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Korean Pop Music a Threat to Contemporary Filipino Identity? Globalization, Nation, and Interrogation in Philippine Culture and Identity*

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For almost a decade, Korean Pop (K-pop) music has become a global phenomenon. Transgressing regional boundaries, K-pop music found extraordinary success in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines. Globalization of culture, however, had not only produced skeptics but also challenged the tenets of cultural identity vis-à-vis a crisis on nationalism. This paper seeks to theorize the adverse and favorable effects of K-pop music with regard to its significance to contemporary Filipino national identity through assessment of history, culture, and meaning. This paper tackles and examines its nuance to contradictions of culture and identity and how the transnationalism of pop culture, like K-pop music, contributes to the development of culture and society in the Philippines in recent history.

주제어 K-pop, Philippines, culture, national identity, and globalization

I. Introduction

Recognition of Korean pop (K-pop) music as a major component of global culture started its humble beginnings at the advent of globalization in the 1990s. Having Western pop music roots, K-pop is considered to be unique and 'native' in South Korea because of its catchy melodies, synchronized choreographies, and expensive-looking produced music videos (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2011; Romano, 2018). K-pop, however, is not limited

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to music, it also transcends other forms of pop culture concerning arts, fashion, food, films, and even education. In just a decade, K-pop has made international fans engage more to study the rich cultural history of Korea, learn the Korean language, and even travel to Korea for leisure and studies (Shim, 2011b). Due to the sensation of South Korean (hereafter Korean) pop culture, more and more people curious about Korea are also engrossed in traditional ones.

Historically, the foundation and development of K-pop music culture are attributed to the prevalent impact of Western cultural imperialism. Theoretically speaking, Shim (2006, 2011b) argued that the hegemonic influence of the West, particularly American, subjugated smaller nations like South Korea: from the consumption of media to the universalization of capitalism. This can be further understood under the Cold War context. South Korea, like the Philippines, was put under the sphere of the political, economic, and cultural influence of the US. Unlike the Philippines, however, South Korea used such suppression to their advantage and produced something of their own. In other words, "globalization, particularly in the realm of popular culture, breeds a creative form of hybridization that works towards sustaining local identities in the global context" (Shim, 2011a).

K-pop is precisely large in terms of definition, periodization, and context. In this study, K-pop is being defined as closely associated with "idol culture." This is entirely different from the oldest form of Korean popular culture called "trot" (Kim, 2020). Musically, modern K-pop had its beginnings in the early 1990s during the rise of boy band Seo Taiji and Boys.[1] The said group changed the landscape of music and performance

[1] There is no exact date on record to distinguish the official birth of K-pop. However, South Korea and international pundits alike consider Seo Taiji and the Boys (서태지와 아이들) as the first K-pop group.

showcase in South Korea. They brought innovations that challenge the ruling "musical styles, song topics, fashion, and censorship" in Korean music (Romano, 2018). Idol culture, however, was only introduced in the late 1990s to early 2000s when K-pop was institutionalized and standardized by bourgeoning entertainment agencies (KCIS, 2011; Seabrook, 2012). These South Korean entertainment agencies and companies begun recruiting and training potential performers called idols. These idols are put together in groups based on individual and collective qualities before debuting. Soon after, these groups ranging from four up to thirteen members showcase synchronized dance moves accompanied by singing music pioneered and popularized by Seo Taiji and the Boys. But like any other pop music, present-day K-pop has already evolved–adopting musical elements from Euro-pop, American hip-hop, to Japanese city-pop (Seabrook, 2012). The same with idol culture, K-pop has transcended the music industry. Some idols are proactive in the modeling and acting industries. Technology also played a key role in the modernization of present-day K-pop (Romano, 2018). This K-pop associated with idol culture, which has been influential in the Philippines, will be further discussed later.

The global impact of K-pop is astounding. Before global recognition, it started along the peripheries of South Korea. East Asia was the first potential market for K-pop. China's growing economic rate was accelerating. And Japan had a faster-growing economy compared to the West in the late 1990s to early 2000s (Jacobson, 2021). Then it tested the waters beginning early 2010s, K-pop moved further down south, penetrating markets in Southeast Asia before gaining wide recognition in the Americas and Europe (KCIS 2011). Southeast Asia caught wind of *hallyu* (한류) in general, K-pop in particular because of the rise of globalization and the impact of the internet's digital connectivity (Passaris, 2017). This was taken advantage of by the Korean government who supported various industries

in exporting K-pop culture in every corner of the world (Shim, 2006; KCIS, 2011; Oh, 2013). To borrow the definitions of Harvey (1990) and Jameson (1996), we can describe globalization as a "new historical epoch" as a result of the development of new technologies brought by capitalism and modernity.

Globalization, however, has implications for the nationalist discourse. Nations could either see the influence of globalization as beneficial, while on the other hand, it can drive skepticism, "backlash," (Ainslie et al., 2017) and produce xenophobia. In the Philippines, K-pop is extremely popular, but the main question is how does the impact of K-pop sit within the table of Filipino nationalist discourse? According to Igno and Cenidoza (2016), many Filipinos are still cynical about the phenomenal growth of Korean culture in the Philippines as it poses threat to Filipino identity. To clarify such a query, this paper seeks to answer whether K-pop is a threat to Filipino culture and identity or the other way around. As a backgrounder, the next part is a survey of K-pop music in recent Filipino history. I would like to point out the success of K-pop music or Korean culture in the Philippines is also due to the increasing accessibility to various media and transnationalism of culture–globalization. After that, I hope to provide a critical review of Filipino identity; its implications, and how vulnerable it is to foreign influence like K-pop.

II. K-Pop in Recent Filipino History

The first question is how did K-pop come to dominate the 'Asian market' so easily? While the present goal of K-pop, as a global phenomenon, is to conquer the 'US market,' K-pop has been successful in dominating the 'Asian market' through a conventional strategy called "localization" (Kyung, 2020). Localization is K-pop's strategy to push its talents (or idols) to flexibly

familiarize and meet the demands of a particular target market (Kim and Park, 2018). This is entirely evident in how Korean entertainment companies brand and package their talents. The group TWICE, for example, it's nine-member K-pop girl group, with three members are Japanese and one is Taiwanese. Apart from releasing songs in the Korean language, TWICE regularly releases songs with Japanese language lyrics. And to penetrate the 'US market' in 2020, TWICE released two English translations of their comeback singles, thus allowing them to perform in a well-known American television show (Tan, 2020). The same strategy is being adapted and done by popular K-pop groups like BLACKPINK, IZ*ONE, NCT, WJSN, and many more.[2] These groups either have Japanese or Chinese members apart from their Korean member/s line-up. In addition to that, due to attempts to penetrate the US market, these groups have designated English language speakers.

In the Philippines and the rest of Southeast Asia, the approach is quite different. Before K-pop, Korean television dramas (K-dramas) were first introduced in the Philippines. Filipino local television channels would acquire famous K-dramas and dubbed them in Tagalog, the official language of the Philippines. These Tagalog-dubbed K-dramas were put in prime-time slots in the afternoon. Familiarity with Korean culture through K-dramas made Filipinos accustomed to K-pop (Igno and Cenidoza, 2016). This is followed by K-pop songs being easily presented to Filipinos through music and video streaming platforms like iTunes and YouTube. There is no data to support whether K-pop was played on local radios in the Philippines, but a local television music channel called MYX regularly showcased K-pop music videos (Villano, 2009). Since the rise of internet culture, Filipinos

[2] Some K-pop groups use abbreviations and English language translations of their Korean names for their international fans for easy familiarization. For example, 우주소녀 (ujusonyeo) uses the short form "WJSN" or English translation "Cosmic Girls" for their promotions, instead. This strategy will also be adopted by budding Filipino idol groups.

spend more time and consume media content on the internet than in traditional media like television and radio (Chua, 2021). In addition to that, various Korean acts, from K-pop groups to K-drama actors, were regularly showcased in Manila through concerts and fan meetings (Capistrano, 2019). The study of Capistrano (2019) even showed that Filipinos were spending a good amount of money to keep up with their fandom. This money is spent on music albums, supplementary merchandise, and concert tickets. The Philippines has been a consistent destination for K-pop concerts. Despite soft-power (Nye, 2004) strategies of K-drama and K-pop, why is Korean culture more culturally acceptable than other pop culture available within the peripheries? Through comparative analysis, Ha (2017) suggested that South Korea may appear to be more recognizable to other Asian countries like the Philippines because of its model of economic success and absence of such "original sin" of hegemonic cultures and imperial militaristic tendencies, something which China and Japan have exhibited in the past.[3]

In terms of competition with the local industry in the Philippines, recent data shows that K-pop is in close competition with OPM (Original Pilipino Music). Filipinos prefer K-pop when listening to upbeat music, while OPM for slow songs such as acoustic ones (Sinay, 2019). This only shows that local pop music in the Philippines is relatively weak to contest with Filipinos' preference for a large variety of K-pop music offerings. Some factors worth considering are that K-pop groups are more dynamic and the amount of media content (music shows, album promotions, participation in variety shows) they produce for public consumption are diverse. Compared to Filipino pop-singers who are limited to releasing songs online and performing only in

[3] Japan had committed war crimes and atrocities in the Philippines during the Second World War. For example, the issue of Filipino "comfort women" persists. China, on the other hand, continues the assertive presence and harassment of Filipino fishermen within Filipino territory in the West Philippine Sea.

local television noontime shows (Kim, 2016; Capistrano, 2019). Despite language barriers, K-pop is a total package in terms of artistic content. From music production to performances, K-pop is good at communicating to its consumers what it entails to offer (Ryu et al., 2018). Not to mention the hardship stories faced by rookie K-pop talents in their journey from debut to early stages of success. In other words, K-pop is not only about the music but the underlying elements surrounding it. However, it must be noted that the only difference between K-pop and OPM is the amount of content dedicated for fan consumption. Another factor is the support that K-pop has been receiving from the Korean government and other encompassing industries in order to help K-pop achieve its local and global goals. Nevertheless, OPM is still striving to keep up in the Philippines' local music industry through digital platforms. Unlike K-pop, however, OPM is far from traversing the national borders (Beltran, 2018; Rappler, 2020).

III. Vulnerability of Filipino National Identity and Culture

In 2020, the former Miss Philippines titleholder and self-producing Filipino singer, Imelda Schweighart, posted on Facebook a xenophobic remark toward K-pop and Koreans. She argued that Filipinos are "losing their identity trying to be like Koreans," rather, "should have our own identity as culture and nation than losing ourselves into trends" (Pyne, 2020). Schweighart is only one of the thousands of Filipinos who are still suspicious of the influence of K-pop toward "Filipino identity."

To define or describe Filipino culture and identity is difficult or perhaps impossible. Before the arrival of the Europeans, pre-colonial settlers in the Philippine islands were deeply influenced by Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures. Economic, linguistic, political, and religious elements were shared

between mainland and island Southeast Asia (Agoncillo, 2012; Scott, 2015; Abinales and Amoroso, 2017). Then came the colonization by Spain, the United States, and Japan. Despite being modeled according to different foreign societal structures, Filipino culture and identity flourished significantly. This Filipino colonial experience of colonial oppression, the tradition of struggle, is credited to give birth to the idea of Filipino identity and national consciousness (Constantino, 1976, 1978; Mulder, 1997; Hau, 2017; Javellana, 2017).

To say that Filipino culture and identity are vulnerable is an overstatement. Filipino history is a witness that the development of such culture and identity was a by-product of coercion, adaptation, and negation. Anthropologically speaking, what constitutes the "Filipino" now, in the contemporary period, is precisely an interplay between the foreign and indigenous ways. Indeed, "rather than conceive of a nation as a single tradition with a single "soul," it is more accurate to conceive of it as a conjunction of interplaying forces, tendencies, and competing traditions" (Zialcita, 1995). This assertion is true to say that Filipinos are not merely passive receivers of something foreign or alien. The hundred years of being forcefully subjugated under foreign rule made Filipino culture and identity left with no other choice, therefore, accept and alter in various situations – simply speaking, what is foreign of yesterday is native today (Lynch, 1963; Hornedo, 1997). Yet, survival of culture in this era of globalization, wherein everyone is exposed to a fast-paced and almost free amount of information might be of consideration. Mulder (2013) was concerned that globalization could produce an "anxiety about the survival prospects of one own culture" alongside the fear it generates of being behind times. But history revealed that today's global challenges are not of any concern to Filipino culture and identity. Filipinos have always relished receiving something imported and fitting it accordingly to their context (Joaquin, 2004; Zialcita, 2005).

The complexity and flexibility of Filipino culture are evident in the

historical development of Philippine pop (P-pop) music. The old P-pop was said to have been founded in the 1970s as a result of complete exposure to Western music. Famous Western artists would have their Filipino counterparts. In terms of sound and style, old P-pop was a total duplicate of Western pop music (Baes, 1998). P-pop, however, underwent significant changes in recent Filipino history. Today, P-pop is synonymous with K-pop. The global impact of K-pop made the Philippines abandon its Western roots. In 2018, a Filipino boy band named 'SB19' was founded by a Korean company Show BT under its owner, Seong Hang Geong. The said company saw the potential of localizing K-pop music in the Philippines because of Filipino fans' enthusiasm for K-pop (Herman, 2020). Although the framework of SB19 is entirely K-pop in terms of music production and choreography, what sets them apart is the use of vernacular or Tagalog language. Recently, two other K-pop-inspired boy bands debuted locally incorporating nationalistic elements in their name and image. A nine-member group called 'ALAMAT,' for example uses local or native languages in their songs seeking to "boost national pride" (Salterio, 2021). Alamat, in Tagalog, means 'legend' or 'myth.' Another group, 'BGYO' who cited being trained under Korean coaches (Basbas, 2021), used a mix of Tagalog and English language lyrics in their debut song.

In terms of artistic elements, while P-pop shares stark similarities with K-pop, it also has differences. While P-pop has the same formula as K-pop in relation to commercial appeal (Iglesias, 2021), some P-pop concepts are still attached to Filipino novelties. Groups SB19, BGYO, and ALAMAT still recognize and acknowledge themselves as OPM artists rather than P-pop idols (Basbas, 2021; Marfori, 2021). The boy group ALAMAT, for example, attempts to revive precolonial cultural ideas and mix them with contemporary pop culture. In other words, they are keener to showcase local Filipino culture and identity than go with recent cultural trends. This

shows that P-pop is still exclusive and not yet ready to abandon its national identity roots. K-pop, on the other hand, has boundaries between its traditional and modern music. In South Korea, traditional music remains an agent of Korean national identity, while K-pop music is progressive and has its own standards (Fullwood, 2018). Traditional ones are still alive and practice today in South Korea. Unlike in the Philippines, traditional music is hardly heard, so there is a longing for this, which results in the revival of its elements in P-pop. There are also differences in terms of the intensity of training. Almost all K-pop idol groups undergo years of training. P-pop groups, on the other hand, debut with less than a year of training (Seabrook, 2013; Sunio, 2020; Iglesias, 2021).

Like how Imelda Schweighart criticized the impact of K-pop in the Philippines, the rise of P-pop also received backlash from some Filipinos. A famous Filipino actor, Janus Del Prado, expressed on social media site Facebook his concern over P-pop of being a copycat of K-pop. He voiced out how P-pop artists have only plagiarized K-pop, through similar sounds and groups performances, except using the Tagalog language in their song lyrics. He said this after the debut of the groups BGYO and ALAMAT, who took Filipino media by storm in early 2021 (Maramara, 2021). But what is wrong with copying elements from K-pop that can be significant in the development of Filipino music? Like Schweighart, Del Prado is suggesting that the K-pop formula is harmful to the national identity. The likes of Scheweighart, Del Prado, and those who see K-pop as a threat is synonymous with such shortsightedness that culture is not dynamic and not influential, thus problematic.

Although the influence of K-pop is prevalent in P-pop groups, the use of vernacular and local elements from their perspective sets the boundary. Therefore, localizing a foreign culture is possible and can be forward-looking as key to global recognition. This research, consequently, argues

that K-pop music is being integral and practical in the development of contemporary Filipino music.

IV. Integration Rather Than Rejection

Shim (2006) has argued along the same lines. Rather than a crisis of national identity, K-pop catalyzed manufacturing a branch of contemporary Filipino cultural nationalism in this age of globalization. Filipinos have used K-pop culture, hence, innovated something from it and claimed that thing as their own. In the same way, how Koreans utilized the dominating Western influence, Filipinos mimic the dominating Korean culture and engraved local elements to it. This mimicry, according to Bhabha (1994), is a result of 'cultural collisions' that result in hybridity. This is in contrast to the arguments of Igno and Cenidoza (2016) that reasoned the rising popularity of K-pop in the Philippines posits challenges to 'Filipino cultural identity' and claimed that the exercise of soft-power can be counterproductive. Oh (2013), however, rejects the idea that the global success of K-pop is because of cultural hybridity. He cites the unique development of K-pop culture and that it endemically progressed in South Korea. To which, deliberately, in juxtapose to the idea that K-pop was a consequence of the West's cultural dominance (Shim 2011a, 2011b). Nevertheless, the success of K-pop in the Philippines and the founding of a new type of popular culture like P-pop validates the argument on cultural hybridity (Shim, 2006, 2011a, 2011b).

Another argument worth considering is the declining consciousness toward a hegemonic type of nationalism in the Philippines at the advent of globalization (Weekley, 2017). Since the famous "People Power" Revolution of 1986 and the democratization of the Philippines in the 1990s, Filipinos have been wary of anything nationalistic. Nationalism, for Filipinos, is the reason

why the country was put under authoritarian rule from 1972 to 1986.[4] This could only mean that Filipinos, behaviorally and politically, pursued a more liberal, impartial, and welcoming vision toward ideas and influences transgressing the national borders beginning in 1986. The relationship of nationalism and pop culture in the Philippines, however, needs further study but as Joo (2011) suggests, in South Korea, there exists a "surge of national pride in Korean popular culture" through its transnational recognition and visibility.

Thus, globalization has been a moving factor in popular culture. The advancing digital technology and increasing capitalism make the transnationalism of culture convenient. As mentioned earlier, even though globalization poses a threat to national cultures, local ones will continue "to exist and cross-fertilize each other," as history showed us (Vanham, 2018). Recent data shared publicly by streaming site YouTube showed that Filipinos still patronize OPM. Home-grown Filipino rapper 'Flow G' topped the list on YouTube's top trending music videos for 2020 with his hit single "*Araw Araw* Love" (Everyday Love). K-pop girl group BLACKPINK's "How You Like That" and "Ice Cream" were placed second and third, while globally famous K-pop boy group BTS' "Dynamite" took only the fourth spot (Rappler, 2020). This only proves that Filipinos despite their obsession with K-pop music, a majority still frequent local ones.

[4] Former President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972 to control and stop the growing left-wing nationalism perpetrated by the Communist Party of the Philippines. Marcos, however, used such emergency power to push for his right-wing nation-building project called "The New Society."

V. Conclusion

The ultimate goal of K-pop is to attain global cultural recognition accompanied by boosting the politics and economics behind it–soft power. While K-pop could be perceived by other nations as threatening to their local culture and markets, in the Philippines, we have seen that it was used culturally and economically to revive a decaying P-pop. Both Filipinos and Koreans were ingenious and inventive to put into advantages of what was offered by dominating cultures as disadvantages. Filipino cultural identity has always been adaptable, vibrant, and inclusive. This is how the Filipino culture survived hundred years of colonialism. And considering pressure from something foreign knocking at its borders. Contemplating the success of K-pop globally, this is the same goal of P-pop as an emerging and revival cultural phenomenon in the Philippines (Benjamin, 2020).

As of 2021, there are at least five (5) home-grown idol groups in the Philippines. These groups have their distinct local concepts, but as mentioned earlier, they still embody K-pop elements in their style. The good and wide reception being received by these groups clearly show that P-pop has room to progress and grow despite elements of customarily copying K-pop. Cultures, after all, are dynamic and shared. The age of globalization, however, still poses challenges to the survival and long-term sustainability of culture. But to worry about the "loss of [cultural] authenticity is as old a phenomenon as the generation gap itself," as Mulder (2013) posits. The future of P-pop is less than uncertain, except that it exhibits chances to grow as a regional and global sensation (Benjamin, 2020). And this early potential of development is credited to the localization of K-pop in the Philippines. As mentioned earlier, the success of K-pop is because of its formula of "idol culture" and the immense support it gets from the Korean government (KCIS, 2011; Seabrook, 2012; Gibson, 2020). These success blueprints

can also be adopted by P-pop groups and companies, but the question also of Filipinos being invested in P-pop is another uncertainty.

Overall, as suggested by existing literature and arguments on the matter, the advancement of K-pop culture in the Philippines in recent history does not threaten Filipino cultural identity. Rather, it absorbs what it can learn from K-pop and then produce frameworks from it that are suitable for Filipinos to make use of. Although, future studies on the relationship between nationalism and popular culture in the Philippines, both qualitative and quantitative, are needed to further support the arguments declared in this study. The possibility of P-pop to emerge as a global phenomenon in the next decade is as interesting as to how K-pop started in the 1990s. Summing up, we can conclude that the arguments theorized in this study, therefore, challenges the underlying negative opinion that K-pop diminishes other local cultures, particularly Filipino culture and identity.

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