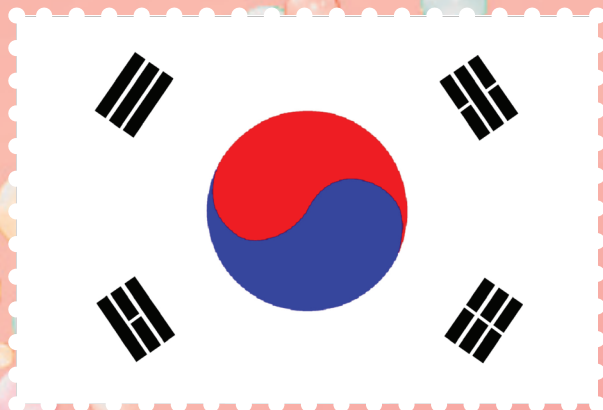


Korean Pop Culture



Entertainment for a Globalized World

A Global Lesson Plan

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Lesson Plan: Korean Pop Culture: Entertainment for a Globalized World

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“Let me entertain you,” sang Gypsy Rose Lee, a burlesque singer and dancer, in the finale song in the 1962 movie of the same name. The South Korean government has taken this refrain to heart and is focused on developing, from the top down, an unsurpassed and profitable Korean Wave of entertainment. They are bent on becoming the Gypsy Rose Lee of the entertainment world!

South Korea is a dynamic and flourishing country, rising from the depths of poverty after the Korean War to become an affluent nation. As with most Americans, the bloody Korean War was my first introduction to the country. Although the fighting started in 1950 and ended with a ceasefire in 1953, it essentially continues today with the division of Korea into North and South. As a world and U.S. history teacher, Korea commanded an important place in the teaching curriculum, primarily in regards to the war. However, today, developments in Korea have expanded beyond the war, and there are different ways to fit this fascinating country into the classroom. My interest in Korea grew when I participated in a 10 day, educational travel experience in November 2014 and continued my research about the country by attending a week-long intensive workshop on Korea in Boulder, Colorado in 2015.



The Korean Peninsula

In my quest to share information about Korea with more Americans educators and students, I thought about a way to make it both interesting and informative. Since a great deal of information about the Korean War has been produced, I thought a different, more contemporary tact would spark students' curiosity about the topic. Contemporary Korean society can be studied from many different angles; the Korean Wave is exciting and certainly caught my attention while traveling in Korea.



The Korean Wave

The Korean Wave refers to the increase in the popularity of Korean pop culture since the 1990s and takes several forms: films, television dramas, video games, and K-pop music. Thus, this teaching unit examines Korean society through a pop culture lens. From this lens we will see how different dimensions of Korean society interact together to create a contemporary pop culture—the Korean Wave. We will analyze how other dimensions of Korean society influence this phenomenon—involvement of the government, the economy, the relationship with the U.S., and historical background. We will also evaluate whether K-pop music is culturally authentic. Let's start our study with a historical look at how the Korean Wave emerged into a tidal wave sweeping the world.

Korea has often thought of itself as a victim, and indeed the 20th century has not been kind to this country. In 1910 it was annexed by Japan, which continued its occupation and exploitation until its defeat by the U.S. and its allies at the end of World War II; the Japanese were permanently expelled from the peninsula at that time. In 1950, soon after the end of World War II, a brutal civil



Hundreds of thousands of South Koreans fled south in the mid-1950s after the North Korean army invaded.

war broke out between North Korea, loyal to communist Soviet Union and China, and South Korea, who sided with the United States and its allies. At the end of the war in 1953, the country lay in ruins with the 38th parallel line dividing the nation, a division that continues today. Both the North and South were intent on rebuilding their nations with distinct national identities. The U.S. was instrumental in helping to rebuild its ally in the south, establishing the Republic of Korea, commonly known as South Korea, and North Korea established a communist-style government under the leadership of Kim Il-sung but much of the credit should be attributed to the future-looking and hard-working people of Korea.

History of Korea's Popular Culture

The permanent U.S. military presence in Korea as a result of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War exposed Korean society to U.S. popular culture. In 1957, the military established the American Forces Korea Network (AFKN) to provide American military personnel stationed overseas with American TV and radio broadcasting.



American Forces Korea Network (AFKN), a stage at the headquarters in the 1960s.

AFKN is in fact Korea's oldest broadcasting station. From the 1960s to the 1980s, when Korean television and radio offered mostly domestically produced programs, AFKN broadcasted a variety of Western entertainment. Korean viewers enjoyed television shows, films, music, cartoons, and sports programs that were absent from local stations. This influenced early Korean popular culture as local youth, musicians, and actors began emulating American television and music stars.

President Park Chung Hee had tremendous influence on all facets of Korean society. In fact, his first-born daughter, Park Geun-hye, is the current President of South Korea. Park, a former military general, seized power through a military coup in 1961. In 1963, he was inaugurated as the authoritarian president of the Korean Third Republic. Since Korea had long been buffeted by the whims of larger, more powerful nations, such as Japan, China, and the U.S., they were eager to shed their most recent national humiliation at the hands of Japanese colonizers and improve Korea's power and stature. The division of Korea into North and South heightened this desire. As a result of Korea's troubled history, President Park ushered in a well-received national aspiration: be "Number One." In particular, Park relentlessly pursued economic growth. He was obsessed with economic data that could be used to measure how the country stacked up against others. His took this Number One refrain and applied it to an enthusiastic and willing country; Korea embarked on a period of astonishing economic development and a rapid increase in GDP. In an event that shocked the country, Park was assassinated by his own security chief in 1979.



President Park Chung Hee with daughter, current president Park Geun-hye.

After President Park's death, many Koreans worked to establish a democratically elected government that would replace Park's authoritarian rule. Instead, in 1979, General Chun Doo Hwan installed another authoritarian government, one that became infamous for its violent suppression of democracy movements.



Logo of the Korean Baseball League

Fearing resistance against his regime, President Chun implemented a cultural policy to divert Koreans' attention from the tense political situation by promoting sports programs and easing censorship of television and film content. For example, in 1981 baseball was elevated to a Korean national sport, and the Korean Professional Baseball League was established in 1982. In 1980, the Chun government took control of the television broadcasting networks, eliminating all but two. As part of its cultural policy, the government allowed sexually-oriented (not nudity) content to be shown on television and in movies. However, political content

perceived as critical of President Chun or his government was banned.

In 1987, only a year before the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Roh Tae-woo won a democratic election to the presidency. President Roh eased censorship restrictions on political content and opened the Korean market to products from foreign companies. For example, movie scripts no longer required governmental approval, allowing movie makers freedom to explore social and political themes. Also, Korea joined the World Trade Organization in 1995. As a member of the WTO, the organization, and in particular the U.S., pressured Korea to “open” its economic markets—including film and television—to free trade and greater competition.



Logo for the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea

As a result of President Roh’s removal of restrictions on the Korean media market, Korea emerged as one of the top ten foreign markets for Hollywood films. In response, the market share of Korean films plummeted from 33% in 1986, to 15.9% in 1993. Throughout most of the 1990s, Korean films comprised only 20% of film market revenues. The commercial success of foreign films made government officials fear the demise of its domestic film industry.



Sopyonje, Theatrical Poster

The turning point for the Korean film industry was the unexpected success of *Sopyonje* in 1993. It became the first movie in the history of Korean cinema to attract more than a million viewers. In the wake of *Sopyonje*’s success and the release in the same year of the U.S. movie *Jurassic Park*, the government began to realize how a strong domestic film and television industry could benefit the Korean economy. The science and technology governmental advisory board calculated that *Jurassic Park*’s global profits equaled the sale of 1.5 million Hyundai cars. This comparison indicated the economic potential of a successful Korean movie industry and, subsequently, the government targeted the cultural sector as a prime area for growth.

The National Assembly enacted the Motion Picture Promotion Law in 1995, which provided tax and investment incentives for the cinema industry. In 1998, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism developed a five year plan during which colleges were encouraged to start programs to educate new entertainment talent, and funding supported Korean movies and promoted their export. Furthermore, the government encouraged privately owned conglomerates (chaebols), such as Samsung, Daewoo, and Hyundai, to invest in the film and television industries, helping them become more globally competitive.



Shiri, Theatrical Poster

Globalization forced the Korean culture industries to become domestically and globally competitive and laid the foundation for the “First Korean Wave.” Because of the initial investment in the film industry, after 1995 film became one of Korea’s first world-wide popular cultural products. For example, Kang Che Gyu’s spy thriller *Shiri* (1999), which looks at Korea’s North and South division, reached the top of the Japanese box-office in January 2000 and became one of the most profitable Korean films ever. In years to come, Korean film remained a successful export product, with films such as *Joint Security Area*, *Oldboy*, *My Sassy Girl*, *A Moment to Remember*, and *April Snow* becoming foreign box-office hits.

First Korean Wave and Television

In June 1997, China Central Television (CCTV) aired the Korean television drama *What is Love?* It became a huge success in China. The popular series centered around two families with contrasting values: One conservative and patriarchal, the other modern and progressive. It portrayed the troubles that arise as these two families become in-laws, while also delivering a message about the importance of balancing traditional and modern values.



What is Love?

The Chinese audience, who had mostly watched TV soap operas from Europe, America, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, were now hooked on Korean dramas and pop cultural products.

The popularity of *What is Love?* paved the way for *Dae Jang Geum* (*Jewel in the Palace*) in 2003. The drama is about a woman who rose from the lower class to the position of master chef in the royal palace during King Jungjong's reign in the Joseon dynasty (1506-1544). *Jewel in the Palace* sparked an even bigger craze for Korean popular culture in the pan-Chinese region. In May 2005, the show's final episode became the most watched television show in Hong Kong's broadcast history with more than a 40% audience share.



Dae Jang Geum (Jewel in the Palace)

After its enthusiastic reception in the pan-Chinese region, Korean television expanded its popularity to Japan, which became one of its core consumer markets for film, television, and pop music. In April 2003, Japan broadcasting ran the Korean drama *Winter Sonata*. This drama turned into a cultural phenomenon with the male lead, Bae Yong-joon, catapulting to national stardom. For example, during his first visit to Japan on November 25, 2004, almost 3,500 fans mobbed Bae Yong-joon at Tokyo International Airport. A police force of 350 men was needed to control the crowd.



Bae Yong-joon in Winter Sonata

Winter Sonata was not just a commercial success; it also changed the way Japan looked at Korean society, and Bae Yong-joon became the ideal man for many Japanese women. Tour agencies in Japan used the popularity of the drama to provide tour packages to Korea. The hotel suite that was used in the drama had a months-long waiting list, and autographs of Bae Yong-joon commanded \$150. Bae Yong-joon, estimates showed, was responsible for an increase of \$4 billion in revenue between South Korea and Japan during that time period.

With the global success of film and television, Korean policy makers saw that the export-oriented economy had captured a new overseas market. The government designated cultural technology and the content industries (the technologies that produce television drama, film, pop music, computer games, animation, etc.) as one of the key technologies to drive the Korean economy into the 21st century. The government pledged financial investment and administrative support to domestic cultural industries and established the Korea Culture and Content Agency in 2001. The Korean Wave, according to the government, not only supported its economy but was a cultural diplomatic and soft power tool. Film, television, K-pop, and online gaming are actively used to promote South Korea as a brand. The government maintains that Korean popular culture creates a positive image of South Korea in the world.

After reaching a peak in 2005, the demand for Korean television shows diminished, but the demand for pop music took over in China, Japan and the rest of Asia. In this next phase, K-pop performers such as TVQX, Super Junior, and Girls' Generation burst into Southeast Asia and Japan markets, emerging as key players in spreading the Second Korean Wave in the region and eventually the rest of the world.



South Korea as a Brand

Second Korean Wave: K-Pop

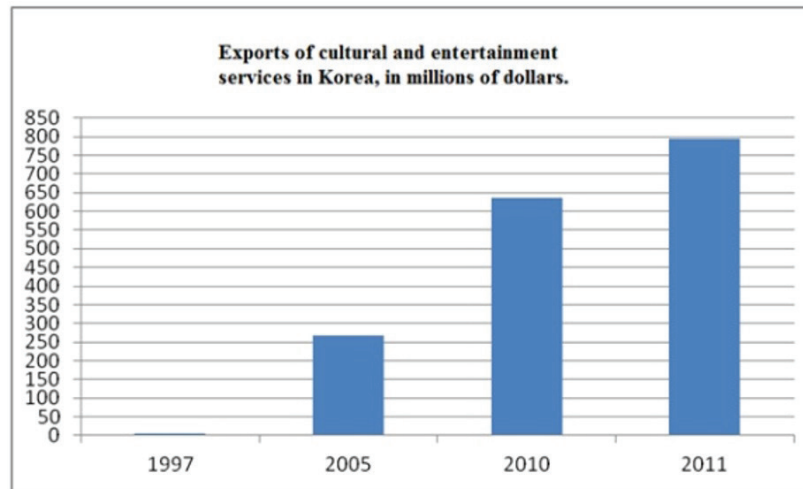
Korea's digital infrastructure and the industry's use of digital information and communication technology have largely contributed to the Second Korean Wave. For example, most people used social media like YouTube when



Psy, whose music video for “Gangnam Style” became the first to reach more than a billion YouTube views; it now has over 2 billion.

watching a K-pop music video for the first time. The K-pop industry has made the Internet and social media fundamental elements of K-pop marketing and global distribution. Using social media in the marketing and distribution of K-pop encourages a “snowball effect” via hyperlinks. SM Entertainment has stated: “Social Network Media has enabled non-Western music to reach the world in a single click ... Korean artists are bypassing traditional outlets like radio and television, aggressively steering their efforts to go international via the Internet.” Indeed, the Internet is important because K-pop is largely driven by online fandom and digital sales. K-pop artists also actively use their social media accounts to connect with fans, sometimes circumventing the controlling power of their talent agencies.

K-pop is created for visual (digital) media, which explains its telegenic appeal: Vibrant set-styling, fashion, performers’ “perfect” physical appearance, and synchronized dance routines. K-pop’s visual foundation can be traced back to the 1990s to the same events that gave rise to the First Korean Wave. Prior to the 1990s, the Korean music industry had been characterized by a state-controlled media monopoly. State approved composers, arrangers, and lyricists wrote songs that singers performed in state television broadcasters’ studios with their bands and choreographers. During this time, ballads were the most popular type of music genre. With the media markets liberalizing and opening to foreign competition after the 1990s, the networks turned to visual music and took advantage of television as an outlet for its marketing efforts. Thus, television networks provided the K-pop industry with a medium to promote their products—both the performers and the K-pop music.



Bank of Korea has attributed the surge in cultural exports since 1997 to the increased popularity of K-pop.

The reliance of the K-pop industry on television networks meant that it was no longer sufficient to produce just good-sounding pop music; they had to offer the music as part of a “telegenic package.” This meant an emphasis on the performer’s personality, appearance, stage and television performance skills, as well as the visual appeal of music videos. In turn, television programs were created that allowed K-pop performers to showcase their personality and their latest music, and establish personal connections with their fans.



The three biggest talent agencies in terms of revenue are SM Entertainment, founded in 1989, YG Entertainment, founded in 1996, and JYP Entertainment, founded in 1997. Talent agencies are responsible for recruiting, financing, training, marketing and

publishing new artists, as well as managing their activities and public relations. In exchange, once trainees debut, they often sign restrictive and long-term contracts, which award them little pay and often contain a no-dating clause. Part of the agencies’ charge is to develop performers or idols through an elaborate and grueling trainee system. Korean talent agencies train idols from a very young age in dancing, singing, and media presence—sending them



S.M.ENTERTAINMENT

SM Entertainment logo

out into the world as polished professionals.

K-pop is extremely popular among Korean youth and there is no shortage of aspiring stars. For example, a staggering 4% of the population of South Korea auditioned in 2012 for Superstar K, Korea's televised singing competition. Talented young people are carefully culled and undergo grueling training for the distant hope of future stardom. The youth in very few other countries would put up with such a punishing, star-making process. Korean youth, meanwhile, are used to intense academic pressure, extreme discipline, constant criticism, and zero sleep. The talent agencies seem intent on drawing on the Korean people's strengths of hard work and organizational skills, the close collaboration of government and private industry, and the government's deep pockets.



A week of training like a K-pop star. Click to view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSkH-djDU-k>

South Korean music producers have found that large groups acting and dancing in unison are popular to fans. The strong collaborative values of South Koreans lend themselves to this collective entertainment form,



Top 10 Favorite K-Pop Dances [Girl Groups] Click to view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cyp2sYJKZpg>

which is not as popular in the individualistic West. K-pop band members must dance in perfect sync; like clockwork, they must have split-second precision. The bands are assembled while the members are still young and hold off their debut until they've learned to act as one. The powerful inner drive to succeed and not let others down pushes them to perfection. They'll do it if it kills them.

K-pop training is an education of the whole person. Band members are taught etiquette and steered away from drunk-driving, drugs, or sex scandals. Companies want to project a "clean" image and steer away from what they consider the raunchy behavior of stars in the West. K-pop labels love stars,

but not superstars: they don't want to get into a situation in which one band member become indispensable. Performers often enter the trainee system in their early teens and live together in a house (dorm). They attend school during the day and take singing, acting, dance, and English, Chinese, and Japanese language classes at night. The training aims to strengthen the performer's vocal ability and build stamina for performances. Agencies often use the training period to test whether the trainees can handle the intense lifestyle of a K-pop idol. Therefore, an important part of the training period is to challenge how serious and passionate a person is about becoming an artist.

Lee Soo Man, founder of SM Entertainment, perfected the K-pop trainee system. It is a 3-step process of exporting K-pop overseas, creating international collaborations, and globalizing the product to create a global brand. Part of Lee's method is to create different images and styles for the trainees, depending on the nation that they perform in—allowing the agency/group to target specific audiences.



The Making of Kpop Stars and the Entertainment Industry System: Click to view: <https://prezi.com/ywvrhf-jm1-d/the-making-of-kpop-stars-and-the-entertainment-industry-syst/>



K-pop bands (l to r): Girl's Generation , 4Minute Volume Up, and Big Bang

include members from different countries; Korean entertainment agencies often recruit idol-trainees through global auditions and many idol groups have members from different countries. To make the songs universally appealing and overcome language barriers, 99.9% of K-pop songs contain English phrases or words.

K-pop is a manufactured or industrialized process; there is no other way to describe it. For example, some K-pop bands follow a specific color theme. Each band has its own color-coordinated outfits, such as dramatic blue, dynamic black, mystic white and dazzling red. The bands are prefabricated and treated like a consumer product right from the beginning. The industrialized idol system largely defines the K-pop industry. Consumption of music is intertwined with the consumption of persona, image, and spectacle.

If you are from the U.S., you are probably surprised to read that the government has a hand in developing South Korea's pop culture. I know I was. The U.S. entertainment scene prides itself on organically producing stars that rely on their innate talent to rise to the top, without government help. How many stars do you know who have climbed to the very pinnacle of stardom from very humble beginnings? But South Korea is pursuing a different model from the U.S., and has poured billions of dollars into its "entertainment investments." So far, the investment in K-culture appears to be paying off.

Critique of the K-Pop Music Industry

Culture is such a high priority for the current President Park that shortly after taking office in early 2013, she upgraded the pop culture division with a \$1 billion investment fund. Korea also has the financial resources and organizational skills to turn the stars into world exports. The K-pop model requires music companies to invest a lot of money upfront for a very distant return. K-pop is a 5 to 7 year plan, and the U.S. model, which requires profits quickly from impatient investors, can't do that. Lee Soo Man stated in 2011, "The U.S. couldn't es-



Search volume for K-pop since 2008 according to Google Trends

Trainees spend an average of 2-5 years preparing for their debut, yet training has no fixed length. Sometimes the training process is documented as part of a reality television series. This allows fans to connect with idol groups right from the start—it personalizes idols as fans “grow up” with them. For example, YG Entertainment produced an eleven episode television reality show following the training and 2006 debut of the group Big Bang and WINNER's Who Is Next? in 2013. Once a group is ready to debut, it will make its first appearance on a music shows' special “debut” stage! For example, Girls' Generation's had its debut stage in 2007.

The K-pop industry makes active use of cultural diversity as part of its global marketing strategy. K-pop groups often

establish a management system like ours. Picking trainees, signing a long term contract, and teaching trainees for a long period of time, this just can't happen in the U.S." He continues, "U.S. agencies are hired as sub-contractors after an artist has grown and gained popularity on their own. As a result, the agencies only play roles of sub-contractors and can't make long-term investments in singer-hopefuls."

Critics (mostly from the West) have said that the Koreans are not good at creativity, and pop music is all about creativity and producing something new. But, as we have seen, there is a reason for the lack of an original Korean sound: the Korean pop scene got off to a late start because of censorship that stifled musical talent and creativity. For a critical period during the 1970s, rock music was banned in Korea. Also, compared to the West, the late start in economic development and trauma of war meant that the deep roots of historical musical fermentation did not have time to germinate into an authentic musical sound. For example, jazz with its deep cultural roots, is considered to be an authentic form of American music. Folk music traditions in Korea have deep roots but they were not able to blend with the rapid modernizing influences in the second half of the 20th century to produce an authentic musical sound.

Part of the concern about cultural globalization and cultural imperialism is the idea that a culture's "authenticity" disappears. Cultural authenticity can be uniquely tied to a particular geographic location. It means an analysis of the extent to which a cultural object reflects the worldview of beliefs and values and depicts the details of everyday life and activity of a specific cultural group. However, the definition reveals the problem with analyzing cultural authenticity by recognizing that there is never just one image of life within a group. Also, the homogenizing influences of modern society make it difficult for cultural authenticity to exist. From my point of view as a Westerner, K-pop reflects the global consumption of music that is entangled with the



Flower Boy Look

consumption of persona, image, and spectacle. The industrialized idol system largely defines the K-pop industry. The music is a reflection of the global market-place, and the point of the music is not a deep reflection of culture and the human soul but a way to make money.

This marketing focus of K-pop music is found in the visual nature of the industry. The artists are expected to be physically flawless. Plastic surgery is used to attain what the industry has determined to be the "perfect" physical appearance. The popularity of K-pop idols has made plastic surgery increasingly popular among young Koreans and turned Seoul into one of the top plastic surgery capitals in the world. In Korean society, K-pop flawlessness has also crossed gender lines; Korea has become the number one market for male cosmetics. The look of the "flower boy" as seen in boy bands, graces billboards throughout Korea. Perhaps the inability of everyone to conform to this ideal leaves many youth alienated and depressed, contributing to the epidemic of teen suicides ravaging Korean society. Yet, it is another very profitable enterprise associated with the K-pop industry.

Can K-pop conquer the United States? In my opinion, the cookie-cutter style of K-pop does not seem an ideological fit for U.S. consumers, who prefer the bawdy antics and individualistic behavior of their favorite stars. Others don't see why breaking into the US market is even a goal. With an adoring Asian market in their backyard, why worry about the U.S. market. After all, South Korea has been wildly successful in developing its own economic model, and, now its brand of culture, as well.

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