

# Comparison of the Factors Behind K-Pop's International Success and the Popular Music Industries of its Neighbors

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**Abstract.** Unlike the widespread success of K-Pop, the popular music industries of neighboring Japan and China did not enjoy a similar level of global success. This paper examines the success of the South Korean popular music industry that transformed K-Pop from a national pop genre to an international phenomenon through three factors: the top-down approach taken by the K-Pop industry, emphasis on exporting its contents, and the absence of government suppression. It then explores possible reasons as to why the pop music industries of Korea's neighbors, Japan, and China, did not achieve a similar level of global success by "testing" them to the factors that led to the popularity of K-Pop. On comparing the circumstances in these nations to the three factors examined in this paper, J-Pop did not adapt a top-down approach in its industry nor did it produce content designed appeal to export markets. C-Pop, in addition to these two factors, did not meet the third factor.

**Keywords:** K-Pop; J-Pop; Top-down; Censorship; Export; C-Pop.

## 1. Introduction

Since its emergence in the early 2000s, South Korean popular music (K-Pop), has gradually risen in popularity both within Korea and abroad. The phenomenal success of *Hallyu*, the "Korean wave", has since spread K-Pop from nearby regions in East Asia, such as China, Japan, and Taiwan, to the wider world in regions such as Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas. Songs such as *Gangnam Style* became the global pop sensation of 2012, and idol groups such as BTS and Black-pink made big names for themselves on the world stage.

K-Pop's global success is especially unique in that it strongly contrasts with the success of popular music industries in other nations that made attempts to popularize their own industry in a similar timeframe, primarily that of Japanese popular music (J-Pop) and to an extent, Chinese popular music (C-Pop).

This can be attributed to a wide range of factors in Korea that enabled K-Pop to achieve popularity beyond its borders. As Lie writes in his book *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, K-Pop's success can be attributed to a wide range of sociological factors, including the decline of traditional Korean music; the influence of western music during and post the colonial era; urbanization and the growth of the middle class; singing as a popular pastime.

However, out of these factors, I focus on three: K-Pop's "top-down" industry, its emphasis on export orientation, and freedom from censorship and government suppression. In the first part of the paper, I will discuss these three factors behind K-Pop's success. In the latter half of the paper, I will primarily apply and test these factors to examine the reasons behind J-Pop's lesser degree of success and C-Pop's potential for global popularity.

## 2. Three Factors behind K-Pop's Success

### 2.1 The "Top-Down" Approach of K-Pop

A unique trait of the K-Pop industry lies within its "top-down" approach that differentiated K-Pop from most other contemporary popular music industries. Contemporary popular music primarily operated in a "bottom-up" approach that used to be a pop-music star's standard route to fame and success. For instance, an aspiring artist with musical talent may take vocal lessons and join or form a band. The artists would continue performing in a band in local gigs until scouted by a record label or

an entertainment company that deemed the artists to be of potential. If successful in an audition, a contract would be signed between the pop music artists and the record company, where the artists would release records or CDs. The artists would then rely on the entertainment company to promote them to radio stations, and subscription services, until eventually performing at larger concerts in major cities as pop stars. This “bottom-up” approach to achieving fame was reflected in many contemporary pop music artists that rose to fame such as the Beatles, where the four members of the band were scouted by Brian Epstein from their performances in underground Liverpool clubs, and Madonna, who rose to fame after joining and performing with the pop-punk band Breakfast Club.

The K-Pop industry deviates from this traditional “bottom-up” approach, where artists progress upward towards fame from the lowest levels of the pop music industry to a “top-down” approach, where its pop music industry is directly controlled and directed by the entertainment companies or agencies [1]. Contrary to the former, where skilled and experienced artists gradually work their way up the industry’s ladders, the latter involves K-Pop agencies directly recruiting untrained or inexperienced people, training them, and forming them into a group where they are then debuted in concerts or music videos. This approach to popular music is extremely unusual. Of course, there have been cases in the past where young people were recruited by pop music industries through a top-down approach. Earlier examples of this include the Monkees which debuted in the U.S. in 1966 or the British girl group Spice Girls which was formed in 1994. However, it is worth noting that this approach has become the norm in the K-Pop industry except for individual musicians outside the K-Pop genre. This is so to a degree that it can be said that K-Pop is entirely top-down. As such, recruited K-Pop stars in the making, often in middle or high school, are trained intensely for five to ten years in singing or dancing by their agencies. Interestingly, the K-Pop industry instructs its trainees in fields that would normally be considered unorthodox in the pop music industry. For instance, they would be taught different languages, mainly English, Japanese, and Mandarin, to better communicate with their fans and to appeal to their international audiences or on how to interact and deal with them. Hence, trainees are packaged into the ideal image of a pop music star [2].

Secondly, this top-down approach used in the K-Pop industry also enables entertainment companies responsible for the management of various K-Pop groups to engage in an efficient division of labor. In such a system, all components involved in the creation of a song or a music video are outsourced to experts in different fields. For the majority of pop music history, pop music was very much bottom-up oriented and did not rely on the division of labor [1]. For instance, most pop stars under the traditional bottom-up pop music composed their own music and wrote their own lyrics. This normally allowed artists to express their individual personalities and had a bigger say in what they wear and how they present themselves to the audience. However, K-Pop stars have little say in what they do, such as what they wear, talk, carry themselves, and so on. Their stage costumes designed by expert fashion designers, who, in most cases, aren’t Korean, are picked out for them. Their music is composed by professional composers, and their lyrics by professional songwriters. The same can be said for their dance choreographers or make-up artists, where what the K-Pop stars themselves are responsible for centers around the delivery of the performance itself. Hence, this seeming perfectionist approach to the creation of K-Pop music and K-Pop stars provides K-Pop with a clear advantage as It not only maximizes the quality of its contents, but also ensures its appeal to audience members beyond the Korean market towards international success [3].

## 2.2 Emphasis on Export Orientation

K-Pop has a strong emphasis on exporting itself to other countries which gives it an export-focused design. Similar to how K-Pop has an international dimension in the production of K-Pop music, its marketing also has an international dimension to it. Prior to the popularity of K-Pop, popular music, especially popular music in Korea, was kept at a national level: created and consumed within the country. This was the case for most popular music genres of most other countries, with the exception of the U.S. or the U.K. as the use of English made its popular music accessible to international audiences. However, K-Pop is an export-oriented industry that was meant from the start to appeal to

international audiences beyond the Korean domestic market. This is reflected in how it is difficult to find elements in K-Pop that make it “Korean”, ensuring that its appeal is not limited to Korean audiences. The attempt at extending beyond the domestic market can be seen through many of the products of its top-down approach, such as K-Pop stars taking language lessons to lessen the effects of a language barrier in appealing to foreign audiences. K-Pop agencies take one step further to achieve this goal by hiring locally, such as Korean Americans fluent in English. This is reflected in the cast of Girls’ Generation, a popular girl group comprised of nine women. Interestingly, each member of the group spoke a different language and was responsible for taking the lead when performing in a country whose language they spoke.

It is important to note that, like any other modern popular music industry, the purpose of K-Pop is to create music and other cultural products to generate revenue for its entertainment companies. This is a major change from the romantic ideology that dominated the art world in the past, where art and music was a tool to express oneself. However, K-Pop diverged from the conventional way that pop stars generated income, such as from selling tickets, records, or appearing in advertisements, due to having a completely different business model. It embraces an innovative business model that optimizes itself for the digital age. Contrary to selling their music, K-Pop agencies release their songs and music videos free of charge onto popular platforms such as YouTube in different languages. By releasing their songs and music videos for free on YouTube and other platforms, entertainment companies gave up on the most common revenue-generating method in the pop music industry. This reflects K-Pop’s ideology of spreading its content to a broader audience to increase its popularity in an attempt to generate revenue in other ways by making use of its popularity gained from its export-oriented, top-down business model.

### **2.3 Freedom from Censorship and Government Suppression**

South Korean popular music only began to take a firm foothold in the late 1990s, when the nation completed its democratization after decades of military dictatorships spanning over the third, fourth, and fifth republics (1962-1988). The end of the authoritarian governments that lasted in Korea also meant the end of strict censorship in the entertainment industries. Prior to Korea’s democratization and during the military dictatorships from the 1960s to the 1980s, the production and consumption of popular music were strictly controlled. For instance, the censors prevented the broadcasting of vibrant and suggestive dances or lyrics containing any elements of drugs, sex, and alcohol. Naturally, this strict suppression of ideas and creativity limited what the pop music industry could produce. As argued in this paper, one of the key components of a country’s pop music genre achieving popularity beyond its own borders lies in its ability to appeal to a wide range of audiences. However, what the government deemed to be an appropriate form of popular music based on its deep-rooted Confucian ideologies fell far short of international pop music trends at the time, making it difficult for Korean popular music to be consumed outside of Korea [2]. Hence, the democratization of Korea and the gradual relaxation of government suppression of the pop music industry was an important factor that enabled the creation of a new pop music genre that appealed to international audiences.

### **3. Conditions in Japan**

The absence of a strict top-down approach can be seen in how J-Pop groups are packaged before the audience. The Korean pop music industry opted for a top-down model in order to create the “ideal” pop that was perfect in every aspect through its efficient division of labor. To use the Girls Generation as an example, their management agency, SM Entertainment, took to great lengths to portray each member of the girl group as professional career idols [1]. This professional impression was furthered by skills such as refined and complicated choreography and fan communication, which in turn was made possible by the industry’s efficient division of labor. On the other hand, popular J-Pop groups at the time such as AKB48, a popular Japanese girl group that debuted in 2005, opted for an approachable, friendly, and amateurish impression. Furthermore, unlike Girls Generation – and most

K-pop stars today – whose members were taught different languages as part of its top-down industry, the members of AKB48 did not speak a second language besides Japanese besides English. Despite AKB48 being wildly popular in Japan at its height, this made language a limiting factor when it came to fan communication and appealing to non-Japanese audiences [2]. Thus, it can be argued that the lack of a rigid top-down approach in its industry and the resulting traits that allow them to better present themselves to their audiences and appeal to foreign markets was a decisive factor that prevented J-Pop from gaining international fame outside the Japanese market.

J-Pop's lesser degree of success in achieving international popularity can also be explained by its business model. As mentioned in the previous heading, K-Pop took a very unique approach to its business model by diverging from the conventional method of generating revenue in the pop music industry. Whereas K-Pop groups chose to digitalize and uploaded their videos onto free platforms to increase their publicity, J-Pop groups such as AKB48, for the most part, generated revenue the conventional way. Japan was, and still remains, an analogue country, especially when compared to its East Asian neighbors. Hence, AKB48 generated profit by selling records, CD disks, and DVDs of their songs and music videos. What they did not account for, however, was the rampant piracy in South Korea and China where copyright laws were comparatively weaker than that of Japan's, explaining why J-Pop was successful much more successful in its own market than in foreign ones. This made it difficult for AKB48 and many other J-Pop groups to generate profit purely from selling hard copies of their music in markets outside of Japan.

#### 4. Potential of Chinese Popular Music

China's popular music industry remains relatively new when compared to that of its neighbors. Although there is no reason not to believe that Chinese popular music (C-Pop) will eventually become popular in the future, I argue that it is unlikely that C-Pop will, in the short term, achieve success on par with K-Pop or J-Pop. It is undeniable that China meets many of the conditions that led to K-Pop's success, including its growing affluence in most major cities and the rapid industrialization and digitalization of its entertainment industry. However, as clearly demonstrated in the case of Korea's pop music industry under military dictatorships in the 20th century, the success of popular music and its popularity overseas depends crucially on the absence of government interference and censorship. This is not the case when it comes to the Chinese government's approach to creativity and freedom of expression [1].

More importantly, a decisive factor for a nation's popular music to achieve international popularity lies in its ability to appeal to international audiences. As I illustrate in the previous heading, an explanation behind J-Pop's limited success lay in its inability to appeal to audiences beyond its domestic market for a variety of reasons including lacking a top-down industry or adopting a business model that was not as efficient in foreign markets as it was in its domestic market. However, combined with the reason explained in the previous paragraph, C-Pop faces a similar problem that J-Pop faced regarding falling short of being a global genre and exporting itself to other countries. The reason behind this lies within China's large domestic market. Take for example the 2017 Chinese blockbuster *Wolf Warriors 2*. With its total gross box office profit of 874 million dollars, more than six hundred million dollars were from the Chinese domestic box office. Likewise, its large domestic market serves as a disincentive for the Chinese pop music industry to export itself to foreign markets when it could generate profit in its domestic market, especially considering that there is no guarantee that C-Pop will rise to popularity in the global market. On a similar note, it is equally important to appeal to international audiences as it is important to appeal to domestic audiences. Thus, for now, it is unlikely for C-Pop to become a global sensation.

## 5. Conclusion

While the popular music industries of these countries began from similar backgrounds and western influences, there were distinct features and conditions in Korea that differentiated K-Pop from the rest. These conditions were what led to K-Pop's rapid transformation from a pop music genre of a small East Asian country to a wildly successful global phenomenon. Having a rigid top-down structure, an export-focused business model, and an environment free from censorship that gives leeway for creativity were three definite conditions besides numerous others behind K-Pop's success. Although there is a plethora of other factors besides directly "testing" these conditions to the other nations, it can, and does, provide an explanation for the three countries' different degrees of success in their respective pop music industries.

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