

# The Globalization of K-pop: Barriers and Opportunities

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**Abstract.** K-pop is key to South Korea's cultural industry, rising thanks to long-term government policy support. Efforts from the "culture as South Korea's second economy" idea to Kim Dae-jung's 1998 administration laid its foundation. In 1996, H.O.T. debuted, marking K-pop's start. Famous works later gained Asian and global popularity, pushing K-pop from domestic to international stages and making it a cultural export powerhouse. During globalization, K-pop entered major markets like China, Japan, the US, and Europe, facing diverse environments with different obstacles and opportunities due to policy, industry, and cultural differences. This study examines progress from market environment to influencing factors and then to development strategies. It looks at both macro and micro institutional factors. Cultural adaptability is also key in exploring K-pop's cross-cultural communication with local markets. The study finds that K-pop's spread in the four major markets is influenced by distinct factors. The Chinese market is affected by political conflicts and cultural appropriation controversies. Japan's mature, monopolized idol industry creates high entry barriers. The European and US markets offer growth space with policy support and mature industry cooperation but also present challenges and competition. Cultural sensitivity and fan economy sustainability are core issues across all markets. Development strategies are tailored for each market. In China, collaborate with local platforms, integrate Chinese culture, and recruit Chinese members. In Japan, use large-scale tours. For Europe and the US, balance localization with cultural distinctiveness while managing costs and local competition.

**Keywords:** K-pop, Cultural Industry Policies, Cross-Cultural Communication, Localization.

## 1. Introduction

Korean pop music (K-pop) is a new genre of pop music characterized not only by its visual spectacle of idol-centred performances but also by a notable degree of musical conservatism [1]. As a significant component of South Korea's cultural industry, K-pop benefited from related industrial policies, initially proposed in 1993 and formally established in 1998. While in the late 1990s, the Kim Dae-jung administration proposed the "Culture-Oriented Nation" strategy positioning cultural industries as central to national economic development, as early as the Park Chung-hee era, this idea was already suggested by him that "culture is South Korea's second economy [2]." The official debut of the first K-pop group was began in 1996, when SM Entertainment launched H.O.T, widely regarded as the pioneering first-generation boy band that catalyzed the formation of South Korea's fan-centered popular culture. Under the stimulation of industrial policies, gradually, K-pop has become a core representative of South Korea's cultural industry. In the present era of globalization, K-pop has expanded beyond domestic markets to command a significant share of South Korea's cultural exports, increasingly targeting Western regions such as Europe and the United States, thereby transforming itself into a global cultural phenomenon.

## 2. The development of K-pop and its impacts on different countries

### 2.1. Begin of K-pop

From 1950s to 1980s, South Korea had ended the colonization of Japan. Despite formal independence, the continued presence of U.S. military forces exerted considerable influence on multiple domains of Korean society, including its cultural industries. During this period, Korean music were partially assimilate elements of western styles while retaining indigenous characteristics.. With the prosperity and the rising GDP of South Korea's economy, the purchasing power of Korean

increased which facilitated greater consumer demand for cultural products, than the begging of K-pop occurred. Group - Seo Taiji and the Boys was the first Korean musician to integrate modern hip-hop and rap into Korean music, marking the genesis of contemporary K-pop. In 1995, SM Entertainment was established, in the following year, it launched H.O.T as the first K-pop idol group, starting the development of K-pop. By the way, to improve South Korea's culture industry, government also sent some supports. In 1998, Kim Dae-jung introduced the "Culture-Oriented Nation" development strategy alongside "New Cultural Policy of the National Government," to develop the cultural industry.

The evolution of K-pop has since been marked by the release of numerous landmark works that achieved both domestic and international acclaim.. In 2009, Girls' Generation's single Gee, produced by SM Entertainment, gained unprecedented traction across Asia; its catchy melody and polished idol aesthetics enabled it to become the first K-pop song to surpass 100 million views on YouTube, effectively establishing K-pop's presence in the regional market [3]. In 2012, PSY's "Gangnam Style" propelled K-pop into the global mainstream, leveraging viral digital circulation and satirical performance aesthetics to secure a position within the Billboard Hot 100's top ten, a first for any Korean artist [4]. This breakthrough demonstrated K-pop's potential as a globally competitive cultural product. The genre's international influence was further consolidated during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when BTS released Dynamite. The single, with its upbeat disco-pop sound and inspiring lyrics, resonated with audiences around the world, becoming the first K-pop song to top the US Billboard Hot 100. This achievement not only expanded K-pop's popularity in North America and Europe, but also marked its development into a lasting, transnational cultural phenomenon.

## 2.2. Different market environment in the process of K-pop's globalization

In the macro market environment, the Chinese government has introduced a series of policies aimed at promoting the development of the cultural industry. Meanwhile, in terms of specific market performance, large-scale entertainment companies have been enhancing their influence by strengthening collaborations.

### 2.2.1 China

With the rapid development of China's economy, its entertainment market has demonstrated a trend of continuous progress. At the macro level, the government has provided substantial support to China's entertainment industry. In 2020, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China formally proposed the goal of building China into a "cultural powerhouse" by 2035. In the "Several Economic Policies for Promoting High-Quality Cultural Development" issued by the State Council, the state will offer benefits to the entertainment industry, including financial support, tax incentives, and technological innovation, aiming to enhance cultural confidence and boost the country's cultural soft power. From the perspective of policy support, the Chinese government tends greater on promoting traditional culture. It encourages the creation of more works with cultural heritage potential to propagate Chinese culture to the world. At the micro level, head enterprises in the entertainment market have strengthened collaboration through coordinated efforts and more cross-sector partnerships, achieving resource sharing and complementary advantages, thereby enhancing the overall efficiency of the industry. China's entertainment market distribution channels are dominated by domestic enterprises and are subject to a stringent content censorship system. As a result, overseas content often finds itself in a passive position when attempting to enter the Chinese market.

### 2.2.2 Japan

In July 1996, the Japanese government implemented the "Cultural Nation-Building Plan for the 21st Century," formally establishing the "cultural nation-building" strategy. The Japanese government aimed to build the country into a major cultural resource country by promoting traditional cultural forms, such as Kabuki and tea ceremonies. Kabuki is a world-renowned form of **traditional Japanese performance art**. Incorporating music, dance, and mime with elaborate costumes and sets,

kabuki dramas depict tales derived from regional myths and history. The Japanese tea ceremony is a Japanese tradition steeped in history. It is a ceremonial way of preparing and drinking green tea typically in a traditional tearoom with tatami floor.

In addition, Japanese government improve some popular culture forms, such as animation, comics and games, while actively promoting cultural spreading domestically and internationally to help country's international influence.

At a micro level, mature agencies occupy a central position in Japan's entertainment industry. Through complex organizations, they allocate work to different departments and control the development resources and project opportunities for artists. It includes a mature system for nurturing, making up, and promoting idols. Japanese consumers tend to favor entertainment models closely aligned with local culture [5]. Japan has strict control over distribution channels, the formidable competitiveness of its domestic industries, and coupled with the difficulty in adapting to cultural differences, all pose significant barriers for foreign industries seeking entry into the Japanese market. According to statistics from the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), the international market size for Japanese comics, animations, and game software is 34 trillion yen, accounting for 30% of the global content market.

### **2.2.3 USA**

The U.S. government has invested in the cultural industry through funding and tax policies. The United States primarily supports cultural institutions through donations from organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. For instance, the National Endowment for the Humanities has conducted media projects for many consecutive years, supporting the development, production, and spreading of various innovative audio-visual works that embody humanistic values, including radio, television, film, podcasts, and documentaries. In 2023, the total fiscal funding received by federal, state, and local arts agencies in the United States amounted to 2.28 billion. Among them, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) received 200 million, State Arts Agencies (SAAs) received 971million, and Local Arts Agencies (LAAs) received 1.11 billion, with year-on-year increases of 15%, 16.5%, and 32.7%, respectively. The U.S. federal government utilizes market mechanisms to encourage free competition in the cultural industry and guide the flow of wealth from affluent individuals to non-profit cultural sectors. The European and American entertainment industries boast numerous large multinational conglomerates with diversified business operations, making the European and American entertainment industries more inclusive.

## **3. The analysis of factors influencing the globalization of K-pop**

### **3.1. Factors influencing the spreading of K-pop in China and Japan**

The primary factor influencing the development of K-pop in China lies in national policy strategies, whereas in Japan, it is the highly barriers and challenging market environment. Meanwhile, the political stances taken by K-pop groups can also exert certain negative impacts.

The political conflicts between China and South Korea created a barrier for the promotion of K-pop in China. In 2016, South Korea introduced Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system from USA [6]. This system had a wide detection range would cover areas over from South Korea, even within China, including the Northeast, North and East China regions. This system posing a threat to China's national defense security which worsen the relationships between China and South Korea. The deployment of the THAAD system resulted strong emotions among the Chinese public, leading to a restriction of South Korean-related products, such as K-pop and Korean dramas. These issues forced many K-pop groups to cancel their journey in China, creating negative factors for the spread of K-pop in China.

The main obstacle for Japan is from its closed market. Japan already had a mature idol industry which resulted in higher barriers for K-pop group to entry, leading to negative development of K-pop

in Japan. These high barriers are results from a relatively monopolistic market structure. Unlike K-pop groups, for whom stage performances constitute the core element, Japanese idol groups often embrace an aesthetic style imbued with a greater sense of everyday life and youthful vitality. These groups, following the "idol cultivation" route, are more closely aligned with the daily lives of the Japanese public, thereby enjoying stronger fan loyalty and national recognition. This unique domestic advantage, coupled with the differences in cultural preferences and values between the two countries, has collectively forged a relatively monopolized idol market landscape in Japan. Just as the mature domestic idol industry in Japan has established high barriers to entry, it ultimately results in the failure of K-pop groups to gain sufficient public recognition in Japan.

Some K-pop artists have engaged in inappropriate behavior and have touched upon historical and cultural issues on both China and Japan political position. Korean groups have used elements with Chinese or Japanese culture into their music videos. IVE, a K-pop group, used Chinese classical element, such as Chinese knot and **auspicious cloud pattern**. However, when in interviews of broadcast their music, the group members blurred their historical stances and even claimed that these elements originated from South Korea, which causing resistance among the Chinese and Japanese public. These acts of cultural plundering reflect a lack of respect from some K-pop groups towards China and Japan.

### 3.2. Factors influencing the spreading of K-pop in US and Europe

For Europe and US, these two highly supported and accepted for K-pop music, and audiences in these regions are also enthusiastic about performances style of K-pop groups. Additionally, close collaborations with Western singers have further promoted the positive expansion of K-pop into these markets.

Western countries have introduced numerous policies to promote the development of K-pop. In 2010, South Korea and the European Union signed a Free Trade Agreement together, with lower tariffs providing favorable conditions for the growth of K-pop in Europe. South Korea even imposed no tariff for EU to response this cooperation [7]. Meanwhile, in 2025, EU and South Korea completed negotiations on a digital trade agreement which is a further facilitating the spread of K-pop digital music and its market competitiveness. In the United States, government had positively promoted cultural exchanges with South Korea, providing an effective platform for K-pop. In 2022, K-pop group BTS was invited to the White House to deliver a speech on anti-Asian hate crimes and met with President Biden. This strategy played a huge part in bringing BTS spectacular achievements, which not only raised the profile of K-pop but also demonstrated strong support from the U.S. government [8].

Compared with Japan, although western countries had already possessed a mature idol industry framework which directly providing a comfortable environment for K-pop, the systems in Western and South Korea shared significant similarities, such as well-established offline equipment and mature fan economy model. Western music lovers also tend to favor on excellent stage performance, making them highly accept with K-pop. Additionally, the developed music industry and social platforms in the West, such as the music digital platform Spotify and the app Instagram, enable K-pop groups to reach a wider audience by sharing daily updates and songs on these platforms.

K-pop groups have actively engaged in international collaborations with Western counterparts to improve market recognition. They have collaborated with renowned Western singers, such as "Sour Candy" by BLACKPINK and Lady Gaga, "My Universe" by BTS and Cold play, both of the collaborative track achieved significant success on the Billboard Hot 100. On musical composition, K-pop groups have released more English words into their lyric rather than Korean, which most of the English is the main part or refrain of their songs. Moreover, the using elements of hip-hop and retro styles also aimed to attract Western listeners.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Opportunities: In China and Japan

However, there exist several strategies to facilitate the sustained and positive development of K-pop in the Chinese market. Initially, by fortifying the collaborative ties between domestic Chinese platforms and K-pop entertainment enterprises, a broader spread of K-pop music can be achieved within China. QQ Music, a network music service product launched by Tencent, stands as the largest music platform in China, commanding over 70% of the music streaming market share. It maintains close cooperative relationships with South Korea's three major entertainment conglomerates—SM, YG, JYP—through initiatives such as licensed copyright agreements and exclusive early-access song releases. Additionally, in 2024, QQ Music launched an overseas version named "bubble," a paid chat application designed for fan-idol interaction, enabling Chinese fans to communicate directly with their idols. Additionally, app "Weverse" is also provided as global fan community platform [9]. In the second place, the inclusion of Chinese artists can effectively bridge the gap between K-pop and Chinese fans. The boys group EXO released Chinese-language versions of their songs, with music performed by Chinese members resonating more profoundly with Chinese audiences, as exemplified by the viral hit "Tears of the Mermaid" on TikTok. Similarly, the girl group AESPA incorporated Chinese into the teaser for their comeback (for "Richman"), enhancing fans' comprehension of the musical concept and facilitating smoother integration into the music market. The Chinese sales of aespa's album "My World" surpassed 1 million copies, establishing them as the K-pop girl group with the highest Chinese album sales among the new generation of Hallyu (Korean Wave) girl groups.

There are also viable approaches to propel the positive development of K-pop in the Japanese market. To begin with, organizing multiple large-scale tours and group events can attract a wider Japanese fan base. For instance, despite the absence of Japanese members, the boys group SEVENTEEN has successfully drawn in numerous Japanese fans through their tours. SEVENTEEN's "FOLLOW" tour comprised 28 shows, with 16 of them held at Japanese domes, including multiple concerts in Saitama, Fukuoka, Osaka, and Aichi (cities in Japan). Moreover, activities that align more closely with the Japanese idol system, such as fan meetings, handshake events, and online or offline meet-and-greets ("eigou-tsuu" or fan communication events in Japanese idol culture), have facilitated rapid fan acquisition for K-pop by fostering strong emotional bonds between Japanese fans and their idols [10], thereby adapting to the Japanese idol market dynamics. Furthermore, the release of Japanese single albums and the inclusion of Japanese artists can also drive the development of K-pop in Japan. The girl group TWICE, as the sole dominant girl group in Japan, enjoys immense popularity due to their energetic and youthful image and the presence of three Japanese members [11]. Their Japanese albums, "#TWICE," have topped the Japanese iTunes album chart, successfully penetrating the Japanese market.

In terms of cultural adaptation and sensitivity, K-pop groups operating in Japan must thoroughly comprehend Japanese culture and social sensitivities to avoid actions that may offend Japanese sentiment, such as the incident involving IVE burning a thousand origami cranes. Strict content review processes should be implemented for event arrangements and promotional materials to prevent potential controversies and maintain a positive public image. Conversely, in China, K-pop can introduce more music works infused with Chinese cultural elements, such as incorporating traditional Chinese musical instruments and poetry into songs, as demonstrated by SEVENTEEN's song "Super [12]," which paid tribute to the Chinese mythological figure Sun Wukong (the Monkey King) and garnered significant attention. Simultaneously, K-pop groups can demonstrate respect and understanding for Chinese culture by learning Chinese and participating in Chinese cultural activities, thereby strengthening emotional connections with Chinese fans. For instance, BABYMONSTER member Ahyeon (Zheng Yaxian) has won the favor of many Chinese fans due to her fluent communication in Chinese, which she has cultivated since childhood, showcasing the effectiveness of cultural integration strategies in enhancing fan engagement.

## 4.2. Challenges: In the Europe and United States

The expansion of K-pop into the Europe and US markets has brought some negative impacts. Firstly, according to laws proposed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, there will be a significant impact on the costs of K-pop groups holding tours in the United States, thereby affecting the execution of their performances and market promotion efforts. The proposed legislation includes raising the fees for international visas. For O-type visa applications, which are temporary worker visas, the fee will increase from 460 to 1655, which is a staggering 260% rise. The O-1 non immigrant visa is for individuals with extraordinary abilities in the sciences, arts, education, business, or athletics, or those with extraordinary achievements in the motion picture or television industry, who have received national or international recognition for these accomplishments. For P-type visa applications for performing artists, the fee will increase from 460 to 1615, a 251% increase. The P-1 entertainment visa is a non immigrant visa that allows foreign citizens who are athletes, artists, and entertainers to enter the United States for specific events, competitions, or performances [13]. According to the Department of Homeland Security, the reason for the sharp fee increase is the imbalance between the high demand for Citizenship and Immigration Services and the insufficient staff. Many K-pop fans have expressed concerns about the proposed new fees, which may deter these groups from performing in the United States.

In Europe, the audience for K-pop primarily consists of the middle class, resulting in limited consumption ability by fans [14]. The growth of K-pop heavily relies on "supportive consumption" from fans. Data from the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) shows that in 2024, revenue from the South Korean recorded music industry fell by 5.7%, marking the first decline in the past decade, while the global export growth of K-pop albums also slowed down. Europeans and Americans have relatively low willingness to purchase K-pop albums and merchandise, and concert tickets are often discounted close to the event date, which differs from the consumption habits of Asian fans. Furthermore, the prevalence of data falsification within the K-pop industry has disrupted the normal market order, leading fans to question the industry. Meanwhile, the gray industries that have emerged from the fan-signing event model, such as "photo cards" and "cut lines" have been criticized for "fleecing" fans, which may also dampen fans' enthusiasm for consuming K-pop.

Despite positive collaborations between Europe or America and K-pop, several factors may still negatively impact on the development of K-pop in the areas. To penetrate the European and American markets, K-pop groups may over-pursue localization, causing their musical styles to converge with Anglo-American pop music and potentially losing the unique cultural charm that originally defined K-pop. This could lead to aesthetic fatigue among European and American audiences, hindering long-term development [15]. At the current market, fans are growing weary of this consumption model, with many believing that companies overly rely on fans' purchasing power without offering more innovative products and experiences. They express dissatisfaction with the excessive economic demands placed on them by the management companies behind the stars. Additionally, the mature and talent-rich native music industry in Europe and America continues to produce high-quality works by many artists, such as Justin Bieber, Billie Eilish, and Taylor Swift, occupying a significant market share. Collaborative tracks between K-pop idols and western singers may only serve as short-term trends, making it challenging to ensure that K-pop groups maintain their popularity and influence in the European and American markets without strong collaborative partners in the future.

## 5. Conclusion

This study analyzed the dissemination of K-pop in four major markets, revealing significant differences in the influencing factors across these markets. The Chinese market is constrained by political policy relations and cultural controversies, necessitating breakthroughs through local collaborations and cultural integration. The Japanese market presents high barriers due to its well-established domestic idol industry, requiring tailored local approaches to gain a foothold. The

European and American markets benefit from policy support and collaborative efforts but face challenges such as rising costs, limited audience reach, loss of cultural distinctiveness, and fierce local competition. Cultural sensitivity and the sustainability of fan economies emerge as common challenges across these markets, with localization combined with cultural integration offering a more favorable path for K-pop's development.

However, this study also has limitations. The first one is that, due to the lack of timeliness in some data and the fact that the samples did not cover K-pop groups of different scales, the representativeness is limited. In the future, conduct surveys to supplement the latest data and diverse samples, and integrate survey findings to enhance micro-level analysis, thereby obtaining more detailed data and information. Another limitation of this study is its predominant reliance on a macro-level, national perspective, which precludes a more granular analysis of micro-level mechanisms, such as audience psychology in specific country contexts. Future research should extend the analytical scope to incorporate the role of dissemination channels, gender heterogeneity, and broader sociocultural determinants in shaping the global diffusion of K-pop. Third, the substantial market presence of K-pop in Southeast Asia remains unaddressed in this study, thereby constraining the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Future research should incorporate emerging markets such as Southeast Asia to investigate alternative trajectories of industry dissemination across these regions.

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