

# Foreign Influences and Localization: The Evolution of Korean Music Through History

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## Abstract

Korean music has a distinct history and characteristics that can be traced back centuries. Over the years, while Korea has maintained its cultural identity through years of struggle and oppression, its engagements with neighboring countries and foreign occupying powers have had a lasting and syncretic impact on its musical evolution. This journey has been shaped by a number of social, political, and historical factors, including national pride, extensive foreign presence through most of the twentieth century, governmental concerns over the preservation of Korean authenticity in music, the development of global music markets, and a dynamic domestic youth culture. Throughout, Korean music has been able to preserve its unique characteristics while accepting a high level of foreign musical influence. It has conquered large domestic and global audiences by generating new musical styles through a complex and divergent mix of imitation and localization of foreign influences while continuously reverting to and maintaining Korean authenticity.

**Keywords:** Korea, history, music, foreign, imitation, localization

## 1. Introduction

During the last two decades, the world of entertainment has been overtaken by a “Korean Wave” -- Korea’s wildly popular and rapidly growing exports of television shows and Korean popular music (K-Pop) -- with Korean bands like BTS and BLACKPINK becoming household names and winning awards globally. K-Pop, with its highly distinctive and globally recognizable fusion of Korean and international musical elements, began its evolution in the early 1990s. However, Korean music is not a new phenomenon; it has a distinct history and characteristics that can be traced back centuries. While Korea has maintained its cultural identity through years of struggle and oppression, its engagements with neighboring countries, and the foreign powers that occupied it over the years, have had a lasting and syncretic impact on its musical evolution -- with Korea continuously importing new musical instruments, genres and styles and, eventually, localizing them.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Foreign Influences Prior to the Twentieth Century

Korean music has a distinct identity that can be traced back to around the fifth century; the earliest references to Korean musical forms can be found in mural paintings from this period illustrating dancers and musicians with a variety of musical instruments (Provine, 1985). Korean traditional musical forms evolved over the centuries to include religious music with origins in ancient ritual traditions, orchestral “court music” played at imperial courts, “aristocratic” chamber music intended for the entertainment of the ruling elites over the centuries, and “folk” music, in a number of different styles (Man-young, 1985). The origins of the various Korean musical traditions are hard to identify precisely. However, it is generally understood that early Korean musical forms combined Chinese and Central Asian influences with indigenous Korean elements whose roots can be found in music associated with native Korean rituals linked to Shamanism -- a religious practice of tribal origins, involving intermediaries (the Shamans) between the earth and the world inhabited by gods and ancestral spirits (Man-young, 1985).

Given Korea’s geographic proximity to China, Chinese musical practices played a significant role in the development of Korea’s own traditions (Provine, 1985). However, while Korean musical instruments bore a substantial similarity to instruments used by the Chinese, they were frequently “localized,” (Man-young, 1985) and instruments favored in China rarely found “hearty acceptance” in Korea (Provine, 1987). Some of Korea’s

court music tended to be similar to Chinese music, but this was only a “small part of the court repertory, which even at its zenith, in traditional times, was known only to a small and elite group of upper-class citizens” (Provine, 1987). As such, there was “a ceaseless ‘Koreanization’ or assimilation of foreign music throughout history” (Man-young, 1985), as imported musical instruments and traditions were modified for “local purposes” and experienced “substantial independent development” in Korea (Provine, 1987). Reflecting this pattern of localization, it has been noted that “a Chinese musician listening to the surviving descendants of this Korean music of Chinese extraction” would not “find any structures that strike him as particularly familiar from his own stylistic inheritance,” that “substantial structural alterations have taken place over the centuries,” and that Korean music is “idiomatically Korean, and it has been so for many centuries” (Provine, 1987).

## 2.2 Influences in the Twentieth Century

After a gradual evolution of its music until the nineteenth century, Korean music saw rapid “cultural intrusion” along with involuntary influence in the twentieth century (Sutton, 2011). After its annexation of Korea in 1910, Japan, like other colonial governments, sought to dominate Korea to advance its goals of economic exploitation and increase opportunities for its own people. Korea experienced coercion of its “politics, economics, culture and education into the Japanese colonial system” (Kim, 2014, p. 27). Music was seen as playing a crucial role in society because it had “enduring power” and “a tremendous ability to move people in any direction, towards peaceful and noble goals or violent and destructive ones” (Kim, 2014, p. 24). Thus, music and music education were seen as beneficial for “political purposes,” in establishing and shaping national identity, and as effective instruments of “ideological indoctrination” (Kim, 2014, p. 25). Motivated by these factors, the Japanese interfered widely with Korean traditional music during the colonial period: in schools, in theatres, and in the recording and dissemination of popular music.

Japan’s efforts to influence musical culture in Korean schools proceeded in multiple waves. The first Japanese governor-general of Korea, Terauchi Masatake, implemented a series of changes to the Korean education system, announcing in a speech in 1911 that “education in Korea is all about making Koreans into enthusiastic Japanese subjects” (Kim, 2014, p. 27). In the early years of the Japanese occupation (between 1911 and 1922), the Japanese introduced the musical genre of *changga* (sing songs) into the primary school curriculum (Kim, 2014, p. 32). *Changga*, generally associated with Western rhythm and style, was introduced in the form of a music textbook that was intended for use both at school and at home, suggesting an intention for the musical style to be adopted by the students as well as the general population. The *Changga* songs were virtually identical to the songs featured in Japanese schools; they represented westernized Japanese music and were in “duple” and “triple” meter that was characteristically Japanese rather than the “triple” meter of traditional Korean music (Kim, 2014, p. 32). In later years, the Japanese introduced a *Supplementary Changga* book using Korean lyrics (out of a desire to appease Korean nationalistic concerns), but with the music mostly set to Japanese meter and rhythm (Kim, 2014, p. 36). Many of the songs from the *Changga* textbook of 1911, with some variations, are still sung in Korea today, highlighting the power of colonial musical education in changing musical culture and the assimilation of introduced music.

After the great depression hit Japan in the 1930s, Japan underwent a significant transformation, from being “primarily liberal” to becoming a “largely militaristic” colonial power, causing the “political orientation of music education” in colonial Korea to be changed as well (Kim, 2014, p. 37). Music textbooks in school promoted patriotism toward Japan and Japanese nationalistic goals. Songs praising Japan and the Japanese emperor, often chosen by the military, began to dominate the textbooks and served as an important tool of military propaganda in schools. Due to these efforts, Japanese music became more familiar to Korean schoolchildren than traditional Korean music -- reflecting the achievement of the Japanese goal of assimilation and a loss of Korean cultural identity during this period (Kim, 2014, p. 42).

Japan’s influence on Korean music extended beyond classrooms to Korea’s professional singers and instrumentalists as well. The pressure exerted by the occupying Japanese had an effect on the type of songs that were popular in Korea; these were often songs that were influenced by Japanese melodies. During the 1930s, the Japanese government began to view traditional Korean music with suspicion, seeing it as an expression of Korean nationalism. In 1933, the Office of Police Matters of the Japanese Governor-general enacted “Disciplinary Rules” in order to prevent any “subversive” songs from being sold (Maliangkay, 2007, p. 62). Dozens of records were destroyed under the false pretext of “indecent” and for “disturbing public order” (Maliangkay, 2007, p. 62). In doing so, Japan exerted an enormous influence on Korean traditional music by disallowing many musical forms and performances. However, this also brought about an important modernization of Korean music. As Korean singers and composers incorporated westernized Japanese musical styles in their own performances, they helped “adjust” the “ears” of Korean audiences to “new tunes and lyrics” (Maliangkay, 2007, p. 68). This allowed the

market of musical tastes to eventually determine which forms of traditional Korean music would survive, which would fade away, and which would be modified through modernization and fusion with Japanese musical elements. Thus, during this period, Korean music evolved to absorb Japanese influence while maintaining elements of its own authenticity.

### *2.3 The Post-War Experience*

At the end of World War II, after the liberation of Korea on August 15, 1945, Korean popular culture was freed from Japan's influence. The arrival of the American occupation forces and their use of radio broadcasting very quickly brought American culture as a mainstream element in Korean daily lives. The American military, which was engaged in a "cultural cold war" against Soviet influence (Armstrong, 2003, p. 71), used radio broadcasts as part of their cultural agenda. In addition, the "pro-American, pro-Western" culture was promoted by a "wide range of actors, including the US government and its cultural agencies," "Christian" organizations, and volunteer organizations (such as the "Boy Scouts") and private foundations like Rockefeller and Ford (Armstrong, 2003, p. 96). Radio became an important (and primary) means of American cultural promotion. By 1957, the newly established American Forces Korea Network (AFKN) began broadcasting and "sonically penetrat[ing] Korean homes" with American popular (pop) music (Baik, n. d.).

Influenced by the sounds of American music, new Korean popular music soon emerged. To entertain US military forces stationed in the US military zone in Korea, Korean entertainers were "trained to identify themselves with and mimic American pop artists" (Baik, n. d.). Korean musicians accurately copied the musical styles of many well-known American musicians such as Nat King Cole and Patty Page (Baik, n. d.). As these Korean musicians gained exposure through the radio, they became the "vanguard" of the modern Korean musical mainstream; their music reflected the "sounds of American pop, jazz, and blues combined with popular rhythms from slow rock, swing, and waltz" (Baik, n. d.). American music became fashionable and Korean youth gained status among their peers by listening to and appreciating American music. Young Korean musical talents "wrote rock songs while smoking weed and growing their hair out," exemplifying the "inchoate appropriation of global youth culture as a means for youth to differentiate from within and assimilate from without" (Baik, n. d.).

By the early 1990s, Korea was experiencing significant political changes. Three decades of authoritarian military rule had ended, with a civilian government (headed by Kim Yong-sam) inaugurated in 1993. The relaxation of "state censorship" on music that had prevailed during the military rule allowed musicians to "explore their artistic freedom and creativity" (Hae-Kyung, 2013, p. 53). The 1990 restructuring of the US military zone into a commercial area permitted entry to native Koreans, leading to more frequent and deeper interactions between Westerners and Koreans. Heavily influenced by American hip-hop music (itself a global force by the late 1980s), Korean music and dance clubs "incubated" a number of Korean musical stars who mimicked the American style. However, while borrowing heavily from the "international/American hip-hop idiom such as sampling techniques, clothing, and dance style" (Hae-Kyung, 2013, p. 53), Korean musicians also developed distinct local characteristics "by introducing elements of Korean music -- both popular and traditional" and by mixing Korean and American lyrics in ways that "were meaningful to domestic audiences" (Hae-Kyung, 2013, p. 53).

The 1990s proved to be a significant turning point for Korean popular music. The most successful musicians of this era, such as Yang Hyun-Suk, Park Jin-Young, and Hyun Jin-Young, built on their commercial success and eventually launched K-Pop: an evolving genre that includes musical styles from around the world, such as hip hop, rhythm and blues, and rap (as well as experimental, rock, jazz, gospel, reggae, electronic dance, folk, country and classical) layered over traditional Korean musical techniques. Over the next decade, the K-pop industry learned to capitalize on global youth trends by creating artists who seamlessly "combined Eastern and Western beauty standards" and artfully interwove Korean musical styles with significant international elements to rapidly modernize and reshape Korea's contemporary music scene, while establishing a global footprint with an outsized international fan base (Baik, n. d.).

### **3. Discussion**

Western impact on Korean music did not extend to popular music alone. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Korea also experienced a significant influence from Western classical music, which was first introduced to Korea in 1885. In that year, two influential Protestant missionaries, Horace G. Underwood and Henry G. Appenzeller arrived in Korea and established religious schools where Western hymns were taught (Hwang, 2009). Hundreds of schools were later established by various western church organizations in different parts of Korea. These schools became the "bedrock of modern Korean education as well as the breeding and nurturing ground for classical music in Korea" (Hwang, 2009). Classical music was regarded as desirable; it became associated with "cultural sophistication and prestige" due to its Western origins and its "affiliation with formal educational institutions"

(Hwang, 2009). Recognizing classical music as a means of achieving a higher social status, Koreans started sending their children to learn western classical music in large numbers. Music training is now a “ubiquitous part of the present-day South Korean cultural landscape,” with the number of music academies having reached well “over a hundred thousand” by the middle of the 1980s (Hwang, 2009).

Although Western music began as a foreign medium in Korea, Koreans mastered and, in some ways, even localized it. Korea now boasts dozens of internationally recognized stars in the western classical tradition. In barely a century, western classical music has been so thoroughly “appropriated” that “it is perceived to become Korean when played by Koreans” or composed by them (Howard, 1997, p. 4). Thus, when asked about the practice of Western classical music in Korea, Byung-dong Paik, a noted Korean composer working in the western classical tradition, said, “I live in Korea. I drink Korean water. I breathe Korean air. I think, then, that my music is entirely Korean” (Howard, 1997, p. 64). Thus, even in the context of Western classical music, with its obviously strong stylistic and western roots, Korean musicians stress its Koreanization, reflecting acceptance and familiarity, but also an ability and willingness to internalize this genre.

In contemporary Korea, the multiple musical cultures of Korean traditional music, Western classical music, and the dynamically evolving hip hop and K-Pop genres co-exist – but do so with a degree of unease. K-Pop’s global reception is widely celebrated, but the declining popularity of traditional Korean music and the lack of “cultural purity” of contemporary Korean music is seen as a problem by some. While government-supported cultural policy in Korea has “strongly favored” the forms of music “with the least evident influence from other countries and cultures,” Korean people today often feel “remarkably little appreciation” for many of the most traditional and pure Korean musical forms (Sutton, 2011, p. 6). While most Koreans would readily acknowledge traditional Korean music as an essential part of their “cultural heritage” and identify the genre as authentically Korean, they also feel increasingly culturally “estranged” from traditional musical forms (Sutton, 2011, p. 6). Newly evolving genres of Korean “fusion” music, which combine in significant measure “unambiguously” traditional Korean elements with other classical and modern aspects of foreign origin, have also emerged. However, while this music has enjoyed some popularity, it too has been dismissed as “impure” and “inauthentic” by some and as “crass and commercial” by others (Sutton, 2011, p. 20).

The “creative struggle” over the evolution of Korean musical styles will clearly be dynamic and unending (Sutton, 2011, p. 4). What is clear, however, is that this process will involve a continuous engagement of foreign influences with authentic domestic elements, with iterative adjustment by Korean artists to seek out combinations that will work best for domestic and global audiences. Thus, while transnational Korean hip-hop, with the emphasis on “rapping and sampling,” was perceived to be authentic by some because it “adhered to or emulated the American hip-hop genre rules and styles,” home-grown Korean hip-hop and K-pop, on the other hand, are perceived to be more “real” for many Korean audiences because they “appreciate the poetic-musical associations between the lyrics and music” that are “specifically meaningful and comprehensible” to them (Hae-Kyung, 2013, p. 57). The “complex rhymes and flows” and “intricate rhythmic articulation of the Korean language” are highly regarded in Korea and are seen as the “essential technical and aesthetic criteria” for “serious artists” (Hae-Kyung, 2013, p. 57). For instance, rapper Kim Jin Pyo is respected by many Korean rappers for his skillful use of the Korean language, and the underground hip-hop duo Garion (MC Meta and Nach’al) are regarded as the most authentic Korean hip-hop artists because they use only the Korean language in their rhymes. While the “artistic and technical merits” and the linguistic authenticity of such performers have been duly appreciated by the domestic music market, the interplay between Korean and English lyrics has also become an important and wildly appreciated “technical and aesthetic device” in Korean popular music, with this “linguistic dualism” gaining a significant fan base of its own (Hae-Kyung, 2013, p. 57).

#### 4. Conclusions

The ongoing evolution of Korean music shows that it has taken “complex and divergent routes” in incorporating foreign influences in syncretically generating its own new musical styles (Hae-Kyung, 2013, p. 61). A number of social, political, and historical factors relating to national pride, cultural and governmental concerns over the preservation of Korean authenticity, an extensive and motivated physical presence of foreigners, the development of global music markets, and a dynamic domestic youth culture have each contributed to shaping Korean music. Through all this, what is clearly in evidence is that Korean music has been able to preserve its unique characteristics while accepting a high level of foreign musical influence. It has conquered large domestic and global audiences by generating new musical styles through imitation, adoption, and localization of foreign influences while continuously reverting to and maintaining Korean authenticity.

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