TRANSACTIONS

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Volume 94 – 2019

COVER: The seal-shaped emblem of RAS Korea consists of the following Chinese characters: 槿 (top right), 域 (bottom right), 菁 (top left), 莪 (bottom left), pronounced Kŭn yŏk Ch'ŏng A in Korean. The first two characters mean "the hibiscus region," referring to Korea, while the other two ("luxuriant mugwort") are a metaphor inspired by Confucian commentaries on the Chinese *Book of Odes*, and could be translated as "enjoy encouraging erudition."

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Room 611, Christian Building, Daehangno 19 (Yeonji-dong), Jongno-gu, Seoul 110-736 Republic of Korea
Tel: (82-2) 763-9483; Fax: (82-2) 766-3796;
email: royalasiatickorea@gmail.com

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TRANSACTIONS
of the
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Borrowed National Bodies: Ideological Conditioning and Idol-Logical Practices of K-Pop Cover Dance

CedarBough T. Saeji

Abstract

This study investigates the ways the South Korean government and other affiliated organizations use the popular practice of performing choreography to Korean popular music, or K-pop cover dance, to build nationalism in Koreans and soft power for Korea overseas. Cover dances generally have one benefit for the original performers; covers can strengthen the perception of popularity of a song or a group. However, the benefits that accrue elsewhere are wide-ranging. Dance instructors may find eager paying learners, university classes may recruit new students, and the Republic of Korea harnesses the enthusiasm of dancers to promote everything related to Korea. This study, a continuation of my long-term work on cover dance, is based on a close reading of the KBS television program *K-Pop World Festival 2018.* The larger project includes observation of cover dancers at practice and in cover dance competitions, interviews with organizers, Korean diplomats, dance professionals in the K-pop world, and cover dance participants, as well as online data collection. As Korea struggles with a low economic growth rate, high youth unemployment, and a host of social problems that are increasing bitterness and dissatisfaction, the KBS program and similar cultural productions provide a different perspective on Korea. In this paper I argue that the coverage of K-pop fans from around the world on Korean television essentializes foreign places and people with a singular focus: to prove the attractiveness of Korea to a *Korean* audience.

The Korean Government and Support for Popular Culture Industries

In 2011 the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) was tasked by the Korean government with producing an annual festival for Korean popular music, or K-pop, cover performers. The cover performances at this Changwon K-Pop World Festival are generally dances although some performers do singing covers. The festival's largest source of funding is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with national broadcaster KBS and the City of Changwon as the two other largest stakeholders. The audition process is mainly coordinated by the Korean embassies in each country and funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this paper I examine the 2018 Changwon K-Pop World Festival (hereafter Chang Fe) through programs made by KBS and interviews I conducted with participants from final-round teams. KBS produced and aired seven television programs about the contest. Five were preliminary rounds held in five different countries: Spain, Russia, Laos, Thailand, and Canada. One was the 90-minute final, the distillation of efforts by more than 3,000 teams that auditioned in 75 countries. A related program talked about K-pop fandom including footage of the twelve finalist solos and teams in Korea, especially the group of female cover dancers from Ukraine and their fandom of Stray Kids, a then-recently debuted K-pop boy group.

Why should the Korean government fund a K-pop cover festival? Although the government supports pop culture today, from the early 1960s until the later 1980s it had a tense relationship with popular culture, creating barriers through censoring bodies and controlling policies. During this era, "songs, films, and television program were expected to promote and legitimize the focus on economic development through hard work, sacrifice, and loyalty to the nation" (Kwon and Kim 2013: 529). After Korea's official democratization in 1987 these policies slowly relaxed, until 1994 when President Kim Youngsam was convinced of the economic potential in popular culture. This famous "*Jurassic Park* moment," when Kim was told that the export of 1.5 million Hyundai automobiles brought in the same amount of money as the single Hollywood film (Shim DB 2008: 17), caused the government to adopt an active and protective role towards Korea's nascent cultural industries. At that time film quotas limited foreign showings, and preferential bank loans and tax incentives encouraged investment in cultural industries by major conglomerates, or *jaebeol* (Ibid.: 17-18). The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 further helped develop the cultural industries as Japan lost market share to Korean TV dramas, and *jaebeol* consolidated and let go of non-essential subsidiary businesses, such as their newly developed cultural units (Ibid., 19). Media and communications scholar Shim Doobo has argued that the *jaebeol* investment laid the foundations for *hallyu* (the international popularity of Korean pop culture products including music, TV dramas, cinema, and computer games), because the subsidiaries they founded with substantial capital, "supported young directors," and "transplanted advanced business know-how" to the new industries (Ibid., 19).

The governmental support for popular culture often took the form of new laws and deregulation of parts of the industry. Deregulation ended publisher registration in 1987, and ended censorship on theatre (1988), music (1996) and film (1997) (Lee HK 2013: 188-89). Cable television began broadcasting in 1995. In 1999 under President Kim Daejung, the National Assembly passed the Recorded Music, Video, and Games Law as well as the Basic Law for Cultural Industries' Promotion, founding the Korea Creative Contents Agency (KOCCA). Kim's government generally invested in internet infrastructure, supporting the digitization of the cultural industries (Kwon and Kim 2013: 525).

Starting in 2004, the government began to realize the growing popularity of Korean media could be an "effective instrument for cultural export and nation branding" (Lee HK 2013: 186). With this new understanding of the role that pop culture could play, under President Roh Moohyun the National Assembly passed new laws to promote the film and video, games, and music industries. His administration saw information and communications technology (ICT)-based industries grow to 12% of GDP in 2011 (Kwon and Kim 2013: 525). President Lee Myungbak passed the 2010 Contents Industries Promotion Law, which worked to overcome piracy of cultural products, "subsidized participation of Korean firms in international events," and opened more international Korean Cultural Centers (Ibid: 526); he also championed the addition of K-food to the list of K-branded Korean cultural exports. As ill-defined as it remained throughout her abruptly ended tenure, President Park Geunhye's creative economy (*changjo gyeongje*) policy was also based on the inescapable logic that the country has few natural resources and is space-poor and technology-rich, making export of high-quality cultural products an obvious area for growth.

Under President Moon Jae-in the investments in popular culture continue. Since the passage of the Broadcasting Act in 2000 the National Assembly has to approve KBS' budget (Kim DH 2018: 94), and naturally it also approves the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). MOFA's support for the festival is key—MOFA staff handles the advertising and organizing of preliminary contests at embassies and consulates.[1] Continuing support for Chang Fe fits within a pattern of the Korean government "initiate[ing] cultural events, or provide[ing] funding for events, study programmes and cultural activities which are deemed to promote and export examples of Korean culture overseas" (Elfving-Hwang 2013: 15). In comparison to ten or twenty years ago, the popular culture industries are thriving—in this robust environment is funding something like Chang Fe justifiable? If the argument is to stimulate international interest, then the festival may be unnecessary.

In 2010 or 2011 the mere fact that people in Euro-American nations were fascinated with K-pop was enough to hit the front page of newspapers and the 6 o'clock news on major channels in Korea. In the past few years, however, foreign interest in K-pop has become commonplace. Campuses in Seoul bustle with international students on exchange, most attracted to Korea by *hallyu*. As K-pop group BTS has set records and won major awards around the world,[2] any remaining doubt by Koreans that there is international interest in K-pop should surely have eroded. It is clear that support for the festival is no longer about supporting the cultural industries; rather, it is about cultural diplomacy and soft power. This accounts for the involvement of headlining sponsors, like KBS, Changwon City, and MOFA, as well as additional sponsors listed on its social media platforms including the Korean Tourism Organization (KTO) and the Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS), Korean Air, and BNK Financial Group. Of course not all contests are supported by the Korean government; most cover contests are organized by participants or by K-pop groups seeking to drive interest in a new release, while others may be part of corporate advertising for Korean products (Khiun 2013).

For years Korean diplomats have sought to leverage *hallyu* for soft power, or cultural diplomacy. Hard power refers to the use of military and economic muscle to force other polities to accede to national demands. In 1990, Joseph Nye coined the term soft power to describe a friendlier approach, convincing other polities through attraction. With soft power, "a country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, and/or aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness" (Nye 2008: 94).

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[1] MOFA's budget for 2019 is 2,356,000,000,000 Korean won (2,105,000,000 USD) which amounts to 0.7% of the total budget of the government. MOFA budget information can be found at http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_5731/contents.do. Accessed 1/14/2019.

[2] For more on BTS' records see Gim Jeongsu (2018: 811), or in non-academic format the K-pop journalist Tamar Herman's book (2020) has all the details.

This approach "rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" (Ibid. 95). Although Korea is the 11th-largest economy in the world, it is flanked by the world's second- and third-largest economies, and both China and Japan have more population, land mass, and natural resources. Unable to use hard power under these circumstances, soft power is particularly attractive to the Republic of Korea. In addition, the government has found Korean pop culture useful in differentiating the South from the North, and as part of the "broader ideological confrontation" with the North (Jang KJ 2018: 25).

Korea's claim to soft power often relies on a narrative of demonstrating how smaller nations can overcome obstacles—showing a more realistic model when not every country can be the United States or China (Elfving-Hwang 2013: 15). Because soft power is effective when it operates to convince the public in another region to support a nation's goals, rather than just targeting political leaders, soft power has always relied on what is popular. Popular culture, however, is not produced by governments, but by creative content producers.[3] These non-governmental commercially-driven businesses have to create products that are attractive outside their country of origin. This makes soft power difficult for a country to achieve, because popular cultural products are loaded with values and messages designed to enhance popularity and promote consumption—not promote their national origin. Furthermore, the active audiences who consume them are dynamic creators of significance rather than simple receptors of textual meaning. In other words, no matter what sort of encoding a cultural producer puts into a product, the audience decodes it their own way (Hall 1980).

The promise of soft power derived from popular culture is illusive—commercial success does not have to bring soft power. Japan has been saddled by neighboring countries' enduring memories of its brutal occupation and atrocities in the Pacific War. For years so-called "Cool Japan" was able to dominate regional cultural markets with popular television shows, *manga* (graphic novels), and *anime* (often televised versions of the same graphic novels).[4] However, scholars agree that Japan's cultural success stayed within the commercial realm, and that "the nature of the Japanese soft power in East Asia that is exerted from the dissemination of popular culture possesses an immense impact on this region's cultural markets, but does not create new 'spheres of influence' for the Japanese state" (Otmazgin 2008: 97). Media scholar Koichi Iwabuchi explained that "Japan's pop-culture diplomacy goes no further than a one-way projection of Japanese culture" (Iwabuchi 2015:420). In his earlier work he theorized that Japan has produced products that are "culturally odorless," or *mukokuseki*, in order to be more universally appealing (2002: 27-32). The tension between hiding cultural distinctiveness and a desire to leverage pop culture for diplomatic purposes are clearly incompatible. Korea's historical non-aggression and underdog status has meant that countries in Southeast Asia may see Korea as more aspirational and less threatening, an image Korea has promoted.

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[3] Although it is true that at times artists do not support their own government or its goals, in the Korean case becoming an idol already requires performances of nationalism; no idol would refuse the government. To learn more about how pervasive nationalism is in contemporary Korean public space, Cho Younghan (2008) and Olga Fedorenko (2017) approach the ways nationalism appears in Korea and how top stars are required to behave as a result.

[4] For more on "Cool Japan" see McGray (2002) or McLelland (2017).

Although K-pop was part of early *hallyu* in the late 1990s (Howard 2006, Pease 2010, 2006, Jung EY 2006), and arguably the first use of the term *hallyu* (or Han-liu 韓流) was in a Beijing journalist's response to the popularity of music groups like H.O.T., it was Korean dramas (Creighton 2009, Hirata 2008, Kim HM 2005, Sung SY 2006) and, to some extent, film (Jin DY 2013, 2006, Choi JH 2010, Yecies 2010, Shin JY 2005, Kim KH 2011) that were the engine of early *hallyu* growth. K-pop returned as a major focus of the international spread of *hallyu* around 2010, with the beyond-Asia success of K-pop groups becoming more pronounced (Lie 2015, Epstein 2015, Epstein with Turnbull 2014). The effort to use *hallyu* and K-pop as not just a cultural export but an approachable nation-branding tactic has only accelerated in recent years as *hallyu* gained ground. The government is therefore heavily invested in directly supporting the cultural industries, particularly in pop music, TV dramas, and games. The Korean public generally supports these efforts, both influenced by second order reception to evaluate pop culture positively in the wake of international popularity and convinced by public discussions,[5] often conducted through the same media that spread *hallyu*, that pop culture will have a positive effect on Korea's international image.[6] The Korean government therefore seeks to use popular culture to brand the nation for international audiences, while simultaneously encouraging nationalism in popular culture producers through funding mechanisms and opportunities for artists. Just as Japan sought to convince the Japanese public that sports diplomacy was beyond politics (Abel 2015: 109), the Korean government wants to demonstrate to the Korean domestic audience a spontaneous and naturally arising international interest in Korea, even while the same government is “hijacking K-pop fans for its own audience and free-riding on the K-pop bandwagon” on the international stage (Kim SY 2018: 204), a practice that is on display in programs like Chang Fe.

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[5] Second order reception is the re-evaluation based on the reception of others—for example if BTS becomes popular with Euro-American audiences it can cause audiences previously exposed to K-pop but not fans to re-evaluate BTS in light of the positive reception of others.

[6] The process of convincing Koreans to support *hallyu* for the benefit of the nation echoes earlier discussions of sports diplomacy, for example in Korea see Margaret Dilling (2001), or Japan see Jessamyn Abel (2015).

Joseph Nye reminds us that there are three resources that allow a country to achieve soft power: it needs to have (1) popular culture—which Korea clearly does—but also (2) political values, and (3) foreign policies that are seen as rooted in moral authority (2008: 96). Korea has not had a large impact on the world—for decades North Korea has dominated Korea-related news. Morally courageous internationally known leaders such as President Kim Daejung (Nobel Peace Prize 2000) and former United Nations Speaker Ban Kimoon demonstrate excellent Korean statesmanship, but corruption surrounding former presidents Park Geunhye and her predecessor Lee Myungbak, as well as high-profile scandals from #MeToo to the Nth Room case, have cast a pall on Korea’s image.

In this article I argue that the act of covering K-pop ideologically, or “idol-logically,” conditions foreign K-pop fans to positivity towards Korea. These cover dancers—borrowed national bodies—act as emissaries of K-pop and Korea through performing K-pop in far-flung corners of the world. Engaging with the music they promote a pop-cultural (not socio-political) vision of the nation. Through research on cover dancers, including interviews with Chang Fe 2018 finalists, I demonstrate how cover dance connects to soft power cultural diplomacy. At the same time, through a close reading of KBS’ coverage, I argue that ultimately the program is using these borrowed bodies to promote the nation not to foreigners, but to the domestic Korean audience.

Idol Stars and Cover Dance

The music industry has changed. The ways that stars become stars, the ways they make money, has shifted as the transition from physical recording to electronic file has swept the world. The Korean entertainment industry has also changed—most of the money in K-pop is now earned not from consumers in sales of musical units, but from other businesses (Oh and Park 2012). The success of hallyu is in large part connected to how Korean entertainment agencies were able to accurately strategize with an early understanding of K-pop as a visualized music that is essentially dependent on YouTube and other social media and sharing platforms for its burgeoning popularity (for more see Ono and Kwon 2013; Jung EY 2015; Jin and Yoon 2014). A key component of K-pop's now-undeniable international success has been the visual—the superior production quality of the music videos that feature fabulous choreography, beautiful stars, and trending fashions.

Fans participating in cover dance loan their bodies to animate and extend K-pop to new audiences. To drive fans to download a digital file, stream, or even buy a CD, artists produce several videos for each title track. These are promoted by the stars on other platforms, but the most important part of the K-pop promotional framework depends on amplification by fans. Beyond the relatively passive acts of streaming and sharing links on social media, the more involved amplification activities commonly engaged in by fans include creating reaction videos, dance covers, and song covers, although dance covers are by far the most widely participatory. Cover dance as a fan practice arose naturally both because of the emphasis on choreographed dance routines in K-pop and because foreign fans can interact with the music through dance which can be easier than singing along in a language they do not know. Because K-pop cover dances help drive social media engagement, K-pop companies have been incentivized to further emphasize dance in videos and to encourage fan participation in dance through releasing dance practice videos, choreography videos, or through on- and offline cover dance contests. Cover dance practices have therefore become an important driver of a feedback loop that builds perceptions of song and artist popularity.

Table 1 (below), for instance, demonstrates the number of subscribers, the number of videos, the top-viewed video, and its viewership as of March 5, 2020. The first three listed teams were participants in Chang Fe 2018. Each YouTube channel has abundant subscribers, produces many videos, and achieves high view counts ranging from just under 1 million for K-Boy's most-viewed video to 174 million for Waveya's most-viewed video. It is interesting to note that two of the artists on the list achieved their highest views when they uploaded their own original productions, not covers. This is an example of the making of new secondary stars from what I call "K-pop adjacent industries," or the fans inserting themselves into the production side of the K-pop economy. Cover groups cannot earn money from YouTube for uploaded covers, but they have developed other strategies. East2West, a group of approximately sixty dancers based in Montreal, has an online merchandise store, paid invitations to perform regionally, and has been an opening act before large K-pop concerts and featured performers at

KCON Toronto and New York. Waveya has subscription members' only content, Sandy and Mandy have appeared in advertisements, and the members of St 319 Entertainment started releasing original K-pop-inspired music.

Table 1: Cover Group View Count: As of 3/5/2020

Cover Group	**Subscribers**	**Total Videos**	**Most-Viewed Video**	**View Count**
East2West (Canada)	1.5m	812	BTS "Fake Love"	8.4m
Haru (USA)	75k	301	Black Pink "Ddu du ddu du"	1.1m
K-Boy (Thailand)	79k	63	Momoland "Boom Boom"	0.94m
Awesome Haeun (Korea)	4.2m	384	Na Haeun "So Special"*	41m
B-Wild (Vietnam)	575k	178	BTS "Boy with Luv"	6.4m
K-Tigers (Korea)	1.34m	367	BTS "Blood, Sweat, and Tears"	14m
Kaotsun's Cover Dance Crew (KCDC) (Australia)	123k	403	Twice "What Is Love?"	3.1m
Kueendom & Kingsman (Malaysia)	38k	134	GD x Taeyang "Good Boy"	3.1m
Risin' Crew (France)	414k	238	BTS "Go Go"	7.2m
Sandy & Mandy (Taiwan)	1.17m	216	Momoland "Boom Boom"	4.6m
St 319 Entertainment (Vietnam)	1.38m	187	Aimee x B Ray "Anh Nha O Dao The"*	97m
Waveya (Korea)	3.63m	619	Psy "Gangnam Style"	174 m
Yours Truly (Canada)	100 k	1,456	BTS "Mic Drop"	2.2 m

* Original songs, not covers

As dancers engage with the choreography of their favorite K-pop stars (even if that dance was created by foreign choreographers), embodying K-pop becomes an act of embodying Korean culture. The dancer is engaging with Korean culture through the dance process, through the notes and Korean lyrics that seep in as they rehearse over and over. The time that young people spend together struggling to perfect choreography can produce vivid memories and tight, bonded communities. For foreign cover dancers, these experiences they have are closely interwoven with an awareness of K-pop as a representative of Korea and Korean culture. Simply put, their dance activity ideologically/idollogically disciplines their bodies and simultaneously their minds to ever-increasing positivity and openness to Korea. They interact with other members of the fan community and often engage in other fandom and *hallyu* consumption activities. Fans are often intimately familiar with the narratives created around their favorite groups, and willingly take on challenges such as keeping track of the shifting and expanding membership in hit group NCT and its current performance subunits (NCT U, NCT Dream, NCT 127, and Way-V). In her analysis of NCT, performance studies scholar Kim Suk-young analyzes NCT's origin story as one where "technology can clone a single organism into multiple bodies" (2020: 31). SM Entertainment founder Lee Sooman's vision for his boy group can be extended to consider cover dance—here NCT that is ever-expanding among new members becomes reproduced again in the bodies of the dancers that animate the musical tracks in schools, parking lots, malls, and community centers around the world.

A cover contest like Chang Fe draws short-term attention to Korea and Korean things, but through active participation in fan communities the long-term goodwill may draw the two countries closer. Chang Fe is just part of how the Korean government seeks to reach people abroad—for example it established October 5 as "Korean Day" and MOFA provides funds for Korea-associated events.[7] *Hallyu* products communicate aspirational messages to consumers (Otmazgin 2016); among these consumers, some of those aspiring the most to Korea, Koreanness, and Korean stardom are people who devote the sort of time and energy spent by cover dancers. What could be a more perfect example of the aspirations of cover dancers than seeing them become, for three and a half minutes, the Korean artist? The existence of a contest that results in an all-expense-paid trip to Korea where cover performers share the stage with idol stars fosters desire. It builds desire—desire to perform on the stage, desire to go to Korea, desire to be acknowledged by the idol stars, maybe even a desire to, with KBS exposure, achieve a "street casting" dream.

Cover dance satisfies the goals of both producer and consumer. Not only is the K-pop product amplified by the cover activity, as already explained, but performance on the street, on stages, in a contest, or just for online upload can achieve the sought-after intimacy between content producer and consumer. Covering is a tribute to the idols, an act of homage, even an exercise practice, but it is also intimacy through embodiment. Cover dancers become closer to the idol by *becoming* them within the dance practice. Many cover groups perform with the same number of members as the group they cover, and may even match hairstyles and accessories to the idol, introducing themselves through their own name and the name of the K-pop idol, as in the image below.

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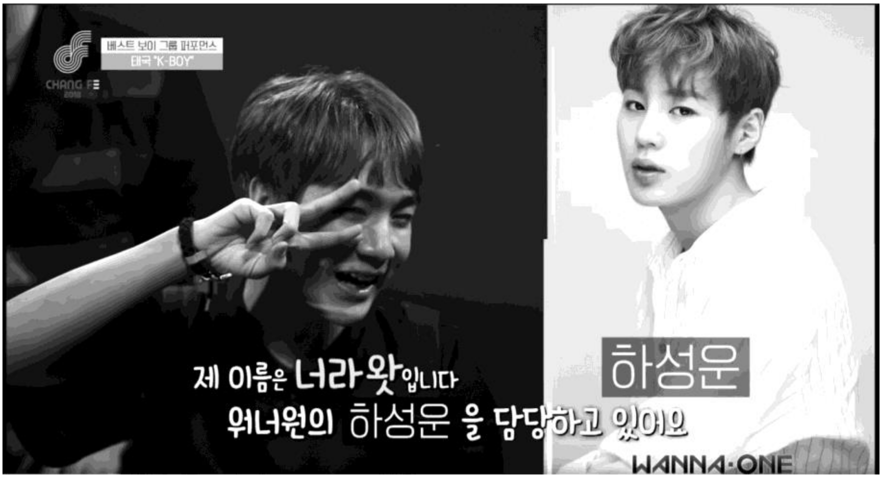
[7] See Irina Lyan (2019) for a description of how Korea Day is celebrated in Israel.



제 이름은 너라왓입니다
워너원의 하성운 을 담당하고 있어요

Image 1. "My name is Narawat, and I am responsible for (the role of) Ha Seong-un." (Source: screen capture from KBS Changwon World K-Pop Cover Festival)

The very active contemporary internet-mediated processes we can see in K-pop fandom demonstrate how the target audience has decoded, and what they think of, a given K-pop release. Particularly when an artist and dancer do not share a language, the physical act of covering is the purest reflection of the audience to the artist. Within the particular context of cover dance this can be even amplified further when the artist watches the cover dance, or even when the dancer watches the artist respond to the cover and records their own response in return, as a series of interactions between NCT 127 and K-Boy, the group from Thailand that ultimately won the grand prize in the 2018 cover festival. K-Boy covered NCT 127, who televised their reaction to the cover.[8] K-Boy then uploaded a video to YouTube of their reaction to the reaction.[9] Later that year K-Boy was invited to Korea to perform the song at the *Seoul Music Awards*.[10] Individual K-pop groups like NCT 127 hold cover challenges for their new songs partially because such challenges will drive interaction with the song, and partially because the acknowledgement from a beloved star is so deeply satisfying to the dancers who worked hard to master the performance.

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[8] This video shows members of NCT 127 watching K-Boy covering their song "Cherry Bomb," https://youtu.be/5Vp-FqpzjlI, "Let's Dance: NCT 127_'Cherry Bomb' dance cover contest reaction video" on 1theK's YouTube channel. Accessed on 05/07/2020.

[9] The reaction can be seen at https://youtu.be/hn5FuAcfcpI, "K-BOY

A Framing Analysis of KBS' Chang Fe Coverage

The framing of the festival has been created for a Korean viewer, even though it was also broadcasted by and available on the YouTube channel of KBS World TV,[11] making it part of KBS' outward-facing programming. Instead of thinking of the international viewer and sending a message to them, the Chang Fe coverage seeks to justify the budget and existence of such a program by demonstrating to the Korean audience how Korea is being successfully promoted to international audiences, and through showing the love Korea is receiving, to further promote a nationalistic reaction in Korean audiences. This is done through framing Chang Fe and covering K-pop as a platform for love of Korea; showing Korea's (superior) status in relation to foreign countries; and finally, demonstrating that no matter how hard they try, the cover dancers cannot approach the level of the Korean idols.

A platform for loving Korea

The first five programs show preliminary contest rounds in five countries. As the KBS team travels to each country, the camera seeks out Korean things and the use of the Korean language. The cover dancers are surrounded by Korean things, going to eat in Korean restaurants, employing Korean *aegyo* (cutesy) body language and learning to speak Korean. The KBS team demonstrates that K-pop opens a door to a deeper engagement with Korea whenever possible.

The program displays the power of K-pop fan interest in another country to spread to other people—family or people passing by on the street hooked in by the cover dancers. There are frequent clips designed to

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REACTION NCT127 REACTION K-BOY" on K Boy's YouTube channel. Accessed on 05/07/2020.

[10] See the performance here, https://youtu.be/y_D25_jD7qU, "K-BOY COVER NCT 127 | CHERRY BOMB @ SEOUL MUSIC AWARDS 2018" on K-Boy's YouTube channel. Accessed on 05/08/2020.

[11] For more on KBS World TV programming see Mun Sanghyeon (2018).

show that love of Korea/K-pop is widespread, beyond just the participants in the contest. The episode shot in Spain includes an interview with a mother in the audience. When asked if she also likes K-pop, and who she likes, she unhesitatingly declares her fondness for BTS. Another mother explains that since her daughter earned good marks, the whole family has come to the event from some unnamed location outside of Madrid just to watch. In the episode in Canada, the camera follows a group as they dance in public. During the song, as their bodies are borrowed to display Korean pop culture, they attract an audience. A teen asks the dancers for their Instagram. Another woman records a video—she is a choreographer and plans to show the video she shot on her phone to her own students to talk about synchronization. Another man talks about their talent. An audience member, a woman in her sixties, is shown moving her body along with the music as she watches. The message is clear: as one of the performers says, "we want to share K-pop with the world." Cover groups extend the reach of K-pop, multiplying the bodies of the stars in far-flung corners of the world. A former student of mine, reflecting on the cover she created with her classmates, wrote:

> As we chose the Nest [UBC's student center] as location, we also drew attention from many people who walked by and students who studied there. Surprisingly, we even had a couple audiences sitting in front of us and viewing us dancing. At that moment, I understood cover dance as a fandom activity not only makes us (real-fans) actively participated in but also make bystanders enjoy K-pop through such social entertainment and their social networking (when they share us in social media or click our video on YouTube). In a larger picture, we are essentially promoting the *Hallyu* culture and boosting Jung Eunyoung's "media convergence and participatory culture" by enriching media contents related to K-pop (2015).[12]

The same message is reinforced by the segments in the KBS coverage that show the social media reach of cover performers with quotes and images flashing on the screen. The number of followers or viewers on various platforms and notable comments are shared. But KBS shows very little interest in the contestants' own country, which is used as a setting to be contrasted with K-pop, and reduced to a few sentences essentializing the country or the city. This is because to KBS, the foreign location is not important except as a setting for the global reach of K-pop.

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[12] Thank you to my former student Xu Qinqin for allowing me to use her words. The video starring her and her classmates is available at https://youtu.be/SY5kKX9EP64, "Devil - Super Junior Dance Cover" on the Hafu Go YouTube channel. Accessed on 05/07/2020.

The dancer learns about Korea through K-pop, and with a passion for Korea they become the extension, the agent, the borrowed body, of Korean soft power. Other people learn about or are exposed to Korea, in a natural way through the bright enthusiasm of someone from their own country who speaks their own language. The audience is no longer on guard against propaganda or hidden subtext. Nor does the audience expect K-pop fans to know everything about Korea—any mistakes they make will not be held against them. Cover dance is an exemplary way to expose people because dancers literally perform their love of Korea in the street. Through them, even more people learn about Korea, and their activities, such as contests, bring K-pop fans together to more tightly bond their communities through face-to-face meetings. The clips from the KBS coverage of the preliminary rounds make it clear that this contest and the interest in K-pop is not just about dance, but about Korea. In the clips from the preliminary round in Russia between 0:43 and 3:32, we can hear the following, which is not unlike sections of the other preliminary round video[13]

0:43 Announcer: "음악과 발레의 역사를 써내려간 이곳에 무섭게 인기를 끌고 있는 것이 있었으니, 다름 아닌 케이팝입니다 ["In this place with a long history of music and ballet there is something that's scarily popular, it is none other than K-pop!"]
0:58 Participants (in English): "I love K-pop"
1:09 Guests: "케이팝 사랑해요" ["We love K-pop"]
1:13 Announcer: "세계에서 가장 넓은 나라 러시아 곳곳에서 케이팝을 사랑하는 이들이 모였습니다" ["K-pop lovers from around the largest country in the world are gathered"]
1:56 Announcer: "한국을 사랑하는 이들을 위한…" ["For those who love Korea…"]
2:02 Announcer: "케이팝은 물론 한국문화를 체험하려하는 사람들로 행사 시작하기전부터 인산인해입니다. ["Outside the venue before the festival doors opened are gathered people who love K-pop as well as those who want to experience Korean culture."]

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[13] You can watch the entire clip at https://youtu.be/sltE7l6pSyk, "2018 K-POP World Festival Global Audition EP.1- RUSSIA" on the KBS World YouTube channel. Accessed on 05/06/2020.

2:09 Guests: "사랑해요 케이팝" ["We love K-pop"]

2:19 Announcer: "케이팝에 관심을 갖다 보니 자연스레 한국 문화에도 시선이 쏠리고 있는 거죠" ["Because they are interested in K-pop they are naturally paying attention to Korean culture as well"]

2:31 Event staff (*as eager audience members try to push by him as he blocks the door*): "원래 (행사장) 좌석이 800석이 조금 넘는데 그이상의 인원이 와서 좌석이 부족할 것 같아요" ["The event hall has a little more than 800 seats, but a larger audience arrived, so it's not enough"]

2:33 Announcer: "그 인기를 한번 살펴볼까요?" ["Should we investigate that popularity?"]

(After the announcer enters the event hall she observes, narrates, and interviews Russian youth as they try the rice punch *sikhye* and Korean traditional snacks.)

3:00 Announcer (*as the camera captures a smiling girl trying on hanbok*): "음악에 빠지니 한국 사랑에 빠지게 됐다는 이들" ["After falling in love with the music they naturally fell in love with Korea"]

3:07 (In a mix of languages with Korean subtitles as follows): "한국의 분위기가 너무 좋아요" "모든 게 인기 있고요" "건물이나 이런 모들 것들이 (좋아요)" ["The atmosphere in Korea is really great" "Everything is popular" "Even things like buildings, everything is good"]

3:12 Guests (in Korean): "한국 사랑해요" ["We love Korea"]

3:15 Announcer: "자타공인 한국 마니아 입니다" ["Everyone can see their mania for Korea"]

3:18 Announcer: "그들이 가장 애정하는 건 케이팝이겠죠" ["What they love the most is K-pop"]

3:21 Announcer: "이제 이르쿠츠크 거리에서도 쉽게 만날 수 있는 데요. 이 많은 사람들이 모인 이유가 케이팝을 보고 듣고 즐기기위해서입니다" ["You can easily hear K-pop in the streets of Irkutsk. A huge crowd has gathered here to see, listen and enjoy K-pop."]

3:30 Guests (in Russian): "우리는 케이팝을 사랑해요" ["We love K-pop"]

A framing analysis of this clip demonstrates that the Korean or foreign audience following along on KBS is being bombarded with a conflation of K-pop and Korea, and nonstop praise and positivity towards the nation. It is notable that the participants and announcer couple the words "love" and "Korea," not just "love" and "K-pop." Although obvious propaganda is shot down by contemporary audiences, positive messages about Korea by outsiders who seemingly have no vested interest in promoting the country, such as Russian teenagers, are much more easily acceptable. Direct and active nation-branding attempts created by the Korean government may sometimes miss the mark as in the cringe-worthy video of girls squealing about an unnamed *oppa*[14] as they visit SM Town.[15] But in the case of Korean soft power through foreign cover dancers, the government has essentially two rounds of insulation. First, a positive attitude towards Korea is filtered through an apolitical star, and second it is filtered through an enthusiastic non-Korean. Through this process the resultant video, like the KBS Chang Fe coverage, becomes exponentially more convincing—it is seen as documentation, not nationalistic messaging.

What does Korea offer?

Foreign countries encountered during the program fall into two categories in KBS's framing: either they want to be Korea, or Korea has what they lack. The interviews and chosen segments with non-Western performers mostly ignore their individuality, focusing on them as a group, and KBS seems never to question why they are interested in K-pop. When it comes to the performers from Western countries, however, KBS staff explicitly show the viewers why the Westerners took interest in Korea. This was proven by emphasizing that K-pop brings a sense of fulfillment that they otherwise lacked until their discovery of K-pop and Korean culture. How Western cover performers encounter K-pop is often recounted, particularly if it can be part of a voyage of transformation. In the Canada segment, two of the featured women had dropped out of high school; one was depressed and overweight. Both of them in different ways narrate how K-pop saved them. "She [Hyuna] is my favorite, she changed my whole life" one of the women explains.[16] The (solo) vocal finalist from France similarly claims that K-pop has changed his life. His K-pop experience began in 2011, at a time when his life was full of difficulty. The program claims that his whole family supports his K-pop dreams, and his grandmother and mother say "*anyeonghaseyo*" (hello) for the camera.[17]

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[14] Technically *oppa* means older brother of a woman, but in practice it can be used for any older male with whom emotional closeness either exists or is imagined, as in the case of idol stars.

[15] The video can be seen with subtitles in many languages at https://youtu.be/UgiBqPghI1I, "[Viral 15: Fantastic Life of a K-Pop Star (Simplified Chinese)]" on the Imagine Your Korea YouTube channel. Accessed on 05/06/2020.

[16] See the segment on the Canadian preliminary round at https://youtu.be/ARm9__ODXSA, "2018 K-POP World Festival Global Audition EP.2 – CANADA" on the KBS World YouTube channel. Accessed on 05/07/2020.

[17] See the final video of the 2018 contest at https://youtu.be/iONYCSJobI8?t=4635, "2018 CHANGWON K-POP WORLD

The program is packed with messages of how much people in other countries love and admire not just K-pop, but Korea. When they are from a less economically powerful country this is not examined, but when they are from a Western country Korea's superiority is shown—it is Korea that can save them from themselves, transform their future, and bring them back to the sought-for sense of community lost in the contemporary world. In the final, Julia, a Rutgers University student from the American creative performance team Haru, explains the bonding power of K-pop cover dance:

> K-pop is truly, in itself, fun. Even the dancing is itself really fun. It's really cool to be able to do a K-pop dance that you learned, and that somebody else learned at a different time, at a different location, but then when you meet up and join together, you already know the same dances. It's just a cool connection you have with everybody around the world.[18]

In KBS' narrative, and in the narratives of the dancers themselves, what unites everyone is K-pop and by extension Korea. Through K-pop, Korea has the power to bring harmony.

In my interviews with the finalists, I found that they held strong views about Korea. Lindsay Katlego Setlema from the Republic of South Africa's impression of Korea went far beyond just K-pop.[19] In an anecdote, he recalled how one participant had left a camera at a convenience store. Discovering this, a Korean female staff member walked to the store to get it. The fact that the camera was still there, and that a woman could walk alone at night to and from the store demonstrated to Lindsay what a wonderful country Korea was. Almost six months after the trip to Korea Lindsay explained,

> Oh I would love to go to Korea, oh I miss that place.

FESTIVAL | 2018 창원 케이팝 월드 페스티벌 [ENG/2018.10.21]" on the KBS World YouTube channel. His segment appears at 1:17:15. Accessed on 05/07/2020.

[18] See the final video of the 2018 contest at https://youtu.be/iONYCSJobI8?t=3051, "2018 CHANGWON K-POP WORLD FESTIVAL | 2018 창원 케이팝 월드 페스티벌 [ENG/2018.10.21]" on the KBS World YouTube channel. Haru's clip starts at 50:51. Accessed on 05/07/2020.

[19] I conducted my interview with Lindsay via video chat on 03/09/2019.

> Thinking about it just makes me sad, I was treated so well in that place, it felt like home, I feel like going back, I want to go back and I *am* going to go back. Right now my work is going towards that. KBS staff, it was beautiful, they treated everyone equally, they treated us like family. I honestly, I wish, I pray for people to be able to go and experience that, Changwon K-Pop World Festival, wow. It is amazing.

Lindsay returned to South Africa and continued to work hard on dance, feeling invigorated and empowered by his experience in Korea. While in South Africa, Lindsay uploaded his own dance covers on YouTube and because of his recognition as a Chang Fe finalist, he was able to form his own dance team for future performances and contests.

The top spot in K-pop is still held by Korean idols

The young people in the program tell the camera that K-pop is superior to other similar cultural products in their own country, expressing amazement and enthusiasm again and again. Conversely the KBS announcer’s language used to talk about the cover dancers is often mildly patronizing, with subtle vocabulary and phrasing choices that reveal the announcer’s understanding of the large difference between a cover dancer and an idol star. In my experience observing cover dance channels as in Table 1, and interviewing cover dancers, learning around four choreographies per month may be average. However, in the KBS coverage from the preliminary round, several groups of participants claimed to have practiced the single song they are covering for six months or more. These statements are included in the coverage offered in silent contrast with idols who must perform multiple complex choreographies from their own and other top stars’ careers.

In the KBS narrative, K-pop is not easy. The featured team in Madrid is shown in vocal and dance lessons, as well as group practice. Bandit, a team in Canada, does ‘hundreds’ of takes to get the right cover to upload. Another Canadian team, EVO, is committed to using their own choreography, not just copying. Even the confusion between two Korean instruments by team Monstar from Uzbekistan demonstrates the gap between the performances of idols and the efforts of cover dancers.

Introductions of finalists juxtapose their performance with the performance of the idols they are covering, in ways that often reinforce the superiority of the original. When the contestants meet Stray Kids, the announcer quips “Stars from TV are here now!” and the contestants jump up and down giddily, while the idols remain suave and polished. This demonstrates the gap between idol and cover performer. At another point, there are video messages from Taemin (of SHINee) and Sunmi directly to the individuals covering their songs. In Sunmi’s message to the young Bangladeshi woman, Shefa Tabassum, she critiques Shefa’s moves and explains how to improve her dancing. The video of the stars re-centralizes the idols, reinforcing their pre-eminence over the cover dancers who serve as temporary stand-ins.

Conclusion

Cover dance is almost unbelievably well-suited to our present mediatized society—it can maximize impact with minimal investment. The cover dancers become borrowed national bodies acting to amplify K-pop (and Korea) as unofficial ambassadors, using their own time and money to rehearse and travel sometimes vast distances to a preliminary contest all for the slim chance at an all-expense-paid trip to Korea. They perform their love of Korea, and both because it is part of the culture of cover dance and because cover dancers rarely have much money, they perform this love of Korea publicly and frequently.

What is the future for these young performers with their dreams of stardom and their love of Korea? Even these borrowed bodies performing covers can be let down—their love of Korea is honed and disciplined in a vacuum consuming *hallyu* materials and only seeing the best in Korea. K-pop media has sucked them in and demonstrated that they, too, can be a dancing body within the video frame (Saeji 2016), as well as outside as they cover the songs. However, if they move to Korea the gap between *hallyu* fantasy and Korean reality may dampen their enthusiasm—Korea is still not an easy country to live in for the visible non-Korean.[20] Even the contestants for Chang Fe 2018 struggled to stay positive during their experience which ended not in a star-studded performance in front of a stadium audience, but in front of only the TV cameras and each other as a typhoon arrived in Changwon at the crucial moment. Although viewers could watch the broadcast from their homes, the 2018 contest ended very differently for those on the stage. Miska Hyunh, a participant on the team East2West from Canada, explained the letdown they experienced:

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[20] There is extensive research on this topic; to begin exploring I recommend Han Gilsoo (2015) and Ahn Jihyun (2018).

> Once we stepped out of this bus, and we thought we were finally discovering Korea with the fresh air, and there they were with the camera "How's Korea?" "What are your thoughts?" They were trying to get reactions, and we reacted like "Wow, it's fun!" but we hadn't seen anything yet.[21]
>
> We were really sad and frustrated. Throughout these videos, we look very happy and cheerful but it wasn't always the case. We couldn't go out (except to the convenience store). We didn't get to explore Korea. We had to wait a lot… We thought that this final performance would be all worth it, but it didn't really happen.[22]

Despite understanding the role that she and other finalists were playing for the cameras, and being somewhat resentful that the experience had not lived up to her hopes, Miska was still fascinated by Korea. A few weeks after we were talking, she moved to Seoul to spend spring semester 2019 at Kyung Hee University. Miska's transition from finalist to exchange student partially demonstrates her privilege as a student from a Canadian university, but because her personal journey to exchange student began with being fascinated by Korean media, it also makes clear the depth of engagement with Korea initiated by K-pop.

Beyond organizing things like cover dance contests, what is Korea doing to actively transform this positivity into soft power? At least for now, the goal seems to be attracting the attention and approval of the world while selling Korean cultural products. Perhaps that is why Chang Fe, instead of actively capitalizing on or amplifying foreign interest in K-pop and Korea, becomes an indirect advertisement to Koreans about the superiority of their own country and its cultural products. At the present moment, Korean young people are not feeling particularly rosy-eyed about the future—they have even nicknamed their country Hell Joseon. In Joseon dynasty Korea, those not born into an elite family were stuck in life-long poverty; to young Koreans the current situation seems similar. Following the tradition of naming generations they call themselves the

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[21] From our interview 02/21/2019 via video chat.

[22] You can see Miska's entire v-log at https://youtu.be/Xa6DE1Jd3fM, "WE WON AN AWARD AT THE K-POP WORLD FESTIVAL 2018 IN KOREA (East2West) | EPISODE II" on the Miskacam YouTube channel. Accessed on 05/07/2020.

"giving up generation" indicating that they have given up on having a real job, getting married, owning a home, and really any type of happiness.[23] The suicide rate continues to climb just as the youth unemployment rate continues to rise, as a whole nation of college graduates somehow all expect to land white-collar jobs in attractive locales. The resultant disappointment when they do not, the dismal economic growth rate, and the repeated scandals that have rocked Korean confidence in their country have brought a malaise on the nation. My reading of KBS' Chang Fe coverage is partly that by purporting to be about foreigners, it attempts to reach Koreans with a message of hope and encouragement. Value what you have, the coverage tells the Korean audience, you live a life many envy.

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CedarBough T. Saeji has an MA in Korean Studies from Yonsei University, and a PhD in Culture and Performance from UCLA. Saeji has taught

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[23] The giving up generation was first called *3po sedae* (3 give-up generation), then *5po sedae,* and finally *N-po sedae.* For more on youth unhappiness and the Korean suicide rate in the context of K-pop see Saeji et al (2018).

Korean Studies at University of British Columbia, Korea University, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and is now a Visiting Assistant Professor at Indiana University, Bloomington. Publications have appeared in edited volumes on women in traditional performing arts, Korean screen cultures, theatre in Asia, and intangible cultural heritage and journals including Journal of Korean Studies, Korea Journal, Acta Koreana, Pacific Affairs, Asia Theatre Journal, and Asia Pacific Journal.

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