



K-Pop

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Origins of K-Pop

Around 50 million people live in South Korea, which is about the size of Indiana. Most Americans had never heard music produced in the nation until 2012, when the singer, rapper, and dancer known as Psy released a video of his hit song “Gangnam Style.” At the time, Psy was little known outside of South Korea. However, the “Gangnam Style” video, with its catchy electronic beats and amusing horse-riding dance moves, struck a universal chord. Within weeks, “Gangnam Style” became a worldwide sensation, and by the end of the year, it had become the first video on YouTube ever to have been viewed 1 billion times. The song went on to top the charts in more than thirty countries, including Australia, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, Spain, and Canada.

### The Godfather of K-Pop

Psy might have been the face that introduced the United States to Korean popular music, but the roots of K-pop can be traced back decades to American music and the music television channel MTV. The songs and videos topping the US charts in the 1980s strongly influenced a South



Korean record producer few Americans had ever heard of— Lee Soo-man. Lee is considered the godfather of K-pop today, but he began his career in 1972 as a guitar-strumming folk-singer in Seoul, the capital of South Korea. By 1980, however, Lee's tastes had changed. Influenced by Western rock groups like Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, he formed a heavy metal band called Lee Soo Man and 365 Days. The band featured loud, distorted guitars, extended bass and drum solos, and screamed vocals.

*South Korean pop star Psy performs in New York in 2013. Most Americans had never heard music produced in South Korea until 2012, when Psy released a video of his hit song "Gangnam Style."*



Lee's heavy metal sound was unique in South Korea, but it was unappreciated. At the time, the country's authoritarian government strictly censored entertainers and the media. Lee's music was banned from the airwaves. In 1981 Lee decided there was no future in the South Korean entertainment business. He moved to Southern California to attend college.

Lee was living in the United States when MTV went on the air on August 1, 1981. The channel introduced the world to fast-paced music videos featuring colorfully dressed musicians singing and dancing their way through three-minute songs. By 1985 MTV had ushered in a new era, reshaping tastes in music, video, and fashion. Lee returned home with a plan to introduce South Korea to the flashy dance moves and slick pop music he had seen on American television.

To this end, in 1988 Lee founded SM Studio (later referred to as SM Entertainment, or SME), a music recording studio and artist management business. Lee's timing seemed perfect. Seoul was hosting the Summer Olympics that year, which focused international attention on South Korean pop culture, known as *Hallyu*, or Korean Wave. Hallyu includes South Korean movies and dramatic TV shows called K-dramas. Korean comics (*manhwa*), and animated films (*aeni*) are also Hallyu, as are Korean foods like grilled meat bulgogi and the spicy cabbage dish kimchi. The late 1980s also saw the South Korean government relax its censorship practices. This allowed the nation's singers, songwriters, and musicians to freely express themselves.

## Culture Technology, K-Pop Hit Maker

Lee tried to take advantage of South Korea's new musical freedom, but his new studio was nearly destroyed the same year it opened when heavy rains flooded the control room. Rather than quit, Lee began working as a DJ so he could save enough money to buy new microphones, digital recorders, computers, and keyboard synthesizers.

While spinning records in dance clubs, Lee studied his audiences. He began to pay attention to which types of electronic dance music (EDM) made people dance and which songs made them wander off to the bar. Back in his studio, Lee worked to create music that sounded like the most popular club songs that got the most people dancing. He expanded his knowledge by hiring classically trained songwriters and students of electronic music.

By 1990 Lee was searching South Korean bars and theaters for talent, and that is how he found his first K-pop idol. Nineteen-year-old Hyun Jin-young was a thin male singer with a high, girlish voice. Lee taught Hyun to rap and dance and dressed him in baggy clothes like those worn by American hip-hop artists. The formula proved to be a success. Hyun's 1993 debut album, *IWBH*, short for *International World Beat and Hip-Hop*, sold over four hundred thousand copies. However, Hyun's success was brief. He was arrested for smoking marijuana, which is considered a major crime in South Korea. Hyun's dramatic fall was as fast as his rise to stardom.

Lee learned a lot from the experience: he decided that in the future, he would develop numerous acts, rather than pour all his time and money into developing a single star. This insight guided Lee when he launched Culture Technology, a star-production system created to train a reliable roster of K-pop performers. In 1995 Lee conducted a worldwide talent search, sending out scouts to audition songwriters, singers, and dancers in South Korea, Japan, and the United States. Because of his previous success with *IWBH*, Lee's auditions attracted a large number of talented young performers who hoped to be the next Hyun. Most of those recruited as performers were middle school or high school students. Recruits who passed their auditions quit school, signed contracts with SME, and moved to Seoul for training.

The Culture Technology process created by Lee is very rigorous and extremely competitive. It has changed little over the years,

## Life of a K-Pop Trainee

Life can be difficult for K-pop trainees who are recruited by large music-production companies like SM Entertainment. Looks are just as important as talent, and recruits are put on strict diets to maintain thin figures and good complexions. Some are required to undergo painful cosmetic surgery procedures to make their eyes, jaw, nose, and forehead look more like elfin anime characters. Trainees also use creams and bleaches to whiten their skin. For all their painstaking sacrifices, there is no guarantee that a trainee will be a K-pop star. Prospective idols regularly perform for judges who are merciless when pointing out weaknesses. Those who do not live up to the high production standards are fired.

Life does not improve much for those who go on to debut as K-pop performers. Successful trainees are required to pay back the entertainment company by working as pop idols. Most receive minimum wage, whereas the producers bring in millions from record sales, concert appearances, merchandise sales, and product endorsements. In addition, one's career can be short; fans constantly expect idols to outdo themselves, and those who fail to deliver are quickly forgotten. As dancer and choreographer Ellen Kim explains, "Korean people want something new every week, and . . . that's the hardest pressure, probably. To come up with something catchy all the time, a hit all the time, and you've got tons of artists and the lifespan of one song is so short."

Quoted in Joseph L. Flatley, "K-Pop Takes America: How South Korea's Music Machine Is Conquering the World," *Verge*, October 18, 2012. [www.theverge.com](http://www.theverge.com).

remains in place today, and has been adopted by other K-pop production companies. For a chance at becoming a K-pop star, trainees, most of whom are ages ten to sixteen, leave their friends and families behind. They give up their personal lives and most belongings, including computers and cell phones (except on weekends). Trainees move into company dormitories, where the entertainment company pays for all living expenses, including food and clothing. Tutors are hired so recruits can continue with their education.



“They go on, practicing in obscurity, day after day, night after night . . . hoping that the hard work and sacrifice will transform them . . . into megastars.”<sup>6</sup>

—Suk-Young Kim, professor of performance studies

K-pop hopefuls spend their days and nights in a regimented, structured learning environment overseen by managers and trainers. They practice singing, dancing, acting, and speaking English, Japanese, Mandarin, and other languages. Suk-Young Kim, professor of performance studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, describes the underlying reason why recruits would subject themselves to such a rigorous training process: “They go on, practicing in obscurity, day after day, night

after night, usually sleeping only four to six hours or at times even forgoing sleep altogether, hoping that the hard work and sacrifice will transform them from nameless trainees into megastars.”<sup>6</sup>

## H.O.T. Is the Future

Although the ethics of the Culture Technology training process has been called into question, Lee’s K-pop star-making system was a huge success. In 1996 SME produced the first in a new generation of K-pop bands. One such group was H.O.T. (High-five of Teenagers), which had five members aged sixteen to eighteen. The concept of the band was based on a formula Lee developed after conducting polls in South Korean high schools. Female students were asked what they thought the ideal boy band would look and sound like. Lee listened, and he dressed H.O.T. in brightly colored, futuristic outfits. With their adorable faces and long shaggy hair, band members were groomed to induce screams of adoration from young girls.

H.O.T.’s music blended rap, EDM, slow romantic ballads, and a little rock and roll. The group’s first album, *We Hate All Kinds of Violence*, was an instant success, selling eight hundred thousand copies in the first three months. The group’s popularity was enhanced by the slightly rebellious ideas contained in its lyrics.

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