

BTS on the Road by Seok-Kyeong Hong. Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2023. 200 pp.

It was time to restart the class after a break, but many desks remained empty. Instead of the sound of students moving their chairs, I heard someone jump in the hallway just outside the classroom door. When I opened it, I saw the students taking my course in the international summer school in Seoul, including both Koreans and non-Koreans, doing what looked like an unusual exercise. It turned out to be a rehearsal of the “horse dance” they planned to perform at a party after the completion ceremony. A few days later, I flew to New York and, listening to the local radio, counted “Gangnam Style” playing at least four times during my thirty-minute drive from the airport. I could not believe I was halfway across the globe from Korea. Fast-forward five years, and a conference brought me to Helsinki. As I passed an ordinary-looking clothing store, I heard through its open windows an instrumental version of a very familiar-sounding song. The realization of what it was made me stop in disbelief: “Fire.”

Despite the exponential growth of Hallyu for two decades since the late 1990s, both the success of Psy’s “Gangnam Style” in 2012 and BTS’ breakthrough in North America in 2017 took media, scholars, and the public by surprise, each time sparking debate on whether this act was an outlier or representative of Hallyu. *BTS on the Road* by Seok-Kyeong Hong, a professor of communication at Seoul National University, addresses this question regarding BTS, showing the ways in which the band conforms to and diverges from Hallyu. As such, the book is not only about BTS but also K-pop—and at times Hallyu—at large. It is based on extensive field research, online and offline, and interviews carried out by Hong for three years prior to the publication of the original Korean version in 2020. To answer the book’s overarching question—“How did BTS transcend K-pop and move people all over the world?” (3)—Hong well reflects the interdisciplinarity of Hallyu/K-pop studies by delving into a different field or discipline in each chapter, while also demonstrating an encyclopedic knowledge and minute understanding of the multiple facets of Hallyu befitting a leading scholar of Hallyu studies in Korea.

Chapter 1, for example, which introduces the reader to the production and distribution systems and fandom culture of K-pop, includes a discussion of hybridity and counter-hegemonic flows. Hong first explains the deep influence of Korean media culture on the formation of BTS, role of K-pop fandom culture on social media in the rise of the band’s popularity, and importance of distribution strategy, mastered by the Korean entertainment industry, for maintaining

the band's appeal to fans and commercial success. She then defines K-pop as a hybrid that "did not stop at imitating imported music styles but created a highly Korean hybrid through the unique combination of its constituent parts and the regionalism of production environments" (49). Hence, BTS serves as an example of Hallyu's hybridity: two imports, the Japanese Idol system and American hip-hop, are mixed in Korea with the resulting product expressing local experiences. Yet, Hong argues, BTS has outstripped K-pop conventions by becoming the first band to achieve phenomenal success and change the conversation in the West. She thus posits that the hybrid (BTS) has "arrived at influencing the West, the origin of its influence, in a reversal of relationship" (49); in other words, the band acts as a counterflow against North American popular culture.¹

In chapter 2, Hong highlights transmediality as another distinguishing feature of BTS within K-pop. Her expertise as a communication scholar is particularly noticeable in this chapter as she effectively explains the rather intricate concept of transmedia and jargon such as "nodes" and "rabbit holes." She points out three layers of BTS transmedia: the fiction of the Bangtan Universe, reality-based narrative of the development of the band's solidarity, and individual stories of each band member as a person. The narratives at each layer are circulated through diverse media, while fans' own experiences, evoked and invoked by these narratives, make up yet another layer. According to Hong, the difference between BTS and other groups can be conceptualized in terms of two criteria. First, BTS displays a particular form of transmediality, constructing a singular world through different stories on multiple platforms, whereas other K-pop groups are more inclined toward One Source Multi Use. Second, there is the band's complexity, that is, the depth of the messages they project through these platforms and intellectual rigor required to decipher them.

The values that BTS projects through its music are the subject of chapter 3. Hong traces the evolution of BTS' agenda from cheerful singing about school matters to angst over unfair and unjust competition, accompanied by words of consolation and reflection on the duality of life's experiences such as joy and sadness or success and fear of failure. Here, I find most fascinating Hong's explanation of the reason why such content resonates with young people worldwide. Having lived and taught in France, she draws parallels between the personal stories of the BTS members, competing since a young age and often

1. For representative English-language debates about Hallyu as hybrid and a counterflow, see works by Dal Yong Jin, especially Dal Yong Jin, *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); and Kim Kyung Hyun, *Hegemonic Mimicry: Korean Popular Culture of the Twenty-First Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

haunted by uncertainty and a lack of prospects despite their hard work, and young Europeans barely achieving basic living standards let alone enjoying the quality of life once available to their parents. In Hong's words, BTS' music videos "convey a pathos that's valid not just in Korea but anywhere in the world" (100) that expresses "the sentiment of this generation" (107) and delivers a message "of empathy and comfort" (105). Hong points out that social media enabled both the emergence of a "transglobal generational consciousness" of living precarious lives with little hope for the future and a perceived "warm community of emotional solace" among BTS fans, anchored in the experience of finding hope and consolation in watching BTS members support rather than compete with one another (105–113); she thereby touches upon the issue of authenticity of mediated experience, frequently raised in performance studies.²

The most ethnographic part of the book, chapter 4, corroborates the arguments of the preceding chapter through interviews with ninety-two international and Korean fans. Hong outlines the typical paths to joining ARMY and the activities, fan labor, concerns (representative of millennials and Gen Z), and perceptions of its members toward the band. It is in this last regard, Hong notes, that BTS fandom is particularly distinct. The "religious-like experiences" of BTS fans, in other words, stem not from admiration per se but the realization of one's resemblance to a BTS member: Fans identify with the members, are inspired by their perseverance, and are "healed" or "saved" through their stories (126–130).

In the last two chapters, Hong contemplates the meaning of BTS' global popularity through the lenses of race and gender. In chapter 5, she deals with Asian pride (the idea of BTS having become a "cool" challenge to mainstream White culture), rejects the notion of K-pop white-washing, and discusses Black fans' complex relationship with BTS. The key takeaway here is that BTS' influence "supplies rich material for the current young generation to develop a new racial imagination and identity" (170). Similarly, in chapter 6, Hong argues that BTS has generated a "masculinity that impacts the hierarchy of global gender imagination" (189). By creating fissures in the discourse of hegemonic masculinity as men who groom themselves, are caring and expressive, and have no fear revealing social closeness with other males distinct from homosexuality, the band has become a resource for people around the world to find their identities—from women who claim their agency inspired by homoerotic imagination originating in East Asian female subcultures to men looking for

2. See, for example, Suk-young Kim, *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

alternatives to “toxic masculinity” and LGBTQ+ fans appreciating the freedom of interpretation when boundaries are blurred.

I suspect that scholars of race and gender may find some tenets in these two chapters disputable or even stereotypical. These scholars are likely to point out Hong’s denial of the contribution of K-pop girl groups to the conversation about race and gender and consistent use of the West vs. East binary, perhaps even wondering if she views BTS as the only group striving against gender and racial hierarchies.³ As is the case with other scholars’ assertions about counterflows, so does Hong’s need further scrutiny not least because BTS, in an attempt to reach wider audiences, has chosen English as the language to sing in for the majority of its songs since 2020. In addition, I do not find persuasive the argument Hong made in the earlier part of the book about the uniqueness of the hip-hop-Idol combination; several bands before BTS had quite successfully experimented with the formula under the YG label, for example.

What I believe is special about BTS—and what the book ultimately demonstrates—is that the band became a point of convergence of multiple factors. These include the switch to social media and transmedia, deepening interest in mental health, identity, and social relations as the subject of popular culture, and growing recognition of the power of Asia and Asians outside the region, in which Hallyu has played a significant role. The difference between BTS and other K-pop acts, then, is more a matter of timing—and degree—than essence. In other words, BTS is unique because it is a precedent-setting trailblazer, as evidenced by the fact that several other Idol groups have since recorded larger sales and went even higher and longer on billboards by adopting the same strategies BTS did.

When *BTS on the Road* came out in November last year, I immediately listed it as one of the main readings in my graduate seminar on Hallyu, excited about the opportunity to discuss an English-language work of such a prominent expert. What is it like to teach using this book? As Hong states in the prologue, *BTS on the Road*, although published by a university press, is not an academic publication. It uses minimal scholarly vocabulary and very few citations. In addition to the research having been funded by Big Hit, the book also feels very personal: The writer does not hide her admiration for BTS members and their performances, sharing her own stories and feelings. The book succeeds as an effort to understand young people, full of compassion for them. Yet, this stance can be perceived as lacking a critical perspective. (The main issue my students raised about the book is the absence of critical views regarding BTS or ARMY.)

3. See, for example, publications on the topic by Oh Chuyun.

Nevertheless, the book's style will likely engage undergraduate students more than regular academic publications. If coupled with either lectures or reading material introducing students to respective concepts and theories, it makes an effective text for courses on Hallyu, Korean pop culture, Asian pop culture, or even pop culture in general. By introducing the reader to the major disciplines involved in the study of pop culture and K-pop—from communication and sociology to race and gender—Hong's work positions itself at the forefront of the current trend where Hallyu is as much a subject of area studies as it is a case study in individual disciplines. No matter the class in which it is read, I am confident it will encourage vibrant and important discussions from which any student—fan of K-pop or not—will benefit.

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