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The Globalization of K-Pop:

Is K-Pop Losing its Korean-ness?

The recent news of Korean boy and girl bands making headlines in Eastern and Southern Asia, Europe and the US are sending new hopes and energy through the K-Pop (short for Korean Pop) industry following the surge of pride when the Korean Wave first hit Japan and China in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The spread of Korean music and the increasing popularity of its singers is mainly due to the three major entertainment companies that dominate the K-Pop market: SM Entertainment (SM), YG Entertainment (YG) and JYPE Entertainment (JYPE). SM is the oldest and largest entertainment company in the Korean music scene. It gave birth to the first generation of K-Pop boy and girl groups, including H.O.T, Shinhwa and S.E.S. It now produces the more recent teenage idols, TVXQ, Super Junior, SHINee and Girls' Generation. YG is known for its hip-hop and electronic sounds that are well represented by its current acts Big Bang and 2NE1. JYPE also has a lineup of idol groups under its name: Wonder Girls, 2AM, 2PM and miss A. As K-Pop's influence and popularity continues to spread, the three entertainment companies are keenly trying to keep up with the demand and expectations of K-Pop audiences around the world. The three K-Pop powerhouses are incorporating experienced foreign—more precisely, Western—talent for both music and choreography in order to make K-Pop more appealing abroad. But a look at the major girl groups of the three labels—SM's Girls' Generation, YG's 2NE1 and JYPE's Wonder Girls—raises an important question: is the “Korean” element in K-Pop being undermined by its global goals?

SM was the first entertainment company to introduce a Korean boy band reminiscent of the Backstreet Boys or 'N Sync. H.O.T still remains a legendary pop sensation in the Korean contemporary music scene from the mid-90s up to this day. It is only rivaled by TVXQ, another five-member boy group produced by SM about a decade later, currently slimmed down to just two members. SM also saw success with its girl unit, S.E.S, in the late 90s. In 2007, SM finally presented a bigger, polished-up version to the market with Girls' Generation. Although the nine member group was overshadowed by the raving success of JYPE's Wonder Girls, who debuted a couple of months earlier and took the nation by storm with its No.1 hit song "Tell Me," Girls' Generation's turn in the limelight came in the summer of 2009 with the release of "Gee," which instantly topped the charts. Overnight, Girls' Generation became fashion icons, sending young girls and women alike scrambling for their daring primary-colored pants and tight t-shirts. Having won over its Korean fans, Girls' Generation was ready to woo fans elsewhere. For the group's next song, SM collaborated with Dsign Music, a group of songwriters based in Norway. In the latter half of 2009, "Genie" was released and was well-received overseas, especially in Japan where Girls' Generation became a favorite among the K-Pop girl groups. The following single, "Hoot," was also co-written, using Denmark-based music publishing company DEEKAY Music. Accordingly, after these successful collaborations with foreign talent, SM sought more famous musicians and bigger names. The latest song released by the girl group this month, "The Boys," was written by Teddy Riley. His involvement was flaunted by SM in the promotion of the song, noting that he is "one of the world's top three producers" and "Michael Jackson's producer." This seems to imply that Girls' Generation is at a level where it can work with these great producers who have global recognition. It suggests that they are willing to work with and at the same time place the group's name alongside these Western music legends.



Girls' Generation from "Gee" music video, 2009

If SM has a more professional relationship with foreign songwriters and producers, YG tends to be on more intimate and friendly terms. It is reputed to be the most music-oriented label. SM, in contrast, has attracted a negative reputation that it is an idol-manufacturing company, not a record label. YG encourages individualistic styles and personalities, and performances by its artists give the impression of on-stage playfulness and spontaneity. 2NE1 pursues this wild spirit of partying and fun the best. The group is made up of four members—CL, Minzy, Dara and Bom—and the 10-year age difference between the two older and the two younger members goes unnoticed when they are performing together. Known as the female version of Big Bang, YG's hugely successful boy group, 2NE1 gathered a lot of attention and curiosity even before its debut in 2009. 2NE1's debut song "Fire" jumped straight to the top of the charts. Like their male counterparts, the outrageous outfits and accessories they sport have become must-have items. Even though 2NE1 is still on an upward climb, YG found a foreign producer who is famous worldwide with a global fan base for the group—Will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas. He is known to be producing 2NE1's next album. In an interview he said, "K-Pop, that industry is exciting. 2NE1, that's why I signed those girls and am producing them, to blow them up outside of Korea." In a reality TV show, the girls were seen working together with Will.i.am in the recording studio. They all seemed excited yet relaxed about the joint collaboration. The group is also often seen with US fashion designer Jeremy Scott. He is fond of all the girls, but CL, in particular, who he says is one of his muses. In regard to 2NE1, he said in an interview: "They are not fake, not manufactured." The statement mirrors YG's intentions and goal in differentiating its artists from other idol groups. Having 2NE1's musical and fashion identity positively evaluated by a foreigner, a funky person and a

successful designer is great publicity on the promotional front. However, neither Will.i.am nor Jeremy Scott mentions the Korean appeal or Korean-ness of the group. Except for their ethnicity, the praise and compliments could have been given to any talented group in any country. YG utilizes foreign experts in choreography as well, including Shaun Evaristo and Lyle Beniga, who are responsible for the dance moves in Big Bang member Tae-yang's solo songs "Where U At" and "Wedding Dress." Employing foreign talents in so many aspects of music production imitates the process of importing pop from abroad, repackaging it in Korea and exporting it as K-Pop. If that is the case, what is the Korean-ness in contemporary K-Pop?



2NE1 with Jeremy Scott (second from far right) at 2011 Style Icon Awards

Unlike SM and YG, JYPE initially took a different approach. JYPE president Park Jin-young (Pak Chin-yŏng), is an established singer, songwriter and producer. This is a big difference from SM's frontman Lee Soo-man (Yi Su-man) and YG's Yang Hyun-suk (Yang Hyŏn-sŏk), who both remain behind the scenes. After the Wonder Girls became a household name with the retro-style hook song "Tell Me," they took the No.1 spot again with "So Hot" and, then, with "Nobody." Park appears in both the music videos for "Tell Me" and "Nobody." This is possible because he is an active singer and performer himself, so there is no awkwardness in seeing him in the screen. His ongoing singing career enables him more artistic freedom and expression. When SM and YG were looking for foreign music publishing companies to work with, Park, as a songwriter, personally tapped into the US music market. Instead of bringing pop to Korea, he chose to take K-Pop to the US. He wanted to find out if any of his songs

could draw interest from the US pop market. What started out as one man's personal challenge holds a bigger hope and promise for an entire music industry. In 2005, Will Smith's *Lost and Found* carried Park's "I Wish I Made That" as its eighth track. In 2006, he sold two more songs, Mase's "The Love You Need" and Cassie's "When My Body Is Talking." All three albums that Park got involved with have made it into the Billboard Top 10. This was a hard-earned reward after years of failures and disappointment. With this renewed confidence, Park produced an English version of "Nobody," the final piece of the retro trilogy, and crossed over to the US market determined to break open its doors. In October 2009, the Wonder Girls' "Nobody" made the Billboard Hot 100. This may seem like a triumph. However, the retro-themed music video, hairstyle and costume that are reminiscent of *Dreamgirls* cannot be ignored in the limited but real success "Nobody" achieved. Familiarity and nostalgia are significant factors that American audiences found approachable, if not appealing. Moreover, touring with artists like the Jonas Brothers and Justin Bieber contributed to making their advance in the US market smoother. Half in doubt, the Wonder Girls released "2Different Tears" in Korean and English in 2010. While it was respectably received in Korea, it did not draw much of a response in the US. For the group's second US album, JYPE announced that Rodney "Darkchild" Jerkins and Claude Kelly, who have worked with Michael Jackson, Britney Spears and Lady Gaga, will participate heavily in the project. In regard to the upcoming album, Park has said in an interview, "The Wonder Girls have their own oriental charm to emphasize. Not Americanized." How much of this oriental charm will shine through still needs to be determined.



Wonder Girls (left) and Park Jin-young (right) from "Nobody" music video, 2008

This phenomenon of drawing in foreign talent may lead either to the growing appeal of K-Pop, or the transformation of K-Pop itself. It is too early to predict whether either case presents a positive future. Perhaps fusing American and European sounds will make K-Pop more familiar and appealing to a global audience already accustomed to Western beats. Adding a common spice that suits everyone's taste usually guarantees a better response. However, if the dish is too ordinary and bland, people will lose interest. But should K-Pop lose its Korean flavor? The global pop music scene is dominated by the US market, yet no one calls it US-Pop or A-Pop. Perhaps it is better to lose the overbearing "K" and create just really good pop music. Before it was all about being Korean: Korean Wave, Korean music, Korean singers. But what importance does that have when we live in a global village where everyone and everything is at our fingertips? SM, YG and JYPE have opened local branches in countries such as Japan, China and the US, and this move to expand parallels the idea that it is not Korean artists and recording labels that need to globalize in order to compete on an international level. Is sacrificing Korean-ness along the way a critical issue? Was there any genuine Korean-ness in K-Pop in the first place? Only time will tell. At the moment though, it seems that the three recording companies have decided to embrace globalization and to integrate some foreign influence and elements into their productions rather than unilaterally propelling "Korean" music onto the world, hoping for the best.

The three major music labels may be on the right track—first, increase awareness and popularity of their artists, then, boldly introduce Korean elements into the music. If K-Pop is to become mainstream pop culture globally, it needs to gain worldwide recognition. Establishing a status for K-Pop and Korean culture will also make it easier to incorporate Korean-ness into future K-Pop. The most important thing is for K-Pop to provide high-quality production and content that can compete on a global level. Recent coverage regarding K-Pop boy and girl bands in regions outside of the already existing K-Pop markets, mainly Eastern and Southeast Asia, like Europe and the US is a positive indication of K-Pop's successful attempt at achieving competitiveness on the world stage. The growing appeal in new markets is perhaps a sign that K-Pop can branch out beyond its Oriental charms.

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