

## Between Hybridity and Hegemony in K-Pop's Global Popularity: A Case of Girls' Generation's American Debut

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Examining the sociocultural implications of Korean popular music (K-pop) idol group Girls' Generation's (SNSD's) debut on *Late Show With David Letterman*, this article discusses how the debut warrants a critical examination on K-pop's global popularity. Investigating critically how the current literature on K-pop's success focuses on cultural hybridity, this article maintains that SNSD's debut clarifies how K-pop's hybridity does not mean dialectical interactions between American form and Korean content. Furthermore, this article argues that cultural hegemony as a constitutive result of sociohistorical and politico-economic arrangements provides a better heuristic tool, and K-pop should be understood as a part of the hegemony of American pop and neoliberalism.

*Keywords: Korean popular music, cultural hybridity, cultural hegemony, neoliberalism*

As one of the most sought-after Korean popular music (K-pop) groups, Girls' Generation's (SNSD's) January 2012 debut on two major network television talk shows in the United States warrants critical reconsideration of the current discourse on cultural hybridity as the basis of K-pop's global popularity. Prior to Psy's "Gangnam Style" phenomenon, SNSD's "The Boys" was the first time a Korean group appeared on an American talk show. It marks a new stage in K-pop's global reach and influence. With a surge of other K-pop idols gaining global fame, especially in Japan, China, and other Asian countries, SNSD's U.S. debut is deemed as K-pop's major introduction to the U.S. music market, the heartland of pop music. Young-mok Kim (2012), consul general of the Republic of Korea in New York, cheerfully maintains that K-pop idols are "really Korea's secret weapon" as its new emerging soft power "through a blend of Western tradition, Asian talents and their own investments" (para. 11). SNSD's breakthrough in the U.S. music market is symbolically considered as Korea's prowess in terms of cultural and economic power. Thus, the debut should be reassessed in its wealth of social implications. In this article, to better understand the phenomenon, I examine how scholars have treated K-pop's global popularity in terms of cultural hybridity and then argue that one has to consider hybridity's broader sociohistorical and politico-economic contexts. In other words, understanding how Korea's rapid post-IMF neoliberalization and culture industries "define and delimit the significance of cultural" (Elliott & Harkins, 2013, p. 2) production, I argue that SNSD's American debut

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Date submitted: 2016-09-03

<sup>1</sup> This article was supported by the Academy of Korean Studies Grant (AKS-2016-C01).

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discloses Korea's value transformations that entail a commercialization of popular culture, specifically, a commodification of sexualized young female bodies in its "diagnostic relationship" to the society.

Within Korea's post-IMF neoliberalization, K-pop has become one of the driving forces of economic developments as well as a dominant cultural genre. As a hallmark of neoliberalism, which a boundary between culture and economics and art and commerce became obscure, K-pop is regarded as a culture technology for boosting Korea's postindustrial, service-oriented neoliberal economy along with other strategic technologies, like ICTs (H. Shin, 2009). With its ubiquity since its inception in 1996, K-pop has been part and parcel of people's daily lives: K-pop and its idols are omnipresent from commercial films and TV dramas to political campaigns and governmental PRs to diplomacy. Contrary to its commercial nature, K-pop is ambivalent in its daily applications. For example, chanting SNSD's "Into the New World," students at Ewha Women's University protested against the University's controversial plan to establish Future LiFE (Light up in Future Ewha) College, which aimed to grant official bachelor's degrees pertaining to new media production, wellness, and hybrid design for working women without prior college education credentials. On July 30, 2016, when students expected to meet the University president, they encountered 1,600 police officers and were forcefully dismissed instead of having a civic discussion with the administration. While resisting the police, the students sang the song in a synchronized mode in lieu of typical protest songs. By criticisms and pressure from the public, the university announced that the plan had been rescinded on August 3. The students' critical appropriation of SNSD's song indicates an open potential of K-pop and its share in society.

In this context, the existing K-pop scholarship explains the phenomenon from functional perspectives. For example, cultural hybridity allows Asian audiences to relate their sentiment to K-pop's cultural and affective features (Ryoo, 2009; Shim, 2006); K-pop's cultural proximity makes it palatable to the region's burgeoning tastes (Cho, 2011; Iwabuchi, 2001, 2008); K-pop has high, innovative production value, such as seamless choreography, catchy songs, fashionable outfits, and slick music videos (Park, 2013a, 2013b); it was K-pop industry leaders' strategic manufacturing and business planning that led to a global success (S. I. Shin & Kim, 2013); and Internet technologies such as YouTube are a major factor in K-pop's global reach (S. Jung & Shim, 2014; Oh & Lee, 2013; Oh & Park, 2012). Overall, cultural hybridity is a counterargument against dominating globalization. Rather than Korea's entertainment market being dominated by American popular culture, the Korean culture industry is believed to successfully practice a counterflow of cultural production from non-Western countries to Western ones in its "indigenized and hybrid versions of *American* popular culture" (Joo, 2011, p. 496, emphasis added), not only for domestic cultural consumption but also, more importantly, as an export item.

As briefly indicated, except for a few critical studies (Epstein & Turnbull, 2014; Jin, 2007 2014; Kang, 2015; H. Lee, 2013), the current scholarship is largely celebratory, focusing on microscopic textual descriptions rather than on larger sociocultural and politico-economic contexts reconfigured by post-IMF neoliberalism. Although in December 2013 the *Korea Journal* published a special issue on the global success of K-pop as a response to the critical assessment of K-pop (Albermann, 2013; Ho, 2012), it still provides descriptive and administrative accounts on how K-pop becomes successful from technological, production, and business perspectives.

To address this myopia, since popular music has “created, circulated, recognized and responded to” (Negus, 1999, p. 4) larger structural conditions, I investigate how K-pop has become a global phenomenon in its place within contemporary Korea’s political, economic, and cultural histories. As a cultural manifestation of “general social, political, and epistemic shifts” (Stokes, 2004, p. 48), in which “alliances between commercial and political factors [are] formed and dissolved as hybrid styles” (Allen, 2003, p. 229), K-pop warrants a critical interrogation as a means to understand broader structural changes since the 1990s. In this respect, it is suggestive that K-pop began when Korea was subject to a massive socioeconomic neoliberalization mandated by the OECD in 1996 and the IMF in 1997, and its global popularity coincided with the country’s aggressive neoliberal efforts to expand its economic territories by ratifying multiple free trade agreements, especially with the U.S. in the mid-2000s.

While the meaning of cultural hybridity is always in flux with multiple interpretations, I strive to examine how it helps K-pop enjoy popularity and profit in post-IMF neoliberal Korea, where American hegemony has permeated in virtually every corner. Since hybridization is constituted and contested in a complex overdetermination of power, and local sensitivity should be an essence of hybridity with its “mutant result of fusion and intermixture” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 6), I investigate whether K-pop exercises a cultural command of locality that is reflective of Korean people’s everyday lives in its creative expression. In other words, since music is one of the most salient sites for hybridization as either cultural exchange or commodification (Hebdige, 1987; Lazarus, 1999), hybridity in K-pop must be discussed within concrete cultural, economic, political, and social backgrounds of production and by its actual content.

While Korea became a major non-Western country that commands exports of diverse cultural products since the 2000s (Jin, 2016), whether or not K-pop contains local sentiments and creative characteristics is an open question that warrants critical examination. Moreover, considering that Korea is subject to the U.S.’s desires and influence and its popular culture has grown within American popular culture references since 1945 (Yoshimi, 2003), the existing cultural hybridity discourse misses Korea’s unequal relationship with the United States. With this asymmetry in mind, it is imperative to scrutinize cultural hybridity as a byproduct of cultural hegemony and a constitutive result of sociocultural and politico-economic arrangements between two countries. Concerning A. Ahmad’s (1995) correspondence between postcoloniality and hybridity, by neglecting historical realities of inequalities in resources and developments, hybridity in K-pop literature exaggerates a mere locality of cultural production: by doing so, it neglects that K-pop stays inside the *modus operandi* of Western cultural production to the extent that domestic and “metropolitan sections of [neoliberal] capital can be integrated” (p. 12) culturally. In this respect, K-pop should be understood as a specific site of emergence that bears earlier histories and experiences in the structural asymmetry of power and privileges.

To that end, I investigate whether K-pop fulfills the main purpose of cultural hybridization, that is, an active negotiation with global cultural hegemony for a creative alternative, (1) by historical and political economic analyses of K-pop industry and (2) by textual analyses of exemplary K-pop music videos, SNSD’s “Gee” and “The Boys.” By doing so, I strive to understand K-pop’s cultural hybridity in terms of both its intrinsic quality in its content to test whether hybridity in K-pop creates new, local culture that “is free from U.S. domination” (Jin, 2016, p. 9) and within structural contexts of the culture industry. As Kellner (1995) advocates a multiperspective approach for a more “comprehensive and

inclusive approaches to culture" (p. 174), this method helps overcome an increasing divide between descriptive studies of media texts and critical, systematic investigation into a structure of media production, circulation, and consumption. Thus, with a combination of political economy of the media, critical textual analysis, and investigation into socio-ideological effect of the cultural genre within the existing networks of power and domination, I endeavor to understand the genre as a cultural manifestation of Korea's extensive neoliberalization, which plays a referential role in individuals' leisure activity, socialization, identity formation, and value system. Subsequently, I hope to provide constructive critique that helps further growth of the K-pop industry and the quality of its content.

### **U.S. Hegemony in the Formation of Korean Society**

Korean society can be dissected through trajectories of Americanization because American military, economic, political, and cultural influences have been intertwined and working simultaneously since the U.S. Army landed to establish a military government in 1945 (Cumings, 2005; Hart-Landsberg, 1998). A majority of Koreans believe the U.S. is the national savior from the Communist invasion (the Korean War), poverty through economic aid, and premodernity through technology and industrialization. Accordingly, the U.S. has been considered more than just an advanced Western country, rather a mythical utopia, which becomes part and parcel of the Korean people's collective imagination and memory (Kroes, 1999). In this respect, Korean culture and society have been in a volatile process of "hybridization" with the U.S. to the extent that American culture, as a constellation of American values, identities, and traditions, permeates and is conceived as Koreans' recognition and expectation of a better world.

In line with America's ascendancy as the sole superpower and Korea's subjection to the IMF's Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), Korean society has increasingly been reformulated by neoliberalism, an American version of global capitalism (Park, 2004). The IMF's all-out assault on the Korean economy allowed foreign speculative capital to ravage Korean capital and financial infrastructure to the extent that the latter's stability and autonomy become dependent on the former's mercy. However, the SAP is a matter of a more important "cultural problem—the problem of defining identity of how to redefine the concept of 'we'" (Park, 2004, p. 154). It is my contention that, while dealing with the identity crisis, neoliberal canons like commercialism and competition have infiltrated into the psyche of Koreans, and popular culture is the most effective tool to spread the neoliberal governmentality. For example, BC Card, a Korean credit card company, made a national sensation by its 2001 advertising campaign with a slogan of "Ladies and gentlemen, you all get rich!" Considering that Korea's industrialization process coincided with its modern identity formation, the advertisement sums up how Korea's sociocultural value is morphed into crude desire of financial success. In this grand value transformation, we witness a growing commercialization of culture, which the rise of K-pop is one of the most telling examples.

Since U.S. popular culture has commanded global hegemony, for Korean culture industries, emulating American pop values and systems provides a better chance of success with less market risk. Simultaneously, a localization of cultural production has been efficiently promoted as a part of transnational media companies' strategy to mitigate local resistance against imperialistic practices of neoliberalism. In other words, localization strategy helps American hegemony deeply penetrate Korea's cultural domain by perpetuating and naturalizing American cultural and business values, structures, and

practices (Jin, 2007). While classical imperialism coopted local elites, today's transnational media conglomerates "rule through other local capitals, rule alongside and in partnership with other economic and political elites" (Hall, 1997, p. 28). Rather than destroying local culture, they operate through it in their localizing strategies. Leaders in K-pop agencies can be regarded as an example of the "dominated group's internalization" (J. K. Lee, 2010, p. 30) of transnational capitalism's business mantra. This is opposite to the growing recognition of peripheral countries' competence to produce and market their indigenous culture globally as countercultural imperialism (Chadha & Kavoori, 2000; Sinclair & Harrison, 2004; Sonwalkar, 2001). Thus, Shim's (2006) appreciation of the surprising box-office success of *Shiri*, a local action blockbuster as an alternative to the Hollywood, misses an important fact that the production of local films has become subject to Americanized, neoliberal financial speculation. It is a more sophisticated, effective way to control the local cultural domain with less resistance.

Regarding cultural production as a mode of transnational capitalism (Hannerz, 1997; Nordenstreng, 2001), I believe K-pop has to be understood as Korea's neoliberal strategy that marketized cultural commodities as an export item when the local economy was devastated by the 1997 financial crisis. This strategy is similar to the way in which the Korean popular music industry began in the post-Korean War era when local musicians performed at various clubs for U.S. soldiers (P. H. Kim & Shin, 2010). K-pop stemmed from when Korea's industrial demands had shifted from a manual workforce to neoliberal service, affective labor in the 1990s. By the industry's aggressive replication of the traditional business strategies used by Korea's labor-intensive manufacture conglomerates in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the contemporary K-pop industry produces quickly profitable, homogenized, disposable cultural commodities from a highly concentrated, hierarchal production system that integrates in-house procedures of artist recruiting, training, image making, composing, management, contracting, and album production. By discipline through years of training, especially docility-utility (Foucault, 1995), the industry colonizes its talents by controlling and subordinating their individualities and characters to its entrepreneurial goals. Idols, especially female idols, are under an agency's perennial control to the extent that they are forced to go on an extreme diet, surrender any use of personal communication devices, and even endure corporeal punishment in a dormitory training center. To maintain an appealing image to the public, female idols are strictly prohibited from having a romantic relationship. Through audition and an extraordinarily long trainee period to debut, K-pop female idols are conditioned as an obedient, disciplined, and sexualized labor force, directly manufactured by male corporate elites to serve the interests and needs of capital. Rampant, explicit sexualization of female idols is a case in point.

Thus, K-pop delineates how hegemony employs an ideological double play in local culture production. As much as it allows "counterhegemonic" practices on a local level, it masks and perpetuates the dominant hegemony by sophisticating predatory labor conditions in K-pop production and, in turn, establishes local culture industry as a cultural hegemon. In this respect, exerting cultural hegemony through exporting cultural products is an old version of cultural imperialism; rather, in neoliberal globalization, indirect ways are a more effective and "sustainable" practice of controlling local cultural production, instituting cultural hybridity as a code name for a new phase of cultural hegemony. Practiced through local elites' voluntary internalization of American hegemony in consumerism, commodification of culture, and sexualization of femininity (Schiller, 1996), the K-pop industry complicates the evasive

characteristic of Americanization. With mechanistic interpretation of cultural hybridization that fetishizes local cultural production, the dominant K-pop scholars mask the neoliberal hegemony.

### **Hybridity: Cultural Logic of Transnational Capitalism**

According to Bhabha (1994), hybridity comes from the in-betweenness of elite emigrants' national and cultural identities, who have to constantly (re)negotiate themselves engaging in a mutual, simultaneous reconstruction and destruction, a process that nullifies a canonical, essentialist notion of cultural authenticity. Literature on K-pop's hybridity focuses on its dexterity in mixing the ideal of American pop culture with what is considered to be Koreanness like *Han*, a century-long pent-up feeling of remorse, high sensibility, and Confucian family values, as an alternative for Asians to seek emotional and cultural closeness. While K-pop takes the dominant American pop canons, Ryoo (2009) indicates that K-pop retains a "fuller affinity for the region's character" (p. 140) in terms of its capacity to express soulfulness. Since American culture is too foreign and Japanese culture carries colonial connotations, Asian people's enthusiasm for K-pop is rooted in their desire for shared temporal, historical, and cultural values and experiences (Iwabuchi, 2001).

Concrete hybridity is a result of local agency's dialectic interaction with hegemonic power of transnational forces by "mitigating social tensions, expressing the polyvalence of human creativity, and providing a context of empowerment in which individuals and communities are agents in their own destiny" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 161). As much as colonialism reproduces or sustains itself through hybridization with the colonized, hybridity is not only an integral part of colonial discourse but also the colonized's chance to resist the colonialism (Parry, 1994). In this respect, rather than a mere existence of hybridity, a manifestation of critical agency and cultural authenticity in hybridization is the most important qualification (Brah & Coombes, 2000). Since cultural/aesthetic practices "develop and emerge as types of implicit (i.e., nonpropositional or nonverbal) knowledge [which is] created in response to lived experiences in a particular social location," appreciating cultural works without paying due attention to dominant institutional structures of cultural production results in "epistemic violence" (James, 2016). Put differently, to correctly understand how cultural hybridity is rendered within global structure of cultural, economic, political, and military hegemonies, one has to scrutinize a concrete set of cultural production structures that engender different qualities of hybridity and in turn whether a concrete hybridity reflects or diverts the dominant hegemony.

However, Bhabha (1994) retains ideological charge in its replacement of imperialist connotations with a mere semiotic practice of cultural consumption. Like Radway (1991) celebrates symbolic, individual pleasure of resistance from reading romance novels without practicing any real-life struggle against patriarchal structures, Bhabha exults in the subversive power of the subaltern's cultural practices against the imperial domination of cultural, economic, and political ideologies. Thus, we must critically dissect the political economy of local culture production structured by transnational capitalism so that we do not fall into "endorsing the cultural claims of transnational capital itself" (A. Ahmad, 1995, p. 12). To correctly reinscribe the social imagination and "cultures of *postcolonial contra-modernity*" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 6, emphasis in original), we must address a changing mode of transnational capitalist cultural production. Otherwise, cultural hybridity that originally is colonial subalterns' transformative political project loses

"revolutionary potential since it is part of the very discourse of bourgeois capitalism and modernity" (Van der Veer, 1997, p. 104). With an undebatable fact of American pop culture's global dominance, no matter how innovative or creative K-pop can be, it is still referenced to American pop as an archetype of global pop styles and genres (P. H. Kim & Shin, 2010). In this respect, Pieterse (1995) maintains that relationships of "power and hegemony are inscribed and reproduced within hybridity . . . [and] hegemony is not merely reproduced but refigured in the process of hybridization" (p. 57). Thus, to correctly appreciate how K-pop is culturally hybrid, one must understand how the music genre has exerted its local, critical *agency* within its concrete contexts of production, promotion, and consumption.

In other words, for cultural hybridity to be successful in articulating local sentiments and agency, K-pop must reconfigure and represent lived experiences of the local population. While the music's look and style are sophisticated and cosmopolitan, they do not necessarily represent "local melodies, current township lingo, and topical subject matter" (Allen, 2003, p. 237; Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000). Put differently, while K-pop has successfully incorporated American popular music, such as electronic dance music, rap, and R & B, it is doubtful whether the musicians have maintained their cultural autonomy against a neoliberal, business imperative of the industry. In this regard, rather than a dialectic, critical, and expressive response to sociocultural and politico-economic changes since the 1997 financial crisis, K-pop is a vernacular articulation of the hegemonic culture industry's *modus operandi*, which marketizes the previously unmarketable. With fundamental asymmetries and dependencies, as much as the K-pop industry promotes its locality of musical production, which aims for exports/global consumption, ironically it deepens cultural dependence on American hegemony (Guilbault, 1993). In turn, the current discourse on hybridity in K-pop "ideologically justifies, naturalizes and cements the hierarchical and exploitative relationships . . . [and] continues to mediate Northern metropolitan hegemony" (Stokes, 2004, p. 60; Waterman, 1990).

Therefore, the current hybridity literature retains what A. Ahmad (1995) criticizes postcolonial intelligentsias for: a "characteristic loss of historical depth and perspective" to "rapid realignments of political [economic] hegemony on the global scale" (p. 16). Without critical agency, hybridity in K-pop means "voluntary" subsumption into the American popular culture hegemony, which is already determined by histories of asymmetries (Araeen, 2000). Otherwise, this blind celebration only confers an "unlimited freedom of a globalized marketplace . . . [where] commodified cultures are equal only to the extent of their commodification" (A. Ahmad, 1995, p. 17). In this respect, without any reference to Korean people's common aspirations, experiences, feelings, and lives, K-pop reduces them to lowest common denominators, that is, explicit sexualization of female bodies for a universal neoliberal market transaction.

However, the dominant scholarship (Ryoo, 2009; Shim, 2006) celebrates K-pop's global popularity as an amelioration of fear from Western cultural imperialism, and considers hybridity as a major tool for cultural counterbalance to Western cultural hegemony. Claiming that there are multidirectional cultural productions from conventional peripheries, Ryoo (2009) boldly maintains that the phenomenon is a "clear indication of new global, and regional, and transformation in the cultural arena" (p. 147) as a sign of overcoming the American cultural hegemony. Furthermore, while neglecting the politico-economics of K-pop production that has been disproportionately conditioned by American cultural and technical criteria, Ryoo admittedly attributes K-pop industry's implementation of American standard of media liberalization

and culture industry to K-pop's success. In this respect, Ryoo's (2009) dramatization of local production should be regarded as what Appadurai (1990) criticizes as "production fetishism," an illusion of local cultural productive power in contemporary transnational capitalism, disguising "translocal capital, transnational earning-flows, global management and often faraway workers" (p. 306). Likewise, while the original use of *hallyu* indicated how local Chinese audiences enjoyed Korean popular culture, its current usage romanticizes and fetishizes the place of production, which concerns more on the local site of production than on concrete individual appreciation of K-pop overseas.

For Shim (2006), K-pop's hybridity was epitomized by the emergence of Seo Taiji and Boys, who mixed various Western music genres and invented a unique Korean flavor. Appropriating American genre formulae, the band successfully exemplified how to exert local agency's active, creative capacity to express local sentiments, issues, and traditions and in turn engendered a broad practical transformation in Korea's soundscape. In retrospect, at the band's astronomical debut in 1992, no one would prove a plagiarism allegation of its single "I Know" from a German band, Milli Vanilli's "Girl You Know It's True." However, over artistic innovation, Shim's cultural hybridity focuses on industrial transformation: Expanding Korea's music market scale, boosting album sales, fortifying record company's roles and, most importantly, heralding a birth of Korea's talent agencies and manufactures of the current K-pop idols. This industrial nature of hybridity is consummated by Lee Sooman, the founder and CEO of SM Entertainment (SME), who invented K-pop's star-manufacturing industry. Determined to "transplant" MTV-style American pop music in Korea after encountering Bobby Brown's "My Prerogative" in the early 1980s (Seabrook, 2012), Lee has extensively researched and experimented on a financially profitable idol group project, exerting a total control on idols' personal and professional lives. And this factory model of K-pop production achieves a market success, culminating SME's accomplishment by being listed on the KOSDAQ stock market for the first time in its kind (Shim, 2006). Thus, K-pop is a new economic model that procures a faster, higher profit margin than the traditional manufacturing industry (e.g., automobiles) as a "distinct spatiotemporal configuration" of Korea's neoliberal economy: "The sharper the differentiation between these two temporalities grows (with dematerialization/digitalization), the more abundant the business opportunities become" (Sassen, 2001, p. 268).

In this respect, the current K-pop scholarship on hybridity is severely "limited to describing the Korean mainstream media's co-opting of a hybrid strategy" (Shim, 2006, p. 40) and exemplar of transnational capitalism's strategic rhetoric that "actively and systematically seeks to capitalize on cultural fusion" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 90). Likewise, rather than an "unpredictable, fluid, and creative form of *hybridization* that works to sustain local identities in the global context," (Ryoo, 2009, p. 114, emphasis in original), current K-pop idol groups, as a systematically administered, factory-produced commodity, are formulaic by using American cultural hegemony, which is a hypersexualization of (female) bodies and glorifying consumerism, to catch audiences' eyeballs to create economic profit.

Under this economic imperative, K-pop idols are deployed into a broad spectrum of different commercial activities, such as endorsements based on their assigned imageries and perceived fan demographics. Having multiple members in K-pop groups is not so much for artistic necessities as for profit-making imperatives. For this reason, K-pop idols are both corporeally visual, which comes not only from their skillful choreographies but also their manufactured physical attractiveness to commercialize



girlish, fair, delicate, cute, sexy faces and tall, slim, and well-toned bodies. If some members do not score expected commercial profit, they are either replaced with others or forced to undergo more harsh tasks, including plastic surgery. In this grand scheme of neoliberal hegemony, K-pop female idols' young, amicable, sexualized bodies convey "the political unconscious" (Jameson, 1981, p. 142), exemplifying what is important, what to think, and how to govern oneself. With Asia's rapidly growing consumerist appetite, especially China, K-pop has profited from applying the hegemonic industrial practice of market research and commodity development by "talent management, financing and marketing, including such characteristics as quick and sensational sell, wide promotion, youth appeal, corporate synergy and cross-promotion" (Nam, 2013, p. 218). SME's SM Town Concerts in Los Angeles, Paris, and other Asian countries are case in point.

As an aesthetization of neoliberal market frenzy, which omnivorously searches for anything profitable, hybridization in K-pop is a celebration of boundless market expansion in diverse markets. SNSD's music videos indicate its trajectory of localizing marketing strategy targeted to various profitable audiences, using the temptress troupe to appeal to American audiences as the marketing strategy of "The Boys." However, with its failure in both Asian and American fandoms, SNSD now tries to recapture its traditional Asian fan base with a tried and true mixture of good, innocent girl imagery and temptress imagery in "I Got a Boy," exemplifying that the group is a synecdoche of hegemonic globalization that "cannot proceed without learning to live with and working through difference" (Hall, 1997, p. 31). In sum, K-pop's hybridity in neoliberalism is a slick business strategy to market pseudo-Koreanness that is stylized, packaged, and commodified for global consumption, which has less to do with real lived experiences, feelings, imaginations, inspirations, or histories of Korean people. However, the main purpose of this article is not to blame SNSD for its failure to truthfully represent Koreanness in K-pop, but to indicate failures and problems caused by its factory-style manufacturing, which is strategically determined by financial interests of industry elites, and in turn alienates musicians and audiences alike.

Therefore, K-pop's hybridity has to be understood not as a cultural term, but as an industrial strategy. Also, it is congruent with the post-IMF Korean government's cultural policy that aims to promote a commercial competitiveness of the cultural, while the pre-IMF one aimed for mitigating the negative impact of Western culture such as commercialism, materialism, violence, and sensuality (Yim, 2002). Thus, if there is anything about K-pop's hybridity, it would be the industry's capacity to produce hybrid cultural commodities that appeal to global consumers (S. Lee, 2012; H. Shin, 2009).

### **SNSD's American Debut: Strategic Marketing of Asian Female Sexuality**

Analyzing SNSD's stylistic and thematic developments in terms of Lieb's (2013) life cycle model for female popular music stars, I reconsider that SNSD's debut fully embodies the American cultural hegemony and conforms to patriarchal capitalism. To satisfy and further consolidate patriarchal gender hierarchy indicated in Mulvey's (1975) notion of the male gaze, SNSD has maneuvered its gendered looks and behaviors:

In order to become and remain a dominant female popular music star, one must start off as a *good girl*; "cute," "innocent," "stable," and "fun." From these she cycles into a

*temptress* phase, where she and her handlers make her sexuality and “hotness” more salient in her public image. (Lieb, 2013, p. 90, emphasis in original)

Actually, with “The Boys,” SNSD’s original image as pure, innocent, and cute teenage girls evolved into a collective image of an aggressive, subject/object of sexual temptation, donned with sexually provocative and form-fitting clothes. SNSD commodifies female bodies by carefully crafting eroticized cuteness and playful sexualization, meeting expectations from both patriarchal gender hierarchy and neoliberal commercialization of sexuality: Being innocent and sexualized at the same time is a hallmark of K-pop female idols’ positionality.

With SME’s transnational pool of composers collecting the most marketable songs for international audiences, SNSD’s American debut project had in-depth degrees of foreign intervention from its production stages, such as American composers Teddy Riley and Busbee. Entering its temptress phase, SNSD’s U.S. debut was deliberately constructed to market sexualized Korean females to various U.S. audiences: an older demographic of men on *The Late Show With David Letterman* and women of various ages on *Live! With Kelly*. The main rationale to use those talk shows was based on successful Korean experiences that K-pop idols’ guest appearances on variety TV shows have successfully served their promotional efforts. Strategically, SNSD attempted to market the traditionally strong purchase-power audience segment in the U.S., just as its previous mega hit, “Gee,” was possible mainly due to obtaining adult male fans. Thus, Letterman’s show, as one of the longest running late-night talk shows, would be a nice American venue to further SNSD’s global market reach.

Comparing SNSD’s two music videos, “Gee” and “The Boys,” I analyze SME’s strategic manipulation of SNSD’s image from the good girl into the temptress to the point that it might become applicable to the American audience. As SNSD’s first major hit and emblematic of the group’s cute looks, “Gee” was originally intended for local consumption in Korea, but spontaneously became an international hit through SNSD’s online fandom and YouTube. While “Gee” appeals to Korea’s traditional model of *aegyo*—submissive, vulnerable, and erotic femininity—the most prevalent theme in SNSD’s American debut is the Dragon Lady, an aggressive, visibly sexual (and sexualized) domineering female as the temptress. An examination of BoA,<sup>2</sup> SNSD’s direct predecessor, and her U.S. debut with the music video for “Eat You Up,” further supports my argument that SNSD’s American debut was a result of SME’s strategy of marketing Korean female bodies to the extent that American cultural “symbols and myths have been translated into an international iconographic language, a visual lingua franca” (Kroes, 1999, p. 470). Even after experiencing failure in BoA’s 2008 U.S. debut, SME’s strategy to fit the Western imaginary of

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<sup>2</sup> BoA’s single, “Eat You Up,” represents two different racialized and sexualized fantasies of Asian women. BoA’s American debut music video, which initially focused on *aegyo* qualities, received negative feedback from American audiences. SME remade the video, but the sexy imagery was out of character with BoA’s previous Korean and Japanese videos; it emphasized the Dragon Lady imagery of aggressive, domineering female sexuality to accommodate and appeal to Western fetishization of Asian women. However, BoA’s Asian fans criticized the American version as too “Americanized” and focused on her dancing ability, and was more wholesome (E. Y. Jung, 2009). Thus, SME’s abrupt attempt to market BoA in a different and more sexualized way failed to attract the American market and alienated her existing fans.

Asian women is still evident in SNSD's debut, since it is structural in the K-pop industry's formulaic business strategy. Emulating the Japanese idol-manufacturing system, which prioritizes appearance and visibility, SME is obsessed with making the idols attractive and appealing to American audiences. Furthermore, as the Japanese culture industry strategically disposed of its local cultural characteristics to market to Western audiences (Lu, 2008), K-pop has also de-Koreanized its content for its global marketing ploy (E. Y. Jung, 2009; Lie, 2012). Thus, both BoA and SNSD could not provide American audiences with unique Koreanness as a creative hybrid experience while emphasizing a superficial adaptation of American genres and styles.

SNSD's "Gee" music video was released on January 5, 2009. The song, dance, wardrobe, hand motions, and facial expressions of the girls conform to the Korean concept of *aegyo*, or infantilized cuteness and eroticism, decorated by the members' dexterous exercise of girlish behaviors, like clenching their fists around their cheeks combined with shy smiles and shrugging shoulders. By using patriarchal female decency and coyness, the "Gee" music video was able to appeal to pan-Asian audiences. For instance, "Gee" shows no direct contact between the girls and their crush, and their dance and outfits are subtly sexy in a delicate, girl-next-door way without showing any cleavage or excessive bare skin. *Aegyo* in "Gee" as an example of cultural proximity in Confucian Asia retains broader socio-politico-economic implications. For example, there are parallels between *aegyo* and Japanese *kawaii*, since both are gendered performances executed by women and girls for the benefit of the male affective and sexual needs. As a symbolic compensation for Korean males' depressed self-confidence, *aegyo* has been promoted in gender relations, expression, and style since Korea's economic devastation in 1997, similar to *kawaii* during Japan's economic depression. In this respect, SNSD's other hit "Genie," whose theme is based on Disney cartoon character—Genie, the royal servant who realizes its master's dream—symbolically soothes adult male fans' depressed morale in Korea's post-IMF economies.

Produced by famous American singer-songwriter and producer Teddy Riley, SNSD released "The Boys" on December 19, 2011, in Korean, followed by the English version on December 20, 2011. The music video is devoid of any storyline and instead focuses on visibility of the idols' dance moves. Also, the video's monochromatic scheme and cold colors, like cobalt blues, silver, and black, play an important role in projecting SNSD's mature, sophisticated, and sexy aura. It is my contention that SNSD's U.S. market strategy hinges on its embodiment of Western racial fantasies, that is, the Dragon Lady image of an aggressive, visibly sexual (and sexualized) and domineering female (a temptress) with a hint of the China Doll image, a submissive and vulnerable female with a wholesome, erotic aura (the good girl). By incorporating nuances of American individualism through various outfits and close-ups, SNSD deliberately attempted to relate the video to the American audience, focusing on sexualized bodies in sexually suggestive dance moves and flirtatious behaviors, such as batting their eyes, winking, caressing their faces, and tilting pelvises to the side and backward, which highlighted their curved body shapes. Undulating, maiden-like body movements objectified their bodies as an object of male gaze and fantasy. Its emphasis on slim, elongated legs, highlighted by signature short pants with arms akimbo, fetishizes female body parts as a commodity that invites a sexual fantasy of male audiences to the extent that SNSD strategically uses hot leather pants, associated with sadomasochistic sexuality, accentuating sexual power or independence. Using English lyrics as an instrument to reconstruct Asian female singers' sexual identity (Benson, 2013), SNSD implemented a more active, sexualized femininity. Compared with more

submissive lyrics in Korean such as "You are my hero" or "Show your power," an English version retains an assertive, subjective femininity as the song's chorus repeats, "Girls bring the boys out." Conforming to U.S. cultural hegemony is most evident in the video's "packaging" and production by Teddy Riley. The differences between its Korean and English videos highlight SNSD's overall U.S. debut strategy, which focused on the girls as sexualized (and racialized) objects rather than individual artists. The most significant difference between the videos occurs at 4:17 as the English version changes perspectives, zooms in more, and applies a lighter filter so that the girls' clothes appear more provocative.

Thus, cultural hybridity in SNSD's U.S. debut was a subjugation of the Korean female artists to the sum of the Western imagination of submissive Asian femininity as "phantasms of orientalism" (Shimakawa, 2002, p. 17). Rather than each member's musical talent, SNSD promoted lively, sexual imagery of appealing, beautiful young ladies, as "looks are actually the most important aspect of a female pop star's [success]" (Lieb, 2013, p. 102). Considering the group's formation with nine young girls with different image and talent profiles, SNSD realizes Negus's (1999) term "portfolio management" as a risk diversification strategy to reduce its market uncertainty.

However, somewhat divergent features suggest that SNSD is not a mere replica of hypersexualized Asian women in the Western media, as indicated by Shimizu (2007). As high-class femininity, characterized by their slim, well-toned bodies and fancy dresses, SNSD is strategically positioned to market elegant and chaste Asian femininity with a hint of active sexual appetite as a new cultural commodity in the American market. While the girls are wearing different outfits and shades of color, there is a unifying sexual, yet modest, subtle, and elegant, seduction theme by retaining conservative Korean values. For example, proclaiming them as the goddess Athena, SNSD is proud to help male counterparts with power and wisdom, reaffirming the submissive, subordinate nature of traditional, patriarchal femininity.

As examined so far, hybridity in SNSD's American debut exists in SME's market strategy that appropriates cultural components from diverse localities. While the life cycle model is a strategic adaptation over female singers' age, SNSD's American debut indicates how the K-pop industry deploys a different ethnicity and nationality as an appealing point in pursuit of earning the American male gaze, replicating tried and true American cultural hegemony. By marketing an all English song with a guest performance on Letterman, SNSD attempted two things at once: breaking into the U.S. pop music market by using stereotypes of Asian female sexuality and marketing the event as a symbol of their popularity and talent in an effort to further consolidate their domestic market share.

SNSD's debut received a lukewarm reception from U.S. media, as opposed to SME's statement that it was critically acclaimed. A similar pattern occurred when Korean media claimed a "success" of the SM Town Live World Tour in Paris in June 2011 as K-pop's foray into Europe; however, French local media were skeptical or ignorant of the event. Analyses of various U.S. media between February 1 and March 31, 2012, revealed that the prevailing sentiment views SNSD through racial and sexual stereotypes of Asian women's bodies, as seen through the Western male gaze. For example, an article from the *International Business Times* features a picture of SNSD with famous actor Bill Murray taken right after SNSD's stage performance on Letterman. This feature is not about the group's musical talent or performance, but a

glorification of their sexualized bodies. As a simulation of a man's womanizing fantasy, Murray is posed in the midst of nine attractive, young, exotic Korean women who are presenting cute, intimate, and tempting body language around and with Murray. *The Wall Street Journal* covers SNSD's live performance on Letterman by focusing on SNSD as uniform sexual objects, characterized as sexualized and alluring Asian temptresses. In this regard, quite contrary to the notion of hybridity as a quintessential result of local agency's dialectic interaction with hegemonic power of transnational forces, SNSD's U.S. debut suggests that the group used the Western fantasy surrounding Asian women's racialized sexuality and fetishism. While the Western media focused on SNSD's debut by portraying its members as sexual objects, the Korean counterparts focused on the group's achievement in the U.S. as a result of their hard work and genuine talent. This disparity may be SME's intentional marketing strategy to appeal to the Western audience by capitalizing on the culture industry's "ever more voracious desire for all things 'different'" (A. N. Ahmad, 2001, p. 80) while maintaining that SNSD, as Korea's national girls, earned their success on the world's biggest music platform through cosmopolitan "motivation toward upward mobility in transitional society from Asian or developing economies to modern and Western economies" (Jang & Kim, 2013, p. 95).

Therefore, whether it spotlights aegyo in "Gee" or girl power in "The Boys," SNSD is a commercial entity of Korea's patriarchal neoliberalism that exemplifies an important set of interactions between the commodification of female sexuality and the industrialization of popular music. Specifically, the modus operandi of SNSD revolves around how female bodies and appearances have constantly been redefined and updated by commercial media's marketization of sexy, attractive female images (Frost, 2005; Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009). In turn, Korean media's promotion of "girl power" or "female sexual empowerment" is a type of hegemonic manipulation that defines how a sexual subject should look and provides a technology of sexiness in the given patriarchal capitalism (Gill, 2008). In this respect, SNSD represents a comprehensive marketing package of young, attractive female talents that have transformed each member's personality into a neoliberal commodity targeted to various audience segments from teen girls to middle-aged men (Y. Kim, 2011). Consequently, rather than cultural hybridity, SNSD's American debut is an embodiment of the American hegemony through "Western technology, the concentration of capital, the concentration of techniques, the concentration of advanced labor . . . and the stories and the imagery of Western society" (Hall, 1997, p. 28). What makes SNSD's U.S. debut noteworthy comes not from its cultural, performative contribution, but from its marketing strategy that conforms to how transnational capitalism has implemented globalization.

### **From "Gee" to "The Boys": Surrogate of the U.S. Cultural Hegemony**

In fact, Korea has become one of the strongest producers of local culture by a deft exercise of hybridity—blending the global and the local. The total revenue K-pop has generated from exporting to various countries proves its success as a new powerhouse in the cultural counterflow. However, the industry has not overcome a stark asymmetry of cultural, economic, and political resources and influences between Korea and the U.S.; rather, it keeps conditioning K-pop to further perpetuate American hegemony. Still, K-pop is not a mere replica of American pop culture; rather, it is the product of a systematic value structure that has conditioned Korean society to consider anything American as the most desirable ideal to be

emulated. In this respect, Jin (2016) aptly maintains “transnational cultural flow of local popular culture [itself] should not be an explanation for the flow of culture from Korea” (p. 59) to others.

Therefore, a superficial analysis of cultural hybridity misses important structural issues, like the political economy of local media industry and a highly elusive nature of hegemony within local sites of cultural production. The neoliberal logic of commodifying the cultural, the growing transnational flow of cultural commodities, and the governmental deregulation of the media industry are the major factors for the K-pop phenomena. In this respect, an uncritical, descriptive notion of cultural hybridity in the current K-pop scholarship, for example, Shim (2006) and Ryoo (2009), is

placed at the service of a neoliberal economic order that respects no borders and harbors no prejudice toward cultural and ethnic difference that can be harnessed for [economic] growth . . . [by] a profit-driven strategy that actively and systematically seeks to capitalize on cultural fusion and fluid identities. (Kraidy, 2005, p. 90)

Consequently, within the context of the asymmetrical relationship between two countries, the recent global popularity of K-pop should be understood within Korea’s position in the U.S.’s model of neoliberal capitalism, suggesting K-pop’s global popularity is a “detoured ‘return’ to the United States” (J. K. Lee, 2010, p. 31) by the Korean culture industry. In other words, the popularity of K-pop in Asian countries can be described as an indirect consumption of American pop music with Korean cultural embellishments: “It is precisely because there isn’t very much ‘Korean’ in K-pop can it become such an easy ‘sell’ to consumers abroad” (Lie, 2012, p. 361). Therefore, the biggest implication of SNSD’s U.S. debut is twofold: K-pop is an active surrogate of the American cultural hegemony and hypercommercialism that rapaciously commodifies anything marketable, and Korean society has become exponentially more Americanized while confronting and adapting neoliberal doctrines since the 1997 IMF crises.

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