

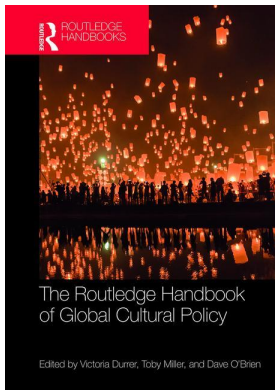
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 30 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Global Cultural Policy

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K-pop female idols

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315718408.ch33>

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Published online on: 26 Sep 2017

How to cite :- Gooyong Kim. 26 Sep 2017, *K-pop female idols from: The Routledge Handbook of Global Cultural Policy* Routledge

Accessed on: 30 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315718408.ch33>

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K-pop female idols

Culture industry, neoliberal social policy, and governmentality in Korea

Gooyong Kim

South Korea (hereafter, Korea) rapidly achieved its economic modernization in less than four decades (1960s–1980s), a phenomenon commonly known as the Miracle on the Han River. This dynamic development has brought about the recent global popularity of Korean popular culture such as film, TV dramas, popular music (K-pop), and live performances coined as *Hallyu* or the Korean Wave. For Katsiaticas (2012), along with democratic uprisings against military juntas in the '70s and the '80s, *Hallyu* has become a symbol for Korea's competent advancement to a more civil and sophisticated country. Historically, owing to the devastated economic, social, and political conditions after the Japanese colonial occupation and the Korean War, the state's cultural policies have been instrumental in helping realize the government's political, economic, social, and/ or ideological agendas (Yim 2002). For example, President Park Chung-hee, who seized power through a military coup in 1961, made full use of Confucian cultural policies that emphasized obedience, diligence, loyalty, frugality, and cooperation in order to implement export-oriented, labor-intensive industrialization, which provided the illicit political elite with a rationale for developmental-*dictatorship* in the poverty-trodden country.

Just as Park Chung-Hee led the Miracle by advancing its distinctly masculine, exploitative modernization project through mobilizing young, docile female workers in the labor-intensive manufacture industry from the '60s to the '70s, Park Geun-Hye, the daughter of dictator-President Park Chung-Hee and the country's ex-President, who was impeached for multiple criminal charges in December 2016, declared her intention to recreate it through *Hallyu* during her inaugural speech in February 2013. In this respect, regarding national development as a result of an active "incorporation of the actively residual [social, cultural, political, and economic traditions] – by reinterpretation, dilution, projection, discriminating inclusion and exclusion" (Williams 1977, p. 123), the author strives to critically examine the proliferation of K-pop within a continuum between Korea's residual legacy of developmentalism and post-IMF neoliberal state policies. Reconsidering the social, cultural and political, and economic backgrounds, the chapter provides an alternative approach to a recent, global popularity of K-pop, and in turn, criticizes the current, dominant academic literature, which does not pay due attention to those structural issues.

In this chapter, the author pays critical attention as to how Korean cultural industries became capable of producing marketable and profitable entertainment content in the context of the country's neoliberalization. It aims to investigate how the industry, which was comparatively under-developed, has achieved the state of art in its aesthetic, technological, and business features in a short period of time since the mid-1990s and competed against other already advanced foreign products and services in a jungle-like neoliberal market. To this end, the author argues the Korean government's neoliberal social policy assisted its culture industry to produce high-quality culture commodities, which in turn played an important role in helping *Hallyu* become successful. By examining the political economy of K-pop's success, the author reconsiders a continuity of Korea's developmentalism that largely relies on under-paid female workers as a docile, disposable labor force in K-pop's dominant modality of neoliberal, service-oriented market rationality. However, there is an important caveat to be discerned to correctly understand the neoliberal characteristics of the K-pop industry. K-pop idols "voluntarily" become prey of the K-pop industry's rampant profiteering, which capitalizes on their competitive spirits, perseverance, and physical strength in their dream of being financially successful and socially famous in the neoliberal show business, while under Park's developmental-dictatorship, female workers had to endure exploitative, inhumane working conditions to support themselves and their families as a matter of survival on sweatshop factory floors in the '60s and the '70s. In this regard, as a popular mode of governmentality, the idols as manufactured cultural commodities by the industry – highly visible, adored, and respected by the public – have an effective, hegemonic agency that normalizes and perpetuates neoliberal subjectivation and subjectification in one's everyday life, while the "industrial warriors" who largely paved the way for the Miracle were despised as "Kong-suni," or "Kong-dori"¹ and have still not received due recognition for their contribution to national development. In sum, this chapter sheds critical light on K-pop idols' political, economic, cultural, and social impact and implications for post-IMF Korean society in a nexus between the state's politico-ideological necessity and the market's economic imperatives.

In this political economy of development, the chapter argues the country's young, docile, disposable female bodies have continuously been manipulated and exploited in the name of national modernization and growth under different agendas and slogans throughout contemporary Korean history. Thus, it maintains that K-pop idols have been closely associated with the Korean government's neoliberal development policies, examining Girls' Generation (hereafter, SNSD) as the most successful K-pop female idol group. For this purpose, the author reviews Foucault's (2008) notion of governmentality as a means to analyze how, by their popularity and ubiquity, the idols have played an ideological state apparatus (Althusser 1971), which normalizes and perpetuates the neoliberal value system, and in turn, interpellates individuals to be neoliberal subjects. As such, the author examines how K-pop helps implement the government of others (subjectification: "how one is objectified as a subject through the exercise of power/ knowledge"), normalization of a neoliberal value system, and the government of one's self (subjectivation as a "relation of the person to him/herself") (Rosenberg and Milchman 2010, p. 66). In this respect, like Binkley (2006), this chapter argues that the recent popularity of K-pop is a micro-mechanism for individuals to naturalize neoliberal governmentality and become active, voluntary agents of neoliberalism. By doing so, it contributes to reconsidering a lingering legacy of state-developmentalism, the nature of development, and socio-economic roles in post-IMF Korea.

Political economy of K-pop: national development in neoliberal Korea

Considering that music is a product of larger structural conditions (Negus 1999), it is important to acknowledge that K-pop was incepted when Korea was in the middle of state-led aggressive globalization campaign (including hastily attaining membership of the OECD in 1996). As a response to the large socio-economic imperatives mandated by the state and emulating short-lived American idols, such as New Kids on the Block, the industry has mimicked European or American music and used English lyrics in an unnecessary excess. As an allegory of Korean economy that relies on export for its economic, political, and social development and maintenance, K-pop is mainly produced and/or played by Koreans for the purpose of product exportation in the context of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the Korean economy's subsequent IMF bail-out (Oh and Park 2012; G. Park 2013b). From this perspective, K-pop's global popularity coincided with the government's aggressive neoliberal efforts to expand its economic territories by ratifying multiple Free Trade Agreements (FTA), especially with the US, in the mid-2000s.

In this regard, among *Hallyu* items like movies and dramas, K-pop is the most strategic cultural commodity, incepted through rigorous market research and experiments (Shin and Kim 2013). K-pop's main features consist of addictive, fast, and dynamic beats and sounds, garnished with a perfectly synchronized, mesmerizing choreography by attractive, physique male idols or appealing, delicate, and sexy female idols (C. Kim 2012). These signature characters of K-pop, which is aesthetically influenced by Western popular culture, have been made possible by the K-pop industry's aggressive replication of the traditional business strategies used by Korea's labor-intensive manufacture conglomerates that ushered in the Miracle in the '60s and the '70s. Likewise, the contemporary K-pop industry takes advantage of a hegemonic model that produces quickly profitable, homogenized, disposable commodities from a highly concentrated, hierarchal production system that integrates in-house procedures of artist recruiting, training, image-making, composing, management, contracting, and album production. As much as Korea's manufacture industry giants achieved their fortune by exploiting cheap, docile, and abundant workers from the '60s to '80s, the K-pop industry capitalizes on the competitive spirits, perseverance, and physical strength of young trainees and idols who dream of being successful and famous.

Thus, as the most salient example of *Hallyu's* state of art, K-pop is a neoliberal industry that reflects how business demands have shifted from sweatshop manual workforce to service, immaterial labor since the 90s. Retaining Korea's traditional culture of Confucian sexism, female idols are employed to meet the growing demand of the service sector economy, and by doing so, they are effectively reinterpreting the traditional Confucian code of ethics by opening up a broader range of workplaces for women. While women strictly used to be confined to the domestic area, with changing economic and industrial needs, they are entitled to pursue professional careers in the public domain such as governmental offices and the mass media. In this respect, K-pop female idols can better be understood within a continuum between Korea's residual legacy of Confucianism and developmentalism. In other words, while the idols ostensibly promote female entitlement and empowerment in the public domain, they are still subject to dominant power relations of Confucian gender hierarchies, developmental capitalism, and neoliberalism. In this hegemonic structure, the idols convey the "political unconscious", exemplifying what is important, what to think, and how to govern oneself (Jameson 1981).

However, with a rapid rise of *Hallyu*, there are growing numbers of scholarly endeavors that investigate how it has been possible from mainly microscopic perspectives, attributing the success to Korean culture industry's technical and business innovations. For example, cultural hybridity allows Asian audiences to relate their sentiment to K-pop's glossy features (Ryoo 2009; Shim 2006); a cultural and historical proximity, which shares commonalities such as Confucianism and experiences of Japanese colonial occupations, makes K-pop palatable to the region's burgeoning tastes (Cho 2011; Iwabuchi 2001); K-pop's innovative production value, such as seamless choreography, catchy songs, fashionable outfits, and spectacular music videos (Park 2013a,b); K-pop industry leaders' strategic manufacturing and business planning led to a global success (Shin and Kim 2013); YouTube is a major factor in K-pop's global reach (Jung and Shim 2014; Oh and Lee 2013; Oh and Park 2012). In sum, the current academic literature is celebratory, merely focusing on microscopic analyses rather than larger socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts.

While there are a few scholars who have examined a contemporary liberalization of the media industry (Jin 2007; Shim 2002), their arguments are not successful in explaining how governmental interventions have been an integral part of *Hallyu*. For example, Shim (2008) believes liberalized global market conditions rather than the state's promotional policies to export the cultural commodities caused *Hallyu*'s international success. Although the author has no objection to this observation, there is a need for critical attention as to how Korean cultural industries became capable of producing marketable and profitable entertainment content, which can compete with state-of-art quality cultural commodities from foreign countries, in the context of the country's neoliberalization. In order to better understand how the Korean entertainment industry has become competitive in its aesthetic, technological, and business features in a short period of time, the author examines how the Korean government's neoliberal social policy assisted its culture industry in producing high-quality culture commodities, which in turn played an important role in helping *Hallyu* become successful.

Therefore, in order to better examine how seemingly contradictory systems of economic, political, and social governance, that is state-developmentalism, Confucianism, and neoliberalism, coexist and support each other in the K-pop industry, the author theoretically contends that, in the current *Hallyu* scholarship, there is a general misconception of neoliberalism. In other words, the dominant *Hallyu* scholarship maintains a myopic view of neoliberalism as a void role of government through a short-sighted opposition between state and market, which ignores the variegated, contradictory nature of neoliberal social formations and aims to debunk it. Since the market is configured within institutional frameworks and rules as its conditions of possibility (Foucault 2008; Harvey 2005), K-pop has been conditioned to prosper while the state is in charge of reconstructing its national economy to accommodate neoliberal challenges for economic development, which is stuck between technologically advanced economies such as the US and Japan and labor-intensive one like China. With a different set of roles and expectations, the state is an integral part of the neoliberal program via a construction of minimal social safety nets, while providing private sectors with industrial fundamentals like mandatory education, infrastructure, and legal frameworks (OECD 2000b; World Bank 2002). In other words, since the market itself is an effect of the state's policies and regulations (Yeung 2000), neoliberalism is internally combined with the developmental state to the extent that an emergent combination of neoliberalized economic management and authoritarian state, which guarantees a maximum capacity of the market economy and in turn, provides a political legitimacy for the regime (Harvey 2005; Peck and Tickell 2002). In this respect, since developmental states facilitate internal as

well as external competition, free trade, and open export market practices, Harvey (2005) indicates that “Neoliberalization therefore opens up possibilities for developmental states to enhance their position in international competition by developing new structures of state intervention” (p. 72). The Korean government’s strategic support and promotion for information and communication technologies (ICTs) and culture industry is a distinctive case in point. Practically, ICTs are not only a major arsenal for speculative global financial transactions but also a basis for commodification of the cultural. Thus, contrary to its rhetoric, neoliberalism works best in a strong regulatory state, especially in Korea’s dirigiste mode of state-led capitalist development (OECD 2000a).

Subsequently, while Korea’s culture industry has conflated the cultural and the economic and further legitimized a systematic commercialization of the previously un-marketed, such as female affects and sexualities in the name of national economic competitiveness, the state has associated the economic with the ideological so as to compensate for its weak political legitimacy since dictator-President Park.

Neoliberalism and governmentality in K-pop idols

As opposed to liberalism’s mission to balance two distinctive spheres of state and market, public and private, and political and commercial, neoliberalism has blurred the boundaries, transplanting the market principles into the core functions of the state (Miller and Rose, 2008). With the notion of “*homo economicus*,” Foucault (2008) maintains that neoliberalism universalizes economic logic as the general matrix of people’s daily behaviors in everything that human beings endeavor to realize based upon a meticulous calculation of cost for benefit. In other words, neoliberalism is an implementation of market-oriented techniques of government in the realm of the state and the personal and in turn constructs neoliberal subjects who are active, responsible, competitive and self-interested. In this active formation of subjectivity, a neoliberal agent is an “entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his own earnings,” in contrast to a classical liberal person of utilitarian exchange based upon his/her needs (p. 226). Furthermore, Foucault (2008) uses a notion of “human capital” as a neoliberal regime of truth and life that conditions individuals’ behavioral rules and codes to pursue any activity, which increases their capacity to achieve their goals, create self-interest, and engage in competition. Thus, neoliberalism affects itself as a form of biopolitics that (re)produces neoliberal subjectivity and transforms society into a massive market (Foucault 2008; Hardt and Negri 1994). Privatization and deregulation are key tenets of neoliberal political strategy in order to govern individuals through a discursive invention of self-interest, investment and competition in all social spheres (Hardt and Negri 2001, 2004). Thus, neoliberalism should be regarded not only as the political economy of marketization in society, but also, more importantly, as a biopolitical subjectification of individuals (Foucault 1995) in an effort to internalize particular forms of responsibility produced by market practices (Nealon 2008).

In this respect, neoliberal governmentality simultaneously works through a macro-technological manner in state policies and a micro-technological level through individuals governing themselves by naturalizing neoliberal rationalities as the basis for their conducts (Binkley 2007; Lemke 2001; Rose et al. 2006). A major benefit of applying the notion of governmentality to K-pop idols is that it provides a better understanding of them as an extra-judicial institution that helps condition and govern individuals’ thought and behavior in a nexus between power relations and subjectification processes. As a synecdoche or an ethos (Barry et al. 1996) of neoliberal Korea that implies particular mentalities and

governing manners, which are realized and practiced in individuals' concrete thoughts, feeling, behaviors, habits and perceptions, the author believes K-pop idols are a form of everyday pedagogy that tells how people understand, articulate and argue about social values and practices through specific lexicons of media spectacles. Thus, the recent popularity of K-pop has played a role in naturalizing neoliberal governmentality. As a result, the next section examines how K-pop contributes to implementing a form of subjectification on the part of the government, making those involved in K-pop active, voluntary agents of neo-liberalism.

Female idols as the poster-child of neoliberal, culture industry

According to statistics on Korea's biggest music chart site, Melon, between 2005 and 2013, a total of 244 different K-pop idol groups have come and gone, (130 all-boy, 103 all-girl and 11 co-ed groups) (KpopStarz 2013). In 2013 alone there were 30 new idol groups, and it is difficult to find solo musicians on the chart, where 7–8 spots out of 10 were dominated by idols for the last 5 years. Starting with the female musical groups, SNSD and Wonder Girls, debuting in 2007, the numbers of all-girl idol groups have been growing, with at least 10 new groups per year (KpopStarz 2013). These figures do not include those not ranked on the chart, and the number would be even higher if we considered the total number of trainees. In sum, K-pop idols disclose that contemporary Korean society is conditioned to run on a limited number of socio-cultural pathways, ruling out anything that is not considered profitable or fashionable.

The contemporary proliferation of K-pop female idols symbolically represents the political, economic, social and cultural transformation of post-IMF Korea by a neoliberal replacement of a labor-intensive industry with a service one, which is a feminized sector in order to capitalize on the gendered-nature of production and consumption (Gonick 2006). The first K-pop female idol group, SM entertainment's S.E.S., marked the beginning of the systematic management of female singers and their imagery in 1997. This came as an effort to shore up the Korean culture industry and market to overseas audiences, since the local economy was devastated by the 1997 Asian financial crisis and Korea's subsequent bail-out by the IMF. This strategy is similar to the way in which the Korean popular music industry began in the post-Korean War era when local musicians performed at various clubs for US soldiers as economic as well as cultural endeavors (*Kim and Shin 2010*).

Deploying various styles and feminine images from innocent and cute to sexy and mature, S.E.S. made an earnest effort to break into the Japanese market, but was not favored as much as in Korea. However, BoA, SM Entertainment's other female idol, saw success with her first Japanese album, *Listen to My Heart*, which was first ranked in Japan's Oricon Daily Chart and Oricon Weekly Chart in 2002. By teaming up with a major Japanese music label, Avex, BoA was successful in marketing and promoting her Japanese albums, such as *Listen to My Heart* (1.3 million copies in 2002), *Valenti* (1.3 million in 2003) and *No. 1*, (1.4 million in 2004) (BoA n.d.). This success prompted the Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS 2011), a government agency, to regard K-pop as a strong strategic item for export businesses accounting for US\$ 180 million profit.

As the most sought-after, and globally well-known K-pop group today, SNSD debuted as a group of nine girls chosen by SM Entertainment in 2007, an event that coincided with the initiation of the negotiation of the Free Trade Agreement between Korea and the United States (KOR-US FTA). As a product of years of conditioning during rigorous traineeship periods of 5 to 7 years, the girls each have her own "talent" and attractive appearance,

whether her face, body or image: With SM Entertainment's complete direction, everything from the girls' outfits, hairstyles, makeup, dance moves, gestures and romantic relationships are completely planned out to gain the audience's favor. The phenomenal success of their song, 'Gee,' with its addictive, catchy hooks and fast beats decorated by amicable 'crab dance' choreography, brought the group to international popularity in January 2009 and subsequently motivated SM Entertainment to aggressively deploy SNSD to market to overseas audiences. The song topped all of Korea's major music charts within two days, and the music video gathered one million views on YouTube in less than a day. SNSD followed up with more award-winning, instant hits with catchy, easy-to-follow tunes, rhythms and dance moves.

A distinctive characteristic of K-pop idols is that they are expected to be not just singers, but celebrities, who act, endorse, model and advertise. Likewise, SNSD's appearances in various media platforms made them media enterprise figures who demonstrate global popularity and appeal by appearing in multiple commercial endorsements in Asia, and their success is scrutinized in terms of an effective Korean business model like Samsung and Hyundai. As a main media promotion strategy, SNSD has appeared on the country's major variety TV shows like *Infinite Challenge* to promote new songs or album releases and to showcase each member's personality, character, interest and so on. Individual members also have their own media practices; for example, Tae-Yeon is a radio music show DJ, Yoon-Ah is a well-known drama actress and Jessica and Tiffany are musical performers. Furthermore, as a total promotion operation, SNSD has hosted its own variety TV shows, such as *Girls Go to School*, *Right Now: It's Girls Generation*, *Factory Girl*, *Girls Generation and the Dangerous Boys*, and *SNSD behind the Story*. There is a double feedback loop between SNSD's initial media exposure as performers and the publicity the group amasses from advertisements, which again feeds positively into their celebrity reputation. In this respect, SNSD has successfully publicized itself as a singular cultural commodity, (re)defining what it means to be a successful K-pop idol.

SNSD has been deployed in the state's official events and ceremonies as the nation's representative cultural icon. For example, Korea Tourism Organization (KTO), a governmental agency to promote Korea's tourism overseas, hypes SNSD as exemplary of Korea's popular culture that sets "global standard for girl idol groups" (KTO n.d., n.p.). In November 2010, the government hosted the 2010 G20 Seoul Summit, an international forum where 20 major world economies' governments and central banks gathered to discuss the global financial system and the world economy. SNSD was extensively mobilized as a part of the state's PR practices, including being a member of the G20 Star Supporters and Talking to the G20 Leaders (Chun 2010). More extensively, SNSD assumed numerous endorsement duties for the state, like Ambassador for Gangnam District Office in 2012, Honorary Ambassadors for 2010–2012 Visit Korea in 2011, Ambassador for Incheon Airport Customs in 2010, Ambassador for the Incheon World Ceramics Festival in 2009, Volunteer Ambassador for the Seoul City Government in 2007. In turn, as a token of the state's recognition, SNSD is the only K-pop group who received the Prime Minister's Award at the 2011 Korean Popular Culture and Arts Awards, organized by the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), a state government agency, for its successful overseas publicity and popularity as a means of PR practice for Korea.

Recently, SNSD's 2012 American debut marked another significant coincidence with Korea's aggressive neoliberalization, that is, Korean President Lee Myung-Bak's (2008–2013) visit to the White House to nudge President Obama to sign the KOR–US FTA. SNSD's strategic debut on CBS's *Late Show with David Letterman* on January 31 and ABC's *Live! With Kelly Ripa* on February 1 played a significant role in distracting attention from serious issues with the KOR–US FTA. Claiming that Koreans should be more competitive and aggressive

in the global marketplace, the mainstream Korean media celebrated that SNSD explored and “conquered” a new, uncharted marketplace that would bring Korea economic fortunes. Thus, more than a global cultural commodity, the group became an Althusserian ideological apparatus to justify and perpetuate the myth of competition as the sole source of international success to rebut the danger of the FTA.

Theoretically, Debord’s (1967) society of spectacle captures how K-pop has been an integral part of Korea’s increasing neoliberalization, characterized with the production and consumption of images, staged media events and consumerism. Via K-pop’s glossy sexualized spectacles, everyday experiences are mediated and conditioned to the extent that the spectacle constitutes social relationships based on and mediated by images, and it is integral to capitalist imperatives that cultivate the cultural mechanism of consumption and entertainment. Textually, equipped with highly crafted spectacles as a manifestation of ideal beauty and propriety (S. Lee 2012), K-pop is a neoliberal ideology of positive thinking filled with color, play, camaraderie and love, which forces the audience to focus on a positive, rosy future of society. In this respect, considering that a capitalist economy is dependent upon a seamless continuation of consumption, K-pop idols are cultural linchpins that teach and provide cues to utilizing commodities as a means of self-transformation into someone better. By doing so, they help mobilize individuals to be a steady force of neoliberal consumerism, while invoking an asocial fantasy of evading established rules and the romanticism of narcissistic pleasure as cultural amnesia. K-pop’s relentless repetition of fantasy enforces a feedback loop upon its audiences that entraps them in the eternal return of always wanting more. Thus, the overwhelmingly visual nature of K-pop is an example of Wolf’s (2004) “entertainment economy,” which transforms Korean soundscape into a subcategory of neoliberal service economy.

Therefore, K-pop’s spectacular entertainment is a major allegory of neoliberal Korea where its economy, politics, cultural forms, modes of everyday experiences and social relations are increasingly re-configured by media spectacles. With fast beats and salient rhythms K-pop is an episteme of neoliberalism, which overwhelms people not just by its neck-breaking speed of transforming society into a miniature of the market but, more importantly, with its simple ideological pitch that instigates people’s desire to be rich and successful. In other words, just as neoliberalism has mesmerized people with an unrealistic valorization of market logic, K-pop has captivated audiences by seamless breath-taking choreography and appealing, sexy appearances of K-pop performers.

K-pop as neoliberal social policy

As discussed above, neoliberalism is far from a retreat of central governments; rather it is market-driven state reform in order to guarantee a maximum functionality of market principles and a commodification of social life at large (Moran 2003). The neoliberal social policy seeks to fend off any possible anti-competitive dimensions, by forcing individuals to confront and endure socio-economic risks personally, as opposed to Keynesianism that aims to compensate, nullify, or absorb possible negative effects of economic liberalization. However, since state policies do not automatically guarantee economic competitiveness in the global economy, the bio-political aspect of neoliberalism plays an important role in shaping subjects as competitive agents in the international regime of capitalism. Thus, neoliberalization works not only by political imperatives to restructure the national economic system, but procures its legitimacy and necessity through civil society’s voluntary, bottom-up support

for the reforms as indispensable social, economic and even ethical responsibilities (Lim and Jang 2006).

The commercialization of culture has been a tenet of neoliberal knowledge/information-based economy, and a commodification of K-pop came to play an important role in shoring up Korea's national economy. Given the fact that the commodification of culture has existed since the Renaissance (Cowen 1998), what is special in the recent popularity of K-pop comes from the state's integral role in intensifying its scope and power in the name of post-IMF national competitiveness and economic development. Moreover, the state's neoliberal policy is characterized by the formal boundary between culture and economics, and art and commerce becoming obscure, if not obsolete (Hesmondhalgh and Pratt 2005). Moreover, this border crossing establishes culture as a mere marketing strategy to promote the state and to host foreign capital as soft power (Gibson and Kong 2005; Jang and Paik 2012; Lee 2009; Nye 2009; Nye and Kim 2013). In this respect, K-pop is regarded as a culture technology (CT) economy for revitalizing Korea's post-industrial, service-oriented neoliberal economy along with the four strategic technologies: ICT, bio-technology, nano-technology and environmental technology (Shin 2009). In this respect, Soo-man Lee, CEO of SM Entertainment is boastful of his CT manual that mandates components

necessary to popularize K-pop artists in different Asian countries ... [like] what chord progressions to use in what country; the precise color of eyeshadow a performer should wear in a particular country; the exact hand gestures he or she should make; and the camera angles to be used in the videos.

(Seabrook 2012, n.p.)

In sum, K-pop subsumes culture as a mere instrument for economic profits and strengthening the country's international competitiveness (Jin 2006; Nam 2013). The K-pop industry has systematically been promoted through the government's methodological interventions (Cloonan 1999; Sassen 2001). As a major governmental body, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MCST 2011) has taken charge of constructing *Hallyu* as the nation's strategic, new economic growth engine. The MCST has promoted the "Cultural Content Industry through cooperation among government agencies," systematically funding media production for global audiences, training "creative professionals through planning and marketing, project-linked" programs, and educating students with "renowned educational institutes in other countries" (p. 17). Specifically, based on the Framework Act on Cultural Industry Promotion, the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) was established on May 7, 2009, in order to aggressively develop and promote profitable cultural commodities in the global market. As a collective of various state institutions and agencies like Korea Broadcasting Institute, Korea Culture and Content Agency, Korea Game Industry Agency, Cultural Contents Center and Digital Contents Business Group of Korea IT Industry Promotion Agency, KOCCA commands a comprehensive strategy from developing human resources to supporting a "development of specialized culture technologies from design to production, the commercialization of contents, and the promotion of various overseas expansion projects to develop the content industry into an export industry" (n.d., n.p). The 'Content Industry Promotion Act' of 2010 deploys a more assertive administrative support to emphasize monetary benefits of cultural "content" enterprises like online game development. Furthermore, the government has provided the industry with financial supports such as tax breaks and loans (Ministry of Strategy and Finance 2012). Those governmental measures indicate how much K-pop's recent success has benefited from a continuity of Korea's decade-long state developmentalism.

As was the case during its dynamic industrialization period from the '60s to the '80s, the Korean government has actively treated *Hallyu* as an export item to keep its national economy floating. Institutionally, the *Hallyu* Culture Promotion Organization and the Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange (KOFICE) were founded to further facilitate overseas promotions and exports of *Hallyu* products in 2012. Practically, the Korean Wave Index, created by the MCST in 2010, quantifies how Korean culture has been consumed and favored so that the industry can modify export portfolios and strategies to cater to each country's selling points and perspectives. In turn, with these state initiatives, in 2011, K-pop achieved a revenue of \$3.4 billion, and its exports reached \$180 million with 112 percent increase compared to 2010 with almost 80 percent annual growth since 2007 (Naidu-Ghelani 2012). Establishing the Priority Sectors criterion to support new economic growth engine sectors, the Export-Import Bank of Korea announced that it would provide loans and credit guarantees worth of US\$917 million to help spread K-pop and other *Hallyu*-related products (Na 2013). For example, a sizeable part of the government's fund for '2013 Popular Music Production Support Project,' designed originally to assist independent musicians in promoting diversity, went to several K-pop idols such as Girls' Day and Hyorin of Sistar who have been manufactured and marketed by major K-pop industry leaders (*MoneyToday* 2014). KOCCA, the fund administrator, maintains that the decision was necessary in order to facilitate an overseas promotion of K-pop, since Korea's economy became heavily dependent on export after the 1997 IMF crisis (Crotty and Lee 2006). Amongst 17 fund recipients, seven went to major K-pop management companies, claiming approximately \$500,000 from \$888,000 and negating the *raison d'être* of the governmental policy.

More than just an export item, K-pop became a comprehensive marketing tool to help raise overseas market recognition of Korean brands. In order to conflate K-pop's global popularity with Korean manufactured goods' quality, the Korea Trade Promotion Agency with another governmental agency, the Korea Trade Insurance Corporation, signed a memorandum of understanding to assist small companies with less than an annual export revenue of \$50,000 by giving "free marketing and financial consulting to the companies, as well as insurance discounts" (J. Kim 2014, n.p.).

Furthermore, K-pop has been deployed as an item of destination tourism in Korea as a neoliberal economy strategy. Through private-state partnership with uses of various governmental venues, the state government has hosted several international K-pop events like the annual K-pop World Festival. Though the Festival is planned and organized by multiple government bodies, such as the MCST, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the KOFICE and the Presidential Council on Nation Branding, the media publicize it, conglomerates like Samsung fund and engage in PR and the municipal governments recruit tourists for the event. In this regard, K-pop has been a center of strategic relations among state, society and market as neoliberal service economy has counted on the culture industry. Thus, emphasizing the role of intellectual property and creativity and reducing any cost of production and logistics, K-pop is a new economic model that procures a faster, higher profit margin than the traditional manufacturing industry, like automobiles, as a "distinct spatiotemporal configuration" of post-IMF Korean economy: "The sharper the differentiation between these two temporalities grows (with dematerialization/digitalization), the more abundant the business opportunities become" (Sassen 2001, p. 268).

As reviewed earlier, dictator-President Park deemed his administration's cultural policy a social intervention to support the state's industrialization projects. In the same way, confronting the IMF's structural adjustment programs, President Kim Dae-Jung's democratic administration (1998–2003) implemented an industrial model of cultural policy, which

highlighted the economic potential and value of culture as an important source of national wealth. As a benchmark for Park's industrialization projects, in the '60s and '70s, the Kim administration enforced the "five-year plan for the development of cultural industries [in 1999], the vision 21 for cultural industries [in 2000] and the vision 21 for cultural industries in a digital society" in 2001 (Yim 2002, p. 41). It is in this context of the Korean government's utilization of cultural policies as a subcategory of political and economic imperatives that K-pop idols have been produced and consumed in Korea.

In this political economy context, SNSD is a cultural commodity that emerged from a nexus of Confucian patriarchy, neoliberalism and state developmentalism. Perpetuating a commodified model of female sexuality constructed by the industry with a "positive" twist, which is "girl power" or "female sexual empowerment" (Frost 2005; Gill 2008; Gill and Scharff 2011; McRobbie 2009), K-pop female idols have become a unique socio-cultural phenomenon that facilitates economic profiteering. In this respect, unfortunately, K-pop has been turned into an economic stunt by the K-pop industry and the government's neoliberal policy as a means to regain national economic competitiveness and confidence. Actually, K-pop contributes to raising the confidence of Korea's neoliberal service industries such as popularizing private dance and singing academies, and supplying tourist-driven shopping malls with fashion items (Mahr 2012). Therefore, with K-pop's economic success, the Korean government is both omnipresent and minimal: universally engaged to naturalize the neoliberal principles and maximally disengaged by having private talent agencies enact its policies.

In sum, K-pop should be recognized in Pratt's (2005) notion of neoliberal social policy: As a popular form of social inclusion based upon the individual's desire to be successful and rich within the existing global economy structure, K-pop contains socially dissatisfied, alienated, yet musically talented youths, encouraging them to stick with the neoliberal mantra of self-endurance, self-discipline and self-development as the key factors for success. By preaching a possibility of social mobility based on their musical talent rather than conventional means such as studying and hard work, the post-IMF neoliberal society encourages and mobilizes artistically talented or interested young people. These aspiring young people then form a large pool of potential talents for the culture industry, which (re)produces a concentrated and hierarchal structure of Korea's previous manufacture industry conglomerates, thus, channeling young people's social energy to the competitive market economy and in turn achieving social-inclusion goals (Scott 2011).

K-pop female idols: regime of truth and life in neoliberal subjectification

In tandem with the Korean government's supports, the K-pop industry has implemented its private, economic goals as a public agenda of national development, exercising Foucauldian biopolitics that (re)produces and proliferates neoliberal subjects. A concept of discipline, especially docility-utility (Foucault 1995) is permeated in K-pop idols who have been conditioned through years of training, and audiences who internalize and glorify their favorite K-pop stars. Broadcasting seemingly raw video footages that show how the idols undergo military boot camp style training procedures plays an important role in normalizing the brutal conditions of competition, self-development, multi-tasking, and flexibility as a general social environment that fans themselves have to overcome. In this respect, as a mundane, popular mechanism for penetrating a neoliberal self-government of the populace, reality TV shows, such as *Real Wonder Girls*, *2NE1 TV* and *Big Bang TV*, provides an experimental

training ground for the government of the neoliberal enterprising self (Ouellette and Hay 2008).

This process functions as a method of controlling and subordinating the idols' individuality and characters to the industry's entrepreneurial goals and principles on the one hand and permeates and intensifies a neoliberal government of successful self-managers in the fabric of individuals' daily lives on the other. For example, in the 7th episode of *One Day*, a reality program that covered JYP Entertainment's 13-member-idol-group project, which begat two separate groups, 2AM and 2 PM, JYP's CEO delivered a speech establishing that the K-pop industry and its training processes are a form of popular pedagogy to anyone who wants to equip a survival technique as a condition of one's citizenship in neoliberal society:

it might have been tough [to get to here], but this training is so much easier than the road you are about to walk on. You guys, as singers, will be heading toward the direction of world stars. But it will be psychologically and mentally 10 times or 100 times harder than this. (n.p.)

The nation-wide popularity of K-pop audition TV programs such as *Super Star K*, *K-pop Star*, *Great Birth*, and *Korea's Got Talent* and the surge in applications for the programs indicate how the neoliberal governmentality of competition and success is widespread in Korea. For example, there were cumulatively over 2 million applicants for *Super State K*, Season 4 (August 17–November 23, 2012). In this respect, K-pop idols, who are important role models for fans, are an effective tool for conditioning thoughts and behaviors, producing auto-regulated or auto-correcting selves who are free yet fulfil neoliberal ideals of rational and self-responsible individuals, competitive and flexible workers and self-calculating consumers. Thus, K-pop helps create docile social subjects who endure political and economic instabilities and risks.

As neoliberalism has marketized what was thought to be non-marketable, such as emotions, care, feelings and sentiments, K-pop female idols are successful in intensively expanding economic profiteering into the previously unexplored or under-explored manipulation of female sexualities by images of girlish cuteness, innocence and delicate sexuality. As such, SNSD's massive fan base includes *sam-chon* fans. These middle-aged male fans indicate how the group has deftly exploited Korea's gendered virtue of *aegyo*, which is a complex quality of ideal female coquettishness with decency, humor, submissive sexuality and affective readiness for male counterparts. Although *aegyo* has been practiced by Korean women to serve male counterparts for ages, it has been confined to private, domestic relationships between couples. Moreover, there was not a case of systematic mass production, marketing and distribution of *aegyo* as an affective commodity prior to K-pop female idols like SNSD. Recently, as its members get older, SNSD has aggressively expanded its collective image from girlish cuteness to more explicit, eroticized sexiness since their American debut in 2012.

Politically and economically speaking, just as with the 1996 Telecommunication Act, a neoliberal deregulation of media ownership directly caused the proliferation of aggravating pornographic media representations on female pop stars in the US (Levande 2008), there is a skyrocketing intensification of sexually explicit portrayals of K-pop female idols as a cultural symptom of Korea's growing neoliberalization. As Korea's neoliberalization intensifies and the number of K-pop female idols multiplies, the idols' escalating competition to grasp audiences' attention has led to images of women becoming increasingly more suggestive. Differently put, the mere fact that there is a growing number of K-pop female idols does not mean that they have successfully achieved and exerted autonomous (sexual) agency; however, they

perform a seemingly positive role of the active female (sexual) subject rather than embody and enact it. In other words, increasing numbers of female idols face a double bind as they are presented as active subjects while being re-objectified and in turn lead female audiences to believe they too can commend active (sexual) subjectivity. However, this process does not change the existing patriarchal gender hierarchy.

As an indicator of the idols' double gender bind, SNSD's human capital lies in their attractive appearances and charming behaviors that beget teenage followers. Considering that consumers automatically become producers or carriers of the neoliberal ethics of self-development and self-competitiveness (Foucault 2008), SNSD's appealing, sexualized visual images and lifestyle have conditioned Korean women to imitate or emulate them by purchasing the same or similar commodities. To show how K-pop idols are seamlessly weaved into other neoliberal industries like fashion and beauty industries, there are numerous online shops and communities where SNSD's fashion items are introduced, promoted and sold globally. Among others, www.style.soshified.com, a subsection of www.soshified.com, the most popular, authoritative, largest SNSD fan community with well over 200,000 active members and 176 staff, stands out since it has a monthly average of 1 million visitors and 10 million page views internationally. Claiming to provide a complete list of "what Girls' Generation wore or what items they were seen with" (n.p.), the online site is an extensive advertising outlet where virtually all walks of SNSD's everyday lives are commodified and promoted, integrating SNSD into the neoliberal consumer economy. Basically, it teaches audiences what to buy and how to use lifestyle commodities so that they can express pseudo individualities, and in turn shape their identities as an outcome of stylistic self-fashioning and improvisation in the neoliberal consumer culture of seductive images and sensations. What is noteworthy is that there is a tutorial category where users, as self-reliant everyday experts, post seemingly self-help know-how to follow or emulate the idols' fashion styles on "Get This Look," "Hair Tutorial," "Make-Up Tutorial," "Outfit of the Week," "Reviews" and so on. By acquiring, customizing and personalizing commodities promoted by SNSD, the vernacular experts to keep up with a current, trending consumer lifestyle are actively enacting governmentality in which self-development, self-realization, self-glamorization and personal well-being are an on-going neoliberal life project. In other words, hosting a participatory genre of peer tutorials in styling issues, the site encourages fans to exercise their free, capable agency in neoliberal self-fashioning and self-renovation opportunities and requirements and in turn, governs them by teaching how to govern themselves as neoliberal, self-reliant lifestyle subjects.

SNSD's influences on fans' life-style choices and self-promotion strategies go beyond unobtrusive measures to the extent that fans pursue plastic surgery. For example, K-pop Combo, that is a common, or sometime mandatory, plastic surgery for double eye-lids and a higher, pointy nose amongst the idols, is an easy, rampant measure for the fans to look cute and amicable, associated with an ideal *aegyo* quality (K-pop Surgery 2014). More specifically, SNSD Plastic Surgery stands for "some of the best and carefully done plastic surgical procedures of the world" by its capability to maintain "natural looks" (SNSD Plastic Surgery n.d., n.p.). Not to mention numerous non-surgical procedures like a Botox injections, skyrocketing rates of plastic surgery amongst Korean females proves the idols' biopolitical power that revolves around a sensual image of an "ideal new feminine subject demanded by neoliberalism" (Francis 2013; Gonick 2006, p. 11).

Considering the first plastic surgery was done on a Korean prostitute who wanted to appeal to American soldiers in 1961 (Stone 2013), plastic surgery in Korea is socio-economically instrumental in order to get a better job or a raise. Due to bleak job-market prospects coupled

with the proliferation of K-pop and beauty industries in the daunting post-IMF economy, an ever increasing number of Koreans accept and are willing to transform their bodies in a hope of being successful (Chung 2015; Ho 2012; Lim 1993). Though individuals ostensibly exercise their ‘free choices,’ personal accountability, and self-empowerment as ethics of neoliberal citizenship, this neoliberal logic of human capital has increasingly made the population subject into a mere object of profiteering, and furthermore, auto-regulating and auto-correcting consumers who are confirmative to the *status-quo* (T. Kim 2003). By consuming various beauty commodities and services, female audiences, who are the main engine of neoliberal consumerism, try to change their appearances and images as a means to accumulate human capital, which ultimately confines them to rapacious commercialism. By doing so, they become active agents of neoliberal governmentality, which preaches personal responsibility, self-development and self-enterprise as ethics of ‘good’ citizens who comply with a pre-determined, gendered pathways and to be obedient consumer-workers in society. In this respect, SNSD is a popular, effective form of neoliberal biopolitics that employs “technologies of subjectivity ... to induce self-animation and self-government so citizens optimize choice, efficiency, and competitiveness” (Ong 2006, p. 5).

Girls’ generation not in their own terms: from factories to performance stages

Manufactured and marketed by SM Entertainment, SNSD as the most successful K-pop idol girl group is not an exemplar of girl power since it is an exemplar of how women are objectified and commodified as a subordinate class (Radin and Sunder 2005). As a neoliberal social policy that is more concerned with the state’s economic competitiveness and growth than its deterioration of living standards, K-pop is one of the most successful models of Korea’s dirigisme mode of capitalist development through exploiting a cheap, docile, abundant, willing workforce (Escobar 1995). Thus, it is Korea’s signature neoliberal service economy that provides the state with global competition as a political legitimation and universalizes governmentality by its conditioning of “the human body [with docility-utility], human body parts [for sexuality], and human behavior [of competition and enterprise] as commodities” (J. Lee 2010, p. 12). As an automated embodiment of governmentality, K-pop idols are the most salient example of alienation, who are adored, celebrated and respected as a role-model of neoliberal economy.

In the working process of the Miracle on the Han River, the rhetoric of self-empowerment, self-responsibility and voluntarism was effectively deployed to legitimize Park Chung-Hee’s developmental dictatorship (1961–1979). As the nation’s ethos, the socio-cultural rhetoric ceaselessly and effectively mobilized rural, unwed women to work as an obedient, docile, cheap, disposable workforce on the sweatshop floors of textile factories. Now, the same ethos is spectacularly and sensationally deployed in post-IMF neoliberal Korea through the K-pop industry. Consequently, since “[p]olitics (in the broad sense of relations, assumptions, and contests pertaining to power) is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities” (Appadurai 2005, p. 42, emphasis original), it is no coincidence that current President Park Geun-Hye, daughter of dictator-President Park Chung-Hee, declared that the Second Miracle on the Han River would be realized through Korea’s popular culture.

In closing, the author suggests some possible research directions for future studies. Based on this chapter’s arguments on K-pop idols as a popular mode of neoliberal governmentality, further empirical studies need to specifically delineate how K-pop idols interpellate audiences to become an agent of certain commercial, ideological and possibly political interests.

In turn, further ethnographic studies should substantiate how K-pop idols are an effective tool to (re) shape individuals' value, behavior and decision-making in their everyday lives. Moreover, as equally important and popular as female idols, K-pop male idols must be examined in terms of their different modalities of perpetuating governmentality. By doing so, further research needs to investigate whether or how they are sexualized like female idols, if not, then how male idols are commercialized and commodified in Korea's neoliberal economy. In sum, extensive empirical, ethnographic research should address varied practical ramifications of K-pop's governmentality in neoliberal Korea.

Note

- 1 Derogatory terms that indicate “factory girl” and “factory boy” respectively. See, Shin, K. 2002. The Discourse on Women in Korea: Episodes, Continuity, and Change. *The Review of Korean Studies*, 5, 7–27.

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