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IMITATORS TO CREATORS:
THE EMERGENCE OF A CONFIDENT NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY KOREA AS OBSERVED THROUGH K-POP AND MASCULINITY

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Kaitlyn Read

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion
Of the Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies
Croft Institute for International Studies
Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College
The University of Mississippi

University, Mississippi
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Abstract

South Korea's national narrative has evolved from one familiar with destruction and outside control to one that can now afford to be more challenging and confrontational. Korea's ascent to both economic and political prominence on the international landscape in record time is well established. The rapid transformation currently impacts Korean society with the country choosing to concentrate on strengthening its soft power and nation brand exporting. This thesis aims to reveal how Korea's recently acquired position of significance on the global stage permits the Korean national identity to be assured and stimulating, in contrast with a derivative narrative once perceived around an image of backwardness. The Korean identity projected to the globalized world through the Korean entertainment industry is formed from a combination of a distinctive Korean soft masculinity aesthetic and the "new traditional," a concept aimed to incorporate what the Korean government wants the rest of the world to view as traditional Korean culture. In order to demonstrate this new assured Korean identity, a case study was conducted on two male Korean popular music (K-pop) groups, the second-generation group SHINee and the fourth-generation group Stray Kids. Both groups were analyzed via tools of visual anthropology to present a changing aesthetic and outward identity that reflects the overall temporal shift in Korean national identity. SHINee reveals a shift from a Western-derived physical look and manner to one confident in its separate soft masculinity. Stray Kids reveal the fusion of this soft masculinity style with elements of traditional Korean culture. These results highlight the Korean government's ability to strengthen its particular national brand and identity as an exportable, consumable product through official K-pop cultural ambassadors and an ever-increasing confident status on the world stage.

Note on Korean Romanization

With numerous transliteration systems for *hangeul*, the Korean script, in existence, it is important to recognize which system I use throughout this thesis to establish consistency. The McCune-Reischauer Romanization system is one of the two most widely used systems and was the official system in South Korea until 2000. However, I have chosen to use the other most widely used version, the Revised Romanization of Korean system due to the fact that it is the official system used in South Korea today. Furthermore, it is easier to comprehend visually for both people who speak Korean and those who do not, because of the lack of exuberant punctuation and diacritics as compared to the McCune-Reischauer Romanization system. While the McCune-Reischauer Romanization system focuses on providing the most accurate method of pronunciation, the Revised system renders the language more comprehensible to all parties involved.

As is common in East Asia, Korean names are written with the given name following the surname, such as Park Chunghee, however some historical figures like Syngman Rhee are more commonly known with their names written in the reverse. In order to avoid confusion, I have chosen to depict Korean names with the surname first unless it is a particular historical figure. For authors, I have chosen to refer to them by their given name first (ex. Ji Hoon Park instead of Park Ji Hoon) in order to eliminate the possibility of repetition among author surnames.

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Introduction

South Korea: To some, "The Land of the Morning Calm," to others, "The Hermit Kingdom," and officially, The Republic of Korea or *Daehan Minguk* ("Great People's Nation"). Regardless of which moniker the globalized world chooses to recognize it by, the indisputable fact remains that it is globally recognized. Once beheld by competing global powers like the United States and Japan for its apparent "backwardness" as a land incapable of holding its own, South Korea[1] now stands alone in the history books for its almost unheard-of, rapid economical and political transformation. Knowing it is not a leading political contender, despite a major military presence within the country, in the globalized world due to its size, Korea, too, recognizes its potential for compelling soft power amplification. Korea's place on the world stage may, geographically, be small, but its influence flourishes.

Undoubtedly, over the past 40 years, Korea has shifted from being a "victim" of outside occupation and grossly destructive war to being an economical and cultural force to be reckoned with. The timeline of Korean history is read retrospectively as a narrative of destruction from the Mongol Invasion in 1231 to Japanese invasions in 1592 to Japanese colonialism of the early 20th century, and of course to the Korean War in 1950, with the national narrative consistently building upon this. With the war bringing the destruction of industrial facilities and extreme hyperinflation, "destruction ratios of major industries during the first four months of the war were estimated as high as 70% of textile industry, 70% of chemical industry, 40% of agricultural machinery industry, and 10% of rubber industry" (Jong Won Lee 2001, 98). Not only did Korea "[fester] for five years through dissent, disorder, [and] major rebellions" as Bruce Cumings (1984, 23-24) notes, but the country has received "some $13 billion in American military and economic aid" since 1945. Once dependent on the United States and American hegemony for

[1] hereafter referred to as Korea

economic and political aid "on an unheard-of scale," Korea has become an economic powerhouse (Cumings 1984, 23-24). With the recent surge of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu)*, or what John Walsh (2014, 13) describes as "the popularity of Korean popular culture overseas…as well as a phenomenon of cultural production that has been used to promote Korean interests overseas," Korea's culture is one of its greatest exports. In return, it provides major economic benefits for the country in regards to consumption and tourism. This shift from "reliant" to "world player" happened in a relatively short time.

This thesis explores the question: How has national identity in modern South Korea changed over time with the emergence of a global Korea and consciousness of a shift from being dependent on outside forces to being a major player on the global stage? My research considers this shift through the lens of the Korean pop industry (K-pop), one of Korea's leading *Hallyu*-focused industries today, an industry that has also only emerged over the last 30 years. The subject of K-pop as a whole and its resulting soft power is a current topic for academics in Korean Studies. Acting as a major source of national revenue, academics around the world are interested in the lengths that K-pop's arms extend throughout not only Korea but also the globalized world. The industry is a rich case study to use for research because of its implications for all parts of the country's status: economic, political, and social.

I consider how Korean identity is performed in K-pop, or in other words, through the changing self-presentations of K-Pop boy groups. K-pop groups provide a unique lens into changes in contemporary Korean identity because the highly visual elements of the genre combined with the increasingly global nature of its consumption act as a self-perpetuating form of soft power. The genre itself revolves highly around the overall aesthetics presented by each group, with company teams specializing in meticulously forming a group's concept, including

everything from stage outfits and makeup to a theoretical storyline running through a single album. Nothing is left untouched or unplanned, and every minute detail has been meticulously considered, making it a prime tool for nation-branding. Through recently forging a path for itself to join other major world powers through its specific soft power tactics, Korea has created an obligation for an uncompromising national identity: one whose legitimacy can no longer be influenced or questioned by outside forces.

By studying Korean identity through the lens of popular music, this project builds on the work of Nicholas Harkness (2015, 325) who has studied Christian music in South Korea. Harkness' research looks at the emergence of Christian gospel choirs to track the changing sense of national identity in the country. Specifically, Harkness (2015, 325) argues that "to sing *songak*[2] in Korea is to present oneself as a certain kind of person." In more elaborate terms, "the aestheticized qualities of the vocal channel serve in the performance of a contemporary Korean Christian identity." Korean Christian choir singers make specific choices with sound to express a changing identity, once suffering but now with urban aspirations, for them as a subgroup. Drawing on Kyung-Sup Chang (1999), Harkness (2015, 315) comments on why Korea's sense of national identity is an interesting study by introducing a phrase popular throughout Korean Studies: compressed modernity. Compressed modernity is the phrase applied to the "rapid transformation of politics, economy, and society over just a few decades:" a phrase that could not be more fitting for Korea (Harkness 2015, 315). In Harkness's (2015, 316) work, he explains how the voice that these European classically-trained Protestant Christian gospel singers project is a representation of "emotional stability, even of ethnonational maturity" where the "rough and

[2] European-style classical singing

painful sounds of Korean's suffering past," sounds heard in traditional, almost-operatic singing of *pansori*[3] are absent.

Whereas Harkness' project urges readers to listen for changing Korean identity in Christian music, this research will look for it visually in K-pop over time. Following his work as inspiration for my conceptual framework, I will show how a visual shift in K-pop group aesthetics shows an equally shifting national identity. I argue that this shift from dependent to major world player has allowed for Korean identity to be more challenging and confrontational. Specifically, this research shows a shift from self-presentations that are derivative of the West in the 1990s, to contemporary self-presentations that are less easily translatable. I suggest that this shift in the self-presentation of K-pop stars provides insight into larger shifts in how Koreans understand themselves in the context of a new global Korea; it is a changing conversation in Korea and the exploration of new dynamics. It shows a country shifting to stand on its own on a global scale, particularly from a cultural significance. Furthermore, other research done on the changing aesthetics of K-pop has not taken into account Korea's place, and therefore level of influence, on a global scale.

I acknowledge that there are numerous aspects of Korean culture and society that I could choose to research in order to look at affected national identity and self-presentation. However, using the Korean music industry as my case selection is the best contemporary choice due to its being a sector that went from highly derivative to being an international pop phenomenon in a relatively short time, much like Korea itself. Due to its global success, South Koreans understand that the industry is consumed on a larger global scale and that it is how we will view Korean culture from the outside. This provides a unique opportunity for Koreans to show Korean culture, or at least what they want the globalized world to see and think about it.

[3] traditional form of Korean musical expression

Methodologically, this argument is based on data gathered through analyzing and then comparing varying visual primary sources over time through the help of an archive compiled of promotional concept photos, live stage performances, set design, and music videos of two K-pop groups over the period of 2008-2021. I employ the tools of visual anthropology to analyze changing visual elements such as changes in clothing style, hairstyles, bodily gestures, choreography, album concept photos, music video sets, and the overall aesthetics themselves, pulled from official company accounts. I collected an archive of nine images, and of them, six were album concept photos, two were from promotional photoshoots, and one from the red carpet. Furthermore, I analyzed a total of nine videos including four music videos, four live performance broadcasts, and one educational promotion. This selection further volunteers a highly representative compilation of data as 77% of the videos come from within a one year period in order to avoid suppressing evidence. Through this method, I compare the visual elements of a Korean group with boy groups of a similar time in the West, by doing an art history-inspired analysis of publicity photos. Finally, I look at interviews held by Western and non-Western journalists alike in order to gather how the artists themselves view their work and their overall place, and therefore role, in the K-pop industry. Understanding not only what the artists see in themselves but what they allow the world to know about how they view their work grants an opportunity to situate these groups within Korea's national brand.

This project begins by providing a brief overview of Korean history beginning in the early 20th century. I discuss Korea's place, or lack thereof, on the global stage throughout the 1900s as a country under control by imperial Japan and seen as "backwards" and "in need of influence" by Western powers. Chapter two aims to clearly show Korea's transition from a once suffering colonized society to a country not only easily standing on its own today, but doing so

with an impressive niche for soft power exports.

An aspect of this impressive ability must account for the distinctly Korean brand that the country is producing en masse today. “Soft masculinity” is a concept at the forefront of this *Hallyu* brand of “promot[ing] Korea and Korean society in a friendly and nonthreatening manner and thereby promoting tourism and the consumption of other Korean products” (Walsh 2014, 13). Sun Jung (2011, 39) describes soft masculinity as “a hybrid product constructed through the amalgamation of South Korea’s traditional seonbi masculinity, Japan’s pretty boy masculinity, and global metrosexual masculinity.” Though it may have had its roots in other beginnings, this soft masculinity is distinctly Korean. As a highly visual element able to be produced and sold to the world via not only K-pop but also throughout Koreans dramas and the Korean makeup and fashion industry, soft masculinity is an important component of the recently-emerged, confident Korean identity that can “be deployed overseas in further promoting national interests in the areas of diplomacy, investment, education, and trade” (Walsh 2014, 14).

Chapter three establishes an overview of the existing literature on the subversiveness of soft masculinity, particularly in performance. Numerous academics (Yamakawa [2014], Elfving-Hwang [2011], Lee [2020]) have recognized that even with initial outside influences, soft masculinity as we understand it today has become distinctly Korean. However, they also argue that it reinforces both harmful patriarchal values in Korea and effeminate stereotypes of Asian men in the West. Though inspired by their work, I highlight the subversiveness of soft masculinity in this thesis. Since this soft masculinity is without a doubt claimed as Korean, I argue that it is in turn promoted as a core element of Korean national identity as bolstered by the *Hallyu* Wave, or more specifically, by K-pop.

Chapters four and five provide an in-depth walk through of the visual changes in two boy groups. This analysis examines Korea's temporal shift to a contemporary distinct and confident identity. Chapter four looks at SHINee, a group that has transcended various generations and continues to be a long-standing leader in the entertainment industry even today. Debuting in 2008 and still actively releasing albums and content, there is a clear shift over time of SHINee's transition from a Western-influenced look to their current distinctively Korean soft masculine aesthetic. I argue that this shift displays less of a reliance on pleasing a Western audience and instead a stronger confidence in their place in the world as a more globalized Korea.

Chapter five looks at Stray Kids, an eight member group that made their debut in 2018. This chapter introduces the concept "new traditional," which combines soft masculinity with "traditional" Korean cultural elements, or at least what Korea promotes as being traditional culture, to form a new brand and identity for the nation that can then be spread as a form of soft power. In both the music video and live performance for their recently-released song "Thunderous," Stray Kids perfectly display the new traditional along with their unmistakable soft masculine aesthetics; perfectly styled clothing and subtle yet noticeable makeup combine with a setting of historical Korean palaces and reference to *pansori*. This combination concept is growing more popular as a means of promotion as it is advanced through the likes of cultural ambassadors like Stray Kids and YouTube series sponsoring tourism to the country.

Soft masculinity, a concept initially inspired by outside trends but then forged as strongly Korean, is a necessary component of the shift to the "new traditional." The new traditional would not present the same or feel "authentically" Korean if part of its foundation continued to rely on a distinctively Western look. In order to present the rest of the world with a Korea-specific brand,

this identity must be viewed as particularly Korean. Though maybe not introduced intentionally at first, this shift has, regardless, allowed for the creation of a brand that can then be used as a form of soft power for Korea's benefit.

Once an identity that could best be labeled as "victimized," the Korean identity and brand has become something of an anomaly following its exceptional transformation to an identity that is not only confident and bold, but challenging preconceived beliefs. This shift is so paramount to the globalized world that even those not interested in Korea or popular culture would benefit from taking the time to acknowledge it. In a world so interconnected via the social media age, studying shifts in a nation's popular culture aesthetics over time as well as the way it is promoted and by whom allows for a more complete understanding of how that country perceives its role on the global stage. Furthermore, it provides insight into the country's actual place in the globalized world. In Korea's case, we must assume that its influence will only grow more prominent if it continues in this manner.

Background

As former President Lee Myung-bak claimed in his inaugural address on February 25, 2008, “[Korea] has risen from [being] a country that accepts help to [being] a country that gives help. Now we have become able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with advanced countries” (Harkness 2015, 316). Through its rise to global prominence, seemingly out of the dust of destruction, Korea’s role in today’s interconnected world grows increasingly important. As a result of catapulting itself to the forefront of the global narrative, the rest of the world’s interest in Korea as a country follows suit: always reaching unprecedented heights. However, the extent of its complicated history is by no means as well known as its mouth-watering kimchi and dazzling K-pop idols. In order to truly understand specific cultural connotations associated with the country, one must first understand the country. With a history plagued with war and imperialism, the recently-made democratic republic requires an extensive look at the past 120 years in order to follow its impressive transformation. From decades of Japanese occupation and colonization to overwhelming American influence after the Korean War, Korea grew into its recently occurring narrative and brand after years of foreign aid. Furthermore, the history of K-pop itself lies in the wider context of the history, democratization, and globalization of Korea, particularly over the last century, a century that historian Keith Pratt (2006, 209) refers to as “a century of suffering” that “still prompts feelings of shame and anger among Koreans.” The ensuing chapter will provide the very history needed to emphasize the importance of a changing Korean national identity.

Initial Silence

Throughout the last century, Korea has faced costly wars and political changes that have consistently put Korea's fate in the hands of foreign politics. From 1910-1945, the Korean peninsula remained under Japanese colonial rule. Five years before The Treaty of Annexation turned Korea into a Japanese colony, the country lived under the Protectorate Treaty of 1905. Ito Hirobumi of the Japanese Meiji Empire was appointed resident-general of Korea, giving the impression that he was under the control of the Korean emperor Gojong. In reality, he controlled diplomatic, cultural, and domestic affairs (Pratt 2006, 209-210). As Koreans continued losing control of their country, the Japanese lost all pretense of simply wanting to preserve their neighboring country's independence, and the situation became dire. Gojong was forced to abdicate his throne while his son Sunjong was made the crown prince, one that the Japanese cabinet could easily control. Furthermore, Sunjong's younger brother was shipped off "hostage-style" to Japan to receive a Japanese education, similar to how future emperors were treated during the Unified Silla period of Korean history beginning in 668 A.D (Pratt 2006, 211). The emperors of this time long past considered it "serving the great," but as Pratt (2006, 211) describes it best, "the 'great' had at least then been the respected China, not the hated Japan." By 1908, there were 127,000 Japanese immigrants living in Korea.

The Korean reaction to almost complete control of their country by a foreign power was mixed. Those who benefited from Japanese control, notably Korean families of privilege who could merely adapt and shift their privilege elsewhere, did not resist the fickle nature of their changing government. However, the lower classes, as expected, did not benefit in the slightest from shifting control. As the farmers at the forefront of the then primarily agricultural society, they were losing their livelihood to the colonialists aiming to profit from said agriculture through

major land reforms. Thus began the Japanese government's plan for modernization, including but not limited to: modernizing agriculture, encouraging industrial development, the creation of railways and roads as well as postal services, improving harbor facilities and the telephone/telegraph systems, exploiting natural resources, and combating endemic diseases like smallpox and cholera (Pratt 2006, 212). Unsurprisingly, there were many groups of unsatisfied Koreans that thought their countrymen should be making these economic advancements for themselves; yet there were also others that wanted to take advantage of Japan's new program. Under the encouragement of their self-strengthening group *Sinminhoe* ('New People's Association'), Korean nationals joined together and fought against Japanese control of the press by printing pro-Korean books and newspapers and control of education by opening new schools (Pratt 2006, 211). Though they were silenced and shut down by the Japanese government, they existed as a pillar of Korean identity and resistance in a time where a Korean identity felt impossible.

Japanese Colonialism

Under the Treaty of Annexation of 1910, Korea was officially recognized as a Japanese colony, losing all independence to the island nation. Koreans now answered to a governor-general appointed by Japan's prime minister as their official head of government. As expected, the governor-general fully answered to the emperor and cabinet in Japan. Unsurprisingly so, the majority of the higher administrative officials of the new government spoke no Korean (Pratt 2006, 213). Korea had become a country so controlled by others that its government's senior officials did not speak the language of the country, a language that had been used since 1443 (Snellinger, n.d.). The Japanese military police occupied the entire country, with

a London *Daily Mail* reporter describing it as “a military camp” (Pratt 2006, 213). Invoking the same phrase used to describe the bloody French Revolution, the historian Andrew Nahm refers to this period in Korean history as a “reign of terror” (Pratt 2006, 213). Japan had become a Robespierre against the people.

Just two years later, the Japanese population in Korea grew by almost 50,000, leaving Korea with 171,543 Japanese immigrants. Despite making up only slightly more than 1% of the population, the Japanese benefitted from the country more than the majority ever could. By 1930, one-third of all arable lands were owned by the Japanese population. Through the modernization program, productivity rose, however Koreans rarely benefited; the government exported 51.9% of the rice crop to companies in mainland Japan (Pratt 2006, 213). The way of life as Koreans once knew it was no more, but a fiery seed of resistance had been planted. As Pratt describes it, “urbanization grew, beginning the transformation of transitional Korean community life and simultaneously creating conditions in which the seeds of radical nationalism could germinate” (Pratt 2006, 213). During this century of injustice through colonization, the Japanese silenced the Koreans, but they could not cover their mouths forever. The Korean identity is now more confident than ever.

During their reign, the Japanese destroyed most “traditional” Korean architectural sites in the name of modernization and development. Gone were the “traditional single-storeyed and thatched style” buildings specific to the rich Korean culture (Pratt 2006, 214). What once was a cornerstone of culture was now the white-marble stone of the neo-Renaissance Government-General Building. Decades later, the most recent form of Korean government demolished this building that was once a symbol of outside control, taking back control of their own. Then, they built the unbelievably modern Seoul City Hall over the Renaissance-style city

hall that served the city from 1945-2008 (The Seoul Guide 2021). The geometric glass building as seen in Figure 1 of Appendix A quite literally overshadows the once colonial-reminiscent city hall.

Supposed Backwardness

Surely with decades of torture to the Korean people, attention would have been paid by the outside world. Unfortunately, that was not the case before World War II. During the early 20th century, feats of imperialism did not face the same mass scrutiny that they do today, rather they were viewed as "semi-philanthropic" in intent (Pratt 2006, 209). American leaders like Secretary of State Taft and President Roosevelt viewed Japanese control as progress for both the Koreans and the East Asian region (Pratt 2006, 210). To them, their allies in the Japanese government not giving the Korean people a chance for peace was the solution to peace throughout the Pacific, an oddly backward idea for officials who considered Korea as an image of backwardness. Entirely unimpressed with their situation, the stronger world powers considered Korea to be the Land of Division, a country incapable of taking care of itself. According to Pratt (2006, 216), it was a suffering country "expected to be grateful" to Japan for recognizing it as one of their outside provinces. Blaming the lack of respect on surges of Korean nationalism springing from Protestant ideals, government officials arrested over 100 Christians as well as the leaders of *Sinminhoe*, accusing their 123 defendants of treason (Pratt 2006, 216). This event known as the Korean Conspiracy Trial proved that, as historian Donald Clark (2003) puts it, "the freedoms guaranteed by the Meiji Constitution were not to be extended to the Koreans" (Pratt 2006, 216). Still, they persisted. The Korean nationalist patriots worked to ensure that the Korean language, or *hangeul*, continued to be taught in missionary schools

around the country. Even though more than 10% of all Koreans lived abroad by 1944, the fight on the homefront was just beginning (Pratt 2006, 217). Shin and Robinson, professors of historical-comparative sociology and East Asian cultures respectively, explain it best: "The notion of the nation was not [yet] an immutable given… it was contested, negotiated, reformulated and reconstructed during the colonial period" (Pratt 2006, 218). The Korean nation was not a certain one. To many Koreans, this century of suffering did not equate to a century of complacency.

Foreign Support: The Only Option

Korea remained under Japanese Occupation until the end of World War II, and then after the war from 1945 to 1948, Korea remained under American Occupation. Even after the country declared independence in 1948, the first president of Korea, Syngman Rhee, had lived in the US since 1913 and had an Austrian wife. Outside forces were a constant influence in the Korean government, arts, and society. Not only did Koreans have to answer to others, but they had to answer to those who did not particularly care about preserving their culture and way of life. During Rhee's 12 year corrupt presidency, the Korean peninsula was faced with mass destruction and death during the Korean War from 1950-1953. With 1,520,295 North and South Korean soldiers and civilians killed, 535,274 wounded, and 421,103 missing, the shattered country not only had to rebuild all of their economies with the help of China, the Soviet Union, and the United States, but they had to rehabilitate all the mental trauma as well (Pratt 2006, 260). Following the official division of the peninsula on the 38th parallel in 1953, Korea still was not free to make decisions on its own as it faced a military coup that resulted in President Park Chunghee from 1962-1979. President Chun Doohwan followed from 1980-1988 with militarism

and massacre, as infamous in Korea as the Tiananmen Square massacre in China nine years later. In suspending the constitution, closing universities, banning political gatherings, and arresting political leaders, Chun incited violent demonstrations throughout his military-led presidency (Pratt 2006, 266). Even though South Korea was technically free of occupation since 1948, the country was not able to experience democracy until 40 years later as the first legit elections with the first civilian president, Roh Taewoo, did not take place until 1988. Under his successor Kim Young Sam's non-military related presidency, Korea embraced democratization and cosmopolitanism in aiming to put Korea "at the forefront of the drive towards globalization" (Pratt 2006, 268).

Until the end of the Cold War, Korea had little choice but to rely on foreign support whether they wanted to admit it or not (Pratt 2006, 277-278). Notably, relying on foreign aid meant answering to the desires of the donor. Economically, Korea was in no situation to act independently until Park Chunghee began to improve the economy via the arts and culture. He saw cultural development as "an essential part of economic reconstruction" (Pratt 2006, 279). While it seems likely that Koreans would be in total support of a renaissance of Korean art forms after so many decades of oppression, the Republic of Korea (ROK) "politicized arts and culture, using them to promote nationhood and cement [legitimacy]" even into the democratic era (Pratt 2006, 279). Artistic expression still knew plenty of boundaries. Park's administration saw a Ministry of Culture and Information in 1968, the Culture and Arts Promotion Law in 1972, and a five year plan to develop culture, merely a strategy of his economic plan (Pratt 2006, 280). However much one might argue, Park's implementations of cultural protection and expansion were a positive change for the country even if there was still heavy censorship of the arts. Despite the rapid economic improvements that came with a focus on culture, the focus on a

continuously censored culture sparked fervor among Korean patriots and their people's movement partly against official censorship of the arts, the *minjung* movement (Pratt 2006, 280). This younger generation grew more and more unwilling to answer to a repressive government.

In the early 1990s, Korea saw a rise of the *sinsedae*: "those born during the early and mid-1970s who grew up in urban areas watching American tv shows, listening to American popular music, eating American fast food, and consuming American fashion" (Shin and Lee 2016, 144). In the simplest of terms, this new generation was fundamentally different from any previous one. Unhappy with the continuation of an oppressive education system, even after the increasingly democratic policies of party politics and press freedom under Roh Taewoo and Kim Young Sam, youth opinions and reactions grew stronger (Pratt 2006, 267). There were too many similarities between the education system of 1990s Korea and colonized Korea, including the use of communal punishment. It was not until 1993 under the presidency of Kim Young Sam that the education system received a more positive makeover; still, the immense pressure put on students prevailed and left a certain distaste in their mouths (Shin and Lee 2016). This distaste manifested in popular culture, particularly the music scene.

The Birth of K-pop

By the early 1990s, the *sinsedae*, living in a recently globalized society and economy, focused their efforts on imitating global forms of culture into their own. Consumers began to target them as the first Korean generation with disposable income, and they spent their time engrossed in everything they could possibly consume from technology and pop music to cosmetics and fashion (Shin and Lee 2016). This global consumption meant the heavy consumption of American pop music with Western groups like New Kids on the Block

performing in Seoul in 1992 (Shin and Lee 2016). Though the government did not approve of these American groups due to the fact that they felt they had such a negative impact on their youth, the boy band craze was already circulating past the point of no return. A Korean musician known as Seo Taiji formed his very own group, Seo Taiji and Boys, that same year and released the rap song “Nan arayo,” considered by many to be the first K-pop song. According to Shin and Lee, “the conservative media immediately criticized the band for their *foreign* music style and ill-mannered stage performance” which included wearing “baggy pants, oversized t-shirts, sunglasses, and baseball hats on backwards” (Shin and Lee 2016, 145). Seo Taiji and Boys, a group focused on rap, dance, and criticizing the education system, challenged the music critics as well as mainstream Korean pop of the time and sold 1.5 million copies of their first album (Shin and Lee 2016). Little did they know, they would become the catalyst of an entirely different Korean pop genre: K-pop.

Even though Seo Taiji and Boys are retrospectively considered to be the first K-pop group, the term “K-pop” itself was not used until three years after the band’s dissolvement. In 1999, Cho Hyunjin introduced the internal term to Billboard magazine when working as a South Korean correspondent. Though Cho addresses the rumors that Korean music industry insiders were using the term before him, he admits to gathering inspiration for the term from the K league, Korea’s soccer league, and not from Japanese popular music (J-pop) as is usually assumed. Aiming merely to define any pop music that came from Korea, Cho acknowledges “the term ‘K-pop’ really started to define the agency-produced or managed idol bands, or sometimes solo acts" even if there were barely six idol groups around to tour and release albums in the late 90s (Herman 2019). Still, Seo Taiji and Boys, a group aiming to create a new sound specific to

their experiences inspired by already-existing genres, remain universally known as the first musical act to be associated with K-pop.

Academics argue over Seo Taiji and Boys' initial influences. Some sources agree that the themes of his songs could not be more different than those of African American rap songs, with Seo Taiji focusing on youth and love and American rap focusing on violence and gun culture, but it is indisputable that there are similarities, both visually and musically (Shin and Lee 2016). Of course, his young fans began to mimic his style of break dancing and fashion, and the concept became increasingly popular.

Released in 1995, Seo Taiji and Boys' song "Come Back Home" was the most popular song of the year, according to a poll conducted by Mnet, one of Korea's major television channels (Naver 2005). The music video for the song was also considered to be one of K-pop's top ten at the time (Naver 2005). This song from their fourth and final studio album, one of the most notable songs in K-pop's early history, was categorized as American West Coast gangsta rap. Classified as "an edgy sound produced by synthesizer and rhythmic stressed bass, with guitars and drums densely layered," the style was initially made popular by artists like Ice-T, 2pac, and Dr. Dre (Shin and Lee 2016, 148). Active until 1996, Seo Taiji and Boys are considered the first K-pop group, and their music as well as their beginning makes a lot of sense in the historical context of a once-colonized, oppressed Korea. Beginning an entire genre based around Western groups and American West Coast gangsta rap, in terms of both style of fashion and music, Seo Taiji and Boys introduced a heavily Western-derived genre to the country: a genre that would only get the chance to become its own once Korea did too.

Over the 30 years that follow, Korea begins to seize control of its own narrative and rise to the position that it is currently in: an incredibly prominent country, despite its small size. With

ever-increasing soft power around the globe, particularly through its now recognizable Korean brand, Korea has made a household name for itself and joined the contemporary world as a major player. The Korean identity has clearly evolved over the past few decades, transforming from one that barely existed to one that is expertly marketed around the globe. Profiting off of the combination of soft masculinity and the new traditional, Korean national identity grows increasingly more notable, with a noticeable following and growing discussion amongst academics in varying literatures as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Literature Review

Many consider 2017 to be the year that K-pop's popularity in the West became impossible to disregard as seven-membered boy group BTS became the first Korean act to perform at the Billboard Music Awards and take home the award for Top Social Artist, beating the likes of popular Western artists such as Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez. With a global interest in K-pop and Korean culture as a whole only increasing since 2017, the topic will be studied now more than ever. Duolingo, the language learning website, launched Korean as an option for students in 2017 and attracted more than 200,000 new learners. Prior to that, the Modern Language Association noted that "Korean uptake in US universities rose by almost 14% between 2013 and 2016, while overall language enrolment was in decline" (Pickles 2018). As of 2018, 14,000 students were learning Korean in the US when the figures only counted 163 twenty years prior (Pickles 2018).

K-pop, in the context of the much broader Korean Wave, is arguably one of the leading topics of discussion amongst not only Korean studies professionals, but also throughout the disciplines of gender studies and performance studies, speaking only from a sociocultural standpoint. K-pop continues to be studied by economists as well due to its nature of being one of Korea's leading exports. There are thousands of scholarly articles written on the complex media genre as a whole with a simple Google Scholar search for "K-pop" yielding almost 6,400 results. Most impressively, the literature surrounding K-pop has not peaked. With marked attention initially being paid to the subject as early as the beginning of the 2000s, there is an illustrious increase in production of scholarly articles on the subject around the 2010s, the decade that K-pop's extreme popularity in the West initially peaked. Most of the literature I have read comes from this pre-2016 era.

Academics have been interested in the popularity of boy bands and the phenomenon of Beatlemania for decades, and this research translates over to the K-pop industry. Initially curious on why and how K-pop is reaching such heights outside of Korea, research topics now range more specifically anywhere from gender performance and soft power to fan culture and economic consumption. It is important to consider research surrounding soft masculinity in the Korean entertainment industry as it sets the foundation for the argument that the Korean national identity has emerged more confidently over the past four decades. Soft masculinity in the K-pop industry comprises half of the concept of the "new traditional," which allows for the expression of a more distinct, assured Korean identity and brand today. Understanding how academics view soft masculinity, particularly in the realm of its potentially insurgent nature, provides readers with a more complete understanding of its impact.

While an overall view of scholarly literature on soft masculinity in K-pop does reveal that a majority of the contemporary debate focuses on the question of the extent of its disruption in Korean society, there are statements that seemingly the entire community agree on. Korean soft masculinity is studied often and is widely accepted to have roots in outside trends. The noticeable shift from macho masculinity in the 90s to soft masculinity today is indisputable. Furthermore, despite its origins, Korean soft masculinity is recognized to be distinctively Korean and is mainly seen as positive. Even Jeehyun Lee, Rachel Lee, and Ji Hoon Park (2020), a few of the academics who warn of the dangers of soft masculinity, note that the Korean soft masculinity is different from the hegemonic masculinity of the United States. Regardless of having a positive or negative opinion towards soft masculinity, no one disagrees on its status as a unique phenomenon, hinting at why it is such a studied and debated topic in academia today.

East Asian Discussion

In "Flower Men of Korea," Yamakawa (2014) discusses the concept of traditional combined with the Korean soft masculinity. She uses "traditional" in the sense that the men who follow the soft masculinity trend are men who are able to both provide for families and have classic sports skills while still grooming and taking care of their appearance. Even though the trend of soft masculinity provides for a focus on self-care and grooming practices, the idea of men needing to provide and have typically masculine qualities persists. In this sense, Yamakawa views soft masculinity as reinforcing strong patriarchal stereotypes. Furthermore, Yamakawa believes that women fuel this changing masculinity because men try to appeal to them and what women want right now is soft masculinity, or in other terms, a Flower Man (*kkonminam*). She notes that the "traditionally male identity and the newer Flower Man identity are blending well in Korean society" (Yamakawa 2014).

Like Yamakawa argues, Elfving-Hwang (2011) also discusses the concept of the *kkonminam* and soft masculinity as a patriarchal reinforcer in nature in "Not So Soft After All: Kkonminam Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Popular Culture." She argues that an outward cosmetic shift in masculinity in Korea does not denote a change in the hierarchy of men and women in the patriarchal society but that it instead just redefines the traits of masculinity. According to both authors, physical changes due to soft masculinity are not reminiscent of changing gender relations but instead are responsible for redefining what masculinity is as a whole.

Both Yamakawa and Elfving-Hwang in particular believe that this new Korean soft masculinity is influenced from outside forces like the worldwide metrosexual trend and Japanese pop culture and entertainment.With decades of Japanese influence and control in their past, it

makes sense that Korean pop culture would have aspects of Japanese pop culture intertwined within. Furthermore, with the bid to restore relations with Japan over the past 40 years, it also seems apparent as to why Korean groups would at one point target Japanese audiences. It is important to consider the global fanbases that K-pop targets the most.

As a whole, both Yamakawa's and Elfving-Hwang's research deals with modern Koreans in contemporary Korean society, further adding to the majority of research from the last decade that focuses on how the Korean identity in general relates to contemporary Korean society. Yamakawa believes a large portion, if not the majority, of Korean men have an interest in being a Flower Man. Furthermore, Elfving-Hwang looks at the emergence of soft masculine men in the context of contemporary Korean society and what significance that image plays in it as well as discusses changes in character traits in relation to this cosmetic shift.

Though Yamakawa discusses the importance of the concept of the traditional in combination with the Korean soft masculinity, it is important to consider "traditional" not only in terms of patriarchal norms but also as traditional elements of Korean culture, or at least what Korea has noted as traditional elements. Even though Yamakawa notes that the blend of traditional male identity and Flower Man identity is seemingly smooth in Korean society, both her and Elfing-Hwang do not take into account the confidence required of what I contrastingly believe is a positively provocative masculinity. Though rooted in outside influence, this new distinct Korean identity is arguably due to the recent change in Korea's place on the world stage and in turn influences others globally.

While Yamakawa's and Elfving-Hwang's research is important and certainly telling, it is important to not only focus on the desires of everyday Korean men to change their personal aesthetics but instead look into the image that Korea feeds the rest of the world. Studying the

changing aesthetics of K-pop idols, players in some of the most highly consumed media in the world, is more significant for studying an increasingly globalized Korea and the outward presentation of what Korea is and who Koreans are. In their own way, K-pop idols are global ambassadors of the country, and both the government and society recognize that these ambassadors are what the rest of the world consumes. With Korea's strong economy now providing for this distinct Korean soft masculinity, it is beneficial to consider the significance of and how the new Korean identity performs on a global scale.

In "Unpacking K-pop in America: The Subversive Potential of Male K-pop Idols' Soft Masculinity," Jeehyun Lee, Rachel Lee, and Ji Hoon Park (2020) consider a similar topic to Yamakawa and Elfving-Hwang of what they all agree to be the non-subversive nature of soft masculinity. However, taking it one step further than Yamakawa and Elfving-Hwang, Jeehyun Lee, Rachel Lee, and Ji Hoon Park consider its subversiveness in a different context as well: reinforcing dangerous effeminate stereotypes of East Asian men. Their article, in short, discusses the dangers of associating soft masculinity with Korea. The authors believe that it is not necessarily a good thing for American fans to associate soft masculinity with Korean men and Korean culture because it emphasizes the racial stereotype of Asian men as effeminate. Through gauging American K-pop fans' reactions of and receptions to K-pop idols' soft masculinity, they conclude that soft masculinity "runs the risk of essentializing the stereotypically effeminate features of Asian men and limits K-pop's potential to challenge this racialized masculinity in the United States" (Lee, Lee, and Park 2020, 5900).

While the arguments and debate over the subversive vs non-subversive nature of soft masculinity are equal parts interesting and important, academics who consider soft masculinity to be merely reinforcing already existent values both common and dangerous to East Asia do not

take K-pop's place in a global Korea into account. Their confidence in doing this, performing gender in a new and challenging way, begs an answer to a seemingly ignored question: what does it mean that these pop stars, these Korean idols, feel comfortable doing something that is considered "weird" in the West? The answer is that, at least in this sense, the emerging soft masculinity of a new K-pop aesthetic is subversive. While no one can argue the fact that it is crucial to consider potential dangers of stereotypes, especially in regions of the world historically looked down upon and considered "backwards," academics like Lee, Lee, and Park have failed to look at one particular aspect of the nature of the Korean response to the stereotype. The Korean pop industry embracing the soft masculine identity is not just a dangerously stereotypical trend. If we look at it from the perspective of a Korea with almost unheard of soft power, influence, and economical prowess on the global stage, we can see the soft masculinity for what it truly is: challenging the antiquated notion that Korea must rely on outside forces for success. Now, the Korean identity is defiant and formidable all on its own.

In contrast to Lee, Lee, and Park discussing the dangers of associating soft masculinity with Korea, one should consider associating it with Korea as a component of a new emergent Korean national identity. In other words, there is another angle that should be considered in discussing this new but changing aesthetic. The fact that this soft masculinity is distinctively Korean is proof that Korean identity has become more confident as opposed to fitting into negative stereotypes. By analyzing the situation from this varying perspective, certain claims can be considered: Korea is actually taking control of the once negative stereotype and turning it into a brand instead. It is possible that Korea knows that it cannot change an entire cemented stereotype that has targeted them for centuries but that with its growing soft power, it can influence and benefit from it.

Western Discussion

Not only is it important to look at literature focused on masculinity and East Asia, but literature studying Western boy bands opens a new realm of discussion and comparison. The debate on boy bands in general covers a wide expanse of topics. Kai Arne Hansen (2016), associate professor of music in the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at Inland Norway University, studies shifting displays of masculinity in United Kingdom boy band One Direction's Zayn's musical career in "Fashioning a Post Boy Band Masculinity: On the Seductive Dreamscape of Zayn's Pillowtalk." He builds off of Elfving-Hwang's argument that soft masculinity doesn't actually change heteronormative gender dynamics in a meaningful way, but he focuses his research on non-Korean groups. Hansen argues that Zayn makes considerable changes to his style and aesthetic before his solo career after leaving One Direction in hopes of "opposing the common stereotypes and prejudices associated with the boy band format" (Hansen 2016, under "Abstract"). The author notes that "even though Zayn's fashioning of masculinity calls attention to how gendered identities are constructed and performed in pop… his representation in Pillowtalk (debut single) conforms to heteronormative gender dynamics as much as it challenges them" (Hansen 2016, under "Abstract"). In other words, even though Zayn appears to be challenging gender norms, he actually ends up reinforcing them, just as Elfving-Hwang claims the Flower Man's soft masculinity to do.

Continuing with the debate encircling gender performance in boy bands in general, whether they be Korean or Western, Senior Lecturer for Film and Media at the University of Central Lancashire, Georgina Gregory (2019) researches boy bands from the 1940s to the present, the role of management and marketing, the performance of gender and sexuality, and the nature of fandom and fan agency. Similar to Hansen, Gregory begins with an argument similar to

Elfving-Hwang's in that a masculine aesthetic transformation denotes changing defining characteristics of what a man is. She too focuses on the discussion of how boy bands change what it means to be a man however, like Hansen, does so in Western artists, primarily from the likes of the Beatles to One Direction. In her book *Boy Bands and the Performance of Pop Masculinity,* the author argues that the identity of the boy band influences their production and in turn allows boy bands to reinforce and subvert gender and class hierarchies (Gregory 2019). By noting that identity politics can be both supportive of and challenging to hierarchies at the same time, her argument shows the importance of gender performance and expression via boy bands in society.

Given literature that reinforces the idea that soft masculinity, or changing masculinities as a whole, is not subversive in nature in both K-pop groups and non-K-pop groups, further augments the uniqueness of the Korean case. In arguing that Korean soft masculinity is in fact subversive, it has become like a tool for Korea: a sociocultural brand that Korea can use to influence its place on the global scale both economically and politically.

Varying Methodologies

On top of the conversation of influence, there remain numerous nuances in the differences between methodologies used in the varying scholarly literature, each notable in their own way. As one of Korea's leading exports both economically and politically, the Korean entertainment industry is a common case study amongst academics. However, unlike Yamakawa's and Elfving-Hwang's data collection via K-dramas, research in the K-pop industry offers a more volatile, revealing nature. K-drama analysis is more structured since once an episode is filmed, it does not change once released to the public. K-pop, on the other hand,

focuses a lot on live performance and live interviews, rendering the genre slightly more dynamic. Both are incredibly vital aspects of Korean cultural export and consumption and in turn both useful tools for collecting data. However, the concept of "aesthetics" is more widely circulated throughout K-pop due to stage costumes, music videos, and album art, and the changing aesthetic is exactly what I am researching.

Even though Hansen's work focuses on Western boy groups like One Direction, his methodological approach is quite similar to mine, focusing on critical musicology, investigating issues of personal narrative, sonic production, and audiovisual aesthetics. The author analyzes Zayn's "Pillowtalk" music video just as I analyze Stray Kids's "Thunderous" music video, and he "demonstrates how provocative lyrical themes, shock effects, and surreal aesthetics showcase Zayn's masculinity as dangerous and seductive" (Hansen 2016, under "Abstract"). The use of performance studies techniques is popular among researchers of visual elements of music.

Further Discussion

Finally, it is important to comment on other discussions being made in regards to academic conversation surrounding soft masculinity and pop music. Recognizing what is being discussed allows for a better understanding of the future of academia in this field. In authors Kyunghee So, Jungyun Kim, and Sunyoung Lee's (2012) journal article "The Formation of the South Korean Identity through National Curriculum in the South Korean Historical Context: Conflicts and Challenges," they argue that ethnic-based identity still defines certain aspects of the newly formed Korean identity that has shifted with the change of the historical curriculum taught in Korea. So, Kim, and Lee's research recognizes that there is a new, different Korean identity, however it looks at its transition through the educational curriculum as opposed to

K-pop. This existing research also follows Korea's globalization trend that began in the 1990s; it is important to note other researchers who come to the same conclusion – in this case, a more confident and challenging Korean national identity – via different methods of case study, further cementing how regardless of which case study is chosen, the transformation to a new Korean identity is firm and undeniable.

With the combination of consistent curiosity in aesthetic masculinity's role in boy groups around the world and growing globalized popularity in Korean pop and culture, academia must continue to expand its reach. In his 2013 journal article "Adolescent Masculinity in an Age of Decreased Homohysteria," academic Eric Anderson calls for the creation of new social theories in regards to masculinity. Though his case study is focused on Western groups, he explains how "the diminishment of homohysteria promotes a 'One-Direction' culture of inclusive and highly feminized masculinities" (Anderson 2013, under "Abstract"). Western boy groups are seen as increasingly feminine, even if not to the same extent as Korean boy groups are. In other words, there are new forms of masculinity being introduced to the world, whether believed to have initially propagated from East Asia or the West, ergo the world of academia needs to focus on them and make proper adjustments in terminology and theory. Masculinity is a debate that will only grow more complicated and diverse in the future, especially with an increasing interest in the Korean identity.

My thesis illustrates the changing Korean national identity from one that was inherently derivative to one that is now confident in its ability to stand alone on a global scale. It is vital to gain an understanding that scholars, particularly a lot of anthropologists, look at K-pop as a genre, even though it is a fairly niche genre, with the idea of soft masculinity coming up often; in other words, K-pop's significance on the global scale must be perceived. In turn, the academic

literature that does give attention to the genre agrees that the Korean soft masculinity involved with it originates from influences of Japanese and metrosexual maculinity styles but then became its own distinctly Korean style. However, academics have framed this style as being something dangerous and unsettling. Building on this research, I rethink soft masculinity as being subversive, a way for Korea to concretely form its path through the globalized world.

SHINee

As previously discussed, the literature surrounding K-pop as a genre includes an in-depth discussion of soft masculinity and its exact role in Korea's sphere of influence. Even with other varying nuances in their work, the majority of academics agree that soft masculinity is distinctively Korean in its style today, as it has evolved alongside the Korean identity and cultural confidence so prevalent in contemporary times. Diving further into the concept, this chapter uses SM Entertainment's SHINee, a second generation boy group[4] to establish the visual shift over time in K-pop aesthetics from a highly Western-derived style to the distinct Korean soft masculinity look that has become synonymous with Korean pop culture worldwide. I argue that this shift reveals a transition from following Western trends and pleasing a Western audience, to confidently embracing their role – and Korea's role – as a global trendsetter creating their own brand.

Despite the sheer magnitude of the K-pop genre and an overwhelming number of potential groups for analysis, SHINee remains a very-telling group to study. Having debuted in 2008 and still actively releasing albums and content, they have transcended various generations and continue to be a leader in the entertainment industry even today. Data estimates approximately 208 K-pop groups as of 2020, with the number of male idols[5] slightly overriding the number of females at 51.6%, rendering it safe to assume there have been at least 105 boy groups come from K-pop (Rahmi 2021). Even then, SHINee's popularity and fame has remained palpable over their 14-year career, allowing the group to clearly demonstrate their aesthetic shift over time.

[4] generally agreed upon by fans and the industry as groups that debuted during the mid-2000s to the early 2010s
[5] the label given to an artist in the K-pop industry

Nonetheless, SHINee's recognition as leaders of the industry has not always been on the global scale. The group debuted with five members, Onew, Key, Minho, Jonghyun, and Taemin, but unfortunately lost Jonghyun to suicide in 2017, so they currently continue as four. This accounts for the change in the number of members in the included images. Jonghyun's death sparked a number of worldwide concerns in regards to mental health in the K-pop industry, with The Washington Post publishing an article titled "K-pop star's suicide note reveals pressures of fame" that draws attention to South Korea having the highest suicide rate of all countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Wang 2017). Consequently, the concern catapulted SHINee to the forefront of the K-pop scene on a more global scale. Even though SHINee had been notable as a household name in Korea for many years prior, the loss of one of their members contributed to their name being known more widely.

This chapter heavily focuses on the visual analysis of two SHINee eras to show their transition from a more Western boyband, hip-hop derived aesthetic to the confidently soft Korean look that they sport today. Beginning with a discussion of "Replay," SHINee's debut song, this chapter provides an in-depth walkthrough of the song's music video, debut stage,[6] and concept photos[7] released in accordance with its album. Continuing with analysis, this chapter then considers the aesthetic of one of SHINee's most recent songs, released in 2021, "Don't Call Me" as a representation of the distinctive Korean soft masculinity. The same elements of visual production are analyzed with "Don't Call Me" as they were with "Replay": the song's music video, a live performance, and album concept photos, however revealing a different outcome.

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[6] the first live performance of the song
[7] photoshoots released by a group's company that reveal the overall aesthetic of an upcoming album

A Western-Derived Aesthetic: "Replay"

The concept photos released for *Replay,* SHINee's successful debut EP bearing the title song of the same name, reveal SHINee's initial reliance on a Western-derived hip hop and R&B style. Released May 22, 2008, the mini album is described as presenting a variety of genres mixed to create 5 different R&B tracks, for what was revealed as the "contemporary R&B boy group" (Hyeong-woo Kim 2008). Peaking at #8 on the Music Industry Association of Korea (MIAK) charts, the EP sold 17, 957 copies within the first half of 2008 ("MIAK" 2008; Music Industry Association of Korea 2008). Despite this figure not measuring up with contemporary K-pop debut EP album sales, it is certainly impressive for a group debuting in 2008. Due to the album's popularity, SHINee's Western-derived fashion choices influenced the fashion choices of many students in Korea, beginning what the Korean media dubbed as the "SHINee Trend" (Dorof 2015). Overall, "Replay" features SHINee's reliance on an edgy, intentionally-relaxed hypermasculine style while navigating tight, synchronized pop and lock style hip hop choreography.

Replay's concept photos precisely reveal the exact fashion that became so popular in 2008; fashion that was heavily influenced by popular Western styles of the decade. The SHINee members sport popular styles highly reminiscent of a Western style, including the "Bieber Haircut," the hairstyle that became associated with Western mega popstar Justin Bieber as he consistently donned it from 2008 to 2010 as seen in Figure 5 (Eckardt 2020). Furthermore, the album photobook photos as seen in Figures 3 and 4 produce a hip-hop, "cool boy" with swag as they wear an assortment of hyper-stylized black and blue ensembles, including Onew in sunglasses. With fitted, but not skinny, jeans and tanks to display their muscular arms, the boys try hard to appear "cool" and "tough." They pose as if they have not tried hard to, with hands

lazily falling out of pockets to signify a stern facade that manifests a sense of not caring. Justin Bieber poses similarly in Figure 5 his more layered version of the same “cannot be bothered” masculine style. *Replay’s* teaser photo shows a correlation in style from Backstreet Boys in Figure 6 to Seo Taiji and Boys in Figure 7 to SHINee. Layering baggy jeans with oversized collar windbreaker-style jackets and t-shirts as in Figure 2, SHINee embodies a continued interpretation of Seo Taiji and Boys’ style that is clearly derived from the likes of 90s Western boy bands like Backstreet Boys. Controversially, one member of Seo Taiji and Boys sports what appears to be dreadlocks, a hairstyle associated with the African American and hip hop community.

Expanding from fashion style, *Replay’s* music video and debut stage performance speak towards initial outside influence in K-pop through its hip hop infused choreography and simple stage presence. With looks ranging from a metallic red bomber jacket with a baseball cap and gaudy gold chain necklaces to a white tanktop embellished with a red bandana around the neck, the members perform short and calculated dance moves, packed with power in order to fully embrace the slow yet hard-hitting “popping and locking” moves typical of hip hop. Dancing in a turn-based, mirroring manner then ending up in perfect sync for the chorus of endless leg swaying, the members cheekily smile at the camera, hand over their hearts, bitten lips, and all. In between flashing scenes of a graffiti-decorated basketball court and a headphone wearing Jonghyun serenading the female love interest, the members take the opportunity to appear desirable and offhandedly interesting. In the live performance, the members perform in front of a single lit-up star serving as the backdrop as fog mysteriously surrounds them. The stage design and use of fog are also incredibly derivative of the striking yet simple designs of groups from the West from both the 90s and first decade of the 2000s.

Emerging Soft Masculine Aesthetic: "Don't Call Me"

Fast forward to 2021, SHINee's aesthetic no longer reflects one relying on outside influence for inspiration, as seen in the *Don't Call Me* album's concept photos. "Don't Call Me" reveals SHINee's soft presentation with form-fitting suits and perfectly-shaped hair that has been carefully dyed unnatural colors to match their aesthetic. The members perform their expressively erotic yet intricate choreography while providing the camera with seductive stares from behind their subtle-but-meant-to-be-noticed makeup. Strikingly different to the photos from 2008, SHINee's style is now unlike any previous Western boy band. Representing the growing interest in soft masculinity, SHINee expresses a more androgynous look overall, combining both stereotypically feminine and masculine aspects. The members pose effortlessly cool and seductive in unique ensembles embellished with florals, from the likes of a flower crown to blouse adornments. Taemin's perfectly-manicured, painted nails and Onew's striking black necklace work in conjunction with Key's form-fitting, jewel-embellished ensemble as seen in Figures 9 and 10. Perfectly displaying the concept of soft masculinity, the members wear more inventive versions of the common suit in Figure 8, including bright colors, shiny loafers, pearl earrings and necklaces, and ruffles peaking out around the neck.

The music video and live performance of *Don't Call Me* reveal a shifting aesthetic of the group as a whole, albeit through choreography and atmosphere. Their dancing reflects a more confidently divergent identity with its allowance of more fluidity in terms of style, so the members take the opportunity to show their individual attitudes and flavor. Gone are the days of strict, contained pop and lock movements, and instead, are now replaced by those of sensuality and sleek intricacies. Opening with freshly-dyed fire engine red hair and expertly-shaped abs on display, Minho joins his other members and a team of performance dancers in enticingly swaying

his hips and purposefully swinging his hands as the complex choreography demands. Taemin's incredibly trendy and praised "skunk hair," or black hair with white stripes throughout, combines well with his dainty, but plentiful, earrings to support his effortlessly chic vibe as he moves his finger down his face in a "shh" manner and smirks at the camera. The live performance of the song includes an extremely colorful, eye-catching set. Dancing in front of a customized, lifesize version of a house and garden, the set is unlike anything seen from a boy band performance in the West. More complicated while somehow remaining chic and effortless, the distinctive Korean soft masculinity manifests in varying ways, but quite notably in SHINee's *Don't Call Me*.

Societal Reactions and Residual Effects

Overarchingly, soft masculinity affects the Korean identity, adding to its ever-increasing confidence in its sustainability and influence. Soft masculinity challenges stereotypical gender norms, accumulating inspiration from global metrosexual trends and Japanese styles of masculinty. The aesthetic offers "a softer, more delicate and visibly feminine way to be a man" (Friend 2018). Focused around stressing the importance of self-grooming, the aesthetic combines typically feminine ventures, like pearl earrings and necklaces, silk blouses, and sparkly eye makeup, with clean-cut typically masculine ventures like suits and leather pants. The style, unique to Korea in its form and scale of expression, equips the country with the ability to present a look that is not derivative of Western style and culture. If anything, this Korean soft masculinity is influencing Western aesthetics. The Korean government, while promoting Korean culture that they want the globalized world to consume, no longer must aim to appeal to the globalized world by morphing to a mold. With a more challenging Korean identity being formed, that very identity can confidently be exported, and soft masculinity is only the beginning.

With a changing aesthetic comes a changing opinion towards K-pop amongst the Korean population. Regardless of how society feels about K-pop, its residual effects cannot be ignored. Regina Kim (2020), a Korean-American culture and entertainment writer, remarks in Rolling Stone that when the Korean solo artist PSY's "'Gangnam Style' became the most viewed video on YouTube, the Korean media and even the Korean government suddenly couldn't get enough of him, hailing him as a national hero for catapulting his country to global stardom" despite limited fame prior. Even though SHINee's renown has not wavered amongst fans since their debut in 2008, "popularity abroad shapes public opinion back home in Korea" (Kim 2020). With members of SHINee acknowledging that "[they're] singing abroad in Korean" and therefore must "work hard as representatives," their recognition as a constant strength of K-pop persists, from winning rookie awards with "Replay" in 2008 to topping the iTunes chart in 46 countries for "Don't Call Me" 13 years later (Je-yup Kwaak 2012; South China Morning Post 2021). However, despite consistent support on the homefront for evolving groups like SHINee, some Koreans fear that "Seoul had lost some of its charm" due to the cultural feedback loop of K-pop changing the capital's landscape to appeal to K-pop-seeking tourists (Kim 2020). With K-pop's consistent international acclaim and growing attention, reactions amongst members of Korean society remain telling.

Pushing Boundaries: Taemin and Soft Masculinity

Closely examining the solo career of one member, Taemin, through the music video for his song "Criminal" provides an interesting study of soft masculinity. In Taemin's case, he reaffirms the notion that soft masculinity is a masculine style that adopts characteristics usually associated with womanhood. As the youngest member of SHINee, he grew up in the K-pop

industry and has continued to push gender boundaries individually at least since SHINee began to transition its style as a group, if not before. While he is not the only example of a soloist who questions masculinity in the industry, he is incredibly well-known nationally and has inspired discussion around gender performance in the West. Taemin, unafraid to voice his opinions on the industry, holds strong views in regards to the future of K-pop's place in the world, and therefore, in regards to Korea's place as well; a place assuredly allowing the country to cement its own identity and brand through concepts beginning with soft masculinity.

Looking even more extensively at the youngest member of the internationally-acclaimed boy group, Taemin stands amongst the K-pop industry as a representative for the distinctive Korean soft masculinity. With a successful solo career on top of his work in SHINee, Taemin's aesthetic embodies everything that soft masculinity and a confident Korean identity entail. In the 2020 music video for his song, "Criminal," Taemin continues to present a dancer-first type song with intricate, original choreography and an alluring androgynous style. Expressively erotic in dance style, Taemin appears brooding, consistently dressed to the nines in varying styles of suits. He wears a perfectly tailored blazer adorned with many lapel pins, the biggest one notably Gucci, and his yellow silk ruffle blouse is topped off with seemingly quite feminine jewelry. His silk gloves are accompanied by a ring on almost every finger. Joining his performance dancers, who are dressed in striking red suits, flashes of Taemin reveal a blue-eyelined smokey eye look with blue-tinted hair, matched with a classic well-fitted black suit and black tie, upgraded with the feminine touch of pearls. Even as he moves away from his surrounding setting of Greek-style sculpture art and an abundance of flowers, he emerges in an asymmetrical suit bedecked with varying harnesses and straps, a staple in the K-pop look today.

In concordance with his visual presentation, Taemin's interviews express a sentiment of a confident and challenging Korean identity, expressed through K-pop. In an interview with Billboard in regards to the music video for his song "Move," Taemin reveals "My aim was to find a middle ground, mixing both masculine and feminine movements into the choreography together" in order to "break the idea of what male performers are supposed to show, what performances girl groups are supposed to show" (Herman 2017). He combines hard-hitting, powerfully dynamic moves with ballet-like graceful lyrical ones, erasing the barrier between what is thought to be feminine and masculine dance. For Taemin, "there is no absolute standard on masculinity," and he notes that "there are a lot of men who care about skin care and even use makeup to express themselves," a form of expression that was not popular amongst Western-derived hip hop styles of the 90s and early 2000s (Abelman 2019). Transforming entirely since his debut days with SHINee, Taemin represents growing attention paid to soft masculinity aesthetics in Korea. As a leading idol in the industry so consumed by non-Koreans, Taemin paints a picture of the brand, the confident Korean national identity that is ever so popular today.

Soft masculinity remains one part of the building blocks that make up Korea's challenging identity. In order to globally present and export what the Korean government deems as the Korean identity and culture, the identity must be fully-formed and strong amongst media consumed by the globalized world, like with soft masculinity in K-pop. Korea no longer needs to rely on another country for economic or political assistance like it did throughout the 20th century and before. The country with the 10th largest economy in the world by GDP for three years in a row no longer needs to appease a Western audience with Western-derived styles (Silver 2022). The Korean identity is confident enough that it stands on its own, and this

exported identity begins with soft masculinity and continues with the concept of the "new traditional," as discussed in the next chapter.

Stray Kids

"Man, I'm not sorry." The catchy, defying lyric repeated throughout each chorus of boy group Stray Kids' title track, "Thunderous (소리꾼)," represents the exact identity of the group, and in turn, the identity of a recently emerging, unapologetic Korean national identity. Throughout the following chapter, I explore the concept of the push for what I call a "new traditional," a combination of traditional Korean cultural elements and the distinctive East Asian soft masculinity previously explained in prior chapters. I do this specifically by doing a close analysis of how they perform the new traditional in various performances of "Thunderous." Based on this analysis, I argue that through this concept, groups like Stray Kids are helping to cement a distinctively Korean identity and build a brand of the nation for the government to export as a means of soft power and influence.

In order to understand Stray Kids' significance, it is first important to have a firm grasp of their background. Stray Kids is an eight-member boy group that debuted under JYP Entertainment (JYPE) on March 25, 2018. In an industry with countless entertainment companies, most small and working diligently to debut and manage a single artist or group, JYPE has stood the test of time as one of the K-pop industry's Big 3 companies. For the last two decades, SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYPE[8] have led the charge ahead in terms of artist popularity and profit, but with the unprecedented recent emergence of BTS, a K-pop group that debuted in 2013, on the most globalized stage that, one could argue, K-pop has ever seen, their agency HYBE Corporation[9] turned the Big 3 into the Big 4. Still, managing five boy groups, three girl groups, and two soloists, for a total of ten artists, JYPE remains at the forefront

[8] all named after their founders, Lee Soo-man, Yang Hyun-suk, and Park Jin-young respectively
[9] formerly and famously known as BigHit Entertainment

of the ever-growing industry, making Stray Kids' worldwide success and message even more notable. Without a doubt, the entire K-pop industry knows their name.

Looking at data that directly shows JYPE's popularity and significance both at home and overseas allows for a better understanding of the global consumption of Stray Kids content. According to the 2021 JYP annual report published by DART,[10] the sales revenue of JYPE worldwide that same year was 72.92 billion won[11] in domestic sales and 71.48 billion won[12] in overseas sales. With less than a 1.3 million dollar difference, JYPE's revenue comes from almost 50% domestic sales and 50% overseas ones, emphasizing that the amount of product and content consumed by international fans is almost just as much as Koreans. This suggests that further research into the subject matter of the content is incredibly revealing in a globalized world.

However, this annual report shows more than just the fact that Stray Kids content is consumed almost equally by overseas countries; it reveals that sales revenue will most likely only increase for JYPE in the future, especially with Stray Kids as artists. In 2014, JYPE's sales revenue totaled 48.48 billion won[13] and by 2019, they totaled 155.44 billion won,[14] more than triple the revenue generated just five years earlier (JYP Annual Report 2021). Most likely due to the pandemic and lack of in-person events like concerts in 2020, revenue dropped to 144.4 billion won[15]. Despite this -7.1% sales growth from 2019 to 2020, however, sales totaled 188.6 billion won[16] in 2021, the highest that the company has seen yet (The Wall Street Journal). Notably, JYPE was second only to HYBE, the top-earning company in the K-pop industry by billions of won, in the first quarter of 2021, and Stray Kids was the top selling JYP artist of 2021.

[10] Data Analysis, Retrieval and Transfer System
[11] equivalent to $59,781,761.51 USD as of April 3, 2022
[12] $58,601,211.09
[13] $39,745,197.45
[14] $127,433,859.14
[15] $118,382,972.59
[16] $154,619,311.85

Having such success and impact within a mere three years of debuting, Stray Kids remain an important contribution to the K-pop industry and its exports worldwide.

Knowing more about Stray Kids as a group provides greater insight into the significance of their role in this increasingly globalized industry. The group comprises leader Bang Chan, rappers Changbin and Han, dancers Lee Know, Felix, and Hyunjin, and vocalists Seungmin and I.N. Bang Chan, Changbin, and Han work together as the unit 3RACHA to write and produce all but two of the 120 plus official Stray Kids songs that have been released, not including the 31 songs released only on their official YouTube channel. Stray Kids are in turn attempting to create their own distinct and recognizable sound which involves a "mix of tradition and modernity" and "a new generation's interpretation of national pride while they also declare they won't bend to societal norms" (Chakraborty 2021). Each member is ethnically Korean, and both Bang Chan and Felix were raised in Sydney, Australia, before moving to Seoul, South Korea in their early teens. Bang Chan, as the oldest, was born in 1997, and I.N, the *maknae*[17] was born in 2001, giving Stray Kids an average international age[18] of 21.75 years. As a member of the fourth generation of K-pop groups, or groups that have debuted since late 2017, the Stray Kids members may be young, but they are not an exception to the industry age-wise. Their connections to traditional Korean culture and knowing that they are such young pioneers of a historic past is notable. Unlike older generations in Korea, who may have distinct memories of the struggles of the 20th century and the suppression of Korean culture, the eight members of Stray Kids are too young to have these connections, yet they are proud to promote their culture to the world.

[17] Korean for youngest, a common term used globally by fans to identify the youngest member of each K-pop group

[18] Korea uses their own unique system of calendar counting to calculate someone's age, usually making people around 1 to 2 years older than what the rest of the world considers them to be, so for my research, I use the non-Korean standard, otherwise known as international age.

The New Traditional

Stray Kids are the unofficial ambassadors of the "new traditional:" a term that I coined representing a new aesthetic and brand in Korean entertainment, especially K-pop. The new traditional style is an amalgamation of the distinct Korean soft masculinity style discussed in previous chapters and "traditional" Korean culture. With an emphasis on weaving connections throughout performances and concepts, the new traditional style focuses on presenting culture in a way that younger generations of Koreans find "cool." It may foster a sense of nostalgia and longing in older generations as a side effect, but the main goal of the new traditional style is to make Korean culture, with its heavy focus on the arts, a modern topic that can be enjoyed not only at home but also exported overseas. The new traditional is imbued with a sense of pride in their culture, a culture that was diminished for many years under outside occupation, that can then act as a sort of advertisement to those who may not know much about it. It is confident and challenging. The new traditional is an emerging method, quickly gaining popularity and traction, that Korea can use to not only foster pride and identity in their youth but can also present to the rest of the world to parade the complete 180 transformation of the country.

Before looking more closely at the elements that are presented as "traditional," it is rudimentary to first outline what exactly a tradition is. Throughout all civilizations, traditions have always been invented. They become symbols at a particular moment in time for a particular reason: maybe they provide someone with a sense of belonging or maybe they are created to exclude others. What exactly is the circulation of "traditions" doing in K-pop, a form of entertainment seemingly only superficial on the surface? Korea is aware of its recent rise to prominence on the global stage and the craze surrounding it. Claiming certain elements of

Korean culture, whether that be architecture seen in *hanok*[19] villages or representative fashion such as *hanbok*[20], allows the government to capitalize on people's now-piqued interest in Korea, both contemporary and historical. Korea's history is now exported in a way that celebrates the culture that Koreans maybe once felt was dimmed. These traditions shown in varying forms of entertainment media work in conjunction with the government as soft power to create ambassadors of Korean culture that draw the global world's attention. Establishing traditions unifies the symbols of what Korea is; it forges the identity.

While it is true that Stray Kids promote the new traditional well, they are not the only group to have done so. Past performances by other groups show the beginnings of the concept. On September 28 2020, third generation group BTS performed their song IDOL in modern stylings of *hanbok* in front of *Gyeongbokgung*, the main royal palace of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), a popular tourist attraction in Seoul, and notably the former site of the Japanese Government-General Building during Japanese occupation. The performance premiered on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon on September 28, 2020, fulfilling the need of the new traditional as a valuable cultural export, an unofficial tool of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism in Korea. Recently at the 2021 Melon Music Awards (MMAs) in Korea, BTS won the Legendary Performance Award for their 2018 performance of IDOL at the MMAs (Allkpop, n.d.). This is notable because they included elements of traditional Korean culture, once again donning modern-style *hanbok*, in their performance, and band member Jimin performed a fan dance with roots in traditional Korean dancing, all while fitting the brand of soft masculinity with his perfectly styled silver hair, subtle but noticeable makeup, and dainty jewelry. The Kim Baek Bong Fan Dance Conservation Society awarded him the Appreciation Plaque stating that,

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[19] traditional style of Korean home built in the fourteenth century Joseon Dynasty period that has a distinctive look with its curved roofs of black tile and wood paneling around its sides

[20] traditional Korean dress

"By having re-interpreted the beautiful Korean fan dance in a unique way, Jimin had made a great contribution in raising the status and aesthetic value of the Korean fan dance globally" (Allkpop, n.d.). The concept of the new traditional was on the rise before Stray Kids, but they have certainly maximized it in their own way much more recently.

An In-Depth Look at the Traditions

Through some of Stray Kids' most recent releases, they perfectly display the concept of the new traditional. On their previous full-length album, released August 23rd, 2021, Stray Kids released the title track "Thunderous (소리꾼)" with accompanying music video. The Korean title of the song is 소리꾼, pronounced *sorikkun,* and is associated with a rich cultural history. *Sorikkun* is the lead singer of a *pansori* performance, a traditional Korean style of musical entertainment that originated in the seventeenth century. Performed only with a lead singer and a drummer, the sound is "characterized by expressive singing, stylized speech, a repertory of narratives and gesture" as the artists use their almost operatic voices to tell a story, most likely a story of the woes of daily life in rural Korea as "the settings, characters and situations that make up the Pansori universe are rooted in the Korea of the Joseon period (1392-1910)" (UNESCO, n.d.). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization designated the genre as a National Intangible Cultural Property in 1964, due to fears that the traditional stage art was threatened by such rapid modernization happening in the country. However, the tradition has been revived in its own way. Returning to "Thunderous," Changbin even raps his verses in a style purposefully reminiscent of the *pansori* style, "[experimenting] with Korean instruments" and "celebrating their cultural roots" (Chakraborty 2021). Stray Kids promote *pansori,* in order

to, as member Felix says "help [them] express and deliver [their] message to everyone who watches over [them]" (Chakraborty 2021)

With prosperous potential in its future, various versions of *pansori* are performed in Seoul today. The Korean Tourism Organization released a YouTube series in 2020 titled "Feel the Rhythm of KOREA," focusing on advertising a different Korean city in each video through modern dance and impressive videography. In the Feel the Rhythm of KOREA: Seoul video, which garnered over 48 million views, performers wearing alternatively-styled *hanbok* dance their way through landmarks across the city to the background music of alternative pop band LEENALCHI's version of traditional *pansori.* The video's caption reminds viewers that "It is time to fall in love with beautiful landmarks in South Korea!" and that "[they] are looking forward to seeing [them] soon!" These videos are investments by the Korean government that are intended to reach all corners of the globe that are not Korea. The colorful flavors seen throughout the videos are most likely not anything that its viewers have seen before because they are part of the nation's intricately created brand. The "K" in K-pop, K-drama, and K-beauty represents an entire brand forged by the government for the sake of exporting. Korea now has the world's attention, and the government knows to capitalize on it. Increasingly so, their method can be enacted through K-pop groups.

Evidence of the new traditional continues throughout the "Thunderous" music video. Opening with a glimpse of a scroll with *hangeul*, the Korean alphabet created in 1443 by King Sejong that became the Korean language as we know it today, written vertically (the traditional method), the video then flashes through a series of cartoon versions of people in *hanbok* as the introductory music builds up. With the initial beat drop into verse one, we see the members in chic, athleisure-style red clothing, popularized as street style today, against the backdrop of a

hanok village. Via the light produced by fire and lanterns, we see the members move around different scenes of the traditional village with their contemporary style: Changbin in a Celine blouse and simple black baseball cap with a shiny, trendy hat chain; Bang Chan with his obviously-dyed fiery orange hair and Vetements underwear strategically peeking out over his exposed six pack; Hyunjin with his Givenchy headband styled artistically with clips around his almost shoulder length, well-manicured hair. Still, with clothing items so popularly inspired by the current soft masculinity craze, there are elements of the past.Though Changbin shows off his name brand clothing like the rest of the group, he does so with a traditional fan in hand. Felix's long hair is reminiscent of the historical haircut of Korean men of the Joseon period despite it being heavily-dyed blonde with grayish-purple strands added throughout; still, the hairstyle represents the very part of Korea's rich culture that came to an end with the introduction of the Japanese colonial period.

As the rhythmic verses begin to flow into the hard-hitting drums of the chorus, the new traditional aesthetic only intensifies. With promises of remaining true to one's self ringing in the audience's ears, the scenes shift back and forth from the members ceremoniously performing their succinct, almost martial dance in front of both an old Korean fortress and palace. At the fortress, the boys wear gold-accentuating, *hanbok*-inspired outfits in the manner of modern royalty. Their palace outfits keep the royal touch in the manner of bedazzled sashes draped across chic, slim-fitting black and white outfits clearly inspired by the classic suit look, a trending look that is a cornerstone of soft masculinity in costuming in the K-pop industry. Surrounded by traditional *dancheong*, or "traditional coloring on wooden buildings and artifacts in Korea for decoration and style, a style that can be seen on ancient murals from the Goguryeo Kingdom era (37 B.C.E-668 C.E.)," Felix shows off his black and white hair, a popular trend

among social media-age, hip people, notably in Korea, known as "skunk hair" ("KOREA Webzine" 2019).

Cementing their status as representatives of the new traditional, their contemporary fashion choices intensify synchronously with the inclusion of elements of "traditional" Korea. All in seemingly simple, trendsetting red ensembles, the boys display varying elements of popular clothing, even if made specifically for performance. They wear strategically baggy jogger-style pants with sporty Converse and Nike Jordan sneakers and an array of simple loose-fitting tops, some with an element of mesh, as in I.N and Hyunjin's case, and a matching chest harness in Bang Chan's. Looking effortlessly cool in an outfit known to be anything but effortless is a key element of the distinctive Korean soft masculinity. Showing off high end brands like Céline and Givenchy while expertly-applied neutral but noticeable eyeshadows and pink lip colors show through the screens give off the impression that appearance is important; in true Korean soft masculinity fashion, it is important to show that you care about putting thought into the way other people perceive you. Apart from the outfits, however, a viewer might think that they have stepped into a historical version of Korea: as sounds reminiscent of *samulnori*[21] beat in the background, *pungmul*[22] dancers perform contemporaneously with the white lions of *talchum*[23] (Suacillo 2021). This mesmerizing mix of the modern and the past, new and old, trendy and long-standing is a concept unique in and of itself; one that perfectly displays the oxymoron that is new traditional.

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[21] traditional percussion genre
[22] traditional music drama
[23] a traditional Bongsan mask dance

The New Traditional's Untraditional Significance

While I have worked to explain the new traditional in action, it is important to understand its exact significance on the globalized world. Why is the contrast between Lee Know, Hyunjin, and Seungmin adorning a trendy beret, chic Chanel, and sleek leather pants respectively while dancing almost nonchalantly in a self-assured manner in front of a wall covered in papers with *Seoye*[24] noteworthy? Embellished with heirloom-quality necklaces, eye-catching earrings, and a plethora of rings on each hand, the Stray Kids members hint at a Korean confidence previously unheard of on such a global scale. As the members prop themselves up on shiny red sports cars and a flashy four-wheeler in the middle of a *hanok* village to deliver their piercing raps and melodious singing, the background is crowded with guards with spears and people dressed in casual *hanbok*, seemingly going about their daily, rural business. This juxtaposition seems to clearly comment on the fact that the Korean economy can easily afford luxurious cars now even though their roots are shockingly different, yet it is still important to remember these roots regardless. The online journal blog Seoulbeats notes that "these juxtaposing elements evoke imagery of reclaiming sacred spaces… and flaunting confidence despite the possible consequences" (Seoulbeats, n.d.). In fact, with groups like Stray Kids focusing on tradition in collaboration with what society can now provide in contrast to a mere 50 years earlier, Korea is calling attention to their beginnings, to their culture. Korea comfortably stands on its own on a global scale unlike 50 years ago. Korea has a chance to further promote their once-suppressed culture to audiences near and far unlike 50 years ago. Korea does not need to derive everything they produce from an already successful Western source anymore. They have the ability to be confident and challenging, and the media that they upload makes that clear.

[24] traditional Korean calligraphy

A Global Reach

One might assume that content so heavily centered around traditional Korean culture, a culture not often discussed in Western history books, would really only be successful in Korea. However, the concept of the new traditional successfully promotes Korean culture abroad just as much as it does domestically. Having gained 50 million views in 6 days and 21 hours, the music video for “Thunderous” beat their record for their previous title track “Back Door” by 2.2 times (Yahoo 2021). Now boasting more than 164 million views, K-Pop Radar, a data service that measures the popularity of Korean acts, breaks down the demographic of “Thunderous” viewers within the first two weeks of its release. Within the almost 66 million views received during its second week, 8.6% of views came from Mexico, 7.6% from Indonesia, 7.3% from the U.S., 6.3% from Japan, and 5% from the Philippines. Korean viewers accounted for 2.9%, which while still lower than countries overseas, is more than double the number of Korean viewers for Stray Kids’ last activity, marking them as “representative 4th generation K-pop artists in Korea as well as overseas" (Yahoo 2021). Further emphasizing Stray Kids’ success both globally and at home, it is interesting to note that it is not until the 17th comment under the “Thunderous” music video that a comment is written in Korean. The first 16 comments are from fans in other regions of the world, with a mixture of comments primarily in English, Spanish, and Russian. At the same time, Korean pride continues to grow in Stray Kids. Cumulative Stray Kids album sales[25] in South Korea increased from 346.97 in 2018, the year of their debut, to 804.88 in 2020, the year their company had an overall decrease in sales. Most notably, in 2021, the year that *NOEASY,* their second studio album that contained “Thunderous” was released, the number jumped to 2,665.41. Album sales in Korea alone more than tripled in one year. The data shows that Stray Kids’ new traditional style is reaching audiences both near and far.

[25] measured in 1,000 copies

With impact extending beyond that of the “Thunderous” music video, Stray Kids’ live performance of the same song at the 2021 KBS song festival, an annual program hosted by Korea’s national public broadcaster KBS that highlights K-pop acts, could have appeared as a tourism advertisement to the glancing eye. Keeping with the same style introduced in their music video, the members continue to wear *hanbok*-inspired contemporary outfits while they include elements of *samulnori* and *pungmul* in the choreography. However, this performance took every aspect of the new traditional and cultural export one step further. With background music reminiscent of *gugak*[26], sounds of the *gayageum*[27] and rhythmic percussion flood the senses in a *sanjo*[28] manner (“Sanjo” n.d.). A brief history of *Namhansanseong*, the fortress where the performance is filmed, moves across the screen as follows: “A fortress with a total length of 12km, built as a temporary capital in case of emergency during the Joseon Dynasty”[29] and “It was registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2014 in recognition of its historical, architectural, and military values.”[30] The title given to these educational snippets is 코리아 온 스테이지 (“Korea on Stage”), which is written entirely in loan words, or words adopted from English in this case. Korean words exist for the entire phrase yet they choose to use loan words with an English translation next to it as if to share that this is Korea, and we are presenting it to you.

For the Korean government, Stray Kids’ performance at the KBS song festival was a type of exhibition. While the members performed surrounded by an incredibly historical backdrop, their choreography still focused around more contemporary arrangements. Dancing in traditional rice hats with multi-colored spotlights illuminating the fortress behind them, Stray Kids look

[26] Korean national music
[27] traditional Korean harp zither instrument with 12 strings
[28] scattered melodies style of *gugak*
[29] Original text: “조선시대 유사시 임시수도의 역할로 건설된 성곽의 총 길이가 12km에 달하는 산성.” Translations are my own.
[30] Original text: “역사적, 건축적, 군사적 가치를 인정받아 2014년 유네스코 세계문화유산에 등재됨.”

equal parts contemporary and "traditional." The video notes that "it is a special project of the Cultural Heritage Visit Campaign hosted by the Cultural Heritage Administration and the Korea Foundation as a performance by the best artists with the great cultural heritage of Korea."[31]

Furthering the concept of exhibiting Korean culture to the globalized world, Stray Kids garnered a lot of attention with their performance of "Thunderous" at the Republic of Korea's National Day at the Dubai EXPO 2020. In the news article "Stray Kids set Dubai EXPO 2020 stage on fire wearing *hanboks*; perform in front of President Moon Jae-in, other dignitaries," the eight members were recognized as ambassadors of the Korean pavilion with the "role [of informing] about Korean culture" (Kachroo 2022). With the combination of modernized *hanboks* styled with shades of plum purple or long blonde hair, the members perform alongside taekwondo athletes to the rapt attention of dozens of dignitaries, from proud Koreans to curious Emiratis. Quite literally, the Korean government is beginning to promote and exhibit certain K-pop groups as cultural ambassadors for the country, and the "new traditional" style seems to be at the forefront of the exports.

As Rolling Stone India suggests, Stray Kids allow noise to meet tradition. The global sensations "[combined] traditional instruments with modern musical elements" in order to convey the message that, as member Changbin explains, even though "great artists before [them] were the ones who worked to spread K-pop globally," they "hope Stray Kids can become a distinct genre within this culture called 'K-pop'" (Chakraborty 2021). Would a music video like "Thunderous," so rooted in traditional Korean concepts, have reached 71 million views on YouTube in less than 3 weeks even just 5 years ago? Stray Kids closely embed themselves

[31] Original text: "대한민국의 위대한 문화유산과 함께하는 최고의 아티스트들의 공연으로 문화재청과 한국문화재재단이 진행하는 문화유산방문캠페인의 특별사업."

against a very Korean background in a way that has almost never been present in earlier K-pop groups, taking a globalized form and really landing it hard in the nation state.

Conclusion

Over a period of fifty years, Korea has transformed politically, economically, and socially to form the country that it is today: a country that has created a distinct, confident identity for itself on the global stage. Fifty years is not only a brief flash of time in the history of Korea, but an impressively short amount of time for a country to rebuild its entire narrative. Korea stands alone in this context. The following chapter will reiterate the key conclusions of my research question regarding the change in national identity in contemporary South Korea along with the establishment of an international, independent Korea no longer reliant on outside aid. In discussing the findings, the chapter further aims to highlight their value and contribution to both the academic landscape and increasingly globalized world. However, it also remains valuable to review the limitations of this research in order to improve research conducted on similar topics in the future and then end with proposals for future research.

Shifting its national identity from a reputation of backwardness and victimhood, Korea has emerged confident and the leading soft power of the 21st century. This project aimed to address this undeniable shift as seen through the changing aesthetics of the K-pop industry. Studying an array of visual primary sources like music videos and concept photos of two K-pop boy groups, industry professionals SHINee and wave-making newcomers Stray Kids, reveals the combination of soft masculinity visuals and styles with the concept of the "new traditional" to project a new national identity. SHINee's recent performance wear and dance moves indicate that K-Pop displayed a shift away from Western-derived looks and styles as seen in their *Replay* era to a distinct Korean soft masculine style in their *Don't Call Me* era. Further analysis of Stray Kids "Thunderous" sources signal the juxtaposition of the soft masculine aesthetic with promotional elements of what the Korean government advertises as traditional Korean culture,

forming the concept of the "new traditional." Overall conclusions reveal that the Korean government is beginning to build its identity through promotion of this "new traditional" with the help of K-pop groups like Stray Kids as official cultural ambassadors. Through this identity, one formed around both soft masculinity and the new traditional, the country has created a brand, and one that sells impressively well to varying demographics around the globe. With less political prowess and influence than other countries with similar GDPs, a recognizable and enviable brand, as shaped in this case through the K-pop entertainment industry, is Korea's key to power on the global stage. This research explicitly supports that this brand is not merely a fad, but a challenging start to an increasingly hopeful and prosperous future for Korea.

Once again considering Sun Jung's (2011) definition of soft masculinity as an intercrossed version of pre-existing masculinities, it is important to remember the notable claim by academics of varying fields that this version of masculinity has, at the very least, morphed into a concept that is distinctively Korean, a concept that encompasses the idea of men expressing themselves in ways that they were not previously prone to, or even allowed to: from subtle makeup looks to more androgynous fashion styles. Academics like Yamakawa (2014), Elfving-Hwang (2011), and Lee (2020) agree that this soft masculinity is not subversive because it reinforces the patriarchy in Korea and effeminate stereotypes of Asian men in the West. Contrarily, my research aimed to constructively challenge this theory by arguing that this changing Korean aesthetic instead allows for a more confident Korean identity. By taking control of the negative stereotype and no longer adopting Western-derived styles at the forefront of their industries, the Korean government is displaying a rise to cultural and global confidence. Moreover, a case study on K-pop, instead of other elements of *Hallyu* like K-dramas and K-beauty, forces more actively revealing results, due to the ever-changing and all-encompassing

nature of the industry.

This research considers a telling and varying number of sources, but given the length restraint of the project, the number of visual sources I chose to analyze were limited. SHINee's data analysis in this thesis drew from two different musical eras, one at the very beginning of their career and one during one of their most recent releases. While the shift from Western-derived, hip hop and pop styles reminiscent of Backstreet Boys and Justin Bieber to a distinctive Korean soft masculinity is starkly evident between *Replay* and *Don't Call Me,* the additional analysis of a transition era in the middle of SHINee's career would only further demonstrate an obvious transformation to cultural confidence. Increasing the sample size would only provide a more conspicuous understanding of the newly emerging Korean national identity.

With a challenging Korean identity on the rise through soft power exports like K-pop, academic literature on nation-branding and soft power as a whole continues to surface. Yet, there remains several areas of future research to consider. K-pop idols acting in the role of cultural ambassadors is certainly clever on behalf of the Korean government but brings into question what exactly the stakes are of them so clearly taking up what the government's idea of culture is. In a world where Korean culture has both aesthetic and monetary value, research should be done on the fine line between an influential artist and promotional tool. With Rolling Stone writing articles titled "How K-pop Conquered the West," the reach of soft power continues to expand; it is conquering the globalized world in a manner that is more commonly associated with military and political influence (Wang 2018). Korea currently leads the charge in virtual globalization that can eventually become physical globalization. With Korea's seemingly perfected formula of soft power tactics in play, other countries could be expected to

follow. This project aims to encourage further study on and interest in the Korean national identity and soft power strength that is so expertly transforming the country's global landscape.

South Korea's economic, political, and social translation from an occupied and divided country reliant on foreign powers to a global leader flourishing through its soft power expansion reveals a comparable shift in the presented Korean national identity. Combining soft masculinity with the new traditional builds the formula for a confident and challenging national identity that can be shared with the globalized world. SHINee and Stray Kids reveal this very transformation through their music videos, promotional concept photos, and interviews. Evidently, the strength of this two-part national identity and Korean brand is its ability to infiltrate the globalized world as a form of soft power. As a debuting preeminent member of the world stage, Korea's confidence in its identity prospers while its influence in the global market of cultural exchange continues to grow with overwhelming potential.

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Appendix A

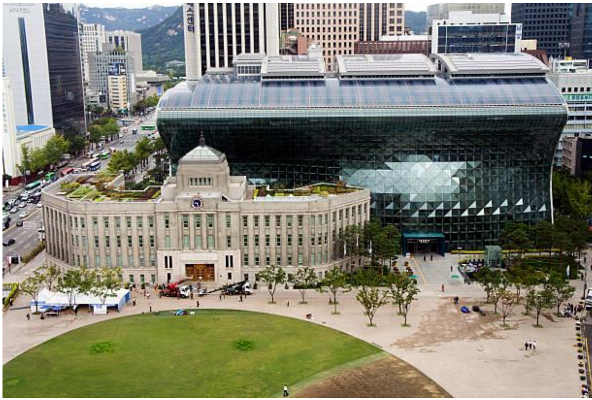

Figure 1

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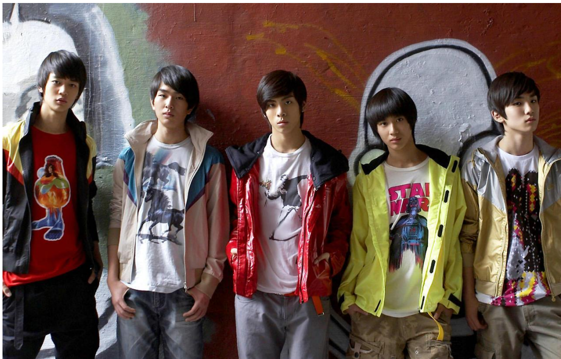

Figure 2

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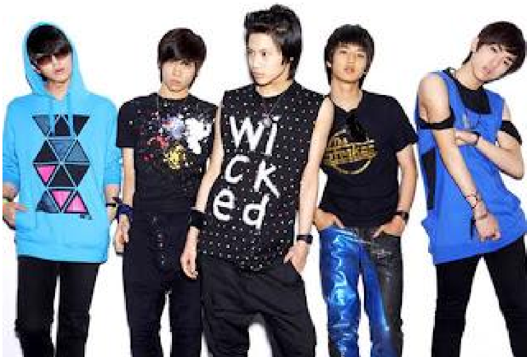

Figure 3

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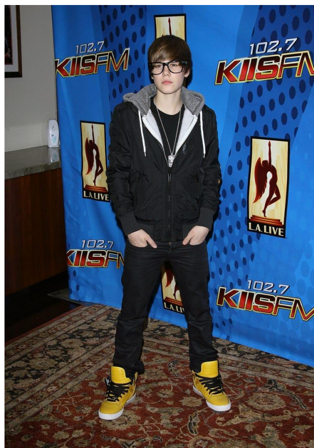

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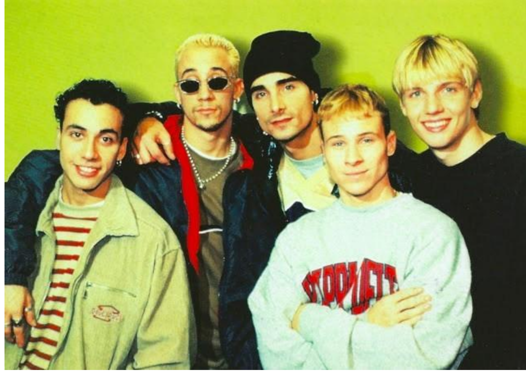

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Figure 8
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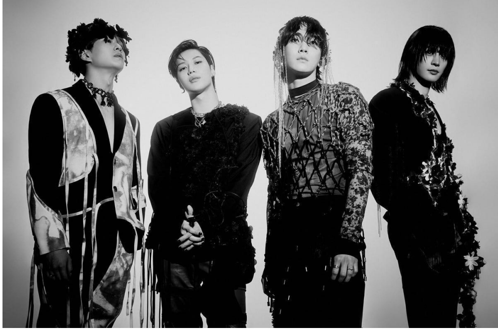

Figure 9

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Figure 10

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Appendix B

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