TWO

Seoul Calling

WHAT IS K-POP? FOR MANY PEOPLE, it is simply South Korean popular music.[1] As a result, *yuhaengga* from the colonial period and trot songs from the era of military dictatorship have been retroactively ensconced in a category that emerged only in the early 2000s.[2] Most South Koreans will readily agree that it may be unreasonable to extend the boundaries of K-pop to include, among other twentieth-century Korean musical genres, *ch'anggŭk* and *ch'angga,* or to include the *yuhaengga* maestro Nam In-su and the trot diva Yi Mi-ja. But what about the trot singer Chang Yun-jŏng, who performs like a K-pop star? If she does not belong to K-pop, then why include the soulful ballads of the indie group Busker Busker? Some Japanese K-pop fans are adamant that K-pop does not include Psy, because they consider him neither cool nor handsome. The Japanese disc jockey who was one of the first to employ the term "K-pop" used it to refer to R & B musicians, but Kim Kŏn-mo and SOLID are not stars in the firmament of K-pop. Given that neither supernatural nor secular authority is likely to issue a decree on the correct demarcations of the category—indeed, the absence of authority in popular music is one of its signature features—the ambit of K-pop is perforce contestable and essentially contested.

Philology is out of fashion, but it is not a bad place to begin any investigation. Almost everyone agrees that K-pop is a conceptual invention that substituted a "K" for the "J" in the term "J-pop," which in turn was

coined in 1998 to identify a new style of music. It is safe to say, then, that K-pop is not only chronologically but also musically a post–Sŏ T'ae-ji wa Aidŭl phenomenon. It is a musical brand and style that crystallized in the course of the first decade of the twenty-first century, severing itself from earlier genres and styles in South Korean popular music as well as from J-pop. K-pop in turn is intimately intertwined with the export imperative that has gripped the South Korean popular-music industry since the late 1990s. Styled as an export, K-pop underwent several permutations, its most important being as a variant of J-pop before a formula was settled on roughly the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and the K-pop brand then found success across Asia and beyond. K-pop synthesized various post–Sŏ T'ae-ji wa Aidŭl trends, especially idol pop and dance pop, and polished them to a perfectionist shimmer and sheen.

In this chapter, I offer a conspectus of K-pop and elucidate its production process. I then explore the extramusical realm of political economy and global culture in order to explain how K-pop came to be produced for export and why non-Koreans began to consume it. I close with a discussion of K-pop as an aesthetic entity.

THE AGE OF K-POP

The year 2000 marked the first time that reliable statistics on South Korean record sales became available.[3] Four CDs racked up sales of more than a million copies each that year: the ballad singer Cho Sŏng-mo had the top two, and those were followed by efforts from g.o.d. (Groove Over Dose) and Sŏ T'ae-ji. The KBS Music Awards Grand Prize that year, like the one the year before, went to Cho. His "Asinayo" (Do you know) is squarely in the genre of the softly sung, slow, sentimental ballad; it would be easy to trace a straight line from Cho back to Yi Mun-se and even earlier ballad singers. In sharp contrast, Sŏ's album is a fascinating mélange of progressive rock genres; the album's top hit, "Ultramania," is at once rock, metal, and punk.[4] Cho is a clean-cut, conventionally dressed,

smiling, seemingly kind young man (though it would be generous to call him gorgeous); Sŏ sports long red hair in dreadlocks and exhibits the moves and artifacts (for example, the skateboard) of the year 2000—not the sort who would have been welcome in a bourgeois Seoul apartment of that era. In the wide world of popular music at that time, Cho and Sŏ stood about as far apart as they possibly could. “Saranghae kŭrigo kiŏkhae” (Fall in love, then remember), by g.o.d., comes the closest of these best-selling songs to contemporary K-pop, but—interesting though the song is, with its mashup of rap, R & B, gospel, and other genres—it is basically a love ballad.[5]

A decade later, a new reality reigned. The age of digital downloads had ended the era of the million-seller CD. More remarkable, however, was the transformation in the kinds of songs that now became top sellers, a change readily gleaned from a reading of the names of the top ten acts: Sonyŏ Sidae, Super Junior, SHINee, JYJ, BEAST, 2PM, 2AM, 2NE1, BoA, and KARA. Except for BoA, all these acts are groups, and all but one of the acts have names that are not identifiably Korean and are written in the modern Roman alphabet; the exception here, proving the rule, is Sonyŏ Sidae (Girls’ Generation), whose name in South Korea is often abbreviated as the acronym SNSD. The names of these acts are clearly indebted not only to J-pop naming conventions but also to the African American practice of employing innovative orthographies. In this they are similar to other contemporary K-pop acts, such as CL, Minzy, Dara, and Bom, which they also resemble by their inclusion of diasporic Korean and foreign members. At the risk of overgeneralization (a single album may include different styles of music, and many songs are hybrids or fusions), most tracks by these performers—inflected though they are by an extremely diverse array of musical influences, from rap and hip-hop to jazz and R & B—can be described as postdisco, post–Michael Jackson dance pop: as K-pop exports, or simply as K-pop itself. Almost invariably, a memorable refrain serves as the leitmotif in an upbeat, high-pitched, bright-timbred melody with rhythmic bass and hip-hop or techno beats. Moreover, subjective though such assessments can be, all the members of the group have been airbrushed into the K-pop aesthetic: tall and slim, with ripped abs for boys

and long legs for girls and sharp facial features for everyone. Gender dimorphism prevails: cute or sexy girls, masculine and muscled boys. Each group puts on a dynamic display of coordinated movement and enacts a precise choreography. As vocalists, dancers, and physical specimens, the groups' members display polish and professionalism. Their costumes are diverse but almost always reflect the most up-to-date fashions. Their music videos incorporate all the latest techniques and trends in cinematography. In short, these performers exude style and confidence, and, like so many expensive automobiles or fancy cell phones, they communicate the sense of a complete and coordinated package. Above all, the package is readily identifiable: while I was watching K-pop videos recently, a three-year-old German girl pointed at my computer screen and declared, "Das ist K-pop."

The debut of Sŏ T'ae-ji wa Aidŭl announced the arrival of the new hegemonic tastemakers: teenagers and youths. As discussed earlier, Sŏ's trio shattered many of the conventions that had governed South Korean popular music, decisively separating young people's sonic world from that of their elders. The group's emergence also marked the moment when South Korean popular music became basically contemporaneous with trends in the United States (but this does not mean that US trends overtook those in South Korea, or that they merged). One consequence of this change was the entrance into South Korea of a diverse set of musical styles, which prospered in the South Korean popular-music scene, whether we define that kind of success anecdotally or by record sales: Kim Kŏn-mo, influenced by R & B, reggae, and rave; the jazz-fusion singer Yi So-ra; the heavy-metal, punked-out Sŏ T'ae-ji; the smooth balladeer Sin Sŭng-hun; the J-pop–influenced BoA; the bubblegum boy band H.O.T.—these were only a few of the more notable stars at the turn of the millennium. As I have repeatedly stressed, songs, stars, and genres do not disappear overnight, and all the trends just mentioned have maintained their adherents in the 2010s. Even trot isn't fading gently into the night: Chang Yun-jŏng, mentioned earlier, brings her glamorous appearance and vocal prowess to a revitalized K-poppified trot.[6] Furthermore, innovative and interesting performers continued to emerge in the first decade of the twenty-first

century. Clazziquai Project, for example, fuses bossa nova, samba, and other Latin rhythms with a newly vibrant electronica, but the music of Clazziquai Project is neither a top seller in South Korea nor an integral element of K-pop abroad.[7] The term "K-pop" signifies a particular style or genre of popular music, one that even a German toddler can readily identify, and the crystallization of its style occurred in the years just after the turn of the new century.

Given what I have said about the ambiguous ambit of K-pop, it is perfectly fine to suggest that Sŏ T'ae-ji wa Aidŭl invented K-pop. Perhaps it is also possible to see proleptic moments in Kim Wan-sŏn or Sobangch'a. Nevertheless, something of a paradigm shift occurred between the advent of Sŏ T'ae-ji wa Aidŭl and the appearance of the export-oriented K-pop of the latter half of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The top K-pop acts listed on the 2010 Mnet chart reveal family resemblances as well as dissimilarities, not only between these acts and Sŏ's trio but also between the newer acts and the idol groups of the late 1990s. The original idol groups, such as H.O.T. and its female analogue, S.E.S., were speedily assembled, and their music, dance, and videos are, to put it charitably, amateurish and asinine. They modeled themselves on such boy bands as Shōnentai (1981) in Japan and New Kids on the Block (1984) in the United States, which recruited good-looking young men and endowed them with sunny songs and dance steps. H.O.T. and its successor groups, devised for domestic consumption, followed the same simple formula and applied it diligently. What H.O.T.'s producer, SM Entertainment, did not fully anticipate was the group's success outside South Korea.

The initial stylistic shift occurred in the wake of SM Entertainment's unexpected success abroad, and of the export imperative that loomed in 1997 (discussed later in this chapter). Sŏ T'ae-ji wa Aidŭl disbanded in 1996, a mere four years after the group's explosive debut, leaving behind a vast vacuum in the youth-music scene. This era also witnessed the introduction of the mp3 player and the slow decimation of the recorded-music industry. SM Entertainment and other producers, anticipating a shift in East Asian musical tastes—a shift to which they had contributed—sought

to promote their groups beyond South Korea. Therefore, in the very late 1990s, we see a move away from bubblegum pop and toward a fusion of genres, with more sophisticated choreography and cinematography. By 2000, even H.O.T. and S.E.S. had shed their innocent, infantile presentation. H.O.T.'s fifth release, the album *Outside Castle,* was ranked fifth on Mnet's 2000 top-ten chart, and the album's standout eponymous single opens with an extended orchestral prelude, whereas the highly staged, meticulous video, marked by a *Twilight*-like aesthetic—eight years before the release of the first film in that cinematic saga—seeks to attain the status of art.[8] Similarly, S.E.S.'s 1999 single "Love," from the album of the same title, which ranked sixth on the 2000 chart, begins with a scat sequence and shows a sophistication absent from the group's earlier efforts. Thus idol groups effected a convergence with the new mainstream popular music, which had entered an interesting period of incorporating disparate musical influences and creating innovative hybrids and fusions.

But where to export? H.O.T., whose surprising success abroad has already been noted, had generated an enthusiastic following in the large littoral Chinese cities. Given the relative weakness of China's domestic popular-music industry, not to mention the country's indisputably large and increasingly affluent population, the prospect of expansion both in China and in the Chinese-language sphere as a whole was more than attractive. Yet SM Entertainment's initial overture was a disaster.[9] In retrospect, it is clear not only that China was a small market in terms of profitability but also that rampant piracy made it virtually impossible to make money in that country at the turn of the millennium.

And then there was the Everest: the United States, an especially challenging market because of the country's leading role in popular music, the sophistication of its listening public, and the sheer rarity of Asian presences in the its popular-music industry. Here, the DR Music label was the pioneer. One of the label's acts, Baby V.O.X., had begun as an idol group in 1997 but quickly absorbed hip-hop and other American musical trends and now incorporated edgy dancing and sexy presentations. Baby V.O.X. garnered fans across East Asia (though not in Japan), and in 2004

the group released an album, *Ride West,* that included songs in English, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, with cameo appearances by Jennifer Lopez and the late Tupac Shakur. "Xcstasy," a single from the album, became a video with an extended narrative, sharp images, and an urban feel.[10] It is fair to say, however, that there was nothing particularly extraordinary about Baby V.O.X.—little, in other words, to differentiate the group from any leading American act of the time. Expensive sports cars, decaying urban infrastructure, and sexy, muscled bodies may have been a combustible combination in Seoul in 2004 but probably provoked yawns on the part of the jaded American audience. DR Music's ambition—global, to be sure, and likely premature as well—came to naught.

Japan, then the second largest market in the world, shared a great deal of the South Korean musical and cultural sensibility. However, South Korea, instead of exporting music to Japan (save for occasional successes with trot music), largely imported popular music from that country. In fact, the late 1990s were a period of profound J-pop presence and influence in South Korea, and it was widely believed that non-trot South Korean popular music would not be viable in Japan. The prevailing prejudice, as mentioned in chapter 1, was not just that Japan was "ahead of" South Korea but also that there was residual discrimination against ethnic Koreans. In any event, South Korea's success in exporting music to Japan was due not to K-pop but to J-pop; that is, SM Entertainment promoted BoA as a J-pop star—one who just happened to be South Korean. The company hired leading Japanese voice and dancing instructors for the singer, investing $3 million in her debut, and in 2002 her single "Listen to My Heart" reached number 1 in Japan.[11] J-pop was characterized by its almost exclusive reliance on Western names and titles, pronounced in a way that also sounded Western (that is, they were usually pronounced as if they were being uttered in English). Thus BoA's Western-sounding name and English-language song titles were very much in the mainstream of J-pop, which had dominated the Japanese popular-music market since the late 1980s.[12] In addition, BoA had entered a particularly promising

Japanese niche for adolescent *aidoru* (idol) singers. That is, she was a hybrid phenomenon—a cute girl who could sing J-pop, not just teenybopper tunes—and her positive reception spawned a series of successors. Even more remarkable is the fact that, despite not having grown up in Japan, BoA actually did learn to speak and sing like a Japanese native.[13] Her secret was intensive language training, which included an extended home stay with a Japanese family, a level of preparation that enabled SM Entertainment to present her as a J-pop act.

The apogee of this localization strategy came with Tongbang Sin'gi (also known as Dong Bang Shin Gi, DBSK, and TVXQ, among other names), which transmogrified into a J-pop group called Tōhō Shinki (the Japanese name uses the same Chinese characters as those used for the group's name in Korean). SM Entertainment found a model for its prized boy band in Backstreet Boys, the phenomenally successful American group that debuted in 1993. (Backstreet Boys, the new and improved version of New Kids on the Block, brought the power of harmony to mellifluous melodies and slow dance steps.) Tongbang Sin'gi debuted in South Korea in 2003, but after 2005 the group's activities were focused on Japan. Like BoA, the group did not occlude its national origins but sought to pass as a J-pop act. As Tōhō Shinki, the group was an a cappella ensemble, its slow, sweet harmonies usually wrapped around a love song. Polite, fan-friendly, and singing in Japanese, the group behaved like a J-pop act and compiled a series of hits. In other words, BoA and Tōhō Shinki/Tongbang Sin'gi were like Zainichi singers, who sought to pass as Japanese, rather than like those trot singers, such as Cho Yong-p'il, who were openly from South Korea. Furthermore, in their emulation of J-pop formulas, neither BoA nor Tōhō Shinki/Tongbang Sin'gi was particularly innovative, and neither projected a distinctive musical style or identity. Both acts sang slow-tempo, high-pitched ballads that fit snugly into mainstream J-pop. Roughly between 2000 and 2005, other SM Entertainment groups, such as SHINHWA, also followed this formula, both in South Korea and in Japan. Success in Japan often spilled over, though sometimes independently, to Chinese cultural domains (especially Taiwan, Hong Kong, and major

Chinese cities) as well as to Southeast Asia. Indeed, followers of Tōhō Shinki/Tongbang Sin'gi regularly claim that the group has the largest fan club in the world.[14]

If Baby V.O.X. exemplified a globalization strategy that left the group all but indistinguishable from an American popular-music act, and if Tōhō Shinki represented a localization strategy that rendered the group irreducibly local (as J-pop, in this instance), then it is unclear what, exactly, is (South) Korean about South Korean popular music. As far as I can tell, no one ever consciously devised the currently dominant style, but it emerged as a fusion of the two most powerful streams in South Korea—idol pop and dance pop. By the turn of the millennium, as noted, idol pop had shed its amateurism and innocence. And by then, many elements of the current K-pop style already existed: attractive stars, youth-oriented lyrics, hybrid musical genres, ensemble dancing, and captivating videos. What pushed the musical envelope was an interesting articulation of dance pop, with its roots ranging from Motown and disco to hip-hop, Latin beats, and electronica. Koyote, for example, synthesized postdisco dance pop with techno pop and presented something of a prototype for K-pop, one that was perfected around the time of the group's 2000 hit "Passion."[15] JYP Entertainment, founded by Pak Chin-yŏng (Jin Young Park), also trod this path, which would be the proximate basis of K-pop style. Pak, sometimes called the Michael Jackson of South Korea, consistently emulated styles popular in the United States and looked to that country for inspiration.

In the small world of South Korean popular music, the major producers are alert to the trends and innovations of their competitors as well as to those of the United States, Japan, and other countries. It is bracing to realize how rapidly styles have merged and conventions have shifted. Consider the evolution of SHINHWA, easily the longest-surviving boy band. When the group debuted, in 1998, it was like any other boy band of the era. Beyond occasional notes of hip-hop, SHINHWA stayed true to bubblegum lyrics and compositions in its breakout 1998 single "Ŭssya! Ŭssya!"[16] A remake of Manfred Mann's 1964 hit "Do Wah Diddy,"

SHINHWA's rendition recalls the Monkees in all their simian silliness. Like H.O.T.'s 1996 hit "Candy," the song oozes a cloying sweetness. But, moving from "Only One" (2000) to "Perfect Man" (2002) to "Brand New" (2004), the members of SHINHWA not only shed the baby fat from their faces and bodies but also enhanced the coordination and sophistication of their dance routines. In the 2006 video "How Do I Say," with its self-consciously artistic black-and-white opening shot and the strumming of a guitar in the background, the group displays a level of polish utterly absent from its 1998 hit.[17] The performers' gestures follow urban American currents, and the dance steps, though far from vigorous, acrobatic, or perfectionist, evince extensive training. Yet the song remains more of a ballad, appealing to the J-pop audience. In this regard, SHINHWA resembles Tōhō Shinki, which had already become a superstar act in Japan. Although SHINHWA attempted several distinct styles, the group lacked propulsive techno dance music and vigorous, precise dance routines, despite its reputation as the premier dance group of the period. After a three-year hiatus (2008–2011), when the group's members were serving in the South Korean military, they resumed performing, and it was only then that the group articulated the contemporary K-pop formula: SHINHWA's 2012 music video "Venus" sets an impeccably choreographed routine to the standard techno beat.[18] The group's evolution recapitulates the larger movement of K-pop performers, from their presentation as idol groups to their marketing as permutations of J-pop to their distinct branding as K-pop.

A significant shift in musical emphasis, as the case of SHINHWA suggests, occurred in the middle years of the twenty-first century's first decade. Two crucial elements were the elevation of dance as an integral part of the musical performance and the intensification of the beat, whether hip-hop or techno. Consider, in this regard, Tongbang Sin'gi. The group's 2003 debut "Hug" is very much a ballad with some dancing, in the mode of Backstreet Boys, and their J-pop debut as Tōhō Shinki stressed the group's vocal prowess. Yet by the time of the 2006 triumph "'O'-chŏng-pan-hap" ("O"-right-opposite-together—perhaps the Fichtean "thesis, antithesis, synthesis"), the group's dance routines had acquired polish and

sophistication, as confirmed by the 2008 hit "Mirotic." Earlier South Korean music videos from the 1990s had featured more acrobatic moves, including break dancing. Koyote and other mixed-genre dance groups popular at the turn of the century occasionally incorporated b-boying and b-girling, but the singers mainly performed allegro steps and coordinated gesticulations, limited as they were by the need to vocalize simultaneously. Similarly, the standard K-pop routine came to rely on ensemble effects, such as contagion and grapevine, along with limb movements, but almost never used anything dramatic or even balletic, such as the fouetté or grand jeté.

But the centrality of sophisticated ensemble dancing is not the only thing that distinguished K-pop acts from J-pop acts and from the earlier South Korean idol groups. A decade after Sŏ T'ae-ji wa Aidŭl embedded hip-hop in South Korean music, the popularity of balladeers, along with the J-pop influence, continued to restrict the ambit of hip-hop; for almost all K-pop acts, hip-hop was more incidental than central. J-pop and earlier South Korean dance pop usually feature a pronounced downbeat, and in this regard these genres are no different from trot music (though trot tends to use two or four beats, whereas most J-pop and early South Korean dance pop tends to use eight beats). But hip-hop is different: the accent is on the backbeat (usually the second and the fourth), which gives hip-hop the famous kick that is conducive to dancing. In particular, with respect to K-pop, the distinct rhythm of sixteen-beat hip-hop—not so much the rapping, scratching, or beatboxing as the backbeat—accentuated the newfound stress on ensemble dancing.[19] Alternatively, some K-pop songs featured the synthesizer-driven techno or trance rhythm of a steady four beats. Here, the influence of French electronic dance music, as exemplified by Daft Punk, arrived in South Korea by way of the United States and Japan and became noticeable in K-pop tunes by the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century.[20] At any rate, K-pop achieved an utterly different feel from that of the typical J-pop tune. Compare Tōhō Shinki's 2005 Japanese debut single, "Stay with Me Tonight," with the group's 2008 single "Purple Line" to register the group's shift away from softer J-pop

harmonies and orchestral music and toward the contemporary K-pop style: faster, with a hip-hop–driven propulsive beat and more reliance on synthesizers than on strings. But even Tōhō Shinki incorporated the sixteen-beat hip-hop rhythm much less comfortably than did Girls' Generation and other later K-pop performers.

There was one more crucial turn. Wonder Girls' 2007 "Tell Me" video, with its infectious techno beat, its catchy refrain ("tell me"), and its style of dancing, serves as the archetype of contemporary K-pop style. But the real advance is that the song's hook is not just an unforgettable unit of sound but also the accompaniment to a signature dance move. That is, the listener, caught up in the compelling (though largely meaningless) lyrical and musical phrase, is also captivated as the viewer of a well-coordinated, precisely timed, interesting sequence of gesticulations and movements. Thus Wonder Girls went beyond percussive and vibratory dancing to introduce the integrated lyrical/musical hook and signature dance move, thereby creating the template for the contemporary K-pop formula.[21]

The "Tell Me" syndrome convulsed South Korea, generating copycat videos by students, police officers, and even soldiers. The video is interesting not only for its self-consciously retro flair but also for its projection of "girl power" in the form of Wonder Woman (ready allusions to American popular culture would also become an element of K-pop style). And "Tell Me" became the template for later girl-group hits, such as KARA's "Mr." (2009) and Sonyŏ Sidae's "Gee" (2009), although without the "girl power" bit: symptomatically, not only does "Gee" simplify the hook, the singers also move like mannequins (or, perhaps better, like mindless dancing dolls). The same sort of compelling refrain and signature move as in "Tell Me" can also be seen in the boy band Super Junior's smash hit "Sorry, Sorry." It was rave, but with backlighting and without the drugs. Simple lyrical refrains ("Mr." or "Gee"), combined with particular dance steps (hip dance for KARA, crab dance for Sonyŏ Sidae), entrenched Wonder Girls' successful formula, superseded it, and thus defined K-pop.

Finally, a significant shift occurred in the visual presentation of South Korean popular music. Even before television, beauty was never

irrelevant; after all, the first Korean popular singers were stage actresses, and beauty was certainly an element of their appeal. But the visual became ever more important in the age of the music video. Every group—I cannot think of a single exception—shed rotundity to achieve the sculpted look. Faces became chiseled; bodies were increasingly fat-free. This was a striking contrast to pre-1980s facial and bodily norms, that is, to the culturally privileged round face and stockier body; brainwashing alone would not have been enough to make most North Koreans find the stocky, moon-faced Kim Chŏng-ŭn (Kim Jong-un) handsome. Call it maturation or masculinization, but the iconic member of the typical 1990s boy band was cute and round-faced, whereas his counterpart today seems to require a six-pack and a sharp jaw. The chiseled faces and sculpted bodies of contemporary male K-pop stars make them look almost as if they and the earlier generation of boy-band stars (such as the cuddly members of H.O.T.) belong to different races. The new look is urban and cosmopolitan: a slim face with large eyes, high cheekbones, and a straight nose, with a tall, trim body and long legs. And viewers actually get to see the abs and the legs.

Gender dimorphism, as mentioned earlier, is a distinguishing characteristic of K-pop's presentation. Although mixed-gender groups do exist in South Korea—Cool and Roo'ra, among others, achieved significant followings in the late 1990s—the accentuation of gender archetypes has solidified the practice of creating single-sex groups.[22] Girl groups can be cute or sexy, but they are all indisputably effeminate. Boys, or rather men, become ever more masculine and muscled, a trend exemplified by 2PM and BEAST. Indeed, as suggested by the latter group's name, this has been the triumph of *chimsŭng* (beast) aesthetics, an American-style muscled male sex appeal.[23] This muscular, masculine aesthetic was new to South Korea when it was pioneered just after the turn of the twenty-first century by Rain (Pi, or Bi), who was over six feet tall and well built. And the presentation of self also has an edge: the performers' dyed hair, tattoos, and suggestions of sexuality are in clear violation of the earlier sacrosanct PG-13 standard. An instructive case is Yi Hyo-ri. Her attire was invariably

modest from 1998 to 2002, when she was a member of the early idol group Fin.K.L (P'ingk'ŭl). By the time she launched her solo career, in 2003, with the smash hit "10 Minutes," her hair was dyed blonde, her shoulders, midriff, and thighs were exposed, and she was gyrating in sexually suggestive ways.[24] The impact was immediate. The media gave the name "Yi Hyo-ri Syndrome" to the phenomenon of young (and old) men's inability to focus after watching one of Yi's steamy performances. The year 2003 was marked not only by the ascent of Rain but also by that turning point when the body beautiful became normative for South Korean music stars.

Beauty and cool may seem to lie beyond the pale of sober analysis, but the attractiveness of K-pop cannot be understood without them. As one member of Super Junior said in response to a query about the group's explosive appeal, "Maybe it is because of our great good looks?"[25] And then there is the story about a middle-aged Japanese woman who was baffled by her friend's raving about Tōhō Shinki: "Are they really gods? . . . If they're around, won't peace come to Asia?"[26] The woman, completely unacquainted with the group, acquiesced to her friend's plea to view Tōhō Shinki's music video: "I cannot forget how moved I was that night. Tōhō Shinki. The intense dancing by five men over six feet tall. . . . The waist movement that suggests—can only suggest—sex. . . . I was overwhelmed by the marvelous bodies of Tōhō Shinki."[27] She is not alone in her response to the K-pop brand of sex appeal, and we shouldn't miss the undercurrents of erotic projection and introjection in the rise of Tōhō Shinki and other K-pop groups.

But the K-pop formula, more or less complete by 2007, found limited success in the United States. JYP Entertainment, buoyed by its domestic success, attempted to break into the US market with Wonder Girls and Rain in the latter half of the twenty-first century's first decade. In 2004, the year after his debut, Rain had starred in the heavily viewed South Korean television drama *Full House,* and he became a pan-Asian sensation in the same year, with the release of his album *It's Raining,* which sold 500,000 copies in China and about 150,000 copies in Thailand and South

Korea. But Rain would hardly make a splash in the United States.[28] Although Wonder Girls reached number seventy-six on *Billboard*'s "Top 100" chart in 2009, Rain's and Wonder Girls' initial foray into the United States fell short of resounding success.

By contrast, the "Tell Me" formula achieved a major breakthrough in Japan in 2010 with KARA and Shōjo Jidai (Girls' Generation). Although both groups sang in Japanese on their Japanese releases, they defined themselves as South Korean—that is, as belonging to the new phenomenon of K-pop. The principal distinction was not so much that "K" had replaced "J" but that the label "K-pop" projected a brand identity. After the success of the Korean Wave, the Japanese audience had come to hold South Korean popular culture, especially South Korean television dramas, in higher esteem. But K-pop was something new: good singing and great dancing (a J-pop concert can be like a concert of European classical music) by cool, physically attractive, sexy stars. These South Korean performers radiated the excitement and edginess of American and other Western performers. With fewer tattoos and piercings, however, and with less explicit references to sex and drugs, they were easier on the eye and the ear, but with no sacrifice of sex appeal.

The news of success abroad clinched export-oriented K-pop's conquest of the South Korean market. Several ineluctable factors were at work. The rise of teenagers as the dominant segment of popular-music consumers led the industry to follow, as well as to adapt and shape, that audience's taste for idol groups. Given young people's increasing access to disposable income, not to mention the dissemination of relatively inexpensive technology for music's reproduction, the growth of the adolescent audience had been notable. At the same time, with the debut of YouTube and similar video-sharing websites in 2005, and with the explosive and roughly coeval growth of social media as well as the nearly universal ownership of video-capable phones and other portable devices for the consumption of music videos, the visual aspect of popular music came to be prized as much as the aural. When a performer was expected to please the eye as well as the ear, an attractive appearance became even more important, as did dancing and

other visual elements. This valorization of the visual has been a factor in the experience of non-Koreans and older South Koreans, too. Members of the post-Sŏ generation in particular, who grew up on hip-hop, R & B, and other genres then new to South Korea, have discovered that they find K-pop performers not just palatable but actually likable: in response to a 2012 Gallup poll, South Koreans in their thirties and forties said that Psy and Girls' Generation were their two favorite acts.[29] Success abroad also spruced up the image and puffed up the reputation of more than one K-pop group or solo artist. Psy, for example, who had been only a middling performer, was transformed almost overnight into the iconic South Korean singer after his 2012 international smash hit "Gangnam Style." In the years just after 2009, the South Korean media were certainly awash in headlines about the latest heroics of this or that K-pop group.

In the course of the first decade of the 2000s, then, K-pop forged and perfected its style. By 2010 and the years just after, K-pop's sheer dominance inside South Korea, and its ubiquity outside the country, was making K-pop look like something of a monopoly, as if there were nothing else going on in the South Korean music scene. And there's no denying K-pop's large and devoted local base. But earlier genres and older stars also have continued to churn out hits and have retained their legions of fans. A diversity of music genres has never ceased to thrive in South Korea—European classical music, most obviously, but also, in the realm of popular music, everything from techno pop and punk to rap and hip-hop. For example, Skull, a South Korean reggae singer, found success in the United States and elsewhere in the latter part of the twenty-first century's first decade.[30] Indeed, K-pop owes its vitality to the existence of South Korean singers, composers, and choreographers who draw on a variety of different influences, and this is also why the current K-pop formula is likely to shift again in the near future. 2NE1's 2009 "Fire," for instance, and the group's 2011 song "I Am the Best" subtly subvert the K-pop aesthetic and ethos by incorporating such influences and elements as Bollywood music and choreography. Be that as it may, any strictly internal or endogenous history of K-pop's emergence would be incomplete. Without denying or

downplaying K-pop's aesthetic choices and musical developments, it is accurate to state that the current K-pop style cannot be separated from the South Korean export imperative—and this statement takes us into the realm of political economy.

THE EXPORT IMPERATIVE

Already by the colonial period, European musical education and the spread of Western- and Japanese-inflected popular music had implanted a new soundscape and instilled a new musical competence among urban Koreans. By the immediate post-Liberation decade, South Korean musicians had acclimated themselves to American popular music and its culture. The diatonic scale had begun to supersede the pentatonic, syllabic singing had overtaken melismatic voicing, and dancing had replaced standing still. The naturalness of the Western soundscape and of American popular culture was supplanting Japanese-inflected popular music and the military-authoritarian culture of seriousness and sincerity. Almost all the thematic conventions of US (and now global) popular music, such as those related to romantic love and its rapture and rupture, were now readily legible by South Korean youth. In brief, youth of the (affluent) world were united in the structure of their feelings as well as in the infrastructure of quotidian life. By the late 1980s, almost any piece of American popular music could be understood and even enjoyed by young South Koreans.

This musical transformation was inextricably intertwined with the emergence of a leisure society in general, and with the affluent youth market in particular. The Sŏ T'ae-ji revolution brought all these changes to the fore; shocking though it was at the time, it narrowed, even obliterated, the temporal gap that had existed between South Korean and US popular music and showed that the distance between the youth culture of the United States and that of South Korea was not insurmountable. That is, by the 1990s, not only were young South Koreans ready to receive the latest US popular music, some were also capable of emulating, if not extending, US musical trends. Here, the sizable presence of the Korean diaspora, in

the United States and elsewhere, provided a ready-made bridge to trends abroad as well as to pools of talent. It was only a matter of time before affluent, postauthoritarian South Korea would generate high-quality, state-of-the-art popular music, which would therefore be potentially interesting to non–South Korean listeners.

Yet the question remains: why export this music? Fame and fortune are two compelling reasons hardly unique to South Korean musicians and promoters. Although not everyone wishes to bask in glitz and glory, many South Koreans may have been just that much more eager for renown and riches. Given that the country had spent the twentieth century in the shadow first of Japan and then of the United States, it would be foolish to deny all desire to cast off the proverbial chip from South Korea's collective shoulder. Even a South Korean youth ignorant of the country's history would have had to be willfully obstinate to question the United States as the gold standard of power and prestige. In more general terms, South Korea had become a culture of ambition, celebrity, and fame. In the 1980s, an eminent South Korean journalist was shocked to discover that in France the child of a *boulanger* merely wanted to be a baker like his father; the journalist mused that this child's counterpart in South Korea would surely aspire to the presidency of a major conglomerate, if not of the country.[31] A motive perhaps even more compelling and ubiquitous than fame is profit. Although South Korea has long been an OECD country, the collective South Korean memory cannot quite shake off either the pervasive poverty and rapid industrialization that have marked the country's short history or the attendant desire to seek material comfort and enjoy accumulated wealth. All over the world, the principal message of popular culture celebrates and promotes conspicuous consumption.[32] To get rich is glorious; the pursuits of wealth and fame in fact constitute a single quest.

Nevertheless, what is striking about the worldwide music industry is the extent of its subordination to national boundaries. That is, performers' pursuit of stardom and wealth has largely been staged on domestic terrain. Some reasons for this phenomenon spring readily to mind: listeners may prefer singers who are co-nationals and songs that are sung in the shared

national language; performers' legibility and likability may be enhanced by their respect for the received national conventions as expressed in appearance, behavior, and conduct.[33] More recalcitrant than listening preferences, however, are extramusical barriers to a performer's entry into a foreign market. For political or economic reasons, governments may impose restrictions on foreign singers and songs. Domestic operators, too, are understandably wary of additional competition. At any rate, whatever the concatenation of factors, popular music in the twentieth century has developed by and large along national lines. In 2012, I was embarrassed to realize that I knew only two of the ten top-grossing popular musicians listed in a French magazine; I was only somewhat mollified to learn that an American professional promoter could identify only one more.[34] Music may not have national borders, but popular music has often been national music.

The ambit of a particular musical tradition, style, or genre is largely coextensive with the expanse of a civilization, empire, or nation.[35] Much as we would like to valorize aesthetic autonomy—music's independence not just from material interests but also from social contexts—not just any piece of music, however great its boosters believe it to be, can become popular at any time and in any place. Temporal and cultural delimitations point to inevitable prerequisites of, or conditions of possibility for, music's popularity; they point, that is, to some set of conventions and infrastructures. The notions of soundscape and musical competence suggest some rudimentary horizons with respect to shared expectations. What is music (as opposed to noise)? Which sounds are comprehensible and enjoyable? Who or what is new, cool, hot? And, conversely, who or what is ridiculous or risible?[36] In chapter 1, I outlined some conditions for the possibility of a European- and Japanese-influenced popular music in South Korea; these included more than a century of elementary musical education that disseminated the Western soundscape, and nearly as long an exposure, at least in urban areas, to Western (and Japanese) popular music. These conditions are inadequate, however, in and of themselves.

Also crucial were some level of affluence and leisure (foreign records were expensive and largely unavailable in South Korea until the 1980s), a propensity for devoting time and energy to aesthetic pursuits (such pursuits themselves being a feature of an affluent society), and access to the technological means of reproducing self-selected music (such means were not widely available to South Koreans until the 1980s). Before the 1980s, it was rare to encounter a South Korean who was well versed in American or global popular-music trends. It was much more common then for South Koreans to learn about the world by way of Japan. In this sense, the Sŏ Tae-ji revolution decisively shifted the primary external reference point from Japan to the United States.

Of course, not only do exceptions prove rules, they are also the rule themselves; the appearance here and there of transnational singing sensations is coeval with the history of popular music. Furthermore, the incidence of such exceptions has clearly multiplied in the post–Cold War decades, signaling an intensified globalization, as evidenced not just by the rise of the new category of "world music" but also by the interpenetration of distinct musical traditions from around the world.[37] Global pop is far from homogeneous, in terms of either its genres or its national origins; nevertheless, in spite of such British invaders as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, or Swedish superstars like ABBA and the Cardigans, the preponderant national power in global pop has been the United States.[38] It would be misleading to equate global pop with American pop, but few would deny the impact and influence of Billie Holiday, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, Michael Jackson, and Madonna in shaping a common soundscape around the world, especially among the youth of affluent countries. In popular music as in the world at large, for some time the indisputable lingua franca has been (American) English. But globalization is not mere Americanization or homogenization; counterglobalization, indigenization, and hybridization are all part and parcel of the dynamics shaping the world in general and popular music in particular. For our purposes here, the only salient point is that, as far as most contemporary

young South Koreans were concerned, the United States came to set the standard for popular music.

Another exception to the rule of the worldwide music industry's general confinement within national boundaries is the emergence of transnational regional stars. Eurovision, for example, operating as a pop-music adjunct to the European Union, creates pan-European stars.[39] In the case of these stars, the language of the lyrics and the style of the music are often global in character; that is, the songs are sung in English and are similar to the regnant genres of global/American pop music. There is, however, another transnationalizing modality, which is to domesticate or localize foreign singers and songs. In the case of South Korean popular music, the predominant method of transplantation has been to acculturate a South Korean singer to the Japanese norm, whether in terms of language or in terms of behavior. Ch'oe Kyu-yŏp/Hasegawa Ichirō and Yi Nan-yŏng/Oka Ranko are the most famous in a long line of ethnic Korean singers who made it to and in Japan; yet, as their Japanese stage names suggest, they were, save for their national origins, almost indistinguishable from their ethnic Japanese counterparts. During the postcolonial period, this pattern was repeated in the two countries' enthusiasm for the same sort of music: *enka* in Japanese, trot in Korean; different names, similar music. Musicians, trot or pop, borrowed from their counterparts across the sea, and singers and composers traveled across it.[40] And even if we exclude the Zainichi singers, there were some South Korean trot stars—Yi Sŏng-ae, Cho Yong-p'il, and Kye Ŭn-suk, among others—who were household names in Japan from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, the time of the boom in South Korean songs (though they all sang in Japanese, and in a genre that South Koreans considered Japanese).[41] Moreover, thanks to the karaoke boom of the early 1980s (the karaoke machine was invented in 1971), personal renditions of South Korean trot songs became fashionable among Japanese businesspeople.[42]

Thus, as we have seen, Korean musicians have been finding success in Japan almost since the beginning of Korean popular music. Even in the

inauspicious post–World War II period, when derogatory colonial attitudes toward Korea and Koreans were rife in Japan, some South Koreans in that country achieved remarkable success. And in both countries, the initial enthusiasm for popular music focused at times on the same songs and singers. It is difficult to overemphasize the geographical and cultural propinquity of Japan and South Korea. More than thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule in Korea, with the latter half pounding an extremely assimilationist note, ensured cultural convergence, if nothing else.[43] Japanese and South Koreans alike were instructed in the modern Japanese music curriculum, which disseminated adaptations of Western choral music and children's songs. Japanese as well as Korean people lived through the US occupation, and many Japanese and Koreans eagerly embraced American popular music (as did much of the rest of the world). In short, Japan and South Korea had similar soundscapes—and, given the considerable heterogeneity in tastes and styles that emerged in both countries by the twenty-first century, what stands out more than the distance between the two countries is the diversity within each one.

Beyond the success of trot music in Japan, some groups, such as the Kim Sisters, were a big hit in the United States, and other South Korean singers, such as Patti Kim, had modest followings in Las Vegas and elsewhere. They sought to acculturate to the American norm, singing in English and in styles that recalled other American singers. And in the mid-1980s, Kim Wan-sŏn, after failing to generate much excitement in Japan, caused a stir in Taiwan. But these successes pale in significance next to the global followings achieved by US pop-music sensations, and even the followings garnered by J-pop performers in Asia and elsewhere. J-pop's success abroad, as discussed later in this chapter, was largely demand-driven: avid, astute listeners sought interesting and intriguing tunes and created a subculture of fandom across East Asia (and beyond).[44] A South Korean music executive told me something similar about K-pop—that young people around the world had discovered South Korean popular music. Yet that account is distorted. The fact is, K-pop has not been a demand-driven, quasi-organic development; rather, it has been the object of a concerted

strategy for its exportation. That is, K-pop's success as an export reflects a long history of adapting South Korean singers to particular export markets.[45]

And so let us return to our earlier question, this time with renewed emphasis: *why* export this music? A common assumption, inside as well as outside the popular-music industry in South Korea, is that the domestic market is too small to be profitably sustained. Yet an OECD country whose population was 50 million in 2013 is by no means a small market; in fact, it is one of the larger domestic markets in the world (one that is, moreover, culturally and linguistically unified). And as we have already seen, not only has the popular-music industry in South Korea been thriving in the post-Liberation decades, South Korea has also become an affluent society with a youth market ready, willing, and able to consume popular culture in general, and popular music in particular. What I have been calling South Korea's export imperative, together with the conventional belief that the domestic market is small, appears to be the reflection not of any objective condition but rather of a bedrock belief that took hold during the period of rapid industrialization that began in the 1960s.[46] The embodiment of that belief was the strategy of export-oriented industrialization cemented during the Park regime, as economic growth became the panacea for mass discontent. Soon enough, the export imperative in turn became a foundational myth of South Korean political economy, giving rise to a master cultural reflex that meets any economic problem in contemporary South Korea with one simple idea: when in doubt, export.

The flip side of the export imperative was an equally zealous commitment to economic and cultural protectionism. Export-oriented industrialization required the acquisition and retention of reserves of foreign currencies, if only to purchase raw materials from abroad for production at home. In resource-poor South Korea, which lacked the fundamental fuels of industrialization, the chief comparative economic advantage was the country's relatively skilled but poorly remunerated workforce. But another essential tactic was to maximize foreign reserves by limiting their outflow. The economic-bureaucratic apparatus, in addition

to making vigilant efforts to prevent the exhaustion of its reserves of foreign currencies, sought to minimize imports of consumer goods. (One consequence of this policy, as we have seen, was the paucity of foreign records in South Korea, except for pirated copies, until the 1980s.) Besides curbing imports and preserving currency reserves, the government encouraged the consumption of domestic products, thus enhancing demand and achieving economies of scale in production. The economic logic of protectionism went hand in hand with Park's commitment to combating all manner of foreign pollution and corruption—communist, capitalist, and Confucian. As a result, South Korean cultural policy became xenophobic and protectionist in the 1960s. Foreign films, for example, were strictly regulated, a policy that not only preserved South Korea's foreign reserves but also prevented the populace from being exposed to alien ideas and practices, such as political radicalism or sexual deviance. As discussed in chapter 1, the Park regime's regulatory zeal extended to popular music as well. The motivation was not purely political but also economic.

All the same, until the twenty-first century the South Korean popular-music industry did not benefit either from the country's export orientation or from cultural protectionism. The Park regime remained indifferent, if not hostile, to popular culture (with some notable exceptions, such as wrestling), and its export-oriented economic policy was single-mindedly focused on industrial production (the heavier and the more technology-intensive, the better). That is, the popular-music industry could expect little economic support, and much less in terms of freedom from control and censorship. And if economics was about factories and machines, politics was all about power—the military, national security, and domestic repression. Culture, popular or not, was marginalized, invoked only in connection with nationalism. In the early 1980s, the Chun Doo-hwan regime's famous 3S policy offered few improvements for popular music, which at the time had little to do with screens, sex, or sports. And even when culture was discussed, both the Park regime and the Chun regime belittled the entertainment industry and reinforced the long-standing elite disdain for mere "mass culture."

Beyond governmental indifference or even antipathy toward popular culture lay a key obstacle to profitability: the government's unwillingness to protect copyrights. Otherwise scrupulous and zealous governmental regulators turned a blind eye to piracy and unauthorized duplication of books, movies, and records. After all, the South Korean economy in the 1960s and 1970s benefited greatly as the work of more advanced counterparts in other countries was (according to one's perspective) borrowed, learned from, or stolen outright by South Korean operators.[47] Thus, ironically, the myth of the small market increasingly became an actuality for the South Korean popular-music industry. In 2002, the market value of popular music in the United States was $12.6 billion, and in Japan it was $5.4 billion, but the figure for South Korea was only $296 million.[48] A disproportion of that magnitude cannot be explained by the larger populations of the United States and Japan, or even by the higher prices made possible in those countries by higher per capita income. Instead, it can be traced to the weakness of copyright protection in South Korea, and to the concomitant efflorescence of piracy, with its downward pressure on the prices of legitimately produced records. In the 1980s, even a casual visitor to Seoul could not have failed to notice the ubiquity of street peddlers hawking high-quality counterfeit CDs and DVDs (these have persisted to the present). Here, the contrast with Japan is striking: not only does the Japanese market now scrupulously heed copyright laws, the typical music CD also sells now at a fixed price that is sometimes four times the prevailing US retail average.

If the South Korean government and the popular-music industry had not already failed to affect popular sensibilities regarding copyright, any belated effort to do so would have been doomed by a major technological innovation in 1996: the introduction of digitized music and the mp3 player.[49] Almost immediately thereafter, the market in recorded music went into a tailspin, not just in South Korea but all around the world.[50] Furthermore, the South Korean government's now liberalized economic and cultural policies left the door open to greater foreign competition. In

1996, after Sŏ T'ae-ji wa Aidŭl's sudden disbandment, South Korea seemed poised to be inundated by pop-singing sensations from Japan and the United States, to the detriment of domestic performers. In 1998, Kim Dae-jung's visit to Japan coincided with an influx of J-pop that made South Korean celebrities out of Japanese stars like X Japan, Amuro Namie, and SMAP.[51] The coup de grâce was the 1997 IMF crisis. The recession that followed the Asian currency crisis of the previous year was compounded by IMF-imposed austerity measures in South Korea.[52] As noted in the interlude, the effect of the IMF's intervention was more than an economic downturn; it was a shock wave that reverberated through South Korean society and left a lasting scar, which cannot be explained exclusively in terms of unemployment and a stagnant economy. The IMF crisis shattered the widespread belief in rapid and continued economic growth. For the battered music industry, it underscored the urgency of cultivating new audiences and new markets. In short, the South Korean popular-music industry was in turmoil in the late 1990s.

But the economic conditions and constraints just described—South Korea's economic and cultural propensity for exports, a market that failed to ensure steady streams of profits, and the economic recession of the late 1990s—are not in themselves enough to explain the nature and direction of music exports from South Korea. After all, economic action, however embedded in social structure, is both voluntaristic (in that several, if not many, options and directions are possible) and often successful precisely because it is unpredictable (if consequences were obvious, many others would have taken the same action).[53] In South Korea, the willingness of new popular-music impresarios and entrepreneurs to step forward and gamble on a particular successful outcome has depended on a concatenation of background factors and, at least in retrospect, on a predilection for taking risks that is more or less coherent, if it does not quite rise to the level of a consistent strategy and vision.

And it is these new impresarios and entrepreneurs who are the source of the initiative to export South Korean popular music. Their business is

similar, of course, to all other businesses—they want to sell something that people want and are able to purchase—but not all production processes are isomorphic. Making hits and stars is different from making cars and trucks. The music industry remains resistant to the Fordist, top-down mode of mass production. The mature automobile market, as unpredictable as consumer demand may seem to the minds behind the latest models, exhibits enough stability to reward top-down decision making as well as the mass production that achieves production efficiency, cost effectiveness, and economic competitiveness. The same cannot be said of the music industry, where the competition is not so much over price (a teenage fan is unlikely to download a trot song, no matter how inexpensive it is) as over quality (by the standards of the targeted audience) and some level (however minimal) of innovation and inherent interest. Thus demand is unpredictable, but production still requires not only specific appreciation of a particular genre, with all its musical and extramusical conventions and practices, but also an uncanny sense of what's next. Every new single is a customized product, one that, even as a mere cover, needs a new composition and requires the assembly of singers and musicians, different types of designers, and a host of other professionals. By comparison with the automobile industry, the barriers to entry into the popular-music industry are much lower: what is needed is not so much sheer amounts of capital and advanced levels of technology as knowledge of popular music and access to talented musicians and other music makers. Particularly since the introduction of inexpensive computers and software, production processes have become financially and technologically accessible to an ever-larger circle and no longer depend on the studios that used to control the means of production. Even though popular music is often characterized as an output of the culture industry, it is in fact much more a craft product than a mass-manufactured commodity. The advantages of size, scale, and experience are much smaller in the popular-music industry than they are in automobile manufacturing or even in the manufacture of fast-changing mobile phones. And even a larger popular-music conglomerate still depends on production units that function relatively independently under

top-down decision makers, and that operate as small, craftlike enterprises. Therefore, the effective unit of production in popular music is a small studio or agency, even though it may be owned by a large conglomerate.

Apart from the relatively low barriers to entry into the popular-music industry, the economic crisis of the late 1990s actually proved to be a major boon to would-be insurgent entrepreneurs, especially small and new producers. Most important, progressive South Korean governmental policy countered excessive economic concentration with legislation that limited *chaebŏl* dominance. The quasi-monopolistic dominance of *chaebŏl,* which had extended from production to distribution, ended in 1998. Thus a new space for competition opened up in the South Korean popular-music industry. It is symptomatic of this development that the three largest K-pop agencies today were all launched just before the implementation of the anti-monopolistic policy: SM Entertainment in 1995, YG in 1996, and JYP in 1997. And it is no accident that all three had already been immersed in popular music, with exposure to global trends. Just as significant is the fact that the Kim Dae-jung regime sought to promote South Korean culture abroad, branding South Korea as a creative and innovative country (and not merely as a player in construction and heavy industry, or even in high-tech production). From tax breaks to outright subsidies, the governmental policy of soft-power promotion would serve to propel the Korean Wave around the world. By 2013, the government's budget for promoting the popular-music industry was reportedly $300 million, roughly the same amount as total turnover in the industry a decade earlier.[54] Finally, the introduction of new technologies—the digitization of music, starting in 1996, and, beginning in 2005, the ascent of YouTube and other Internet-based modes of music-video dissemination—gave a momentary advantage to newer labels and agencies. As intimated earlier, the emergence of a new format often accompanies the rise of a new musical genre; J-pop, for example, arose with the new CD format in the late 1980s.[55] The South Korean entrepreneurs—by using new Internet-based technologies to market a new musical style, and by devising a new business model that relied more on the Internet than on pressed records—made South Korea

the first country where sales of digitized music exceeded sales of music in nondigital formats.[56] Here again, the new entrepreneurs were willing to work with new technologies and new outlets and thus rode a wave that combined a new format with new content (that is, new genres and styles).[57]

By the first few years of the twenty-first century, the three major K-pop agencies had become the face of youth-oriented South Korean popular music. *Chaeböl,* after an initial exodus and hiatus from the entertainment industry, would re-enter the music market in the early years of the century, but only to promote received genres, ranging from trot to ballads, and focus on domestic sales; they were not a force for innovation or exportation. K-pop was created largely by entrepreneurial firms that had to expand abroad in order to prosper. Beyond the big three, other agencies produce and promote K-pop groups, such as DSP Entertainment (KARA), CUBE Entertainment (BEAST), and Nega Network (Brown Eyed Girls).[58] Being at once new and small, these agencies carved out a new market niche, and in so doing they ushered in the age of K-pop.

To answer, then, the question of why this music should be exported: almost every developed country has a domestic popular-music industry, but few countries have both the (presumed) need to find success abroad and the capacity for systematically generating accomplished acts that can appeal to audiences beyond national borders. Thus, after the crisis of the late 1990s, intense competition combined with the export imperative catapulted the new style, K-pop.

THE BUSINESS OF K-POP (IS BUSINESS)

The founders of the three most important K-pop agencies were or are musicians.[59] Therefore, it is tempting to seek a larger and deeper artistic vision behind K-pop. But that would be a mistake, for the logic of musical innovation followed the logic of the export imperative in particular, and of the profit motive in general. These K-pop impresarios were not farsighted

visionaries; they were simply in the right place at the right time, and they seized commercial opportunities rather than projecting their artistic vision. Money may be a horrid thing to follow, but it is a charming thing to meet and keep; it is the alpha and omega of K-pop.

The career of Lee Soo-man (Yi Su-man) and the trajectory of SM Entertainment exemplify the parameters of export-oriented K-pop, which Lee calls "culture technology."[60] As a student at the elite Seoul National University in the 1970s, Lee had attained renown as a folk singer and disc jockey. Given the period's regnant culture of anti-government activism, he positioned himself squarely as a progressive: against military rule and trot music. When he ran afoul of governmental authorities, he went abroad to study, and in 1980 he landed in Southern California, at California State University, Northridge. He shifted his major from agriculture to computer science—an obvious sign of the times—and also found his musical tastes profoundly shaken by his five-year stint in Northridge. From folk, his interest turned to dance pop and other genres of popular music that were thriving in the early 1980s in the United States. Above all, he absorbed the nascent and dynamic years of MTV. When Lee returned to South Korea, in 1985, he abandoned both agriculture and computers to enter the music industry. Over the next decade, he also jettisoned folk altogether in favor of producing and promoting newer sounds. At first he sought to reproduce the type of music that was then popular in the United States; as discussed in chapter 1, he found modest success with Hyŏn Chin-yŏng. Lee then changed his tack again and replaced MTV-inflected dance pop with Japanese idol pop, and here he found models in two groups that were extremely popular in Japan in the 1980s: Shōnentai (Boy Platoon) and Shōjotai (Girl Platoon). He may also have found some reassurance in the formula that had spawned New Kids on the Block and Backstreet Boys, whose US debuts had been in 1984 and 1993, respectively. After H.O.T.'s sensational success, Lee quickly trained and produced S.E.S. (1997), SHINHWA (1998), and Fly to the Sky (1998), all three of which found fans in South Korea as well as some spillover success in Chinese-language areas. These groups were largely for local consumption, however. It is

possible to see them as proto–K-pop groups, but their brand of bubblegum pop and their adorable but amateurish dance moves owe more to their 1980s-era Japanese counterparts and to that era's Sobangch'a than to contemporary K-pop acts (and, as I have argued, early and late SHINHWA are quite distinct music-cum-movement experiences).

It was in China that Lee first sought to capitalize on H.O.T.'s popularity, but his effort to cultivate the Chinese market in the late 1990s was a dismal failure, as noted earlier. And, again, the most significant impediment to success in China was the impossibility of establishing a viable business model in a market rife with piracy.[61] It was only after Lee's ill-fated venture in China that he created a South Korean version of J-pop, which would also prove popular in the sinophone market.

Toward the latter half of the decade between the years 2000 and 2010, two trends brought about a shift in SM Entertainment's strategy. As discussed earlier, JYP Entertainment, depending heavily on American innovations, provided the contemporary K-pop template in the form of Wonder Girls' "Tell Me." That song's explosive popularity in South Korea led others, including SM Entertainment, to take a leaf from the Wonder Girls' songbook. At the same time, the Korean Wave—the widespread popularity of South Korean television dramas across much of Northeast and Southeast Asia—had ensconced South Korea as a popular-culture powerhouse, legitimating it as a potent brand. SM Entertainment, buoyed by confidence and the resources from its Japanese successes, revised its strategy once again to export K-pop. Therefore, even Tongbang Sin'gi, as noted above, took an American turn around 2008, away from J-pop. SM Entertainment and other agencies, pushed by the export imperative and pulled by the large and lucrative export markets, began a more global drive with the contemporary K-pop formula.

Again, the K-pop formula is driven by market considerations, not artistic concerns; the logic of K-pop is the logic of capital. Perhaps an artistic principle underlay Lee's various shifts and turns, but it seems more reasonable to conclude that he was looking for commercial success. Indeed, almost every aspect of K-pop originates in business interests.

Consider, for example, the ensemble character of K-pop. In the beginning, it was an emulation of American and Japanese groups, but it became one of the defining features of South Korean popular music. There are solo performers, to be sure, but cold commercial logic sustains the group structure. Even a casual listener notices that K-pop's ensemble singing can sound surprisingly accomplished, whereas a similar level of accomplishment is much less common in a solo K-pop singer. That is, good singers who can work together are common enough; superb soloists are few and far between. What is true for singing is true for dancing as well. Precision choreography relies less on individual virtuosity than on trainable ensemble movements. To put this idea polemically, K-pop relies less on individual genius than on collective effort. Just as significant, not only is a solo performer at the mercy of individual ups and downs, she can also be in only one place at a time. But the group structure allows a K-pop act to thrive even in the absence of one or two of its members, who may be on leave for a television interview or for an appearance on a television drama. Given the desire to appeal to a large audience—not just in terms of particular tastes for facial features, qualities of voice, or types of physiognomy but also in terms of language skills—it behooves a producer to compose a relatively heterogeneous group (the point is not to have clones, or to have everyone speaking the same language). And the group structure, which obviates a reserve army of backup singers and dancers, is not only economically advantageous but also logistically expedient. A member who drops out can be replaced. In turn, if a group should fail to thrive, then its more promising members can join another group. Individuals, therefore, are pieces in the grand strategy of a K-pop impresario. Furthermore, the group members' collective existence of living and working together sustains morale and limits divalike perturbations. In addition, a solo performer lives or dies on her own, but a group can cultivate distinct subsets of fans. The intertwined lives of the group's members give rise to ongoing narratives about them, which fans can follow, speculate about, and discuss endlessly among themselves. Thus the group

structure provides a flexibility, efficiency, and reach that a solo act cannot easily offer.

Girls' Generation is exemplary in this regard. The K-pop formula is explicit, including catchy refrains, propulsive beats, and signature moves packaged and performed to perfection. The nine young women in the group —their precise selection was a protracted process—are all deemed physically attractive, but they also express a diversity of facial features and corporeal characteristics.[62] (They are nevertheless united by the group's signature feature of long, slim legs.) The group often releases the same song in four different languages. Although the musical arrangement and choreography are the same for each version, the group not only translates the lyrics into a local language (two of its members are fluent in Japanese, two more in Chinese, and another pair in English) but also makes a series of local adaptations, and discrete language sites are made available to individual fans as well as to various national fan clubs.

Commercial concerns also underlie the proliferation of subgroups. Super Junior, for example, has performed as Super Junior-M, Super Junior R.K.Y., Super Junior-Happy, and Super Junior T.[63] The idea, as with the China-oriented Super Junior-M, is to have the group come and go, to maximize its exposure (and producers' profits). Along this line of thinking, the latest trend has been to create multinational and multiethnic groups, not for the sake of political correctness but principally to extend their appeal to neighboring Asian countries. SM Entertainment promotes EXO, which debuted in 2012, as two subgroups, EXO-K and EXO-M, and these operate primarily in South Korea and in sinophone areas, respectively. The group 2PM includes Nickkhun, who is from Thailand, where K-pop is extremely popular.[64] There is a trend toward including ethnic Chinese performers in K-pop groups, such as f(x) and Miss A. The blatant appeal to co-ethnic affinity is a permutation of the foundational logic of K-pop.

Other features of the group structure also reflect the cold calculus of business. Given the profound popularity of Wonder Girls and Girls' Generation, it would seem obvious to produce all-girl groups. Yet the initial

motivation for forming them, at least according to a senior SM Entertainment executive, was because the South Korean military conscripts almost every male South Korean citizen for a minimum period of twenty-one months.[65] The draft, needless to say, strikes many idol singers in their prime, since they must enlist before they are thirty years old. The effects of universal male military service on the world of K-pop range from the short life of a boy band (and of a garage rock band, for that matter) to the emergence from military training of a masculinized rock star.[66] Thus SM Entertainment assembled girl groups, which are not subject to the problem of dissolution caused by compulsory military service.

In response to the nascent global demand for K-pop, the genre's stars differentiate themselves from the vast majority of American acts (beyond the obvious ethnonational distinctions) by projecting a polite suburban gentility beneath an edgy urban veneer. K-pop offers kinder, gentler versions of some of the more outré performers from the United States and elsewhere, but it also presents itself with a professional sheen. Once again, both elements—politeness and professionalism—are intended to appeal to a particular segment of the world music market. Certainly a significant slice of what is currently the largest market (Japan) and of what is likely to be the largest market in the future (China) seems smitten with the package. But the politeness and gentility (smiles rather than sneers), instead of reflecting a Confucian cultural trait, are the systematically cultivated expression of a calculated decision to appeal to the targeted audiences. It is possible to interpret this gentility as a matter of regional sensibility—as something along the lines of East Asian cultural conservatism. However, it is probably more reasonable to regard this presentation as an edginess that is not *too* edgy, a sexiness that is not *too* sexy, an urban quality that is not too "ghetto." Just as rock 'n' roll achieved mainstream acceptability in 1950s white America by shedding its mantle of "Negro" music, K-pop appropriates all the elements of urban American (often African American) sound, movement, and energy and tames—bleaches—them for popular consumption around the world.[67] And, as

diligently seductive and charismatic as K-pop stars are in performance, they present themselves as humble and modest. In addition, it does not take much exposure to K-pop performances to note the frequent nods and winks directed at viewers (supporters or customers, according to one's perspective). Made up and dressed up, K-pop stars nurture their fans and fan clubs, not only in concert and on websites but also in direct encounters.[68] In other words, they work as employees, not as self-regarding artists. Like solid professionals, they have been trained in the business of K-pop, which includes good customer service.

The most distinctive aspects of K-pop, in terms of the popular-music business, are its almost complete eschewal of the independent musician-artist, its embrace of the studio system to develop talent, and an extreme division of labor in the creation of songs and videos. The K-pop formula relies on a particular mode of production. The incubation system dedicated to spawning K-pop stars is a contemporary South Korean analogue of the famed Hollywood studio system.[69] Needless to say, all music agencies recruit talent and train their stars to some extent, but the K-pop system is extremely comprehensive. Agencies differ in their levels of organization and in their curricula, but there is a broad family resemblance across the agencies. The recruitment process is highly selective. SM Entertainment, for example, chooses about 1 trainee for every 1,000 applicants (other agencies claim roughly 1 acceptance for every 250 applicants). There are three classes of trainees: *chunbisaeng* (preparatory students), *yŏnsusaeng* (practicing students), and "project group" members. Those at the preparatory stage may still be young enough to attend primary school, and their participation may be a casual extracurricular activity. The second stage, that of practicing student, is much more serious; here, the aspirant may spend five or more years training to be a K-pop star. At least four of the nine members of Girls' Generation spent more than six years as *yŏnsusaeng*.[70] Because many of the *yŏnsusaeng* attend school, they can take part in training only in the afternoons, and they often end up returning home on the last train, around midnight. They may spend up to twelve or

more hours every day in group and individual lessons, in every sphere deemed necessary for K-pop stardom—singing, dancing, foreign languages, etiquette, and so on. A JYP executive claimed that the agency's training center offers sixty-seven different subjects. The regime is akin to that of a well-disciplined military camp or a training institute for Olympic athletes. According to several *yŏnsusaeng,* the most nerve-racking routine is the monthly examination in which each trainee's progress is judged. After three to five years (the full range seems to be from two to eight years), the most promising *yŏnsusaeng* are organized into project groups preparing to launch their professional careers. An SM executive claims that perhaps 5 percent of the trainees turn professional. Even at the project-group stage, individuals drop out for a number of reasons; for example, one potential member of Girls' Generation joined another group, T-ara, whereas another decided to pursue academics and was admitted to the prestigious Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (the MIT of South Korea).[71] The agency invests heavily in its trainees, spending an average of about $300,000 per person—roughly twice the average annual income of a college graduate—over a five-year period. The money goes not only to musical instruction and dancing lessons but also to plastic surgery and other efforts to enhance the attractiveness of the final product.

After his or her debut, the K-pop professional inhabits a total institution. In spite of their fame and their fan clubs, K-pop stars live together, often sharing bedrooms, and they work without much free time. One K-pop star claimed that the lack of personal freedom and free time meant that the only readily available source of entertainment was to "hang out with other K-pop stars." Thus the widely publicized life of a K-pop star seems more like the life of a low-wage foreign migrant worker than like the life of the proverbial rock star. According to a governmental report, the average salary of a K-pop performer was about $10,000 per annum, but music executives point out that they have invested a great deal in making their trainees into stars and continue to cover all their considerable expenses.[72] Poor remuneration and adverse conditions have led to lawsuits that have entangled agencies and stars.

The heart of the popular-music industry is planned obsolescence, and the same principle is central to K-pop's star-maker machinery. Just as no music producer can expect a hit to keep selling after months on the charts, SM Entertainment and other agencies are not betting that any of their acts will survive beyond five years or so. In spite of the agencies' relatively heavy investments of money and time, they assume that rapidly changing tastes will render even the most successful group passé after a while. In South Korea, given the stiff competition and the constant streaming of songs, it has become rare for any song to hold the top spot on the charts for more than a week. As each act struts its short half-life upon the stage—and lucky are those who debut and then stay in business for even a year—the factory keeps on churning out new acts. Music fashions change, markets may change, and all these permutations are part and parcel of the strategic vision of SM Entertainment and its peers.

To be sure, there are other avenues of popular-music stardom in South Korea. Several well-publicized audition programs exist. Arts high schools and special majors at several universities prepare students for careers in musical entertainment; Rain and SE7EN are graduates of the renowned Anyang Arts High School. Other stars are simply found by talent scouts and record executives. However, because K-pop is essentially an oligopoly (though this situation may change in the future), there is currently only one royal road to K-pop stardom: the training institute of one of the major K-pop agencies. The agencies also seem to be expanding their influence; in 2009, for example, SM Entertainment was instrumental in establishing Hallim Entertainment Arts High School.

Given the realities—an oligopolistic industry, with few competitive entertainment agencies; the weakness of the independent music scene; the industry's intimately intertwined elements—and the lack of viable alternatives, most K-pop stars are doomed to live out their short careers in thrall to their managers. And, apart from military conscription and other reasons for ending a career, there are the challenging and demanding working conditions. The stars work long hours without any sustained rest or relaxation, in a state of semipermanent sleep deprivation. The physical

demands—constant training, vigorous dancing, incessant traveling—also lead to physical injury and illness, not to mention mental stress.

In this regard, the ethos behind the stars' impeccable public behavior is less Confucian than authoritarian. K-pop stardom is hardly a charmed life. Its fragility can be gauged by the plethora of suicides among successful performers.

The success of K-pop as an export is not merely about the thorough training of singer-dancers but also about the assembly of high-caliber professionals. Whether we look at Hyundai Sonata or Samsung Galaxy, South Korean corporations have brought together technically proficient individuals—at times foreign experts, but more often nationals trained at top universities abroad, usually in the United States—who seek to emulate and, over time, to supersede the leading brands and models. Although there is a strong desire for insourcing, or doing everything in house, the reality in K-pop is that outsourcing is constant. K-pop producers seek to hire world-class artists and professionals to do everything from writing lyrics and composing music to choreographing and costuming; Swedish popular-music composers in particular are highly desired by K-pop agencies that seek global acceptance. In addition, given South Korea's drive to be a world center of fashion and design, the South Korean popular-music industry draws on domestic (and, at times, foreign) talent in fashion and even CD sleeve design. K-pop agencies are blessed with an oversupply of highly trained musicians and entertainment-industry professionals, many of whom have studied and worked abroad as performers, composers, choreographers, stage managers, and so on. The agencies also draw on the far-flung populations of the South Korean diaspora.

Production in and of itself is incomplete, of course, without distribution and marketing. A corporation like Hyundai or Samsung, before it establishes brand recognition (that is, a mark of sheer visibility but also of reliable reputation), spends enormous energy and money on establishing links to local distributors, marketers, advertisers, and allied professionals. Quite often, such a corporation extends extremely advantageous deals, and not just pecuniary rewards, in order to crack a particular national market.

Much the same can be said of SM Entertainment and other agencies, which perforce rely on foreign partners who have access to distribution and promotion mechanisms that are often idiosyncratic to the countries in question. K-pop agencies seek close collaboration with local promoters, and with the prevailing modes of operation in local markets. For example, contemporary East Asian business practices are characterized by the rhetoric of human relations, and K-pop agencies devote considerable time and energy to cultivating their business partners and counterparts. Many resources are expended on encounters with these partners, who are offered not only elaborate and expensive meals and drinks but also sexual entertainment.[73] By offering financial incentives for local promoters to sell K-pop, K-pop agencies frequently sacrifice short-term profits in favor of longer-term gains. One high-level executive said that though the usual split is fifty-fifty, his agency was willing to strike a "crazy" deal that gave 90 percent of first-year profits to a Japanese partner.[74] These and other aspects of South Korean business practices are in fact deeply influenced by Japanese business customs and conventions.[75] This aggressive courting of local partners has inevitably generated criticism of K-pop agencies' business practices.[76]

Localization strategy remains a cardinal feature of K-pop marketing. Most agencies are acutely conscious of the distinct demands of different national markets. In this regard, K-pop's success in Japan is indistinguishable from the K-pop agencies' concerted efforts to adapt to the particularities of the large but challenging Japanese market. For example, the CEO of SM Entertainment, who grew up in Japan and is fluent in Japanese, is, not surprisingly, keenly aware of the necessity of heeding Japanese conventions. And not only are there Japanese-language websites for fans, and lessons in Japanese language and culture for K-pop performers, these websites and lessons also hew closely to the prevailing conventions of the Japanese popular-music industry, ranging from elaborate packaging (including gifts added to packaged CDs and DVDs) to active cultivation of devoted fans and fan clubs. Whereas South Korean

fans employ the language of kinship to address the stars, their Japanese counterparts purchase large amounts of fan-club paraphernalia and generate a distinct subculture.[77] In short, market research and local knowledge contribute, in however small a measure, to the dissemination of K-pop in Japan.

Yet another critical component of K-pop marketing is its embrace of the Internet and social media. In the post–World War II decades, the classic route to pop-music success in the United States or Japan was performing at local venues and seeking airplay on local radio stations, thus generating record sales. K-pop acts take part in these received activities, but the emphasis has been less on promoting the sale of physical CDs than on eliciting downloads of digitized music. More recently, much of K-pop marketing has been taking place on YouTube and has relied on social media to disseminate K-pop content, a process that leads both to royalties, however limited, and to loyalty among the fans who purchase paraphernalia, attend concerts, and contribute to other sources of income. The explosive growth of YouTube, social media, and smart-phone use between 2005 and 2010 was especially important in making K-pop a pan-Asian and, indeed, global phenomenon.

Here again, K-pop was in a favorable position. In the years that followed the 1997 IMF crisis, one of the major governmental initiatives was to embrace and enhance the digital economy. After Kim Dae-jung's Cyber Korea 21 program proposed a massive expansion of Internet infrastructure, by 2002 South Korea had become the country with the world's most extensive broadband penetration.[78] Beginning in 2000, the website Soribada experienced explosive growth as a file-sharing site, one that, after a government crackdown, transmogrified into an extremely successful music-download and subscription service. By 2003, all the major South Korean producers of cell phones had incorporated mp3 players into their devices, thus anticipating iTunes and Spotify. By 2011, more than 20 million South Koreans (in a country of 50 million) owned smart phones. Thus South Korea's early adoption of digital technology not only brought a crisis to the South Korean popular-music industry but also paved the way

for a new mode of music dissemination. In short, South Korea was something of a pioneer in the brave new world of the digitized information economy, and the country was therefore in a position to benefit from the new way of conducting the music business.[79]

It would be a mistake, however, to characterize K-pop agencies as either purely entrepreneurial or strictly formal-rational organizations. K-pop agencies, like the film studios of Hollywood's golden age, are extremely organized in disciplining their stars-in-the-making—but, again like the old Hollywood studios, they are also rather capricious and idiosyncratic in their decision making, as a consequence of the charismatic authority accorded to founder-entrepreneurs and of the general cultural propensity for hierarchical management in South Korea.[80] Many elements of the South Korean entertainment-business model also exist in the United States (recruitment and training of stars, and so on). Despite certain similarities, however, the business model in the world of K-pop entertainment is in many ways antipodal to that in the world of US entertainment (for example, a US agency typically "represents" its "talent"). Moreover, in the ideal type of US arrangement, the aesthetic autonomy of the performers is valorized.[81] In addition, aspiring performers under the US model manage and assume the course and costs of preparing for their own careers, whereas a K-pop agency insources the career-preparation process. This is not to say that K-pop stars are powerless and mindless puppets of producers' vision and incubation but rather that the K-pop industry's structure privileges producers over performers. In short, then, K-pop emerged from a South Korean version of the old Hollywood studio system. It is predicated not on faith in the artist's autonomy but on extreme division of labor and massive dispersion of expertise. The production agency creates acts and songs from diverse sources, and the agency's performers, after years of in-house training, ultimately execute what has been conceived for them. The "K" in K-pop has more to do with *Das Kapital* than with Korean culture or tradition.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL TRANSFORMATIONS

A studio system does not exist in a vacuum. It must have the means to populate and sustain itself, and it must be able to sell its products beyond its national market. By the turn of the millennium, both of these preconditions were in place for the K-pop system.

A studio system, no matter how perfectly conceived and executed, cannot recruit potential stars in a country devoid of talent, or in a culture that devalues talent—and, as it happens, contemporary South Korea has a large reserve army of potential K-pop stars. In the affluent South Korea of recent decades, popular entertainment has entailed not just listening passively to professional singers but also actively performing in quotidian settings. Although *noraebang*—specialized establishments for karaoke singing—did not open in South Korea until 1991, the karaoke machine, invented in Japan in 1971, had already become a household fixture as well as a ubiquitous feature of bars, churches, restaurants, and virtually every other kind of establishment where South Koreans congregate. Communal singing at family gatherings and religious rituals or in public places is hardly unique to South Korea. As noted in chapter 1, Koreans learned to sing choral songs from Western-inspired musical educators and Christian missionaries. Furthermore, people often entertain themselves by performing music, and in East Asia singing certainly occupies a major role in that regard. Yet South Korea is remarkable for the way in which the primary postprandial entertainment seems to require heading to the nearest *noraebang.* Of the scores of suppers I have had in South Korea over the past two decades, I can hardly recall a single instance in which this second stage (*ich'a*) was not suggested, and almost always at an establishment where singing was compulsory. To be sure, television viewing remains a default mode of evening entertainment for adults at home (precollege students are busily studying, by and large, at *hagwŏn,* the so-called cram schools), and almost every South Korean seems to be staring incessantly at one screen or another, but it remains the norm for urban work colleagues to eat dinner together and possibly engage in a spot

of drinking. The night out (more common during the week than on the weekend) tends not to be just about drinking and conversing (even imbibing without simultaneously eating is uncommon) or dancing or other escapades, and the typical destination, across all age groups, is the *noraebang.* Indeed, *noraebang* culture is hegemonic, forcing nearly everyone to participate in a collective songfest (even as many South Koreans insist that they hate doing so). Yi Ch'ang-dong's 2007 film *Miryang* (Secret sunshine) captures the inextricable intertwinement of everyday life and singing in contemporary South Korea, whether one is crooning alone at home (accompanied by a karaoke machine) or with friends at a local *noraebang.* Thus did South Korea become a nation of singers, and the singers perform mainly pop songs. It is also not uncommon for young people (and even some old ones) to reproduce K-pop dance steps in public. Furthermore, there are innumerable televised auditions for identifying potential stars, and they are some of the most-watched shows.[82] At any rate, as far as the supply of potential South Korean singing stars is concerned, there appears to be, in a word, a surplus.

The sheer scale of this supply is inadequate in and of itself, of course; after all, if South Koreans were still singing trot songs, these potential stars' international appeal would be largely restricted to Japan. But the South Korean soundscape, at least for people born after the struggles of the Park years, has become firmly and naturally Western. Whether we look at standard sartorial habits or the dominant discourse about life and love, young South Koreans' adherence to Western and specifically American norms would be difficult to deny (much as that adherence *is* constantly denied). The Confucian ideology that devalued singers—recall the abysmally low status of *p'ansori* singers, or the attempted and successful suicides among the first Korean stars in the colonial period (see chapter 1)—has waned significantly, to the point where, by the early 2010s, the most desirable occupation for a young South Korean girl had become that of singer or K-pop star. Although a survey of preteens and teenagers about what they would like to be when they grow up is hardly predictive of their future occupations, responses to a survey can strongly suggest what is

popular and admired at the moment. What is more relevant for would-be K-pop stars is that some parents now encourage their children to pursue careers in K-pop, just as eager mothers (and the occasional father) have sought to enhance their children's performance at school, or perhaps in classical music.[83]

We should also take note of the particular nexus of schooling and employment in South Korea. Given the salience of entrance examinations for matriculation at an elite university—and admission to an elite university is widely believed to guarantee an elite job in a corporation or in government—"diploma disease" has spread as an incapacitating condition of life for many young South Koreans. Although school classrooms are now less martial and intimidating than in the past, many children find themselves going to school after school: *hagwŏn.* Facile commentators have been eager to trace this phenomenon to the Chinese meritocratic examination system (*kagyo* in Korean), but the system of cram schools is in fact more of a modern Japanese invention, which South Koreans have emulated. Meanwhile, young people, devoid of free time and entertainment, find that popular music serves as one of the few respites they can enjoy privately or with peers. Even more striking is the fact that, because few viable employment opportunities exist for those who are left out of the paper chase, K-pop stardom has become the South Korean dream, a beckoning and lucrative opportunity for young, non–university-bound South Koreans, particularly since there have been few visible outlets for independent musicians in South Korea, unlike in the United States or Japan, with their respective garage-band and live-music (*raibu*) scenes.

Moreover, South Koreans have undergone a physical metamorphosis as they have become taller and, at least by the standards of Western pop culture, more attractive.[84] This is to say nothing about the ubiquity of plastic surgery.[85] The traditional Confucian mores sharply condemned alterations to the face and body bestowed by one's parents, but conventions shifted so rapidly that by the 1990s it was becoming more and

more acceptable to undergo facial cosmetic surgery, whether to make one's eyes appear larger and more vivid by the construction of so-called double eyelids (accomplished with an incision of the encephalic fold) or to make one's nose more shapely and distinct.[86] The widespread yearning to be beautiful (or at least not ugly) became enshrined as something of a basic human right. The 2006 film *Sigan* (Time), by Kim Ki-duk (Kim Ki-dŏk), emblematically captures this pervasive South Korean turn toward cosmetic enhancement. As one measure of this rapid change, in 2000 there was still a public outcry when the actress Pak Nam-ju (Park Nam Joo) acknowledged having gone under the knife, but in the early 2010s such a revelation is no longer major news.[87] The past few years have seen a series of K-pop stars reveal their past cosmetic improvements.[88] According to one survey of Seoul women between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine, more than 61 percent had undergone some form of plastic surgery, and more than 77 percent said that they needed some form of artificial enhancement.[89] Indeed, South Korea is a world leader in plastic surgery, in terms of both medical practice and popular consumption.[90] The proliferation of makeovers in physical appearance, fashion, and everyday demeanor has made the wealthy Gangnam area a place that strikes outsiders as a hotbed of fashion models and movie stars. (On a South Korean television show, a young Thai woman gushed, "I have never seen an ugly woman in Gangnam.")

In fact, changing aesthetics have permeated every dimension of South Koreans' appearance. In the matter of hairstyles, for example, the 1980s were a time when the rules were simple and finite. Boys had crew (or near crew) cuts; lengths varied, but almost all men had well-trimmed hair. Girls had straight hair; women permed their hair and kept it short. Long, straight hair was extremely rare (and an identifying mark of Japanese girls and women who were in South Korea). Some women had more hair than others, but the color scheme was black and blacker—a point of traditional pride for Korean women.[91] Then, in the mid-1990s, the rules became confusing and complex; lengths, styles, cuts, and colors began to vary. The

changes are evident in music videos: if it was hard to find dyed hair before the year 2000, it was very hard to find undyed hair just a few years later. In the late 1980s, young Japanese tourists with dyed blond hair prompted exclamations that such a thing would never be seen in South Korea; today in Seoul, it has become reasonable to assume that young women who haven't dyed their hair are most likely not South Korean.

Until the 1980s, in the name of Confucian tradition, sartorial and sexual modesty were the unquestioned norm in South Korea. In roughly the same way that American television audiences of the 1950s saw Elvis Presley as indecent, the performer Kim Wan-sŏn, who was almost always fully clad, was often considered obscene in the mid-1980s, but two decades later she would have seemed quite modest, if not altogether quaint. South Korea became much more open in the post-Liberation era, as described in chapter 1; it was the dark decades of military rule that made Kim's clothing and dancing seem so risqué, so un-Korean. In contrast, the conservative Lee Myung-bak regime went so far as to promote K-pop as one aspect of South Korean soft power, at a time when K-pop was even more un-Confucian in appearance. The onslaught of US popular culture—in the generalized context of sexualized bodies and sexual imagery—shaped South Korean tastes, from movies to music videos. Before the 1980s, even a chaste kiss was seldom seen on screen, but quasi-pornographic scenes proliferated thereafter. Greater bodily exposure and sexual suggestiveness were slower to appear in popular-music shows and videos because, unlike movies, they were open to South Koreans of all ages. Singers, especially women, remained reluctant even to show bare arms and legs until the 1990s, but after the advent of Yi Hyo-ri Syndrome, in 2003, exposing the body became the norm, however delayed its emergence.

Apart from domestic transformations, K-pop's trans-Korean success was predicated on changes beyond the Korean peninsula. To paint with a broad brush here, the making of modern national identity in East Asia in the twentieth century was coeval with the creation of national popular culture. Notwithstanding the hybrid and transcultural origins of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean popular music, much of each nation's popular music was sung

in that nation's language, by actual or presumed ethnic natives of that country.[92] Certainly South Korean popular music had an ethnic Korean veneer.[93] Soft xenophobia was one facet of the phenomenon of national popular music, but a more important factor was the interest of a nascent national audience (sustained by family and friendship circles and by a nationalized mass media) in listening mainly to popular music sung in the nation's language; thus national audiences made stars of their co-ethnics.[94] Musicians and producers found inspiration and examples from everywhere in composing and performing popular music. Yet much of Northeast and Southeast Asia was not only impoverished but also protectionist. Foreign popular music, when not censored or heavily taxed, long remained a luxury good. In the post–Cold War period, many of the conditions that had sustained national popular music became weakened. The collapse of state socialist societies went hand in hand with the financial and economic globalization that sought to eliminate nationalist barriers, including economic and cultural protectionism. There were also related efforts to protect copyrights, to market music across national borders, and to denationalize and globalize popular music. Rapid advances in the technological means of reproducing music—above all, the creation of the World Wide Web and the development of web browsers, which led in turn to the diffusion of digitized music—accentuated this political-economic-cultural globalization and convergence, at least among the affluent nations of the world.

Furthermore, the socioeconomic conditions that made it possible to consume popular culture spread across Northeast and Southeast Asia. Here we see many of the same trends that established popular music in colonial Korea, such as urbanization, industrialization, and the rise of the middle classes and youth culture. And not only did the economic and political preconditions exist, increasingly affluent Asians had also been schooled in the musical competence and cultural sensibilities associated with Americanized popular music, an education that entailed familiarity with the Western soundscape and the domain of recent American popular

music as well as with its cultural assumptions, ranging from its rhetoric and poetics to its valorization of romantic love. The inevitable companion of financial globalization was global consumerism, or the globalization of consumption.[95] In brief, South Korea's neighboring countries, in addition to Europe and much of Latin America, were ready for something like K-pop.

Consider the Japanese attitude toward South Korean popular culture. As we have seen, Japanese listeners had been receptive to ethnic Korean singers since the colonial period. This convergence of musical taste undoubtedly helped, as did numerous points of physical, linguistic, and cultural similarity. Yet the success of trot/*enka* singers notwithstanding, it had long been believed, as discussed earlier, that mainstream Japanese listeners would resist and reject Korean singers. From roughly the mid-1980s on, however, South Korea's dynamic economy and democratic politics, as well as the nation's cultural resurgence, steadily enhanced the general image of South Korea in Japan.[96] The 2002 World Cup, which South Korea and Japan jointly hosted, would prove to be something of a turning point. In 2003, with the spectacular success of the television soap opera *Uintā sonata* (The winter sonata; *Kyŏul yŏn'ga* in Korean) the Korean Wave (Kanryū) swept over Japan. The powerful trend of obsessive fandom, especially endemic among middle-aged women, was acute enough to generate a countertrend: the Counter-Korean Wave (Ken-Kanryū).[97] This was fueled less by older Korea-haters than by younger Japanese men seemingly troubled that "their" women (usually older sisters or mothers) were expressing unabashed enthusiasm for South Korean stars, such as Pae Yong-jun (Bae Yong-jun, widely called Yon-sama in Japan). But even Counter-Korean Wave activists were loath to engage in outright racist discourse, and their ineffectuality can easily be gauged by the continuing popularity in Japan today of South Korean TV dramas (often aired in the original Korean, with Japanese subtitles). Even a casual visitor to South Korea is bound to notice groups of Japanese women who are making pilgrimages to the filming locations for their favorite dramas; hundreds of

Japanese fans attended the funeral of one of the stars of *The Winter Sonata,* but hardly any South Korean followers were present.[98] By the time that KARA and Girls' Generation found success in Japan, in the guise of K-pop, South Korean popular culture was already a well-recognized, well-respected brand in Japan.

Beyond Japan, K-pop has a significant following in the Chinese-language spheres as well as in Southeast Asia, especially Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. In Europe and Latin America, however, despite pockets of enthusiasm, K-pop is hardly a commanding presence. Yet it is remarkable that K-pop should have any fans at all in Paris or Lima beyond those cities' expatriate or diasporic Korean (and possibly East Asian) communities. To be sure, the explosive enthusiasm that "Gangnam Style" generated across the world in 2012 cannot be gainsaid, but it remains to be seen whether Psy or his coterie will experience a systematic breakthrough in the largest and most competitive market: the United States. In fact, one major OECD country where "Gangnam Style" failed to go viral is Japan, where K-pop's popularity is second only to its popularity in its native South Korea, and so it's possible that K-pop will instead remain a niche genre across Europe and the Americas.[99] This speculation is strengthened by K-pop fans in Japan who see Psy as neither hot nor cool and thus as not really belonging to K-pop. At the same time, as Psy's success has demonstrated, South Korean popular music is bigger than the contemporary K-pop formula.

THE PLACE OF JAPAN AND J-POP

We have already considered some of the reasons why K-pop became a South Korean export. The success of K-pop in Japan and elsewhere raises another question: why didn't J-pop generate a following in South Korea and beyond? To focus, for the moment, on South Korea, the continuing ban on Japanese cultural exports in that country—a ban lifted more or less completely in 2004—blocked overt public performances of J-pop, such as on television or radio shows. Even as recently as the last several years,

several clerks in CD stores told me that they were wary of playing J-pop songs, for fear of anti-Japanese men stridently denouncing these clerks and the stores for their collusion with Japanese colonialists. At the same time, however, Japanese popular music has long been widely available and popular in South Korea. For example, Ishida Ayumi's "Blue Light Yokohama," a captivating 1968 hit, could be heard across South Korea in the 1970s.[100] In the 1980s, Itsuwa Ayumi's "Koibito yo" (Lover) and Anzen Chitai's string of melodious love ballads became difficult to avoid, as evinced by the large circulation of pirated CDs available in Seoul and elsewhere.[101] In the 1990s as well, despite the shift to American music, J-pop still had a large following in South Korea; indeed, South Korean performers openly emulated, performed, and at times lifted J-pop tunes. (As already mentioned, murmurs of a J-pop invasion of South Korea were sounded in the late 1990s, when the South Korean popular-music industry was in crisis.)

One might also ask why J-pop did not conquer East Asia in general. It would be easy to invoke the memory of Japanese military aggression, which kindles nationalist passions. In spite of occasional flare-ups of jingoism, however, anti-Japanese sentiment cannot account for J-pop's limited penetration into East Asia.[102] Neither does it make much sense to insist on the musical shortcomings of J-pop, J-pop singers, or performers in other Japanese popular-music genres. Rather, we should look to the involuted character of post–Cold War Japan, which became an affluent, culturally differentiated society.[103] However diverse South Korean musical culture may be, it is still no match for Japan when it comes to the range of musical genres, the enthusiasm of the fans, and the propensity for participating in making music. That is, K-pop is the name of the game in South Korean popular music, but Japan has many different games in play. Contemporary Japan is a realm of subcultures and a culture of *otaku,* a term that surfaced in the late 1970s to signify the fanatical followers of science-fiction manga and anime but was soon applied to those with any type of avid subcultural interest.[104] It is an archipelago that exhibits

Galapagos Syndrome: the existence of distinct ecological niches, which generate flora and fauna of popular culture that occur nowhere else in the world.[105] Furthermore, the Japanese popular-music industry, which experienced a decade of rapid growth after the introduction of CDs in the early 1980s, became intimately intertwined with indigenous broadcast television, and thus with corporate sponsorship.[106] In this context, there has been a powerful inward pull toward satisfying the large domestic market as opposed to seeking risky export opportunities. In other words, Japan's large domestic market creates a disincentive for music exports. Following the money has meant staying in Japan.

J-pop arose along with the new audience for popular music, which in turn arose from the spread of digital music in the form of CDs, and from the availability of relatively inexpensive CD players starting in the mid-1980s.[107] The record-buying audience became younger and more dominated by women, a circumstance that led, predictably, to the rise of singers who appealed to the new customer base.[108] Songs were often written in *katakana* (Japanese script used for foreign words) or even in Roman script, a practice that K-pop adopted. J-pop also anticipated K-pop in absorbing R & B, dance pop, and other American and world music trends in the 1990s. The music, because it appealed to younger listeners, immediately became distinct from older Japanese popular music as well as from Western (especially American) pop music: it was more upbeat, faster, and louder than the older Japanese music but less upbeat, slower, and quieter than mainstream American pop-rock.[109] J-pop was mellower music, often sung at a high pitch but incorporating melisma and other characteristics of African American singing.[110] Despite some generic characteristics, it would be misleading to overgeneralize about J-pop. For example, PUFFY, a popular late-1990s group, instantiates postmodern pop music with its lyrics and compositions, which often recapitulate and incorporate the very history of popular music. Amuro Namie has infused mainstream J-pop with an Okinawan sound.[111] The so-called Queen of J-pop, Hamamura Ayumi, carries the mantle of Matsutoya Yumi and

Nakajima Miyuki, two vocalists of feminine sensibility. There are also numerous idol singers and bands—Utada Hikaru and Arashi, for example, or EXILE and L'Arc~en~Ciel—with interesting and innovative hits, some of which have spread J-pop well beyond the Japanese archipelago.

Diverse though J-pop may be, its insistent undercurrents and idiosyncrasies render it distinct from American and global pop, and it was a sense of pride in this reality, not a sense of the new genre's being inferior to or derivative of foreign popular music, that led to its name.[112] But, as with the popularity of "Western food" (*yōshoku*) in Japan, no one can say that J-pop is in any way traditionally Japanese, and yet it is difficult to find J-pop outside Japan except where Japanese people congregate. The group AKB48—in the lineage of Onyanko Kurabu (Kitty Club), which was exceedingly popular in the late 1980s—is emblematic in this respect and is easily the most popular group in contemporary Japan.[113] Its members, all demonstrably amateurs, are chosen by fans, who become eligible to vote in an annual election by buying CDs (voting proceeds on the principle that one purchased CD affords one vote). The top vote getters are the ones who perform onstage in any one year. As for the annual election, which entails campaigns featuring handshakes with potential voters, it has become a national media circus that makes newspaper headlines. The democratic character of AKB48 is of a piece, alas, with the rather demotic nature of the performers and performances; in spite of some talent and training, they are not particularly skilled at singing, dancing, or playing musical instruments.[114] Indeed, it is said that they are not particularly beautiful, either; beauty, it is also said, would "threaten" fans who prefer "cute" girls—that is, the proverbial girls next door. Nevertheless, the group's popularity is nothing short of sensational. In fact, the title of a book about the group's leading member asks whether she has transcended Jesus.[115] What sustains the group's phenomenal popularity is that its members are the stars of their own long-running social drama, which in turn relies on extensive marketing that uses physical contact (the aforementioned campaigns and handshakes) and social media.[116] The overwhelmingly

male fan base idolizes and idealizes these girls, who resonate with the dominant Japanese *kawaii* (cute) aesthetic à la Hello Kitty.[117] AKB48 fans, somewhat like television viewers who immerse themselves in long-running soap operas or reality shows, avidly follow the vicissitudes of the cast of characters; that is, extramusical contexts and offstage narratives entangle AKB48 and the group's fan base. But the group is illegible to cultural outsiders, who are merely baffled by its popularity.[118] Moreover, although the concept of AKB48 is itself eminently exportable, the reality of moderately attractive, middling singer-dancers can hardly be expected to generate much enthusiasm outside Japan.

Elsewhere in Asia, as well as in Europe, there is a cultlike devotion to Japanese manga, anime, and video games that is not a consequence of governmental policy or corporate ambition; rather, it is largely a demand-led phenomenon known as "Cool Japan," the Japanese equivalent of the Korean Wave. But until quite recently the Japanese government was strident in its dismissal of popular culture in general and manga in particular. Almost no one—not government bureaucrats, musical promoters, or popular singers themselves—sought to promote or export Japanese popular culture.[119] The contrast here to the South Korean government of the twenty-first century could not be more pronounced. But Japan's inward orientation is not a long-standing cultural characteristic; post–World War II economic growth in Japan was, like its counterpart in South Korea, led by export-oriented industrialization. After Japan's bubble of property-led speculation burst, in 1991, the country entered a period of stasis. One of its manifestations was a general disinclination to return to an export-oriented growth strategy and society. Japanese businesspeople had long bemoaned the country's small market, but now they found it big enough, and adequate to their modest aims.

Finally, the intensely competitive global music market, which prizes what is cool or hot, demands perpetual innovation and superior quality. In the first decade of the 2000s, while K-pop was forging a distinct style, J-pop was rehashing established genres and routines. Neither a strong infusion

of hip-hop, as in BIGBANG, nor the powerful combination of compelling refrains and memorable dance routines that marks K-pop groups, such as KARA, appeared in or affected J-pop, which is precisely why those K-pop acts were so popular in Japan.[120] In other words, the factor of aesthetic innovation, at least from the standpoint of fans, cannot be overlooked in any analysis of why J-pop has not spread outside Japan, especially since the same factor has played such a major role in propelling K-pop to the status of a transnational phenomenon.

THE AESTHETICS, BRANDING, AND CHARACTER OF K-POP

K-pop, as we have seen, is a commercial product, an output of the South Korean culture industry that seeks to satisfy consumers. It has no overriding cultural, aesthetic, political, or philosophical agenda—or even any ambitions along those lines. At least in intent, K-pop is not about art, beauty, sublimity, or transcendence. The business of K-pop is simply business. Even so, K-pop is not just an interesting social phenomenon; it is also an aesthetic achievement. It may seem paradoxical that a thoroughly commercialized music, geared to ephemeral enthusiasm, should prove to have aesthetic virtues, but the same mercenary impulse did not preclude the triumphs of a Mozart or a Verdi. To say that the alpha and omega of K-pop is crass commercialism is not to deny that it can also be physically attractive as well as artistically accomplished. But before we examine K-pop's interesting and innovative aspects, let us pause to thoroughly absorb its profoundly commercial character.

As I have been arguing, K-pop is a post–Sŏ T'ae-ji wa Aidŭl development in South Korean popular music, a development that at once diverged from past Korean and South Korean soundscapes and converged with regnant American and global popular-music conventions. K-pop, in its visual emphasis and its fusion of singing and dancing, represents one terminus of the MTV revolution and the age of music's digital transmission and reproducibility. K-pop, as we have seen, is a package that depends on an

extreme division of labor, one that integrates various types of expertise and places high value on polishing itself to a perfectionist sheen. Or, to put this in a less than flattering way, K-pop is utterly lacking in authenticity, autonomy, and originality.

K-pop is inauthentic in that it is neither Korean nor South Korean. Not only is it different from traditional Korean music, it also diverges from the long tradition of Korean popular music. But most K-pop fans don't care about that kind of inauthenticity. Rather, the kind of inauthenticity that might concern a K-pop fan is the kind associated with phoniness, that foible identified and excoriated in J. D. Salinger's 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye* but more completely articulated by Lionel Trilling and Charles Taylor.[121] Modern authenticity, tied to notions of sincerity, of staying true to oneself, is understood as the outward expression of an inwardly experienced correspondence between the true self and the self in the world—a unity between the two that is uncompromising with respect to the movement of time and to external contingencies. To put this idea another way, K-pop, as a mercenary pursuit, does not stay true to its art (such as its art may be). In this sense, K-pop flatly contradicts the European Romantic ideal of the artist as a seeker after Beauty and Truth (and, for that matter, the Socialist Realist goal of an art that represents an objective reality in hopes of transforming it). Surely Lee Soo-man is worlds away from Wackenroder and Tieck's art-loving friar, at once ascetic and aesthetic, and remote even from such radical rock musicians as Radiohead and Rage Against the Machine.[122] Nearly every aspect of K-pop is functional, intended to satisfy the market rather than fulfill some deep artistic or political urge. Indeed, customers' expectations play a significant role in the constitution of K-pop. Consider something as seemingly trivial as K-pop performers' general reluctance to lip-synch, which stems from producers' awareness that audiences reject inauthenticity in general, and lip-synching in particular. K-pop performers' avoidance of lip-synching is akin to the practice of concert pianists, who tend to play from memory in part to satisfy the expectations of the audience. But whereas an aesthetic ideology in classical music underpins the practice of performing from memory, the

only reason for a K-pop performer to resist lip-synching is to fulfill the audience's expectations for the performer to sound authentic, and thus to fulfill the commercial imperative of pleasing the audience.[123]

As for autonomy, K-pop stars, by and large, only sing and dance. They execute what has been conceived for them; they wear what they are told to wear, they sing what they are told to sing, and they move and behave as they are told to move and behave. For this reason, some critics deride K-pop performers as robots because they seem to lack artistic autonomy and personal will. One gauge of an act's autonomy would be its sense of group identity and continuity, its commitment to a particular aesthetic principle or musical style. But K-pop groups tend to move with contemporary currents, and thus they are anchorless. As already noted, SHINHWA began as a boy band but became masculinized when it was fashionable for the band to do so. R & B was a significant influence on KARA's early music, but the group shifted to dance pop when that became the genre of the moment. SM Entertainment's J-pop emulations ceased as its rivals, JYP Entertainment and YG Entertainment, incorporated the latest American trends to win a larger market share. When Wonder Girls' "Tell Me" proved to be what people loved, SM Entertainment was happy to cast Girls' Generation in that mold. In short, K-pop follows trends and does not seem to value music in and of itself; it is a heteronomous entity.

And finally there is the question of originality. K-pop is indistinguishable from American pop music in virtually every way: in its ubiquitous but shallow historical references to and mashups of recent pop hits, stars, and genres; in its fusion of upbeat cheerfulness with danceability; in its modes of singing and dancing; in its sartorial styles; and in its immersion in urban youth and commercial culture. There may be exceptions, but K-pop performers in general, unlike American stars, did not start out playing music in the family garage or composing songs in their bedrooms. Instead, they auditioned and were trained to be performers. In the K-pop studio system, perspiration is worth more than inspiration. Originality is valued only to the extent that it represents something new, cool, and exciting for the paying public.

To summarize, the elements of authenticity, autonomy, and originality are the essence of the Romantic ideology of the artist, an ideology diametrically opposed to the logic of K-pop. K-pop is a particular mode of popular-music production, consciously and commercially conceived and expertly and effectively executed. It is predicated on the belief that comprehensive and prolonged training can be combined with a highly professionalized division of labor to generate popular-music success. That is, K-pop embraces its status as a culture industry. It may be faint praise to say that K-pop, as a product of Brand (South) Korea, is as good as a top-of-the-line Samsung cell phone: engineered to (near) perfection, reliable but affordable, stylish yet functional, and easy on the eye (as with K-pop, no one would say that South Korea has a long tradition of crafting cell phones, or that Samsung has thus far been noted for originality). K-pop, as an export-oriented industry, trains and cultivates promising raw talent and produces performers with attractive faces and bodies who can sing and dance well while collaborating seamlessly and harmoniously. K-pop groups are rendered compelling precisely by this professionalism and this perfectionist impulse. But aesthetic judgments are ultimately beside the point. People would not purchase Samsung cell phones if the devices were not functional and dependable, presentable and pleasurable. In the same way, popular-music fans would not download a track or attend a concert if they didn't get their money's worth, so to speak. Again, the logic of capital is the logic of K-pop.

Thus the corporate discipline of the star factory runs counter to the Romantic ideology of the artist-genius, but we might question that ideology itself. Ethnonational authenticity is a matter of cultural criticism, as discussed in the interlude, but it is also a topic that few people seem to become exercised about. No one has found the roots of cell phone production in traditional Korea, but that worries neither Samsung executives nor global consumers. The idea of authenticity as the state of being true to oneself may valorize untutored genius, but the mundane reality is that few if any stars emerge completely out of nowhere. Stories of unheralded geniuses, such as Britain's Susan Boyle and her South

Korean counterpart, Ch'oe Sung-bong (Choi Sung-bong), are compelling and certainly promote TV viewership and music sales.[124] Yet even in televised talent contests like *The X Factor,* and even over the course of a short broadcasting season, the hands of voice coaches, dance instructors, and makeover professionals are visible. The romance of the *orecchiante,* the person who cannot read music but performs it beautifully, is a nostalgic ideal; but even in the United States, this putative diamond in the rough is repeatedly ground down before she is allowed to make her professional debut. The point here is not to deny the possibility of musical genius but rather to observe that the inborn talent of almost all successful musicians, past and present, has been enhanced and transformed by teachers, formal or informal, over an extended period of preparation. Whether we are talking about Herbert Simon's ten years or Malcolm Gladwell's ten thousand hours, the K-pop system is testament to the power of training over genius.[125]

The contemporary arts, especially in the United States, are still under the reign of Romantic ideology. Talent and genius are said to trump training and effort. Cineastes glorify the auteur and love to bash Hollywood and the studio system. Musical excellence, for its part, is widely believed to be unteachable, even though teaching institutions proliferate, and even though it would be almost unimaginable for a composer or a singer to emerge out of thin air.[126] Amateurs are thought to exude authenticity; conversely, excessive training smacks of inauthenticity. Moreover, the longing for the undivided whole ignores the inevitable reality of artistic divisions of labor. Billie Holiday, for example, neither wrote the lyrics nor composed the music of her incandescent interpretations, yet who would deny that she was a great singer?

Romantic ideology not only distorts the production of music and art but also suppresses the role of the audience and the market. According to the Romantic line of thought, the true artist creates in splendid isolation, communing with his own genius (and perhaps with the predecessors who are his equals) and ignoring if not damning his potential listeners. The

egoistic sublime, however, is mere solipsism; originality in and of itself is useless as a metric of musical greatness. Without heeding the regnant soundscape, one may well compose noise or nonsense; a measure of imitation is the condition of music's possibility.[127] At least implicitly, a poet or a singer has readers or listeners in mind, who in turn shape not only the performance but also the creation of the poet's or singer's art. If poets are singing in solitude, then they cannot be the unacknowledged legislators of the world. The relationship between the artist and her audience is mutually constitutive. On the one hand, the desire for a large audience virtually guarantees that the work will cater to demotic tastes, though a large listening public is not necessarily a guarantee of the work's aesthetic merit or longevity.[128] On the other hand, the artist's annihilation of the audience all but guarantees that the work will be solipsistic if not entirely unsustainable; the occasional masterpiece may be produced (Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge,* perhaps), but the work is more likely to resemble that of the painter Frenhofer in Balzac's "Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu" (The unknown masterpiece) or, in the case of music, any number of contemporary classical pieces that usually go unperformed and are sometimes unperformable. Artistic success is a *collective* sublime, entailing the aesthetic and social concourse of the audience and the work of art.

In short, it is possible to view K-pop performers as inauthentic automatons singing unoriginal songs or performing East Asian versions of various kinds of American and global popular music. In one sense, this kind of disdain is simply prejudice.[129] K-pop performances are also dismissed for their polish and perfectionism, and K-pop itself is regarded as a flash in the pan. Here, we might recall the earliest music videos, which were criticized for privileging style over substance and thus elevating impermanence over immortality.[130] The Internet is awash in the backlash to the Korean Wave, with K-pop derided for inauthenticity, heteronomy, unoriginality, and many other failures. K-pop does strike many self-proclaimed lovers of music as artificial and superficial, simple and simplistic, even comical and vulgar. But an appreciation of K-pop, like an

appreciation of virtually everything else in life, depends on the momentary suspension of disbelief and the willingness to enter into another world and sensibility.[131] 4Minute and f(x) are not Beethoven. K-pop is as different from European classical music as a Krazy Kat short is from *Andrei Rublev.* But we would be shortsighted if we could find nothing of value in either the short or the longer film, in either f(x) or Beethoven. If we can move beyond the fact of K-pop as an unabashed culture industry, and if we can liberate our senses from Romantic ideology and its associated shackles, then it may become possible for us to appreciate K-pop's interesting and innovative features.

In the regnant structure of the K-pop lyric we find the popular-music equivalent of the villanelle (or perhaps, as a very critical critic might have it, the equivalent of that parodic form known as the paradelle).[132] The strophic structure of all popular music is accentuated in K-pop. The hook—"Tell me, tell me," "Sorry, sorry," "Gee, gee, gee"—anchors the song, and the song's emotional and artistic gravity then resists erasure from the mind's recorder. Lyrical and musical refrains in turn are articulated and enhanced with signature gestures or dance steps as the performers produce kinetic equivalents of lyrical refrains in what is sometimes called "point dance."[133] Thus crab dance accompanies the refrain "Gee, gee, gee," or physically onomatopoeic movements replicate the beating of a heart in 2PM's 2009 "Heartbeat," or the "la-la-la-la-la" refrain in KARA's "Mr." is accompanied by the performers' swinging hips. The effect of this unity is memorable, especially since its performance is almost always perfect. This synthesis is, in a sense, productive of a particular structure of feeling; the K-pop formula achieves what Wallace Stevens points to in "Peter Quince at the Clavier": "Music is feeling, then, not sound." The synergistic hook, with its fusion of lyrics, music, and movement, is K-pop's signature innovation and contribution.

"Formulaic" is a dirty word among many music aficionados. On the one hand, almost any good song (or poem, or other work of art) is constituted by a form and is therefore formulaic; it is simply a matter of how the form

(and the formula) are employed, developed, and articulated. On the other hand, if a song is merely repetitive (in the pejorative sense of being formulaic), then it is unlikely to be as successful as K-pop songs are. Music, especially art music or classical music, is formalist: much of its beauty resides in the precise articulation (and performance) of an established syntax. Yet what makes art music or classical music incomprehensible to many listeners, and therefore unenjoyable, is that it lacks a ready-made vocabulary. What popular music achieves—and the K-pop hook heightens this effect—is the presentation of a comprehensible vocabulary, an articulation of phonemes and words (even if they are phatic and ultimately meaningless) that listeners can begin to make sense of so as to enter the K-pop song's sonic world and hermeneutic circle.[134] Thus the language of K-pop, with its simple, almost universally understandable grammar and vocabulary, is akin to Basic English, or Globish.

Most K-pop lyrics are eminently forgettable, but the predominant theme of passionate, romantic love and its permutations—that the course of true love never did run smooth—generates some memorable anthems or poems for young people, as when 2PM sings of heartache in "Heartbeat" or when 2AM voices undying love in 2010's "Chugŏdo mot ponae" (I can't let you go even if I die). A jaundiced elder finds such lyrics difficult to take seriously, but they do convey the almost inexpressible turbulence of youthful emotion and serve as a poetry of the heart (or so I interpret what these groups' youthful fans have to say). These lyrics veer wildly between the love that dare not speak its name (and therefore cannot be named) and the love that must be expressed simply and straightforwardly; the alternation is not entirely unlike the dialectic between apophatic and cataphatic theology. What is remarkable, however, is that some K-pop songs go well beyond the seemingly evanescent emotions of the adolescent heart and articulate personal troubles that in turn are related to serious social issues. For example, H.O.T. (if, for the moment, we can consider that idol group, in all its bubblegumminess, as belonging to K-pop) sang about the educational dysfunctions of South Korea (see chapter 1) in the 1996 hit "Chŏnsa ŭi huye" (Descendants of warriors). Tongbang Sin'gi's 2006 song "'O'—

Chŏng-Pan-Hap," mentioned earlier, articulates a hard-hitting social critique, decrying the absence of "absolute truths" in a reality that is empty ("O"); the video, apart from its well-choreographed dance routines and its picturesque shots of Tokyo, Bangkok, Prague, and other locales, uses rapid flashes of imagery to portray social problems that include alienation, poverty, and violence.[135] Wonder Girls' 2007 megahit "Tell Me" is plainly a girl-power anthem—and we should not underestimate the presence or the power of such elements in the performances of K-pop girl groups, especially for young female listeners and viewers who are aware of the gender-based double standard and yearn for more freedom. It is true that popular-music fans (the word "fan" is, after all, short for "fanatic") often hear messages that a song has not sent, feel emotions that the song has not conveyed, and grasp meanings that the song has not intended. Nor is resistance or empowerment central to K-pop, whose logic is, again, the logic of capital. It would still be a mistake to dismiss the emancipatory moments that eager or even casual listeners experience in connection with K-pop. K-pop songs are not political manifestos, but devoted fans are not the only ones who have discovered optative moments in these songs, which in their most captivating renditions present counterfactual possibilities, not just escapist fantasies. Nor are K-pop songs hermeneutics of suspicion, but attentive listeners endow them with meanings and dreams or just with simple phatic pleasures and thus experience them as shining some light into the darkness.

In general, popular music provides the compass and comfort of musical order, which almost any novice listener can grasp, and the very banality of the lyrics facilitates and encourages the listener's engagement with a song's sense and sensibility, its sentiments and passions. As Edmund Burke noted, "We submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us."[136] Everyday beauty, not sublimity, is what K-pop presents. If K-pop lyrics are not quite poems of quotidian life, they manage to assert, clarify, and even deepen listeners' inchoate emotions and thus prove purgative, if not cathartic. Although K-pop lyrics are closer to ditties than to poems, a moment's immersion in a discussion group for K-pop fans reveals that the

lyrics are far from simple fixed clichés.[137] As in Schubert's "Lob der Tränen" (In praise of tears), or at least as in August Wilhelm Schlegel's lyric text, K-pop music goes beyond mere words to express and explicate tears or smiles, the pain or pleasure of life. And pain and pleasure are intelligible, even enlightening, states.

As musical compositions, most K-pop songs are not only well executed but also well crafted, and some are in fact innovative, at least in the context of popular music. Girls' Generation's "Genie," for example, incorporates the Dorian mode: by not resolving its chord progression, the song gives a sense of being unsettled—appropriate when a feeling of floating is what the song is intended to project. The song's composer and lyricist, Yu Yŏng-jin (Yoo Young-jin), began as a ballad singer in the 1990s, and his work now incorporates disparate musical styles. Yu is often dismissed as a hack, but his compositions are sometimes truly fascinating, if only because of the need to be competitive, and therefore innovative. "NuABO," Yu's 2010 song as performed by f(x), has a surprising moment in which the musical theme (or formula) is suddenly reversed, and the video also goes to black and white.[138] This reversal in the music and the reversion to retro black and white in the video create a surprising synergy that even a casual listener/viewer could not help noticing. The time dilatation seems especially apt in the world of popular music, where the dictum of carpe diem, in the sense of a lifetime burning in every moment, is normative, and where the insertion of the past or a reversal of this kind is necessarily unsettling—a small surprise, but no less an artistic achievement for that.

K-pop choreography, too, is expertly conceived and at times sumptuous and sophisticated. Its execution is all the more astonishing for seeming to require no special effort from performers who are not just singing (recall the reluctance to lip-synch) but doing so with real élan. When K-pop performers dance, they may not have the grace of a Fred Astaire or the charisma of a Michael Jackson, but the number of groups capable of first-rate ensemble dancing is remarkable.

K-pop music videos are cinematic short stories that are necessarily limited, not just in duration but also in their artistic ambitions. As such, if they don't quite attain the grandeur of the greatest films by South Korean directors, they range from competent to excellent, and they employ almost all available cinematographic techniques. Given the importance of the music video in the age of YouTube, K-pop producers have sought to revitalize the genre. To be sure, K-pop videos are mostly simple narratives that showcase the body and highlight dance, but they also represent a great deal of diversity. Some are lighthearted, like AFTER SCHOOL's 2012 "LOVE LOVE LOVE," which encapsulates a miniature romantic comedy using the theme of Max Ophüls's 1950 film *La Ronde*. Others are much more serious and self-conscious about pushing the envelope, such as Brown Eyed Girls' 2010 "Abracadabra," which walks the line of what is sexually permissible by flirting with themes of erotic empowerment and recalling both Just Jaeckin's 1975 film *Histoire d'O* (*The Story of O*) and Paul Verhoeven's 1992 film *Basic Instinct*. Modest though these music videos are by comparison with great works of cinema, many also mesmerize as they rapidly engage the viewer and make the most of their three minutes' running time.

In short, then, K-pop is a commercial enterprise whose products, like cars and cell phones, are designed and intended to be sold, but it would be a mistake to deny or denigrate K-pop's triumphs. The current style, which solidified toward the end of the twenty-first century's initial decade, embodies a moment of particular but necessarily evanescent perfection. Given changing tastes and omnipresent competition, K-pop producers will relentlessly pursue innovation, especially as we move toward the next great disruption imposed by a major social change or technological transformation. For the moment, though, K-pop's current aesthetic achievements are here to behold, and it would be a pity to miss them.

THE LEGIBILITY AND LEGITIMACY OF POPULAR MUSIC

Popular music's severest critics are absolutely right: it is the product of a culture industry. What they forget, however, is that music has been a commercial enterprise for centuries.[139] The sheer variety of the professions that spiral around the enterprise is simply staggering, encompassing everyone from dancers and choreographers to stagehands and set designers, from audio and hi-fi inventors and manufacturers to disc jockeys and composers and lyricists. It is a big, oligopolistic business, too: in the early 2010s, the four largest popular-music corporations controlled roughly 85 percent of global sales.[140] What is curious, however, is how focused this big business is on churning out highly crafted songs and accomplished stars, especially since no one seems to be able to articulate an abstract definition of a star, although any number of people in the business can point to any number of concrete individuals who have achieved stardom. Nor does anyone in the business seem to have mastered the process of creating a hit or a star, at least in the sense of working from a business plan or a blueprint. But if people in the business don't know what they're doing, they do know what they want—hits and stars, fame and fortune. Few stars, admittedly, are born famous; some achieve fame, and some have fame thrust upon them, but the reality is that the moment of a future star's discovery would be meaningless without the subsequent process of cultivation: the makeover.[141] The sempiternal temptation is to perceive a seed of pure genius in the act of making music, one that commodification and capitalist industrialization have sullied by introducing not just alienation and exploitation but inauthenticity and unoriginality, defiling innocence from its original Edenic state to fall into the corrupt present. But the industrialization and commodification of popular music are coeval with popular music itself. A star is born with the help of myriad midwives, most of whom seem to have a singular fixation on their own slice of fame and fortune. Popular music, alas, was born in a state of original sin, for its widespread dissemination would be impossible without its entanglement in capitalist (and necessarily technological) industrialization and the consumer society.

And the original sin that stains the soul of popular music is further darkened by the question of popular music's legitimacy. The European Romantics, in revolt against the facile universalism of Enlightenment thought, generally located the soul or essence of a people in that people's language but sometimes also in its folk music and folklore. Speech, music, and narrative, arising organically, as it were, from a way of life, were believed to express and exemplify a people and its distinctive lifeway; hence the Grimm Brothers' famous collation of tales of the German people (however mediated and transformed those tales may have been).[142] The conservation or revival of folk songs, too, as emblems of authenticity, was never far behind any initiative to preserve or recapture the soul of a people. In the course of the nineteenth century, the European Romantics and their cultural heirs also established the crucial divide between the authentic (real, natural, organic) and the inauthentic (artificial, industrial, commercial).[143] Today as well, the criterion of authenticity remains very much alive in every sphere of musical discussion, whether in connection with early music (the temporal test) or world music (the ethnographic test). Whereas folk songs were said to have emerged—organically, collectively, mysteriously—from the genius of the people as a whole, popular music was clearly a conscious construction, an industrial invention. From this polarizing perspective, folk music is a bottom-up phenomenon, and mass music is a top-down production. Thus folk music, according to the terms of this binary, is inextricably intertwined with tradition and embodies the entire community; it endures over time and invites participation. Popular music, by contrast, is new and fleeting; it often appeals to youths who are susceptible to fashions and fads, and it induces passive listening as well as social alienation. Moreover, whereas folk music is local or national in origin, mass music is definitely not local, may be foreign, and is certainly cosmopolitan. What is most damning, popular music is a commercial product—a commodity.[144] Folk music, in short, is of, by, and for the people; popular music gives the people what they want but is not of or by them. Art music and folk music can aspire to the status of art; mass music

is relegated to the status of a commodity.[145]

In the received judgment of musicological scholars and music critics, popular music almost always fails the test of authenticity. The ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl, for example, proposes a commonplace criterion of authenticity, one that "is rooted in the idea that each culture has a primordial musical style of its own. . . . An authentic song is thought to be one truly belonging to the people who sing it, one that really reflects their spirit and personality."[146] Unfortunately for Nettl, however, most of what people sing did not arise organically and endogenously but frequently came from far away; in Italy and Hungary, for instance, folk songs were often Arabic and were clearly not indigenous.[147] Moreover, as we have seen, famous folk songs in Korea were standardized and nationalized versions. In addition, they were often sung to the accompaniment of European musical instruments, and so their contemporary articulations are quite remote from any past state of regional diversity and any quality of truly authentic performance. By Nettl's criterion, we might also transpose Richard Wagner's notoriously anti-Semitic remarks to South Korea and conclude that K-pop may be inauthentic because it is not rooted in the musical traditions of the Korean people.[148] But K-pop is what most young South Koreans grew up listening to; it is what they have known all their lives—and if we had to identify the one essential root of K-pop, it would not be Korean music, traditional or popular, but rather US popular music, specifically its African American strains. That is not a bad lineage, musically speaking, but it does suggest that K-pop would fail the ethnonational test of authenticity.[149]

What is perhaps most significant, the besetting sin of popular music is simply that it *is* popular. The idea that the vast majority of people have been shaped by popular music, as well as by television and movies, is seen as a concern in and of itself. If a medium happens to offer sociological insights into how people live and what people feel and think, but if it also shapes quotidian morality and metaphysics, then it should come as no surprise that intellectuals and educators get so worked up over it.[150]

Popular music satisfies hungers not only for fun and relaxation but also for meaning and even salvation, appetites for everything from the silly to the serious. Like Verdi's *tinta* (color), it seems to bleed and blend into the whole world.[151] Popular music has become not merely the noise of life but something akin to its master key.

Theodor Adorno famously wrote that popular music is inevitably doomed to standardization, to the mechanical reproduction of certain memes and the hapless quest for pseudo-individualization—doomed, that is, to be passively consumed, to be at once distracting and indistinctive, to be mere white noise.[152] In other words, popular music, for Adorno, is a sedative, an opiate to help the masses cope with the unpleasant realities of capitalist modernity.[153] To be sure, European art music has frequently been popular music; and for the European aristocracy and bourgeoisie, there certainly was and is nothing inorganic or inauthentic about European classical music.[154] And opera—today the word virtually denotes snobbery—was the functional equivalent of popular music in Italy and elsewhere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[155] Moreover, despite the enduring insistence on making distinctions between and among opera, musical theater, and musicals, such interstitial works as *Les Brigands, The Mikado, Porgy and Bess,* and *West Side Story* suggest that these distinctions are something less than hard and fast.[156] Be all that as it may, the question of whether sublimation or the musical equivalent of opium is actually such a terrible thing is a matter of perspective, but Adorno also articulates another, aesthetic critique: that whereas Beethoven's late style struggles with death and thus with eternal, universal issues, popular music remains ensconced in the here and now and is thus doomed again, this time to ephemerality and oblivion.[157] But even though popular music is a product of the culture industry and an object of conspicuous consumption, it is almost always polysemous, as any extended colloquy with its listeners would reveal, and its meanings are almost always profound.[158]

Personal choices in the realm of popular music—as instances of the articulation of the modern ethos of choice, which in turn confers both

individual and group identity (What sort of person am I? To which group do I belong?)—take place in a realm of existential freedom and have decisive consequences. However derided mass music may be as a commodity churned out by the culture industry, it can capture the soul, according to people who profess to love popular music as something to live by, live with, and even live for. What other contemporary phenomenon gives rise to what Chateaubriand called "le vague des passions"?[159] As with yesteryear's wine, women, and song, so also with yesterday's sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll: popular music was and is inextricable from life's emotions and from enjoyment of life. Popular music would pass almost any test of authenticity that revolved around the idea of a music's belonging to and being meaningful to people.[160] Indeed, the fundamental distinction between folk music and popular music may be that folk music is older and less popular, and therefore less meaningful to most people. To put this idea in polemical terms, when an aging Briton hums "Yesterday," is her experience somehow less authentic and less meaningful to her than if she were humming "Greensleeves"? Would we even remember "Scarborough Fair" if not for Simon and Garfunkel? (And who can recall one of that song's likely precursors, the Scottish ballad "The Elfin Knight"?) Or, again, for the Zainichi writer Kyō Nobuko, when an ethnic Korean woman in her eighties bursts into a rendition of "Kachūsha no uta" (Song of Kachūsha, perhaps the first hit in Japan), that song may be more meaningful to her than any other song or form of music she has encountered in her long life.[161] A common trope in modern novels and films is the popular song that recovers a deeply grooved memory. For example, in Im Ch'ŏr-u's novel *Kŭ sŏm e kagosipta* (I want to go to that island), we readily comprehend the significance when a woman farmer sings the popular song "Mokp'o ŭi nunmul" (Tears of Mokp'o), which expresses something deep and meaningful in that character's life.[162] Needless to say, we shouldn't ignore the tremendous variation across individuals; it is not unusual for European art music to be, effectively, soul music for some ethnic Koreans, the music they grew up with, the music that embodies something deep and

meaningful about their personhood. For the vast majority of the population in the affluent world and increasingly in the nonaffluent world as well, however, popular music is the ambient reality that structures meaning and feeling, the sense of self and reality. It is, in other words, the world of everyday sociology and philosophy.

If the aesthetic or emotional legitimacy of popular music remains a topic of controversy among academics, among nonacademics there is no need for an apologia, since popular music *is* music. (And does anyone really need to defend or justify music of any kind?) Of late, many critics have shown themselves ready to vouch for popular music's aesthetic magnificence; for others, popular music betokens the decline of civilization.[163] But aesthetic judgments, if they are not merely to reproduce an existing social order by reflecting assumptions about socioeconomic or sociocultural superiority and inferiority, must rest on appraisals that are both formal and commensurable.[164] The philosophically grounded articulation of an aesthetic judgment valorizes particular formal criteria—for example, complexity over simplicity, refinement over rusticity, innovation over convention—in a way that more or less objectively proves some piece of music or some musical style better than another. And the modern European discussion of aesthetics, usually said to have begun with Alexander Baumgarten's ponderous *Aesthetica* (1795), symptomatically produces and reproduces similar sets of hierarchies—in the case of Baumgarten, logic over beauty (the latter associated with the aesthetic/imaginative faculty, itself characterized as "facultas cognoscitiva inferior" or "gnoseologia inferior").[165] Yet not only are such criteria historically and culturally variable, they are often endogenously constituted within a particular genre.[166] In any event, the deployment of formalistic criteria would do little to persuade folk aficionados that Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* is superior to the Cuban folk song "Guantanamera," and even those few folkies who could be convinced of the opera's aesthetic superiority might still prefer to hum "Guantanamera" in a moment of repose. Moreover, folk aficionados probably like their folk songs simple,

rustic, and conventional and would certainly rather hear “Guantanamera” performed by a banjo-strumming Pete Seeger than by a full symphony orchestra, to say nothing of how perplexing they would find a dodecaphonic or micropolyphonic version of the song.

Everything considered, the standard explanation for popular music’s appeal is, to put it crudely, the underdeveloped taste of the masses (or—which is to say much the same thing—their unfortunate ignorance). According to Gunther Schuller, who would write brilliant books on jazz and Alban Berg, “The commercial, made-for-profit musics have . . . moved into the vacuum left by [the] massive failure of the whole educational environment.”[167] But would systematic instruction in the theory, history, and appreciation of European classical music have been enough to prevent the appearance of Schuller’s “made-for-profit musics”? To put this question differently, if European art music were to lose its value for the wealthy and powerful, would it still have any value at all? There is no way to be certain, but clearly the sedulous pleasures of popular music have triumphed everywhere. In the future, independent thinkers on the model of Kenneth Rexroth surely won’t be the only ones to find the sensibility and artistry of a Catullus in a popular singer like Bob Dylan.[168]

Then there is the question of moral psychology. When I was endlessly playing and replaying études from Hanon and Czerny, it was to the leitmotif of my Japanese piano teacher barking, “Mit Gefühl!”—as if those finger exercises had ever been meant to evoke profound emotional responses. She was convinced that European art music, especially pieces associated with nineteenth-century Vienna, was a path toward the virtuous and moral life.[169] But we have not had a totalitarian society that promotes popular music; and many authoritarian societies, such as South Korea under military rule, have actively censored popular music as immoral and decadent. This is not to suggest, of course, that the culture industry or even folk music is on the side of angels; in the future, Adorno’s dystopian view of popular music as an opium of the people may come to be validated. Moreover, an art form, no matter how autonomous, cannot exist in splendid

isolation, and it takes considerable suspension of disbelief to hope that humming a Beethoven melody or a tune by Girls' Generation or, for that matter, engaging in any form of prayer will deliver us from evil. Even though it is unlikely that people are dying miserably every day for lack of what is found in popular music, hardly a day goes by without someone finding pleasure, joy, and even moral compass there.

The devaluation of the popular is, in a word, overdetermined. In critical discourse, ancient or modern, Eastern or Western, rare is the intrepid intellect who privileges comedy over tragedy, lightness over seriousness, the ephemeral over hoped-for immortality, *Weltfreude* over *Weltschmerz.* The occasional exception notwithstanding, to assert that popular music is squarely in the camp of comedy, lightness, the ephemeral, and *Weltfreude* is surely to offer a robust generalization. At the same time, bound up as popular music is with pleasure, fantasy, and relaxation, it is also a realm in which many people contemplate and express their innermost sentiments and ponder life's joys and travails and meanings.

And so it is the revenge of popular music to reign supreme among the arts for today's affluent youth. Intellectuals may bemoan young people's failure to read prose, much less poetry. They may complain that young people don't know much about history, and that they probably know even less about painting and architecture. But no one can deny that almost all young people listen to a great deal of popular music, and that, at least in this respect, appreciation of music is nearly universal among them.[170] The philosophers of aesthetics are right about one thing: art is a cognitive endeavor. It is not altogether impossible to enjoy an illegible, incomprehensible work of art (contemporary classical music, that virtual oxymoron, comes to mind), but enjoyment of a work generally depends on its being legible and comprehensible, and many people do understand and enjoy popular music and its conventions.[171] Popular music is omnipresent—cacophonous in public spaces, sonorous in private spheres—and it has come to define contemporary lifestyles in the affluent world. Whatever one may think of hip-hop or K-pop, both are recognizably music even for those who listen almost exclusively to European art music.

All this is to express an indisputable reality: that many people enjoy K-pop in particular, and popular music in general, for good reasons, and that no amount of social snobbery or supercilious philosophy is going to change their tastes or their minds. K-pop fans say many things; in my translation, they are saying that K-pop can soothe and massage the soul, thus assuaging or fulfilling desires and longings, or offering (or selling) hope, or comforting and satisfying the conscious self, or providing the means of a measured resistance to overbearing parents, or stimulating the craving to be creative or grown-up or sophisticated. K-pop offers fodder for conversation, enables people to pass the time pleasantly, helps them make new friends and acquaintances, invites them into a new world of sound and movement, satisfies the urge to belt out a song or dance to the beat, and even gives people reasons to forge ahead. Some fall in love with K-pop stars and songs; others find friends who live in the same subculture. K-pop, like popular music in general, marks the beautiful in ordinary life: a promise of happiness, the anticipation of bliss. To say that K-pop is the opium of the masses or a sedative marketed by the culture industry, true though those statements may be at times, is surely not to tell the whole story. To the extent that K-pop is, more or less, a mass-produced commodity with mass appeal, it may very well be true that critics have condemned it to the inferno of *odi profanum vulgus,* for the stench of the demotic clings to popular music. And it doesn't matter.