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More or Less a Foreigner: Domestic Reception of Multinational K-Pop Groups

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Abstract

With K-pop's tremendous growth transnationally, scholars have pointed to the industry's inclusion of singers from different national and ethnic backgrounds, highlighting them as examples of successful glocalization. But there has been little attention paid to how these "foreign" singers, now integrated into the Korean pop music industry, are received within South Korea itself. In South Korea, public attention towards these idols has intensified as a result of the global success of multinational K-pop groups like Blackpink and NCT. The public visibility of these idols complicates South Korea's image as an ethnically, linguistically, and culturally homogenous nation. This article examines the domestic reception of these idols, exploring the tensions that emerge at the intersection of Koreanness, K-pop, and multiculturalism in South Korea today. Drawing on focus group interviews with Korean K-pop fans as well as Koreans who do not actively follow the industry, the article explicates how foreign K-pop idols alternately challenge and reinforce contemporary everyday South Koreans' understandings of Koreanness.

Keywords: South Korea, K-pop, Popular Culture, Migration, Diversity

Introduction

In July 2021, two Chinese members of a popular K-pop idol group posted on their Weibo accounts congratulating the Chinese Communist Party on its 100th anniversary. The posts generated immediate pushback from Korean fans, who objected to what they called "communism praising" content coming from celebrities who are part of a K-pop group. Some fans prepared official statements, hashtag campaigns, and even printed and hung banners around

Seoul requesting the singers' Weibo pages to be deleted to prevent such incidents in the future (Pannchoa, 2021).

This incident raises questions not just about these particular idols, but about the role of non-Korean artists in the Korean pop music industry and how they are viewed by the Korean public. This is arguably a salient issue at a time when "the members of K-pop groups are [...] increasingly *multiethnic and multinational*" (Ahn & Lin, 2019, p. 161, emphasis added). However, despite the long-standing presence of these idols in the industry and the increasing occurrence of incidents like the one described above, scholarship has largely focused on foreign singers merely as a means to market K-pop groups abroad (M. Lee, 2014; Ye & Kang, 2017). Still, as this incident indicates, their position is far more complex — they are simultaneously expected to serve as a cultural and linguistic bridge to K-pop fans abroad, while also remaining loyal to the country that gives their industry its name: Korea. At the same time that entertainment firms' investment in multinational K-pop groups appears motivated by capitalistic practices in the transnational music industry, the presence of foreign idols in the domestic Korean music industry inextricably positions them as residents who live and work in Korea.

This study aims to elucidate foreign idols' presence by focusing on how they are seen by the domestic Korean public. While we use the term foreign to refer to these stars (following the Korean popular press and the individuals we interviewed for this study) we use their designation as foreign merely as a point of entry for analyzing the shifting and dialogically constructed meaning of both "foreign" and "Korean" identity in Korea today. We recognize the importance of first making it clear what we (and others who write on this topic in both the popular press and in scholarly work) mean when we talk about the presence of foreign idols in the K-pop industry. We therefore begin by constructing a novel dataset of hundreds of popular K-pop idols starting

in the early 1990s through 2020, mapping for the first time the full scope of the industry's demographic changes over time. This dataset serves to contextualize foreign idols and informs our study, which examines the reception of foreign idols among the domestic Korean public through focus group interviews.

The appearance of foreign idols at the heart of Korean popular culture raises questions about Korea's evolving character as a multiethnic country, a topic of preeminent concern in contemporary Korean society (Kim, Curran, & Zhen, 2020) that has nevertheless remained underexplored in academic studies. Especially given their prominence in Korean popular media, foreign stars add fodder to ongoing public debates over issues of Korean identity and multiculturalism (*damunhwa*) at precisely a time in which Korea is forced to reevaluate its identity vis-a-vis increased ethnic diversity (Ahn, 2018; D. Kim et al., 2020; N. Kim, 2012). More broadly, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how representation of foreigners affects conceptualizations of national identity and belonging (S. Shin, 2017). Finally, while the primary focus of our study is the qualitative examination of public responses to foreign idols, we also contribute a comprehensive dataset on K-pop idols dating back to the industry's inception, which we hope will assist future research on various topics related to the study of Korean popular culture.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: first, we provide some background on the status of immigration and foreign idols in contemporary Korea, alongside a discussion of existing work on K-pop and Korean cultural identity. Here, we articulate our research question. Then, we introduce our dataset, which provides an overview of the industry and the presence of foreign idols since the 1990s, before jumping into the main focus of this study -- our focus

groups. We conclude by synthesizing our findings, discussing the limitations of our study, and outlining potential future research on the topic.

Migration and K-pop

The emergence of K-pop and multinational idol groups coincide with Korea's recent transformation from an ethnically homogeneous society to an increasingly multicultural one. During the 1990s, Korea transitioned from a net exporter of labor to a net importer of labor. Between 1987 and 1992, the number of migrant workers in the country increased by a factor of ten, with the vast majority being "unskilled workers engaged in so-called 3-D jobs (dirty, difficult, and dangerous)" (Lim, 2012, p. 508). According to the Korean Ministry of Justice (2020), much of today's migratory inflow consists of guestworkers, primarily from Central and Southeast Asia; most of the country's marriage migrants and international students also come from this region. Diaspora engagement policies have further facilitated the immigration of ethnic Koreans, who constitute the single largest group of foreign residents in contemporary Korea, and most of whom come from China (Ministry of Justice, 2020).

There is a growing body of research that examines issues of migration in Korea. This includes work on ethnic return migration (Han, Han, & Lee, 2019; Jo, 2017; Tsuda & Song, 2019), the rise of multicultural families (Kim, Yang, & Torneo, 2014; H. Kim, 2014; Thompson, 2019), the continued practice of temporary labor import through guestworker programs (Y. Kim, 2010) and entertainment visas for female hostesses (Choo, 2016; M. Kim, 2014; Kim & Song, 2017). However, studies on migrants within the high-profile, popular culture entertainment industry remain scarce. This is unfortunate since foreign idols who debut and achieve celebrity status gain high levels of publicity, which effectively makes them the most visible migrant group

in Korea, where they are employed by Korean corporations, work along with Korean colleagues, live as members of the Korean society, and interact with the Korean domestic public.

At the same time that the employment of foreign idols in the domestic Korean music industry inextricably positions them as working residents in Korea, it is recognized that their position is intrinsically linked to the capitalistic practices in the transnational music industry. Rather than representing contradictory positions, we argue that this duality of global commercial interests on the one hand and local employment, on the other hand, represents an intersecting space worth exploring critically. The global recognition of the Korean film and music industries (Kwak, 2019; H. Shin, 2009) has had direct implications for how Korea defines itself, as reflected in the country's evolving approach to nation branding and cultural industry policies over the past few decades (Gibson, 2020; Istad, 2016; Jin, 2014; G. Kim, 2017; Kwon & Kim, 2014; Oh & Lee, 2013). Idols' active and highly visible role in the K-pop industry, therefore, positions them at the heart of the country's shift toward a net exporter of popular culture. On the industry side, scholars often draw on theories of cultural globalization and hybridity to explain the success of K-pop in foreign markets. For example, some argue that K-pop's international success is due to its incorporation of foreign melodic and linguistic elements, with studies alternately highlighting the role of European and American music producers (I. Oh, 2013); English lyrics (Jin & Ryoo, 2014); and English stage names and foreign language education (D. Kim, 2016). Others focus on localization efforts, including media communication strategies (Siriyuvasak & Shin, 2007) and the recruitment and training of idols from target markets (K. Lee, 2018; S. Shin, 2017; Ye & Kang, 2017). Perhaps as a result of recent popular attention towards multinational idol groups, it is widely assumed that foreign idols in K-pop are a

characteristic of recent idol generations (Choi & Lim, 2019, p. 75; Shim, 2016, p. 210), yet little is known about the history of foreign idols in K-pop and its reception by domestic audiences.

K-pop's cultural hybridity has naturally drawn attention to issues of cultural identity. In fact, many studies debate if K-pop is even distinctively Korean at all (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2015; S. Lee, 2016), or whether it is Korean or hybrid elements of K-pop that appeal more to international audiences (e.g., Yoon, 2018). On the one hand, Lie (2012) argues that "it is precisely because there isn't very much 'Korean' in K-pop can it become such an easy 'sell' to consumers abroad" (p. 361). On the other hand, cultural critic Park Sang-mi argues that the recent upsurge in K-pop's ethnic diversification might reduce the popularity of K-pop abroad, citing the results of a survey conducted on North American fans who said that they are attracted to the genre for its "distinct Korean character" (Kang, 2020, p. 517). Discussing the mixed success of Korean idols trying to break into the American market in the mid-2000s, H. Shin (2009, p. 507) suggests that the Korean music industry creates "de-nationalized transnational stars." This survey of the field shows how fraught the concept of "Koreanness" and "foreignness" can be when applied to a multinational industry like K-pop, much less to the identities of those stars that work within it.

As mentioned above, the majority of studies that examine foreign idols in the K-pop industry have focused on how foreign members facilitate K-pop groups' reception in their home countries (M. Lee, 2014; Ye & Kang, 2017) and how they are received by international fans (Jin & Yoon, 2016, p. 1287). However, the reception of foreign idols within Korean society remains underexplored. A recent experiment-based study from the United States demonstrates that exposure to musical performances by outgroup members (e.g., ethnic minorities) enhances outgroup warmth, suggesting that music can be "an effective strategy in improving intergroup attitudes" (Case et al., 2021, p. 15). Still, little research has explicitly engaged with how the

presence of foreign members affects Koreans' attitudes towards K-pop groups, the K-pop industry, or foreigners in Korea. The few studies that go beyond representation and explicitly engage with the domestic audience's perception of foreign members tend to focus on specific singers rather than foreign idols as a whole (e.g., Butsaban, 2019; E. Kim, 2017). The relative lack of research into domestic perceptions of foreign idols is somewhat surprising given the centrality of foreign idols in some of K-pop's most popular groups—such as Blackpink and NCT—and the fact that these idols are increasingly the subject of popular attention in Korea. The domestic audience's interest in foreign idols is exemplified by several weekly television shows on major Korean broadcasters that are centered on non-Korean participants, including shows that feature idols and singers among other foreign guests (e.g. *South Korean Foreigners, MBC* and *Non-Summit, JTBC*) and one program dedicated specifically to multinational K-pop groups (*Idol on Quiz*, KBS).

To complicate the picture further, multiple studies have noted that the Korean diaspora has played a major role as consumers and distributors of Korean popular culture abroad (Jo, 2020; Koh & Baek, 2020; Yoon, 2020). Nonetheless, few have addressed the longevity of the Korean diaspora within the K-pop idol industry or the complex questions that their presence raises about issues of national belonging and identity. To fill in these important gaps in the literature reviewed above, we suggest the following research question:

RQ: How do Koreans -- both fans and non-fans -- perceive multinational idol groups, and what do their perceptions indicate about contemporary Korean cultural identity?

Who are Foreign K-Pop Idols?

Before examining what perceptions of foreign idols, it is important to first establish who foreign idols are and what role they have played in the Korean pop music industry over time. Therefore, we begin by constructing an original dataset of Korean singers spanning nearly three decades. The early 1990s marked a new era of dance music in Korea and included musicians like Seo Taiji, who fronted the group *Seo Taeji and Boys* (Seotaejiwa aideul). In fact, Lie (2014) argues that the fundamental importance of *Seo Taeji and Boys* is such that "in the history of South Korean popular music, we can point to the period before and the period after *Sŏ T'ae-ji wa Aidŭl* (*Seo Taiji and the Boys*)" (p. 57). Popular artists from this period went on to set up the influential production companies SM, JYP, and YG Entertainment (K. Lee, 2016). Therefore, in order to capture how the K-pop industry has changed since its earliest days, we start our dataset with Seo Taeji and the Boys' debut; to be eligible for inclusion in our data, a group or solo artist must have debuted after this history-making group in April 1992.

Not all trainees debut and not all idols achieve success. While commercial achievement is not the only metric for an act's success, the general public is nevertheless more likely to know about singers who are popular enough to enter the public psyche. We therefore consider a group or soloist influential enough to be included in our data if they have won at least one award on one of Korea's prolific weekly music programs: *Top 10 Songs, Inkigayo, Music Bank,* and *M Countdown* (K. Lee, 2016, p. 145). *Top 10 Songs* was the premiere music show in Korea in the 1980s and 1990s, running until February 1998 on the public broadcaster KBS. It included a ranking of the best songs for the week from a combination of national voting and expert opinion. In 1998, two new programs, *Inkigayo* and *Music Bank,* began airing on SBS and KBS respectively, and in 2004 one of Korea's main cable networks, *Mnet* (short for Music Network) launched its own weekly music program, called *M Countdown*. These shows picked up on the

weekly award format of *Top 10 Songs*, although the award criteria have shifted over the years to now include categories such as digital music charts as well as album sales and viewer votes. The final of Korea's four main ongoing music programs, *Show! Music Core*, began in 2005, but has included a weekly award only sporadically over the years, and thus is excluded from our study for the sake of consistency.

With this in mind, we compiled a list of all Korean musical acts that debuted after 1992 and won an award at least once on a weekly music show. After eliminating any artists who were double-counted -- for example, a member of a group going solo, or a collaboration between two artists from other groups -- we were left with 208 unique groups or soloists, representing a total of 826 individuals (see Table 1). The task of identifying which of these individuals should be counted as "foreign" was a more difficult task. As discussed above, the term foreign is a fraught one that is worthy of discussion and debate. For the sake of consistency, idols are defined as "foreign" for the purpose of our dataset if they could be publicly identified as holding a non-Korean nationality, either solely or in addition to Korean citizenship. We recognize that the Korean diaspora holds an ambivalent position in contemporary Korea, in terms of both their cultural and legal identification. For example, the majority of diasporic Koreans are not recognized by the government as Korean citizens, but at the same time do have access to privileged resident visas based on their ethnic lineage (C. Lee, 2014). We reflect this ambiguity in our dataset by examining the presence of diaspora idols as both parts of and distinct from the full set of foreign idols, and consider an idol part of the diaspora if they publicly identify as ethnically Korean while also holding a non-Korean nationality.

[Insert Table 1 approximately here]

Our findings are twofold. First, it is observed that idols with a foreign nationality have been a staple of the K-pop industry since its inception in the 1990s. Although the absolute number of K-pop idols - both Korean and foreign - has increased since then, the relative share of foreign idols has not changed drastically. Multinational idol groups are thus not a recent phenomenon, but rather one that requires a discussion of idols dating back to the 1990s. We reflect this in our focus groups by prompting participant conversations about both recent and earlier generations of K-pop idols (see findings below). Second, we find that although K-pop has a long history of national diversity, the presence of foreign idols with non-Korean ethnicity is a more recent phenomenon. Earlier generations of K-pop idols were characterized by mostly (but not exclusively) members of the Korean diaspora, but over the years increasingly more singers of non-Korean ethnicity have joined K-pop along with a steady stream of diaspora singers (see Figure 1). This additional layer of detail is important to include in conversations about industry trends; merely stating that the number of "foreign" idols is increasing obscures this nuance, and assumes a certain type of "foreignness." In fact, this nuance and the role of diaspora singers within the K-pop industry was a key topic of conversation in our focus groups, which we describe in more detail in the following section.

[Insert Figure 1 approximately here]

What Role do Foreign Idols Play?

The increasing prominence of foreign singers in the K-pop industry raises a host of questions not only about their reception among the domestic Korean public but also about what place they have, if any, in Korea's increasingly diverse society. Given the complexities of these questions, focus group interviews (FGs) offer a number of advantages. First, as Montell (1999) notes, focus groups provide in-depth data of the sort produced by interviews, but also offer additional insights

gained from interactions between participants, providing rich data that reveals "taken-for-granted categories and beliefs" (p. 47). That is, FGs are dynamic, participatory spaces that allow for participants to interact with each other and not only share previous experiences, but also, through their interaction, articulate new ideas, understandings, and ways of moving forward (Breen, 2006).

Our FGs were carried out in November and December 2020 via Zoom, and participants were recruited via Korean-language posts on social media. To account for the 2 million Korean nationals who live outside of the homeland, including almost 200,000 Korean nationals studying at the tertiary level (Ministry of Justice, 2021, p. 28), we did not limit our recruitment to only Korean nationals in Korea but also included Korean nationals living abroad (see Table 2 for participants' demographic information). In reflection of our research question, which is concerned with the domestic reception of foreign idols, groups included both self-described K-pop fans as well as non-fans. Although the participants had different levels of familiarity with currently active idols, most participants had previous experiences of being a K-pop fan in their teens. Also, even those participants who reported not actively seeking out information about K-pop still reported exposure to idols in news outlets, social media, and television programs. This high level of exposure speaks to the pervasive nature of K-pop in contemporary Korea.

In total, we conducted five FGs with four participants each. Because previous research has noted that using FGs composed of people who already know each other has both advantages and disadvantages (for an overview, see Rabiee, 2004, p. 656), we organized some groups with participants who were familiar with each other, and others whose members did know each other. After asking participants to discuss their initial understandings and opinions about foreign idols, we showed each FG an identical set of photos featuring various popular K-pop acts, prompting

deeper discussion of who, exactly, fit the definition of "foreign" and "Korean."[1] After the 5th FG, we found that we had reached data saturation, meaning that responses began to converge and little new pertinent information was likely to be gained through additional conversations. Therefore, we suspended data collection after the 5th FG. Each FG was conducted entirely in Korean and lasted 60 minutes. The discussions were facilitated by one or two of the authors, and a research assistant was also present. All the FGs were recorded and then transcribed. Each participant was compensated approximately $13 dollars (15,000 Korean won).

[Insert Table 2 approximately here]

After the FGs were completed, the authors read the transcriptions and individually wrote up initial impressions. Next, we convened to discuss observations and identify key themes. This was a qualitative, interactive process of analysis in line with the tenants of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2014). Specifically, we were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2012) observation that "the purpose of [thematic] analysis is to identify those [patterns] relevant to answering a *particular* research question" (p. 57, emphasis in the original). In other words, we did not seek to hierarchize themes according to their prevalence but instead sought to identify themes that were directly related to our research question.

Focus Group Results

Below, we identify and discuss key themes that emerged from the focus group discussions: how foreign idols are defined by the Korean public, what role they play in the industry, and what they

[1] We attempted to choose a range of idols and singers that spanned different temporal eras of K-pop as well as individuals representing different potential conceptions of foreign and Koreanness. The idols pictured were Shinhwa (two Korean-American members), Super Junior (one Chinese and one Korean-American member), 2PM (one Thai member, one Korean-American member, one Korean member who spent significant time abroad but does not have dual nationality), EXO (three Chinese and one Chinese-Canadian member), BlackPink (one Thai member, one Korean-New Zealander member, and one Korean member who spent significant time abroad but does not have dual nationality), and Yoon Mirae (Korean-American with mixed Korean and African American heritage).

mean for broader issues of migration and integration in Korea. Crucially, while our focus groups consisted of those living in Korea and Koreans abroad as well as fans and non-fans, the conversations still coalesced around several key topics. In particular, our participants discussed the instrumental role that these idols play in the global marketing of K-pop, as well as the tension between this instrumental role as an explicitly non-Korean presence in the industry and pressures to assimilate to Korean culture.

Defining Koreanness Through Foreign Idols

Interviewees' understanding of what makes someone a foreign idol involved overlapping dimensions of citizenship, race, culture, and even occupation. When first asked to provide a definition, most participants initially gravitated toward one based on nationality and ethnicity. When prompted to name any foreign idols or multinational groups they were familiar with, the majority of participants mostly listed currently popular singers from Thailand, China, or Japan or groups with multiple members from different countries including, among others, Twice, Blackpink, and NCT. It was not until they saw our collage that any of the participants seemed to consider the presence of foreign idols, and diasporic Koreans in particular, in earlier generations of K-pop. After seeing pictures of groups like Shinhwa and Super Junior, participants expressed surprise and momentary confusion at their inclusion in a discussion of multinational idol groups. One participant asked: "Are there any foreign members in the bottom left picture of Shinhwa?" (3-4), to which another participant responded: "To my knowledge, Andy of Shinhwa is American. Also, I think Hye-song went to study in the United States. Come to think of it, there were multinational groups even in the earlier generations of idols." (3-3)

The examples of diaspora idols sparked a re-evaluation of the initial assertion that nationality and citizenship were the key to identifying foreign idols. If holding non-Korean

nationality was the key to "foreignness," then Korean diaspora singers should be considered foreign; yet, the majority of participants did not classify diaspora idols this way. Instead, they concluded that idols born and raised by one or more Korean parents, whether within or outside of Korea, should be considered Korean:

> "Although the nationality listed in their passport is foreign, they will have been exposed to Korean culture and language through their parents while growing up, so I am not sure that I would consider them as a 100% foreigner." (3-3)

The dual emphasis on a Korean cultural upbringing and having parents of Korean ethnic heritage points to what we later identified as participants' *ethno-cultural* understanding of Koreanness. This perspective was reinforced throughout the focus groups as various participants emphasized both ethnicity and cultural behavior in distinguishing between who they perceived to be Korean and foreign. Rather than trying to investigate their nationality, many participants said that foreign idols can be distinguished by their looks and behaviors. However, this ethnicity-based understanding of identity was open to contestation—so long as certain conditions were met. One focus group member took the example of a famous male celebrity from Ghana, who is well known for his fluency in Korean language and culture, and argued that in the case of "a foreign national who seems Korean, whose way of being is very Korean, there might be room for considering that person as one of us." (5-1) The quote reflects an inclination to recognize foreigners as members of Korean society, while simultaneously revealing a reluctance to fully embrace the cultural diversity that comes with immigration. In order to be recognized as members of Korean society, foreigners are expected to fully adopt Korean cultural behavior. Even if they do meet the high bar of assimilation, though, these individuals would still only be

grudgingly considered “one of us” rather than fully “Korean” -- a view that points back to the *ethno*-cultural interpretation of Koreanness outlined above.

Ultimately, most participants recognized Korean idols to be those who were born and raised by one or more Korean parents, regardless of the location in which they were raised. While this view of Koreanness does not preclude multiple ethnicities or foreign citizenship, it restricts any opportunity to fully acquire status as Korean through either citizenship or self-identification. Emerging from participants’ discussion is an ethno-cultural interpretation of national identity. Crucially, this ethno-cultural interpretation of national identity limits the prospects of meaningful incorporation of migrants in Korea. The reluctance to accept foreign idols - and migrants more generally - as Koreans, pushes them to the periphery of society, even if they are well received as idols.

Foreign Idols’ Instrumental Value

Participants’ reluctance -- or even outright refusal -- to include foreign idols as a part of Korean society is partially tied to the ethno-cultural understanding of Koreanness, but also a reaffirmation of the perceived purpose of including foreigners within the K-pop industry in the first place -- to internationalize the K-pop industry. Rather than emphasizing their artistic contribution or promotion of cultural diversity, focus group participants were broadly in agreement that foreign idols serve a primarily commercial purpose for the K-pop groups and entertainment companies that they represent. Specifically, these foreign group members were seen as points of entry to overseas markets, with individuals recruited from abroad expected to enhance access to the market in their country of birth. Many participants assumed that a foreign member’s linguistic and cultural familiarity with the target country would improve communication with local fans, and automatically provide a source of publicity:

"These days it seems like each group recruits one or two foreigners so that they can perform globally as well as in Korea. That way, they are able to communicate in English and receive more attention and recognition in the group members' home countries, where they can promote cultural contents." (4-3)

Because participants viewed foreign idols as a means of access to foreign markets, they became inextricably linked to their status as foreigners. Specifically, the idols' foreignness was seen as a tool of market entry and considered beneficial for accumulating revenue beyond the Korean domestic market. In other words, foreign idols were understood in terms of their instrumentality -- that their primary purpose is to aid the expansion of K-pop abroad.

Interestingly, this perspective was both similar and different when the role of diaspora idols was brought into the mix. As noted above, once visually prompted by examples of diaspora singers from K-pop's early days, participants re-evaluated the distinction between foreign and Korean idols to adopt a more cultural-based view of Koreanness. Nonetheless, they still expressed a highly instrumental view of the role that these singers played. Participants felt that instead of helping to open up foreign markets, the diaspora singers present in the industry in its early days were serving a marketing purpose *within Korea itself*: "It felt more as if their foreignness was an exotic charming point, rather than implying cultural or national diversity. And it felt as though they were recruited for their ability to rap in English...and their glamorous style." (2-3) In sum, to the extent that these early diaspora singers were perceived by participants as foreign at all, their foreignness was seen mainly as a strategy to increase the appeal of any given K-pop group for Korean domestic consumption.

Emerging from these observations is an instrumental view of foreign idols that defines and characterizes idols recruited from overseas as strategic assets to the K-pop industry.

Ironically, this instrumental view is both welcoming and exclusionary at the same time. On the one hand, it embraces the perceived contribution these idols make to the globalizing K-pop industry, while on the other hand, it reduces non-Korean idols to their ascribed foreignness, effectively situating them at the periphery of society, regardless of the longevity of their stay in Korea.

Assimilative Expectations

The instrumental view outlined above emphasizes idols' commercial purpose abroad while simultaneously downplaying their membership in Korean society. However, by situating the discussion of Korean identity within a domestic music industry that has a global reach, we find that the global is inextricably linked to the national. The participants viewed K-pop as globally transcending but ultimately Korean: "After all, K-pop has its roots in Korea and is an industry that developed within a very particular context that is Korean society." (5-3) At the intersection of the global and the local emerges a paradoxical set of expectations articulated by focus group participants that simultaneously focuses attention on the idols' purpose beyond Korea, but at the same time holds them to the standards of Korean culture and society.

The participants noted that domestic audiences often scrutinize the behavior of foreign idols in terms of their adaptation to Korean cultural norms, and discussion of their success or failure appears openly in media channels, including in news articles, entertainment programs, and social media accounts. Participants, particularly fans, admitted that these standards were often strict and even unfair. Nevertheless, they broadly agreed that idols have a responsibility to acquire at least some fluency in Korean language, culture, and history:

"As you know, there have been some controversies lately with groups because they have

multinational members. Their presence isn't really an issue, but as long as they are active in Korea I think that they should know some Korean, adapt more to Korean culture, and acquire an understanding of Korean history and other knowledge." (4-4)

Political issues like the one described at the beginning of this article, in which Chinese members posted about the CCP's anniversary, were also of major concern for participants. Even our participants who were not fans of K-pop were well aware of past scandals involving non-Korean members, specifically mentioning several incidents where Chinese members left the group unexpectedly. Fans in the focus groups, similar to those organizing the campaign above, expressed particular concern that these actions could bring negative media attention and damage the reputation of the group as a whole:

> "Usually when assessing the performance of idols - if all of the idols are Korean - the assessment will be focused on the very basics, such as dance, performance, and vocals…If [foreign idols] fail to speak well, or if their statements or actions go somewhat against Koreans' understanding of history, commentaries, or actions, then those factors will be given more emphasis than the basics, and then that will be exposed in the media." (5-1)

A consistent theme within these discussions was that in addition to the overall assimilative expectations placed on foreign idols, their specific national background could be an additional obstacle. Idols from China and Japan were seen as particularly problematic due to the prevalence of historical and diplomatic disputes between these two countries and general negative public opinion in Korea: "Honestly, foreign nationality is not an issue in the case of idols from countries that don't have historical disputes with Korea, such as Thailand, but when it comes to countries that continuously keep on distorting historical truth, such as China and Japan..." (1-1)

At the same time, participants said they do react positively when they see foreign idols who have successfully adapted to Korean culture. Agreeing with another participant's comment, one FG member remarked: "Personally, I too feel very satisfied and proud when foreign idol members have good knowledge about Korean culture and language." (1-3). The participant added: "For that reason, the foreign cultures of these members do not seem to be of particular interest." (1-3) The quote illustrates how foreign idols are not only expected to conform with the host culture but that this assimilative expectation also overshadows the singers' background and potential contributions to diversity in the industry. By implication, one participant noted, the lack of interest in idols' foreign cultures also implies a lack of interest in the perspective of foreign idols as newcomers to Korean society. Taking the example of an idol from Thailand, the participant elaborated:

> "Minni is a Thai person. And that's it… There is no effort to go further and explore what that means, or what it is like for Minni as a Thai person to live in Korea. I guess we don't take much interest in a person's background even when we meet people in our daily lives who are not Korean." (5-3)

The simultaneous lack of interest in the foreign cultures of K-pop stars and concern over their adaptation to Korean norms together reinforce a set of assimilative expectations, in which the identity and experiences of foreign idols are downplayed in favor of dissecting their (in)ability to act Korean.

Discussion

Our study offers a number of intriguing conclusions and directions for future research. Our initial compilation of K-pop idols indicates that contrary to popular consensus, the presence of foreign idols in K-pop is not a recent phenomenon -- in fact, national and cultural plurality has been a

staple of the industry from its inception. Nevertheless, the increasing number of foreign idols within the growing K-pop industry means that the visibility of these singers is growing. Our focus groups did indeed indicate an increased awareness of foreign singers, and even many of the non-fans were able to name popular groups with multiple foreign members. This prevalence led our focus groups to concur that having a variety of foreign idols within K-pop groups is "the new normal" and hardly even noticeable anymore. Nevertheless, participants made it clear that these foreign idols can become noticeable to the broader domestic audience and media if they fail to conform to Korean standards or express views that do not comport with Korean views on history and foreign policy disputes.

Results from the FGs demonstrate how "foreign" and "multinational" Others are understood and defined both by considering their role in Korean industry and by discussing the boundaries of Koreanness - against which foreignness then can be delineated. In particular, we found that the presence of diaspora complicated the boundaries of foreignness and Koreanness, which prompted participants to shift from a focus on nationality to also consider ethnicity, cultural upbringing, and idols' role within the global industry of K-pop. Whereas foreign idols of non-Korean ethnicity were regarded as a point of entry to overseas markets, diaspora members were understood as having an exotic appeal in the domestic market, through their display of foreign fashion and language. At the same time, it was widely agreed among the focus groups that members of the Korean diaspora might be considered Korean even if they hold foreign passports, but only if they are brought up in a family that is ethnically and culturally Korean. According to the findings of our study, Koreanness cannot be acquired after birth but is also not guaranteed by birth. These findings challenge narratives of Koreans' ethnic nationalism (G. Shin, 2006) and point to an ethno-cultural definition of Koreanness (see also Campbell, 2015).

Altogether, the group conversations demonstrate the complexity of terms like "foreign" and "multinational" in the context of cultural industries, where foreignness is understood not merely in terms of nationality, culture, and ethnicity, but also in regards to the role a foreigner is expected to play within their K-pop group.

It is important to note that while our focus groups ended up focusing almost entirely on ethnic, national, and cultural diversity, racial diversity is also an important and underexplored aspect of foreignness both within the K-pop industry and in Korea more broadly. While the vast majority of foreign idols in the industry have been Asian, there were indeed several Black and white singers from various countries included in our dataset dating back to 1994. In fact, several focus group participants briefly mentioned the example of Black Swan, a new girl group that debuted in 2020 and includes one Senegalese member and one Brazilian-Japanese member. The former drew particular attention given the rare inclusion of Black singers in the industry: "Seeing her on the stage of Music Bank had real shock value and made me think that K-pop has become really inclusive. That left a big impression on me." (2-3) The very fact that multiple participants mentioned this group despite their relatively recent debut and current lack of commercial success shows that the existence of foreign idols from different racial backgrounds does garner public attention in Korea, even if it is unlikely to generate public support.

Another important topic that could be tackled more fully in future research is the connection between foreign idols, representation, and other migrant groups in Korea. There is a significant gap between ethnic and national representation in K-pop and the majority of migrants in Korea, including Korean-Chinese diaspora and Southeast Asian nationals. When asked about other groups of migrants in Korea, our FG participants explicitly rejected any connection between them and foreign idols: "We easily think of those with a multicultural background as

socially and economically marginalized. Therefore, although we refer to idol groups as multinational, their group members are mostly glamorous and therefore not easily associated with the multicultural people we meet in our neighborhoods." (5-4) The complete disconnect between foreign idols and the vast majority of non-Koreans living in the country once again casts doubt on the ability for prominent representation in popular culture to spark greater understanding and acceptance of diverse populations.

Conclusion

While there are many unresolved questions about the role and reception of foreign K-pop idols, this study has nevertheless made three main contributions. First, by providing a dataset of more than 800 singers, we track for the first time in a comprehensive way the presence of foreign singers in the K-pop industry since its inception. This will provide background for future research on these idols and on the changing contours of the industry over time. Second, we examine Koreanness through the lens of an under-studied group of migrants within Korea -- foreign idols. By studying these highly visible and prominent singers, our findings demonstrate an ethno-cultural definition of Koreanness among both fans and non-fans, which we argue limits the opportunity for meaningful incorporation of migrants in Korea because it recognizes as Korean only those born and raised to ethnically Korean parents. Finally, the fact that foreign idols were seen through an overwhelmingly instrumental lens -- that part of what defined their foreignness and explained their presence in the industry was their intended purpose of marketing K-pop abroad -- coupled with the strict assimilative standards placed upon these singers, calls into question the ability of even the most prominent of diverse voices to have broader impacts on acceptance of foreigners in Korea.

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Table 1. Award-Winning Musical Acts 1992-2020

	Number	Number of Members	Number of Foreign Singers
Groups	134	752	112
Soloists	74	74	13
Total	**208**	**826**	**125**

Figure 1. Number of Korean, Diaspora Korean, and Non-Korean Singers in K-pop

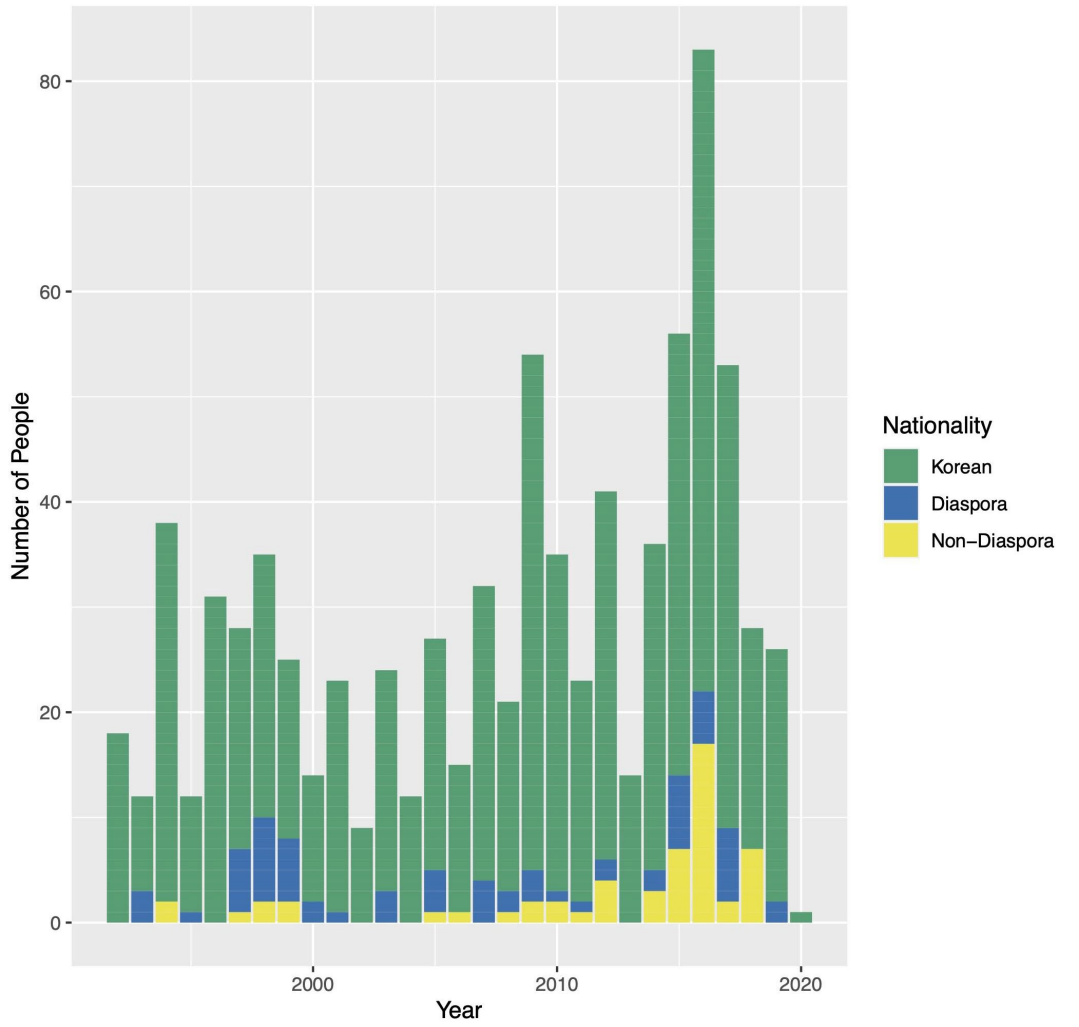

Table 2. Focus-Group Participants

Gender	Age	Occupation	Country of residence
Female	20s	Student	United States
Female	20s	TV producer	Republic of Korea
Female	20s	Student	United Kingdom
Female	30s	Teacher	Republic of Korea
Female	30s	Student	United States
Female	30s	Office worker	Republic of Korea
Female	30s	Office worker	United States

Female	30s	Student	United States
Female	30s	Illustrator	Republic of Korea
Male	20s	Entrepreneur	Republic of Korea
Female	30s	Office worker	Republic of Korea
Male	30s	Engineer	Republic of Korea
Female	20s	Nurse	Republic of Korea
Female	30s	Freelancer	Republic of Korea
Female	20s	Student	Republic of Korea
Male	30s	Office worker	Republic of Korea
Female	20s	Office worker	Republic of Korea
Female	20s	Researcher	Republic of Korea
Female	20s	Freelancer	Republic of Korea
Female	20s	Office worker	Republic of Korea