drama or K-movie. 'How You Like That' from girl group BLACKPINK (YG Entertainment), which features the members wearing modified *hanbok* at the end of the official 2020 music video, made big news in and outside of Korea (BLACKPINK, 2020). Following these, boy group A.C.E. released two pieces, 'HJZM: The Butterfly Phantasy' and 'Goblin' (2020), with main themes borrowed from tradition. Project group Woozoo Hipjaengi released the piece 'Hallyang', a hip hop song with various *gugak* elements, which the producers dubbed 'Joseon Hip Hop'. More recently in 2021, the boy group Stray Kids (JYP Entertainment) released 'Sorikkun' (Stray Kids, 2021), which resembles a historical K-movie, with the music video featuring various traditional sounds and images, like a folding fan, old palace, *hanbok*, *pungmul* band, *daechiwta* band, and *sajachum*. Even the title 'Sorikkun' equivocally references *pansori* singers and the idols themselves. More and more productions like boy group ONEUS Theatre's 'LUNA' (2021) and RAVI's 'Asura' (2019) and 'Beom' (2021) are incorporating *gugak*'s sounds.

3.3. Three Elements of *Gugak* found in Contemporary K-pop Performances

The ways K-pop artists are negotiating and constructing Korean-ness through appropriating *gugak* and K-heritage can be divided into three categories: music, visuals, and performance. These correspond well to K-pop's core traits, as forged in the genre's 'trans-media' strategy (Hong, 2014, p. 130), which transformed K-pop from aural music to audio-visual performing arts and turned singers into performers. Visual elements, such as hi-tech staging and music videos, costumes, make-up, and storytelling narratives in both music videos and stage performances have become essential complements to K-pop's perfectly produced music and dance choreographies.

The first element of K-pop's appropriation of *gugak* is music. But the devices of appropriation are diverse in terms of depth and analysis. The most popularly utilized methods involve borrowing the sounds of specific musical instruments, use of part of the *jangdan* rhythmic cycle, incorporation of parts of specific *gugak* genres, and insertion of *chuimsae* into the lyrics. For the most part, these are superimposed in fragments often digitally deformed or distorted by synthesizers.

The visual elements, usually seen in music videos and stage performances, utilize various Korean images like wearing modified *hanbok* and various symbolic images of old houses, pavilions, palaces, folding fans, folding screens, and tigers. Often these Korean images mirror the main theme and narrative of the music video, mimicking images of K-dramas and K-movies.



Figure 1: BLACKPINK “How You Like That” Source: Caption from You Tube, BLACKPINK “How You Like That” Official MV by the author. Copyright: YG Entertainment INC.



Figure 2: STRAY KIDS “Sorikkun” Source: Caption from You Tube “Sorikkun” Official MV by the author. Copyright: JYP Entertainment



Figure 3: August D “Daechwita” Source: Caption from You Tube
 “Daechwita” Official MV by the author. Copyright: HIBE Co.

In the performance dimension, the most significant display of *gugak* in a live K-pop piece was BTS’s MAMA (Mnet Asian Music Award) performance of ‘IDOL’ in 2018. *Bukchum, talchum, pungmul*, fan dance, lion dance, and various *gugak* performances opened the stage as the intro for ‘IDOL’ with BTS members. Other K-pop groups’ music videos also insert fragments of *gugak* performances into scenes filled with symbols of K-heritage.



Figure 4: BTS “Idol” MAMA Stage Performance Source: Captions from You Tube
 BTS “Idol” MAMA Stage Performance by the author. Copyright: HIBE Co.

A very recent phenomenon related to this topic is the growing interest in contemporary *gugak* and K-heritage by major Korean media outlets.² In 2020,

² For the interest on globalization of *gugak*, see Kim (2012b).

the *pansori* based band LEENALCHI released ‘Beom Naeryeo Onda’ (‘Tiger Is Coming’), and their music video series ‘Feel the Rhythm of Korea’, produced by the Korea Tourism Organization and featuring the Ambiguous Dance Company, became a big hit (LEENALCHI, 2021). Consisting of three female and one male *pansori* singer with electronic bass and drum, LEENALCHI’s music became a soundtrack to the pandemic era. Through *YouTube*, their music rapidly reached global audiences, with media outlets dubbing their music ‘Joseon Pop’ and ‘Gugak with Hip’. Along with other contemporary *gugak* bands including Jambinai, Ssing-ssing, Lee Hee-moon, and ADG7, the *gugak* syndrome has moved into the centre of popular culture and extended its global reach.



Figure 5: LEENALCHI and Ambiguous Dance Company “Beom Naeryeo Onda” Source: Captions from You Tube, Feel the Rhythm of Korea by the author. Copyright: Korean Tourism Organization



Figure 6: Kim, Jun-su “Daechwita” Source: Captions from You Tube “Daechwita” Pungnyudaejang by the author. Copyright: JTBC Music

Recently, two TV audition shows, including Joseon Pan Star (MBN, 2021) and Pungnyudaejang (JTBC, 2021), featured hybrids of *gugak* and *gayo* music, with various K-pop numbers sung by *gugak* singers in *gugak* style, often borrowing from *pansori* narratives. It remains unclear and arguable whether these hybrid kinds of music should be called *gugak* or K-pop. However, it is certain that with the advent of these contemporary *gugak* in Korean popular culture, K-pop is increasingly affiliating its image with more authentic, trained *gugak* musicians. It is equally certain that K-pop is gaining ground in its effort to achieve 'Korean-ness' by negotiating elements learned and borrowed from *gugak*. For example, the music video for 'Hallyang' (2021), produced by project group Woozoo Hipjaengi and released after the big hit 'Beom Naeryeo Onda', resembles a kitsch-hip performance with LEENALCHI and the Ambiguous Dance Company. In addition, August D's 'Daechwita' (Kim, 2021), BTS's 'IDOL', BLACKPINK's 'How You Like That' (Jang, 2021), and others were sung by various *pansori* and *minyo* (folk song) singers in the TV shows mentioned above, resulting in a brand-new style of K-pop. Meanwhile, several K-pop groups' stage performances accompanied by *gugak* orchestra have been attempted (Tomorrow x Tomorrow, 2021).

These phenomena of hybrid *gugak* and K-pop, and K-pop's adoption, appropriation, and transfiguration of K-heritage, are gradually widening its spectrum and now raise expectations for the construction of a new contemporary hybrid Korean aesthetics. At the same time, the music is reaching global audiences through SNS, with the potential for expanding international exposure to and understanding of *gugak*.

Conclusion

Today, K-pop is solidifying its 'Korean-ness' through various strategies, opening an interesting new phase of global K-pop. Over its first decade, K-pop did not consider incorporating 'local' flavour, or intentionally excluded it in service to its global cosmopolitan image. However, the recent transformation of K-pop, which has earned its 'K-brand' status, indicates an aspiration to be the lead purveyor of Korean aesthetics on the world's stage. The above-cited examples of K-pop's embrace of tradition and heritage provide appropriate texts for introducing new discussions on Korean aesthetics. As examined earlier, when K-pop artists borrow *gugak*, the result is neither *gugak* nor crossover music. However, it is clear that their musical, visual, and performance elements increasingly lean strongly on *gugak* and Korean heritage.

Is there now an argument to be made for embracing the 'Korean-ness' in K-pop? While finding the answer requires a careful case-by-case examination of the whole process of production and consumption, this paper advocates doing so for three broad reasons.

First, K-pop's attempts to bolster its 'Korean-ness' provide concrete proof of the bands' current confidence in their place behind the 'K' and will likely accelerate the removal of any earlier doubts as to K-pop's 'Korean identity'. For its Korean fandom, K-pop evokes feelings of Korean national identity and cultural pride, while for its fandom abroad, the 'K' in K-pop declares its 'Korean-ness'.

Second is K-pop's global responsibility as a representative of Korea, as asserted by music critic Kim Young-dae in his analysis of BTS's 'IDOL' (2019, p.198). While K-pop historically excluded Korean sounds to enhance its universal marketability, today, globally renowned K-pop stars like BTS and BLACKPINK are displaying more confidence in showing their Korean-ness to the world.

Third, certain elements of *gugak* and K-heritage are being incorporated into musical, visual, and performance materials as new, strange, and curious ingredients that add 'flavour', as is often done in the world and local pop music. Often in the past, K-pop's treatments of *gugak* have been musically 'stateless', while visual images emphasized 'oriental fantasy', thus giving rise to the denouncement of the idea that these appropriations relate directly and exclusively to 'Korean-ness'.

In K-pop, 'Korean-ness' is negotiated and constructed. Its negotiated and constructed Korean aesthetics, disassemble, borrow from, appropriate, adopt, and fragment forms believed to be inherently Korean but cannot, in themselves, be considered 'essentially Korean'. By negotiating tradition, K-pop is claiming its Korean-ness by constructing a new contemporary Korean aesthetics as popular aesthetics. The K-aesthetics of K-pop and its hybrids lie outside the debate on 'authenticity' since the question of aesthetics is local and not a measure of pop music's value. Another phenomenon of *gugak*'s appropriation by K-pop is the possibility of creating a new contemporary hybrid of Korean aesthetics, which will be an interesting subject of study in the near future.

By embracing K-heritage, K-pop's performers are successfully neutralizing doubts about their right to the prefix 'K' as a signifier of Korean cultural identity. Regardless of the claim by essentialists that K-pop only inherited 'genuine' K-aesthetics by coupling with various globally consumed *Hallyu* productions, including K-movies, K-dramas, and K-games, K-Pop has the potential to lead 'K-heritage' in the reconstruction of K-aesthetics in the age of digital globalization. At the same time, it is apparent that K-pop's negotiated K-aesthetics will be considered 'contemporary Korean aesthetics' globally since K-pop is so bound up with global production and consumption. Thus, today's K-pop becomes an apt vehicle for carrying forward the debate over what constitutes authenticity when it comes to Korea's traditions and the continued utility of splitting Korean arts aesthetics between 'pure/elite' and 'popular' arts.

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