



## Teaching K-Culture: The Traditional in the Modern in K-Pop Music Videos

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### Abstract

*K-pop has enjoyed worldwide popularity in the last decade and, in the more recent years, has received prestigious awards and recognitions in the United States. At the same time, the interest in diverse areas of Korean culture and in learning the Korean Language has been growing fast. According to a report by the Modern Language Association of America, from 2009 to 2016, the enrollment rate in Korean classes in US institutions of higher education increased at a faster rate than any other languages. As I taught a fully online class titled Humanities 4471, Comparative Cultures, I incorporated Korean culture represented through the popular media. No textbook was used for this class, but instead, the Internet and streaming services such as YouTube and Netflix were utilized as pedagogical resources. In this paper, I will focus on teaching the traditional in the modern, as depicted in some of the K-Pop music videos and other videos related to K-Pop. Among others, “2018 Melon Music Award” and “Idol” by BTS were selected based on their integration of traditional Korean aesthetics, especially hanbok, music, and dances such as Buchaechum (a fan dance) and Sangmochum (a farmer’s dance) which requires difficult acrobatic skills. Before viewing each video, students were provided an introduction and detailed guidelines to help them identify and understand the traditional Korean art forms blended in it. For assessment, students were given a multiple-choice test. It was interesting to see that the average class grade was higher on this task than on the others. In addition, several students were inspired to write a research paper on K-Pop and incorporated some of the music videos in their work. Being products of a modern popular genre and offering abundant imagery, the music videos played an indispensable role and made teaching and learning about the Korean traditional aesthetics a vivid and rewarding experience.*

**Keywords:** *the traditional in the modern in K-pop music videos, teaching K-Culture, K-pop, BTS*

“K-Culture,” on the rise in the last decade and a half, is a broad term for the Korean culture that encompasses many fields, including music, films, TV series (popularly known as K-dramas), food, beauty products, and technology. Among these categories, K-pop has especially enjoyed worldwide popularity in the last decade and, in the more recent years, has been recognized in the United States with prestigious accolades. Consistently with this trend, the interest in learning the Korean Language has been growing fast. According to a report by the Modern Language Association of America (MLA), from 2009 to 2016, the enrollment rate in Korean classes in US institutions of higher education increased at a faster rate than any other languages. Between 2009 and 2013, it increased by 45.1%, and between 2013 and 2016, by 13.7% ([5] p. 13), contrasting with the overall decrease (6.7% and 9.2, respectively) in the enrollment in foreign language classes. The increasing interest has been fueled by the popularity of k-dramas, first in Asian countries and later over the world, and by K-pop that started to draw the interest of younger generations not long after the former had taken hold. In the state of Georgia, Korean has become the third most spoken language after English and Spanish. For these reasons, as I taught Humanities 4471 (Comparative Cultures) at Middle Georgia State University, I incorporated Korean culture represented through the popular media, including a Korean film, a 24-episode K-drama, and, more importantly for the purpose of this paper, a number of K-pop videos. In this fully online class, I and the students benefited from these primary sources as they made learning Korean culture more approachable and enjoyable for the students. In this paper, I will focus on teaching the traditional Korean aesthetics and dances depicted in some of the music videos by BTS, the most renowned K-pop group worldwide, and in a video from the 2018 Melon Music Award.

K-pop, with its interdisciplinary nature, presents music not only to be heard but to be seen. In this vein, the music videos used in the class were selected based on their integration of the traditional Korean aesthetics and visualized art forms, especially different types of dance. No textbook was used for this



class, but instead, the Internet and streaming services such as YouTube and Netflix were adopted as main pedagogical resources. The periods covered in the class spanned from the last decades of the Joseon Dynasty (the last Korean dynasty) in the late nineteenth century to the current-day South Korea. Before viewing each video, students were provided with an introduction and detailed guidelines to help them identify and understand the traditional Korean art forms blended in it.

The first video introduced to students is a recording of the section focused on BTS from the 2018 Melon Music Award, a prestigious music award ceremony in Korea. It was utilized as the primary guidelines to prepare students for the K-pop music videos viewed and studied in the class. The Melon Music Award video practically is a visual textbook with rich content as the ceremony celebrates BTS and their music with an interdisciplinary approach in the context of many different traditional Korean art forms. The climax of the award ceremony starts with a blue and red background, a possible reference to two of the prominent colors in the Korean flag (00:14:12). All BTS members are wearing Hanbok, the traditional Korean dress, and soon a series of Korean traditional dances is introduced. First, in contrast with BTS member J-Hope's modern popular dance in the center position, a group of dancers performs the traditional Korean Samgomu ("Three-drum Dance") with precisely synchronized movements and sounds. The dancers who are also drummers cannot see one another, so they can only rely the rhythm they hear. Students are instructed to compare this traditional dance with the modified and rather futuristic version in the music video "I am the Best" by one of the most popular female K-pop groups named 2NE1. "I Am the Best" features all of the background dancers blindfolded, alluding to the precision required to perform such a dance in a large group (00:02:40-00:03:10). See Photos 1 and 2 for comparison between this and the traditional version of Samgomu.

In the rest of the award performance, a number of other Korean traditional dances are presented. BTS member Jimin showcases Buchaechum, a Korean fan dance ("chum" means "dance"), paying homage to the traditional version. This dance can be performed individually or in a group to augment the visual effects of the patterns and shapes the dancers create with their fans. Jeongguk, another BTS member, then starts Talchum, a traditional Korean mask dance, followed by Sangmo dancers and Lion-mask dancers. Sangmochum is a traditional Korean farmers' dance. Students learned that "Sangmo" is the hat with a long streamer worn by a Sangmo dancer and that Sangmochum has been traditionally performed at festivities related to farming. Farming has always been an important part of the Korean culture and has been considered a respectable way to make a living. For example, during the Joseon Dynasty marked by its rigid class system, there were nobles and government officials who practiced farming. This had to do with the Korean philosophy of respecting the land and appreciating what comes from it. As seen in this video, what is so remarkable about Sangmochum is that the signature movement has to be executed with highly acrobatic skills since the dancer has to keep turning with his body nearly perpendicular to the ground while he has to constantly rotate his head to rotate along with it the long streamer (00:16:32-00:16:40). In their music video, "Idol," BTS members make movements hinting at this dance. Throughout the performance of these dances at the award ceremony, a modified version of "Idol," infused with sounds of traditional Korean musical instruments, plays out. This provides unity to the interdisciplinary nature of the performances resulting from the synesthetic convergence of music, dance and video arts decorating the background.

In addition to Sangmochum mentioned above, the music video "Idol" is heavily laden with other traditional materials and offers a wonderful opportunity to learn Korean culture. In it, BTS consistently refers to or reinterprets a variety of traditional Korean art forms not limited to dance and folklore. The scenes where the members are dressed in modern western attire alternate with the ones where they exhibit Hanbok. There are scenes with traditional Korean architecture and references to Buchaechum (See Photos 3 and 4). The video also features Bukcheong Saja Noreum, or Bukcheong lion mask performance originating from the province of the same name in North Korea, as well as the visual presentation of the Korean version of a folktale about a rabbit in the moon. At moments, viewers get a glimpse of a tiger that swiftly jumps across the screen. The tiger has symbolized the Korean spirit and has been closely linked with the Korean folk culture. Another element to observe is the use of abundant bright colors, as in the scene of Buchaechum (Photo 3), that are also prominent in many of the traditional Korean ceremonies and festivities. At the same time, to make the learning process more fun, I assigned a humorous and insightful video by Josh and Ollie commenting on the music video. The authors of the video observe with acumen that "Idol" is "an identity-focused song" that defines not only BTS's identity as individuals but also their identity as a group who shares a common Korean cultural heritage (00:09:05-00:09:12).



Photo 1. "I Am the Best" by 2NE1. The blindfolded dancers on the right and left perform a modified, futuristic version of Samgumu.



Photo 2. Traditional Samgumu, with the difference of dancers arranged in three tiers, performed at the 2018 Melon Music Award.



Photo 3. Buchaechum re-interpreted in the music video "Idol."



Photo 4. Traditional Buchaechum.



Photo 5. BTS performing "Dynamite" in Gyeongbok Palace.



In a more recent video pertaining to the topic studied in the class, BTS performs another hit song, “Dynamite,” in Gyeongbok Palace at night (See Photo 5). Students learned that the main building of the palace, Geunjeongjeon, with stage lights cast over it, is not a mere background but instead takes the role of a protagonist in the video, which is analogical to the palace’s position as an important witness to the Korean history over the centuries. Built in 1395, it served as the main palace of the Joseon Dynasty until it was destroyed during the Japanese invasion in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was restored in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is a major tourist attraction in the current-day Korea. Along with the history, students were prompted to observe several different components: the bland of the modern lighting, the disco music, the traditional Korean architecture, and the attire adorned with Norigae. At the end of the video, BTS member V (or Taehyung) takes a traditional bow to the audience, expressing the group’s appreciation of their fans and the audience. Koreans often bow this way to show their respect to their parents and elders in the family and to other people who are their seniors in age or rank or both.

For assessment, students were given a multiple-choice test with the purpose of gauging their knowledge of the Korean traditional art forms and aesthetics as they are intergrated in the videos studied. Some questions dealt with more specific details such as the names of dances incorporated in the music videos. Others had to do with inferring a more encompassing aspect from different music videos, which results from the convergence of different art forms. The class average was higher on this task than on the others. Of course, the lengths of these videos were a lot shorter and, thus, made them more manageable than the films, including documentaries, and hour-long K-drama episodes. Students commented that they enjoyed watching the K-pop videos and learning about Korean culture through them. Furthermore, several students were inspired to write a research paper on K-pop and included some of the music videos in their work.

In conclusion, the K-pop music videos, especially the ones by BTS, and the video documenting the 2018 Melon Music Award, provided an opportunity to turn a subject that could be considered archaic and remote into one that is relatable and enjoyable to the present-day students in the class. Characterized by their highly artistic quality, the videos are packed with cultural references and abundant colorful imagery. Sometimes re-interpreting traditional Korean art forms and sometimes touching on them more subtly, the videos and the artists in them became indispensable resources. Being products of a modern popular genre and implemented as a pedagogical tool, the videos made teaching and learning about the Korean traditional aesthetics a vivid and rewarding experience.

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