

# The Colonial Era and Beyond: The Past and Present and its Effect on Music and K-pop in Korea

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## Introduction

The Japanese colonization of Korea had enduring effects on Korean culture, politics, and entertainment, especially evident in music. From 1910 to 1945, the Japanese government enforced policies aimed at assimilating Korean culture into Japanese culture. These policies suppressed Korean culture, eroding the sense of national pride and autonomy among Koreans, and leaving the country in a vulnerable state, hindering its independence. Korean language, literature, media, and culture were banned and replaced with Japanese equivalents. This cultural eradication extended to music, which was targeted as a significant symbol of Korean identity.

During the Japanese colonial period, traditional Korean music, particularly folk songs popular in the countryside, was dismissed by the Japanese as "uncivilized." In response, Koreans began using these folk songs as a form of resistance against

Japanese rule, expressing anti-Japanese sentiments and pro-independence ideas. Music became a key tool for the Korean elite to subtly resist colonization, as physical resistance was not a viable option. Following Japan's defeat in World War II and Korea's subsequent independence, the country's culture was further shaped by the Korean War and its relations with the United States. Today, the lasting impact of Japanese colonization is still evident in the K-pop industry, where controversies occasionally arise over sensitive topics related to past political tensions between Korea and Japan.

There is a significant body of research on the colonial era and the music that emerged during that time, with notable contributions from scholars like Lie (2015) and Kim (2014). However, there is limited research on how Japanese rule has had lasting effects on Korean music, especially as seen in the contemporary K-

pop industry. Understanding the colonial influence on Korean music is crucial for grasping how history shapes both the past and present.

In this paper, I will answer the question, “How has the Japanese occupation of Korea and subsequent events, such as the Korean War, impacted Korean music, including the K-pop industry, both historically and in the present day?”

This research paper will first outline the Japanese colonial period in Korea (1910-1945) and examine its impact during that time. Understanding this era is crucial for analyzing Korea’s contemporary historical and cultural foundations. Scholars have argued that the political, social, and cultural environment of Korea was strained due to strict policies of forced assimilation under Japanese occupation, which left Korea without a strong sense of identity (Pak 397). The paper will discuss how the enforced assimilation imposed Japanese culture upon Korean society, leading to significant cultural loss.

The paper will then transition to an examination of traditional Korean music, highlighting how it was censored and partially erased during the occupation. Following Korea's liberation from Japanese rule, there was a resurgence in popular music, influenced significantly by the presence of the US Army in Korea after 1945, as noted by Lan (130). This influence from abroad, particularly from the United States, played a key role in shaping the modern Korean music scene, setting the stage for the development of the K-pop industry.

After the Japanese left Korea, many elements that had been suppressed during the Japanese rule like music could begin flourishing again. This was also influenced by the growing popularity of American pop music in the years after 1945. Singers like the Kim Sisters<sup>1</sup> and their promotion of American music abroad allowed the US to leverage power at the height of the Cold War (Han 474). At this time the genre of Trot music became very popular and was seen as a pillar of Korean national culture. Trot music brought different class groups together through this genre that

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<sup>1</sup> The Kim Sisters was a Korean born group who travelled to the US to perform for American audiences post liberation.

originated out of traditional Japanese music (Lie 37). Japanese colonialism had lasting effects on Korea even after liberation. In the 1990s, the beginnings of Korean popular music were being cultivated. This can be seen through the Seo Taiji boys and the popularity that they brought to the music scene.

However, during the Park Chung Hee regime, which lasted from 1963 to 1979, there was significant censorship in Korea. Park Chung Hee, the second president of Korea, ruled with authoritarian tactics and implemented measures that prohibited certain music genres, such as hip-hop and rock 'n' roll. These genres were seen as promoting behaviors deemed inappropriate for Korean mass culture. Despite these restrictions, American media and cultural influences made their way into the Korean market. The younger generation's embrace of these influences facilitated the growth of Korea's own cultural industry. This period marked the beginning of agencies seeking out young talent, laying the foundation for what is known today as the K-pop industry.

The imprint that Japan left on Korea continues to have lasting effects, particularly in the cultural sphere. The K-

pop industry, in its formative years, was significantly influenced by the established J-pop industry. As the Japanese market was one of the largest and most successful in the world, early K-pop adopted elements from J-pop. This cultural exchange between Japan and Korea is ongoing, with K-pop artists actively promoting their work in Japan through concerts, merchandise, and exclusive Japanese albums.

K-pop agencies often release special albums in Japanese and offer exclusive items and events to cater to the Japanese market. These efforts reflect Japan's significant consumer power and the strategic importance of the Japanese market to the K-pop industry. This paper will also explore how political tensions between Japan and Korea have occasionally surfaced within the K-pop industry. It will analyze two specific controversies where insensitive comments or items sparked outrage, highlighting the ongoing sensitivities and complex historical relationship between the two countries.

### **Literature Review**

Multiple authors have explored Japanese colonialism in Korea, focusing on

the political and social climates of the time. Park (2010) discusses the creation of a "dual society" during the colonial period, characterized by social hierarchies where the upper class was predominantly Japanese, and the lower class was Korean. This division contributed to a dual society structure. Park also examines theories of colonial modernity and the varying perspectives on colonial Korea.

Pak and Hwang (2011) analyze the educational policies implemented during the colonial period, which served as primary tools for assimilation and control. They highlight how these policies aimed to impose Japanese culture and values on Korean students. Kim Jeong Ha (2014) provides insights into the forced assimilation practices in primary schools during the colonial era, using interviews to illustrate how these policies were experienced by Koreans.

John Lie (2015), a well-known scholar in this field, specifically examines the impact of colonial rule on Korean music. He analyzes how music was affected by and responded to the Japanese occupation. Although these scholars approach the topic from different angles—social structure, education, and music—they

converge on the conclusion that the colonial period left Korea with a diminished sense of cultural identity, having been stripped of significant aspects of its heritage by Japanese policies.

The liberation period following South Korea's release from Japanese rule in 1945 was crucial for the country's development, not only in reshaping its economy and political system but also in redefining its culture, which had been suppressed during colonization. After World War II, the presence of US military bases in Korea, particularly after the Korean War began in 1950, introduced American cultural elements, including music and entertainment, to Korea.

Lan's article (2021) provides an overview of this period, detailing the relationships between Japan, Korea, and the US, particularly concerning popular music. Lan highlights how the American presence during and after the Korean War facilitated cultural exchanges, influencing Korean music styles with American elements. Similarly, Park's (2019) dissertation examines the profound impact of the US on Korean music, noting how American missionaries introduced Western music and how American music

was disseminated through propaganda radio in Korea around 1940.

Writer Yoon (2017) explores the role of the US military occupation in promoting American music in Korea. The US Army Military Government in Korea actively promoted US music programs, both to influence Korean music development and to disseminate US propaganda. This period marked a significant phase in the evolution of Korean music, blending external influences with local traditions and paving the way for the unique development of genres such as K-pop.

From the 1940s to the 1990s the growth of Korean music grew and began to take shape to build the foundation for Korean popular music, known today as K-pop. During the height of the Cold War, the US was trying to show ethnic race relations, and to do this they promoted this trio called the Kim Sisters. Han examines this topic in his 2018 article by looking at the political climate and how the Kim Sisters were used as an "ethnic spectacle" in part because the US wanted to promote American music abroad to assert power over other foreign countries. During this time the genre of trot music became popular which originated from the

colonial era but only gained larger recognition in this time. Lie (2015) in a different section of his book talks about trot and how it became recognized as an important genre in Korean national popular culture. This genre bridged the gap in the social divisions between high and low and it was once only listened to by the older generations, but it shifted to a younger audience. Author Lee (2017) also traces the genre of trot back to the colonial era. In the following years, a group called the Seo Taiji Boys became a large hit in Korea taking influence from American popular music, specifically from the American hip-hop scene. Maliangkay (2014) looks at how this group and its influence began a large shift in the music scene in Korea. Seo did not conform to the mainstream culture, but he became the social norm. The music scene during this time was heavily impacted by the political and social climate of the country as well as great influence from the US.

K-pop has always been influenced by the Japanese market and Japanese popular music. Author Shin (2009) examines the transcultural flows between Korea and Japan in terms of globalization and music. The interconnectivity of Korea and Japan

is important to understand when looking at K-pop and J-pop and how each of them significantly influences one another in different ways. In a similar vein, Pozzi (2022) looks at the Japanese market and the promotion of K-pop idols with Hallyu in Japan and the idea of soft power. Pozzi argues that K-pop is more than just transcultural phenomena and the consumption and hybridity of K-pop in Japan. Writers such as Nye and Kim have examined the Korean Wave (Hallyu) and its role in projecting South Korea's soft power globally, particularly through the success of the Korean music industry. Kozhakhmetova (2012) also discusses Hallyu, focusing on its influence in the Japanese market, a theme shared by other scholars like Pozzi and Jin (2020). Jin explores the hybridity of K-pop and J-pop, analyzing how each genre incorporates elements from the other while maintaining distinct characteristics. Although K-pop has been influenced by Japanese popular music, it has developed unique features that differentiate it from J-pop.

Jung (2014) addresses the cultural and political dimensions of Hallyu, including the presence of anti-Korean sentiment in Japan. Conversely, Kang

(2023) discusses the rise of anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea, which has sometimes led to backlash against K-pop idols touring in Japan. Lux (2021) further elaborates on the complex relationship between the Korean and Japanese music markets, highlighting the cultural flows and exchanges that shape both industries.

Oh and Lee (2014) explore how K-pop draws influences from both American and Japanese popular music, illustrating the genre's hybrid nature. Koo (2022) expands on this by examining the global reach of K-pop, noting that many idols are not Korean but hail from various countries. This diversity adds a transnational dimension to K-pop, emphasizing global connectivity. However, Koo also argues that despite its global appeal, K-pop retains deep roots in Korean nationalism and state-centric ideas, reflecting a duality in its cultural identity.

### **Colonial Period (1910-1945)**

It is important to understand the political climate between Japan and Korea to understand why Japan colonized Korea. Japan wanted to strengthen itself during the Meiji Restoration (1868-1889) to show that they were an imperial power in their own right to combat Western imperialism.

During this time, referred to by colonial scholars as new imperialism, a widely held belief was that for a nation to assert power, it needed to secure colonies. For Japan, Korea then became a target. After two successful regional wars, the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) Japan leveraged its growing military power to occupy Korea. Later, they occupied parts of Manchuria as another way for them to get closer to having complete rule over Korea. In 1905, Korea became a protectorate of Japan and in 1910 Japan gained full control of Korea through annexation.

Japanese domination policies were fueled by complete assimilation through language, education, and culture erasing Korean national identity (Park 84). Colonial education for Koreans was a direct way for Japan to assert their language and through disintegration, it would increase the likelihood of intellectual dependence. Education was used as a tool and was the "making of loyal and good subjects" under the Educational Ordinance of 1911 (Pak and Hwang 381). Segregation in schools also reinforced the hierarchy between the colonizer and the

colonized. Japanese language became mandatory in schools while Korean literature and language were significantly reduced or completely removed from the curriculum.

To fight back against the colonizer Korea struggled for independence under the rule of the Japanese and on March 1st, 1919, Koreans held a nationwide peaceful protest. Japan responded with heavy military force to suppress the protestors which ended up killing and wounding many Koreans. After this incident, Japan enforced very strict military control. While also reassessing their colonial policies to further crack down on their power over Korea. The assimilation allowed Japan to exercise domination while also reinforcing the fact that Koreans were inferior to the Japanese.

Korea lacked modernization compared to Japan, which the Japanese used as a justification for colonization because Korea could not modernize themselves and needed aid and help from the imperial power of Japan. Japan saw Korea as a tool to secure capital and supply raw materials for their country. Resources like cotton and minerals were seen as important elements to boost

Japan's capital (Park 85). Railroads, roads, electrical power, infrastructure, and manufacturing were just some of the elements of modernization completed during the colonial period.

However, the bulk of this transformation was completed through forced Korean labor. Korean men were initially drafted for mining and assembly line work to relieve Japanese workers during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) which was under the "National Mobilization law of 1938. Soon after, Korean men were forcibly drafted into the military to aid Japan in their fight which through the second Sino Japanese war and the Pacific war (1941-1945). Between 1 and 1.6 million Korean men were drafted by Japan either as forced labor or into the military draft" (Kim 268). Japan kept a tight grasp on Korea and wanted to create "Japan and Korea as one body" (Pak and Hwang 391). Another policy implemented to assume complete assimilation was the order in place to change the names of all Koreans. If names were not changed within six months Koreans would be denied access to schooling or government services and food rations. Under these strict policies,

Koreans were forcibly put into a mold that Japan wanted for them, and their labor was exploited to coerce them into becoming what the Japanese believed to be loyal subjects during their colonial rule.

### **Music During the Colonial Era**

During the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) the yangban, or the elites would listen to Confucian music that was refined and that had the essence of "elite music." Many of the songs during this time were sung by peasants and those of the lower class; however, the yangban listened to versions that were sophisticated and refined. When Korea came under Japanese rule, the yangban began listening to the types of music that the Japanese elite would enjoy. On the other end of the spectrum, the non-elites and everyday farmers had their own types of folk music that were deeply rooted in the countryside with different regional variations. One of the most famous folk songs was called "Arirang" which became so popular that it is unofficially known as the national song of Korea (Lie 18). There are over 3,600 variations of this folk song that vary based on regional differences and styles. Lie states that "Paradoxically, from the contemporary nationalist perspective, it



was not the Korean elite but the Japanese colonial government that promoted the collection of Korean folktales and folk songs" (Lie 19).

This statement is contradictory to many beliefs because under Japanese colonial rule any songs that were deemed as Korean national songs were banned. Because of this, it is quite interesting that the Japanese colonial government promoted Korean folk songs. Arirang became an unofficial national anthem in part because all other national songs were censored and stood for the resistance movement against the Japanese. During the March 1st movement variations were sung which touched on topics of injustice and current political issues.

Music has often been used as a propaganda tool by various countries, especially in contexts with imperialistic and nationalistic agendas. During the Japanese occupation of Korea, music was employed similarly to how Western powers used it to reinforce control over colonized regions. In Korea, Japanese authorities used music as a propaganda device to solidify their dominance. Korean children were exposed to this propaganda in schools, where they were required to

sing only Japanese songs. As a result, many only recall knowing or hearing Japanese songs during school and play, as they were too young to understand the broader implications of colonialism and imperialism (Kim, 269).

In Kim's research, interviews with individuals who were schoolchildren during the colonial period reveal how pervasive this musical propaganda was. One interviewee recalls, "We sang war songs all the time at school (and he sang 'victorious Japan' gadason nippon) but we did not know what it exactly meant" (Kim, 271). This shows that these children adapted to the imposed cultural norms without fully grasping their significance.

Japanese authorities also used these songs as tools of war propaganda. Military songs were promoted through newspapers and were a staple at farewell parties for draftees heading to war. At these events, a mix of Korean popular songs and Japanese military songs, including the Japanese anthem, was sung. While many Korean songs expressed sorrow over the loss of their country, Japanese songs often glorified imperialism and Japan's military prowess. This contrast highlights the different messages

conveyed through music during this period, reflecting the complex interplay of cultural suppression and resistance.

Another form of music that was popular during the colonial period was Ch'angga or choral songs. Christianity spread to Korea and Missionaries taught Koreans this style of music that was influenced by European and American hymns, along with Western music. Ch'angga was a mixture of choral and folk music but can be differentiated from traditional Korean music. Ch'angga also turned into a vehicle for resistance music under colonial rule but surprisingly it was music for the educated that promoted the independence movement in Korea. In response, the Japanese tightened the rules regarding censorship of music and officially banned Ch'angga but promoted similar choral songs that were seen as politically acceptable (Lie 20). In efforts to force complete assimilation, the Japanese forced their language upon Koreans, and "This went as far as using Japanese music textbooks in Koreans schools; therefore, 'The school songs hakkyo ch'anggas (Western songs for school) were, for the most part based in Western music idioms' instead of traditional Japanese music

styles" (Lan 130). Music during this period was heavily derived from folk music that came from the countryside that was enjoyed by elites but as the Japanese became stricter these types of songs got turned into methods of resistance.

### **Postcolonial Korea and US Music Influence**

During World War II, in 1942, the Office of War Information (OWI) in the United States began broadcasting radio programs into Korea. These broadcasts, primarily in Korean, included news and music, and were intended to support the Korean Independence movement and serve as a propaganda tool against Japanese rule. Much of the music played on these broadcasts was European classical music. However, in 1941, prior to these broadcasts, the Japanese government had banned the transmission of US radio into Korea, aiming to prevent the spread of Western influence.

Despite this ban, Western music had already been introduced to Korea earlier through missionaries who spread Western hymns (Park 2019, 23). At the end of World War II, Japan's surrender to the Allied forces led to Korea's liberation after thirty-five years of Japanese rule.

Following the liberation, the US Army established its presence in the southern part of Korea, while Soviet forces took control of the northern part, setting the stage for the division of the Korean Peninsula.

Postcolonial Korea was heavily influenced by the US, especially because the US military was based in South Korea through the Korean War. After the end of colonial rule, the Japanese music market was beginning to disappear and soon after both South and North Korea banned all Japanese music. Western popular music seeped into Korea through music clubs and a radio station (American Forces Korean Network) for the American soldiers based in Korea. Many Korean pop musicians began their careers from 1950-1970s performing for the U.S. military (Yoon 111). Through this radio station, the US played exclusively American popular music which exposed South Korea to even more Western styles of music. The American GIs wanted to hear music that they were familiar with and thus, Korean musicians were more inclined to gear their music to their listeners, US soldiers. American popular culture continued to

heavily influence Korea in the years following liberation and the Korean War.

There were a couple of genres that came to Korea from the American soldiers stationed in the country; some of the most popular genres included jazz and mambo music. American influence changed the soundscape in Korea. Instruments like the saxophone and the trombone found their way into Korea through the influx of American popular culture. During this era, jazz was heavily consumed by Americans and thus made its way to Korea and Lie states that "from quasi-orchestral renditions of big bands and swing music to the more accessible and imitable crooner songs — again, frequently just called 'jazz' — South Koreans learned to perform for American GIs and, over time, for their own fellow Koreans. They also dressed and comported themselves in line with American expectations" (Lie 32). In the beginning, Korean musicians were solely there to perform and entertain the American soldiers but as time went on, they were able to perform for everyone. Jazz was a channel for Koreans to explore various genres that would have never otherwise come to their country and became popular in their music scene.

Another genre that made its way into popular Korean culture was mambo. Mambo was very popular in New York, and it then spread globally and was consumed in radio, movies, and other broadcasts. Mambo was more than just the music; it was a show that involved dancing and a whole spectacle that was thoroughly enjoyed by many. Mambo spread to other Asian countries like Japan, Taiwan, and China. The tempo was catchy and easygoing for listeners to enjoy the rhythm. Mambo was quite a departure from previous music styles that were popular in Asia but became a craze quickly. Klein states that "The US military served as a global disseminator of Western popular music. It was a sprawling, transnational entity with vast entertainment needs, and the ethnic diversity of its troops — a consequence, in part, of America's imperial reach into the Caribbean — created pathways for Latin music to flow into Korea" (Klein 2020). Mambo showed that having the US being such a close influence as well as the global success of this genre opened Korea to new types of music and influences.

Postcolonial Korea faced instability after decades of Japanese occupation,

making the influence of the United States on its culture and media crucial for its development. The U.S.'s impact helped shape Korea into a new cultural entity, often mirroring aspects of American society. Many scholars discuss the concept of "mimicry" to describe how Korean popular culture and its music scene emerged by emulating American styles. According to writer Klein, this mimicry—copying American music—enabled Korea to distance itself from its colonial past and engage in cultural reconstruction, especially after the war. This period of transition allowed Korea to forge a new identity, moving beyond the constraints of its history into something innovative and dynamic (Klein, 195).

Yoon elaborates on the idea of mimicry, noting that "In postcolonial Korea, the traces of two colonizing forces—Japanese and American powers—had to be denied, yet were already inscribed in Korea's media texts, industries, and audiences" (Yoon 2017). This statement highlights the complex interplay of these influences in shaping Korean media and popular culture, reflecting a blend of both American and

Japanese elements while also striving to establish a distinct Korean identity.

As a result of these two very large forces in Korea, and the success and popularity of their markets and media, it is understandable why Korea followed in their footsteps and mimicked these successful and more powerful countries in the music industry. Mimicry was important for the cultural development of a country that was trying to regain its footing after being suppressed in all aspects of life. Korean music was heavily influenced by American popular music and at times was a complete copy of what was being consumed in the US, but Korean musicians began their careers catering towards the American soldiers but over time opened it up to fellow Koreans which opened different genres to a wider population. There was a direct exposure to American popular music in the postwar era of Korea which inevitably shaped the soundscape in Korea moving forward.

### **Korean Popular Music Rising**

Following the initial stages of finding more of a unique voice as a country, Korean popular music and different genres and groups emerged and contributed to the success of the music

scene. As stated before, with the Korean War going on from 1950-1953, American soldiers were based in Korea which led to the need for military entertainment.

Similar to World War II, all Asian women's bands were popular during the Korean War as well. One of the groups that became very popular during this time was the Kim Sisters. The group was made up of two sisters and one cousin because their father was taken by the North Koreans and murdered, and the mother was left with very little and needed an income (Lie 29). These three women were savvy to the trends and adaptable to the times. They began performing at nightclubs that catered to military personnel.

Also during this time, the Cold War tensions were extremely high across the world and the US was extremely fearful of communism which created a sense of urgency to promote American ideals and politics abroad to curb the influence of communism on other countries. To support this idea, the US wanted to promote its music abroad. Han argues that "there was not only a common perception among US diplomats that American popular music could be easily picked up by foreigners in terms of its rhythm and

tunes, but also that it could also be contributed to Cold War cultural internationalism through the dissemination of American ideals rooted in democracy, capitalism, and racial equality (Han 477).

The Cold War era left many countries in a state of tension and competition, leading them to assert power and promote themselves on various fronts, including politically, culturally, and through other means. The United States became particularly invested in introducing Asian talent to American audiences as part of its Cold War strategy. This effort aimed to project a positive image of the US, contrasting with the perceived threats of communism in Russia and China. The cultural and music exchange during this period was part of a broader competition to demonstrate the superiority of the American way of life, which the US framed as promoting democracy and human rights.

Despite this portrayal, the reality in the US was quite different, as racial segregation between Black and White Americans was still prevalent. By inviting performers from abroad, such as the Kim Sisters, the US aimed to showcase its

commitment to multiculturalism and diversity, which Han (486) describes as a strategic move to enhance its international image. However, this practice often amounted to tokenism, as it used these performers to superficially demonstrate racial equality and cultural inclusivity.

This phenomenon reflects a deeper aspect of colonial dynamics, where colonizers take pleasure in seeing their subjects adopt their customs and styles. The idea of mimicry plays a role here, as there was a certain satisfaction in watching Asian women like the Kim Sisters perform American songs in an Americanized style, reinforcing the cultural dominance and influence of the US. This mimicry not only confirmed the power the US held but also served as a form of cultural validation for the audience.

The genre of trot originated from the colonial period and took influence from Japanese *enka* or traditional Japanese music, American, and European music. The typical trot singer was trained in European classical music and sometimes jazz and Western music during the colonial period. Trot music was also derived from *p'ansori*

which was a traditional style of expressive singing and storytelling (Lie 37).

Although the roots and beginnings of the trot genre are deeply connected to the colonial period, the genre experienced a resurgence during the rule of Park Chung-hee, the second president of South Korea, who served from 1963 to 1979. During the 1970s, the primary audience for trot music shifted from rural migrants to urban populations, reflecting the country's rapid urbanization and a cultural shift away from rural traditions. Trot became a form of "soul music" for many South Koreans, evoking feelings of nostalgia and cultural continuity during a time of significant change.

Lee highlights the debate around the origins of modern Korean popular music, noting that some view trot as its foundation due to its adaptability, while others argue that *simminyō* ("new folk song"), which is considered more authentically Korean, marks the true beginning of the genre (Lee, 105). This debate underscores differing perspectives on the rise of Korean popular music and its connection to the trot genre.

Despite the modernization and American influence on Korean popular

music post-colonial era, the trot's ties to Japanese music, established during the colonial period, remained evident. The sounds and lyrics of trot, often filled with a sense of nostalgia, continued to remind many South Koreans of the past. This genre's complex heritage highlights the enduring cultural influences and tensions that have shaped Korean music history.

President Park Chung-hee was much more open to normalizing Japanese and Korean relations during his rule but shifted his views on Japan through his time in power. However, President Park was not thrilled by the influence of American popular music and to further anti-Japanese ideas began to ban trot music. Many trot songs were banned in the 70s because of their "Japanese color" connection to Japanese ideals and sounds. Despite bans on this genre of music many South Koreans still enjoyed this music and "these fans eschewed traditional Korean music, but they couldn't quite bring themselves to embrace American or American-inflected popular music. Thus, trot was, in effect, a cultural integument of the new South Korean and its burgeoning national popular culture" (Lie 42). Trot was an important genre that stood as a

sense of national identity even though it was so deeply rooted in a difficult time in Korean history.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, South Korea experienced a significant transformation in its music scene, marked by the rise of successful pop acts and a changing soundscape. This period saw an increase in live entertainment and concerts, fostering a movement towards managing pop idols and creating specific music visuals, particularly in genres like hip-hop, R&B, and rap. Several social, economic, and technological factors contributed to the post-1990s emergence of boy bands and the broader evolution of the music industry in South Korea.

Under the Park Chung-hee regime, strict censorship rules were in place, but these restrictions were somewhat relaxed during the presidency of Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988). Chun's administration moved towards depoliticizing and normalizing elements of popular culture that had previously been seen as anti-establishment or counter-cultural (Lie, 59). This relaxation of censorship allowed various international influences to enter South Korea, enriching the country's cultural landscape.

The focus on capital gain and the consumer power of the younger generation also played a crucial role. As South Korean society became wealthier, there was an increased emphasis on catering to the tastes and spending habits of the youth. Technological advancements further facilitated this cultural shift. The proliferation of personal stereos, karaoke rooms, and more televisions in homes expanded access to music and media, exposing the public to a broader array of cultural content than ever before. These changes collectively set the stage for the rise of K-pop and the idol culture that has become a hallmark of South Korea's global cultural influence.

One of the largest and most influential groups of this period was Seo Taiji and the Boys. It was a group that was heavily influenced by Western music and fashion. Genres like hip-hop, rap, metal, and hard rock all influenced the style and sound of the group. LA fashion and style also had a large influence; many would categorize them as aligning with the aesthetic of American gang culture with their style, however, it was more a nod to the nonconformism in Korea. This group pushed the boundaries and convention



with their fashion by wearing large baggy shirts, tailored jackets, layering various garments, incorporating Western formal dress, folk Korean dress, and other styles (Maliangkay 300).

Seo Taiji pushed back against South Korean social norms and did not want to conform to what society was seen as correct and ironically over time, he and his beliefs became the social norm. He also did not profit from the fame and did not promote himself on variety shows or television, which was uncommon for such a successful performer. To keep up a mysterious front, Seo kept his private life a secret which was part of the act and the mystic of his image.

Another way he did not want to conform to society's standards was he refused to become a product to be bought and give into the capitalist system. Seo Taiji and the Boys became a large hit in Korea, but many parents were wary of the image that Seo was promoting to their children. Although Seo was a rapper and influenced by Western rap he did not sing about violence, drugs, and sex (Maliangkay 301). His image was clean compared to artists in the West. Seo Taiji was such a

large phenomenon for his time that some even call his rise to fame a 'revolution'.

During this time Korea was often comparing how far behind Japan or the US in terms of popular music. However, groups like the Seo Taiji Boys began a movement toward idols becoming stars which was only the beginning of the boom of Korean popular music. Post-1990s Korean music was diverging away even more than previously from Japanese music. Similarly, "by the early 1990s, few South Koreans had any sustained personal experience of the colonial period; postcolonial Korean-Japanese discourse was no longer in Japanese but in Korean" (Lie 60). This goes to show the shift away from the colonial hold that Japan had on Korea in so many aspects of society. Having acts and talent like Seo Taiji allowed Korea to have its own voice in the music scene that was not only tied to the Japanese market.

### **K-pop and the Relationship with Japan**

Following the Seo Taiji and Boys making a large mark on Korean popular music and what was to come, were the beginnings of idol groups under various companies that paved the way for K-pop. From the 1990s to the early 2000s was

when the first K-pop group emerged. During the mid to late 1990s, several major entertainment labels were established in South Korea, which played pivotal roles in shaping the K-pop industry. SM Entertainment was founded in 1995, followed by JYP Entertainment in 1997, and YG Entertainment in 1998. SM Entertainment launched the first K-pop idol group, Highfive of Teenagers (H.O.T.), in 1996. This group, consisting of five members, was designed to appeal to the tastes of teenagers at the time, focusing on attractive visuals, singing, and dancing, which quickly gained popularity (Koo & Koo, 117).

The success of H.O.T. paved the way for other groups and solo acts, including notable artists like BoA and TVXQ. Scholars Oh and Lee noted that while Seo Taiji and Boys were influential, it was SooMan Lee, the founder of SM Entertainment, who recognized the significant potential of Korean pop music, later termed K-pop, in Japan and other parts of Asia. This recognition led to the development of a specific 'formula' for creating K-pop idols, which in the early stages was heavily influenced by the Japanese idol industry.

Japan's influence on the early K-pop industry is particularly evident in the career of BoA, one of the first solo K-pop

idols. BoA debuted in 2002 as a J-pop singer, marking a significant period of collaboration between the Japanese and Korean music industries. Her success in Japan was substantial, as she was produced and promoted similarly to Japanese idols, illustrating the strategic approach taken by Korean entertainment companies to penetrate the Japanese market (Jung, 119). Many early Korean popular songs were written and arranged by Japanese producers and then marketed under Japanese companies, highlighting the deep connections between the two countries' music industries. This cross-cultural exchange helped lay the foundations for the global spread of K-pop, with Japan serving as a crucial early market for Korean artists.

This was the case of BoA as well as a group called TVXQ. TVXQ/Tohoshinki was a male idol group that began their career in Japan then later gained popularity in Asia more generally. They garnered many Japanese fans, mostly young Japanese women. Their success set up an avid following and foundation for K-pop idols going forward. Shin states that "there is little doubt that the term 'K-pop' was invented by the Japanese music industry

and was propagated by Japanese media in its initial stages" (Shin 106). The Japanese music market allowed K-pop to become its own genre because the system that was in place allowed Korea to essentially copy the Japanese idols. Pozzi explains that "[...] it is a key point that underlines the extent to which K-pop promotion adheres to the Japanese pop music market's rules" (Pozzi 83).

Over time, significant differences emerged between the Japanese and Korean music markets, distinguishing their approaches to idol management and production. The Korean entertainment industry developed a more efficient system, placing a greater emphasis on training, social media engagement, and sophisticated music production techniques compared to the Japanese idol system. One notable difference is that while J-pop idol groups generally do not include foreign idols, K-pop groups often feature trans-Asian idols, reflecting a more inclusive and international approach (Jin, 50).

Despite the early influence of the Japanese entertainment market on Korean popular music, the Korean industry has evolved to establish its unique style and

system. The Korean market has taken the initial model provided by Japan and refined it, focusing on creating a highly polished and globally appealing product. This includes extensive training regimes for idols, a strong emphasis on social media presence, and strategic international marketing.

The intertwined histories of Japan and Korea have led to shared characteristics in their music industries, yet they also compete in the global arena. While some attribute the success of Korean popular music to its early reliance on the Japanese market, it is clear that the Korean entertainment industry has innovated and adapted to create its own distinct identity. This evolution has enabled K-pop to gain significant global traction, surpassing the Japanese market in some aspects and becoming a leading force in the international music scene.

Tensions between Japan and Korea have been prevalent since the colonial period with the rise of K-pop and the Korean industry and politics having sparked anti-Korean and Japanese sentiments in both countries. Even though Japan is a large market for Korean media and popular culture there have been

tensions that have been under the surface. Ahn talks about how for many years Japan has been seen as more economically advanced than other Asian countries but as countries like Korea and China have had growth in the global economy Japan felt a sense of insecurity (Ahn & Yoon 181). Music industries rely on being able to sell and promote their products which highlights the capitalist mindset that is so ingrained in this market, especially with K-pop and J-pop. Since it is a competitive market, it is understandable why there are tensions over these industries' politics. In 2019, there was a trade dispute over exports between Japan and Korea which influenced the K-pop industry.

Several K-pop groups planned tours in Japan, which led to a backlash from fans in South Korea, who used social media to call for boycotts of Japanese brands and concerts. The hashtag #CancelJapanConcert trended online, reflecting concerns that performing in Japan amid ongoing political and historical tensions could negatively impact the careers of the idols. While most tours proceeded as planned, the incident highlighted the intersection of

nationalism, politics, and capitalism within the K-pop industry (Kang, 1020, 1029).

Such moments underscore how deeply intertwined the music industry is with national identity and international relations. The ongoing disputes and animosity between Korea and Japan continue to influence public perceptions and commercial activities in both countries. For example, Yoon (2011) discusses an incident involving a granddaughter of Japanese Emperor Akihito, Gato, who copied a dance by the K-pop group Girls' Generation. This act sparked a wave of anti-Korean sentiment from Japanese netizens, who questioned the implications of a connection between the Japanese imperial family and Korean culture (Kozhakhmetova, 39).

These examples illustrate how K-pop is closely linked with broader political and cultural dynamics. The industry's global reach means that tensions between Korea and Japan, or between any countries, can quickly escalate into broader cultural and economic disputes, highlighting the complex role of popular culture in international relations.

## **K-pop Controversies Surrounding Politics**

The development of K-pop has been significantly shaped by the political climate and historical events, from the colonial period to the present day. This influence is evident in various controversies involving K-pop idols, particularly those related to sensitive historical issues between Korea and Japan.

One notable incident occurred in 2017, when a member of BTS wore a shirt depicting the atomic bombing of Nagasaki at the end of World War II, alongside the words "Patriotism Our History Liberation Korea" (Qin 2018). This shirt sparked controversy, as the imagery and text were seen as insensitive from the Japanese perspective. The end of World War II marked Korea's liberation from Japanese occupation, a historical context that still stirs strong emotions and tensions between the two countries.

The controversy led a Japanese television network to cancel BTS's scheduled performance, citing the incident as the reason. BTS issued a statement apologizing to fans for the cancellation but did not directly address the controversy

over the shirt. The designer of the shirt, a Korean streetwear brand, also apologized, stating that there was no intention to create anti-Japanese sentiment (Qin 2018).

Such controversies highlight how deeply K-pop is intertwined with politics and history. Even globally popular groups like BTS are not immune to the political sensitivities that exist between Korea and Japan. These incidents demonstrate that the cultural and historical narratives surrounding K-pop are often inextricable from the broader geopolitical landscape, influencing both public perception and international relations.

Another controversy arose when a member of the K-pop group, TWICE, who is Japanese posted to Instagram stating her thoughts on the period between the Heisei era to the Reiwa era in Japan. The 125th Japanese King, Emperor Akihito stepped down from the position to allow his son to take the position. The Japanese call their head of state "emperor", but Koreans call him "King" because of resentment from the Japanese occupation. Sana, a member of TWICE wrote in Japanese on Instagram "I was born in the Heisei era, so am sad to see it end. I would

say 'good job' to Heisei [the name that will be given to Emperor Akihito after his death]. Toward the first day of the new Reiwa era, I will spend the last day of Heisei with a fresh mind" (Oh 2018).

This statement is controversial because she refers to the Japanese age and the emperor's abdication while being a part of a K-pop group. It was even more controversial because she posted this statement on the official Japanese TWICE account. There were critical responses online and even brought up anti-Japanese sentiments from Korean fans. Some criticized Sana for her insensitivity towards Koreans and their history surrounding the colonization and the Japanese era closely related to Japanese militarism and imperialism (Koo & Koo 176). Korea still bears historical scars from the colonial period and situations like these heighten the sensitivity towards these controversies. K-pop is transnational which allows for tensions to arise at times because of shared histories.

### **Hallyu and Soft Power**

From the 1990s to the mid-2000s, South Korean television dramas and Korean popular music spread rapidly across Asia to countries like China and

Japan. Popular Korean products expanded globally and the term Hallyu or "Korean Wave" appeared which refers to the global craze for Korean culture. Following the mid-2000s a large portion of Hallyu was led by K-pop groups and fans consuming their music and products. Through this popularity, the Korean Wave extended its fan base onto a global stage which expanded the consumption and interest in Korean culture. Writer Lux explains that President Roh Moo-hyun who served from 2003-2008 emphasized that the Hallyu should be used to share and exchange pop culture with South Korea's neighbors to create more positive relationships and business ties. However, Roh did not want South Korean culture to come across as overpowering because that could cause tensions with South Korea's neighbors (Lux 90). The exchange of popular culture across countries is important for relations nationally. Hallyu allowed South Korea to expand economically very quickly which was crucial for their economy. Hallyu and the increase in consumption of Korean culture opened Korea up globally.

However, there was still rocky relationship between Korea and Japan. In the early stages of Hallyu, mainstream

Japanese media criticized the main consumers of Korean cultural products which were middle-aged housewives who were interested in Hallyu, and it was seen as unsophisticated, unrealistic, and even embarrassing (Jung 125). In Japan, there were conflicting parties surrounding Hallyu and its success. Japan became a large consumer of Korean culture, but many tried to resist promoting and consuming Korean products out of fear of loss of Japanese economic and cultural power throughout Asia. Hallyu allowed for a crossover of culture through a capitalistic avenue in the period of rapid globalization.

The Korean Wave boosted Korea's national image on a global scale but also asserted soft power at the same time. The idea of soft power comes from the persuasion of people but not through force. Joseph Nye who coined this term says, "Soft power co-opts rather than coerce them" (Nye and Kim 31). Soft power involves the attractiveness of popular culture like music and other cultural elements which is why it goes hand in hand with Hallyu. The assertion of soft power is through the power of attraction and influence. In contrast, hard

power is often through military force and economic power which forces people in a direction they might want to go. If soft power is used too much it can limit its effectiveness through attraction and deterrence. Lux states that in terms of soft power, "It is especially true for East Asia with its complicated historical-geographical context like past colonial rule of Japan. Credibility is the basis of any soft power" (Lux 20). Soft power flips the narrative whether it is economic, political, or cultural power. In the case of Korea, soft power allows an international audience to be attracted to Korean culture. Historically Japan has held power over Korea not only during the occupation but in subtle ways following. With the boom of Hallyu and Korean cultural products, there have been instances of anti-Hallyu sentiments. In one instance, a Japanese actor began protests online against Fuji Tv by making posts against Hallyu and using unwarranted language towards Koreans and Korean immigrants also known as Zainichi (Jung 126). The popularity of Korean culture has been on the rise, and it has allowed the country to expand globally and strengthen the country.

## **Conclusion**

The Japanese occupation of Korea stripped Korea of their own culture and covered up their national identity. Complete assimilation enacted by the Japanese left Korea powerless. While colonization was a brutal time period, some argue that there were some positives such as economic growth, modernization, and expanded infrastructure. However, the militaristic control enforced by the Japanese was harsh and affected every aspect of South Korean life. One way it affected culture was through music. Once Korea was liberated from Japan, the US Army Military Government of Korea took control of South Korea which allowed for an influx of American influences on Korean culture. American culture seeped into South Korea which had a great influence on the soundscape of that time and going forward. Singers like the Kim Sisters showed how interconnected entertainment and politics are so closely related. Similarly, the genre of trot that came out of the colonial period had a resurgence of popularity but also faced bans because of the relationship between Korea and Japan. From the 1960s to the

1990s Korean popular music began to create its own identity but was still interconnected with the Japanese market. The first K-pop groups came out as J-pop artists and had promotions in Japan because the Japanese industry was much more established than the Korean music industry. Music in Korea continued to expand and in the early 2000s K-pop took off as its own genre and moved away from the shadow of Japanese popular music. Korean culture has become extremely popular, and the Korean Wave has shown global interest in Korean culture, especially through K-pop.

The colonial period had lasting effects on Korea not only politically, and socially, but also culturally. The Japanese music industry continued to try to assert control over South Korea. These effects can still be seen today through the various instances of anti-Japanese and anti-Korean sentiments from both countries. This was shown through the two examples of politically fused controversies from both BTS and Sana. The history shared between Korea and Japan will never be erased and elements of the past do not define the future but will still have some influence. Although relations between South Korea



and Japan have been on the mend and amicable, however, there are still instances of conflict due to insensitivities and comments regarding the colonial past. Korean popular music has been shaped and influenced by the colonial past and Japan and many of these influences can still be seen today.

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