

CULTURE COURSE

K-Pop

From trot and rock to the idol system and the global wave, with every claim traced to its source.

10 Chapters | Philip Osztromok | Generated with Claude

K-POP

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K-Pop

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Why K-Pop? Scope & Sources

K-pop is one of South Korea's best-known exports, yet the word is used loosely: sometimes for all Korean popular music, sometimes for one particular kind of idol group. This chapter sets out what the word means, what the course covers and leaves out, how to tell what is recorded from what is fan legend or industry marketing, and where to follow up.

> **How this chapter was checked**
>
> The facts here come from the opening sections of Wikipedia's article on K-pop (its lead, "Etymology", "Characteristics" and the start of its section on language), as I read them. I read no books, archives, chart databases or industry reports. Where the article hedges, I say so. Other chapters will check their own facts against their own sources.

What the Word Means

The article defines K-pop (Korean 케이팝) as "an abbreviation of 'Korean popular music'" and as "a form of popular music originating in South Korea". It then narrows the sense in two steps, and the difference matters for the rest of the course.

Sense	What the article says
The broad sense	The genre "emerged in the 1990s as a form of youth subculture", with Korean musicians influenced by Western dance music, hip-hop, R&B and rock. In academic circles the term "has been retroactively applied to the popular music of Korea going back as far as the 1930s."
The everyday sense	Today K-pop "commonly refers to the musical output of teen idol acts, chiefly girl groups and boy bands, who emphasize visual appeal and performance."
The sense inside Korea	Domestic pop music is called *gayo* (가요), "still widely used within the country". In 2022 the Korean Music Awards added a separate K-pop field, defined as dance-pop "originating from the Korean idol system with a focus on performance".

Read the label carefully

"K-pop" can mean the music of one country, a style that began in the 1990s, or the output of the idol system. A claim such as "K-pop began in 1992" or "K-pop is a manufactured product" is true or false depending on which of the three is meant. When you read a claim, ask which sense it uses.

Where the Word Came From

The article says the first known use of "K-pop" was in *Billboard* on 9 October 1999, in an article headed "S. Korea To Allow Some Japanese Live Acts" by Cho Hyun-jin, then the magazine's South Korea correspondent. The term is described as the South Korean equivalent of "J-pop". Cho himself, according to the article, "is not sure if he coined the term", since some articles stated that insiders were already using it. The word became popular in the 2000s, "especially in an international context".

"First known use" is not "invented by"

The article is careful here, and so should we be. A first printed appearance shows only the earliest instance someone has found. It does not show who coined the word or when people began saying it aloud.

A Quick Sketch of the Story

The lead of the article gives a short outline that the later chapters will fill in and check.

- **Origins.** K-pop "can trace its origins to 'rap dance'", a fusion of hip-hop, techno and rock "popularized by the group Seo Taiji and Boys" in the early 1990s. Their popularity with teenagers "led the music industry to focus on this demographic". (Chapter 3.)
- **The idol system.** Lee Soo-man of SM Entertainment "developed the Korean idol system in the late 1990s" and created H.O.T. and S.E.S., the "first generation" of K-pop. TVXQ and BoA had succeeded in Japan by the early 2000s. (Chapters 4 and 5.)
- **Going global.** In the 2010s the Korean Wave and social media "drove the international popularity of K-pop". In 2019, South Korea ranked sixth among music markets, led by BTS and Blackpink. (Chapter 8.)

- **The four large companies.** The article says the industry "is dominated by four companies: SM, YG, JYP and Hybe". (Chapter 4.)

> **The article's own wording on the market**
>
> The lead says that in the year after 2019 the South Korean music market "a record 44.8%", with a verb missing from the sentence as I read it. I rely on no growth figure from it. Numbers like this are checked against a named chart or industry source when a later chapter needs them.

What Is Argued About

The article is open that several things about K-pop are disputed, and the course keeps them as arguments rather than settling them.

- **How "Korean" it is.** The "Koreanness" of K-pop "has been debated in recent years", with "an increasing share of Western songwriters, non-Korean artists, songs in English and marketing for a global audience". Some authors call it a "transnational culture".
- **The training system.** Agencies offer "binding contracts" to potential artists, "sometimes at a young age", and trainees live together in a regulated environment. The article says Western media often criticise this "robotic" system, and that *The Wall Street Journal* reported in 2012 that training one idol under SM averaged US$3 million. That is a newspaper's report, not an audited figure.
- **Treatment and commercialism.** The article says K-pop "has been criticized for its commercialism and treatment of artists", and also that in the 2020s "the genre has seen greater artist autonomy".
- **English.** Modern K-pop "is marked by its use of English phrases". The article notes that English has not guaranteed popularity in North America, and gives the view that Western audiences value authenticity and individual expression, which the idol system can be seen as lacking.

What This Course Covers

- **Popular music as its own subject.** K-pop is treated here as music and as an industry, from its roots to the present.

- **South Korea.** The focus is South Korea. For the period before 1945 and 1948, popular song of the whole peninsula is covered, because there was one music scene under Japanese rule. North Korean popular music gets no more than a short, factual note based on openly available sources, if that.
- **A road map.** Chapter 2 covers popular music before K-pop. Chapter 3 covers Seo Taiji and Boys and the 1990s. Chapters 4 and 5 turn to the agency system and the anatomy of an idol group. Chapter 6 covers the sound, and Chapter 7 fandom and business. Chapter 8 follows the wave abroad, Chapter 9 looks at pressure and argument, and Chapter 10 draws the threads together.

What It Leaves Out

- **Dramas, films, webtoons and festivals.** These have their own courses. They appear here only where a song depends on them, as with a soundtrack.
- **Politics as a subject.** Korean politics is covered in Korean Politics 1 and Korean Politics 2. This course covers state control only as it shaped music.
- **Ranking and gossip.** The course does not rank artists, and says nothing about people's private lives. Songs, groups and agencies are named for reference, and you do not need to have listened to any of them.

Record, Fan Legend and Marketing

Pop music is a subject where three kinds of source mix together, and each has its own weakness.

1. **The record.** Release dates, chart positions, contracts and court rulings can be checked in a named source. Even so, sales and chart figures often differ between sources, and such disputes are shown with their owners and never resolved here.
2. **Fan legend.** Stories passed around fan communities may be true, but they often have no source. Treat "it is said that" as a prompt to look for a source.
3. **Industry marketing.** Agencies and broadcasters describe their own artists, and "record-breaking" and "first" are selling words. Read to the end of the sentence: first in what, counted by whom, measured how?

Some topics later in the course, such as working conditions and the deaths that prompted public debate (Chapter 9), need extra care. They are reported as the sources report them, with owners and no speculation.

Where to Listen and Read

Which services carry which songs depends on your country and changes over time, so I give no list. Search for a song by title and artist on a music or video service available to you, or ask a local library. For reading, Wikipedia is a starting point (this course relies on it for facts and flags where it hedges), and each article has references to follow up. You do not need to listen to anything in advance; the chapters stand on their own.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the three senses of "K-pop" in this chapter (broad, everyday, and inside Korea) and say what *gayo* means. Then give an example of a claim that would be true in one sense and false in another.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

State where and when the first known use of "K-pop" appeared, and explain why "first known use" is not the same as "coined by". Then name the group the article says popularised "rap dance", and the company founder it credits with developing the idol system.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe the scope of this course in four sentences: what it covers, what it leaves out, and how it treats North Korea. Then name the three kinds of source the chapter says mix in writing about pop music, and give one weakness of each.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **K-pop:** "Korean popular music"; three senses: any Korean pop, the style from the 1990s, the idol system's output
- ***Gayo* (가요):** the word used inside Korea for domestic pop music
- **First known use:** *Billboard*, 9 October 1999, Cho Hyun-jin (who is not sure he coined it)
- **Origins named by the article:** Seo Taiji and Boys ("rap dance"); Lee Soo-man, SM Entertainment, H.O.T. and S.E.S. (first generation)
- **The four large companies:** SM, YG, JYP, Hybe (as the article says)
- **Argued:** how "Korean" it is, the training system, treatment of artists, the role of English
- **Scope:** South Korea, plus the whole peninsula before the division; North Korea in at most a short factual note
- **Check:** the 2020 market growth figure and the training-cost figure

Next chapter: Before K-Pop, which follows popular song from the colonial period through the US military clubs, the folk and rock scenes, and music censorship.

K-Pop

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Before K-Pop

Chapter 1 said that "K-pop" can be read broadly, back to the 1930s. This chapter follows Korean popular song from the colonial period to the 1980s: trot, the stages of the US military bases, the folk and rock scenes of the 1960s and 70s, and the censorship that shaped them. It is the background that the 1990s breakthrough in Chapter 3 grew out of.

> **How this chapter was checked**
>
> The facts here come from Wikipedia's articles on Trot (music), Yun Sim-deok, Korean rock, Shin Jung-hyeon (Shin Joong-hyun), Han Dae-soo and Kim Min-ki, as I read them. I read the opening and main sections of each, and no books, archives or recordings. Where the articles disagree with each other or hedge, I say so. Several figures (sales, "first" labels) are the articles' claims, with owners named.

Trot: The Colonial Roots

The article on trot (트로트, also called *ppongjjak*, 뽕짝) describes it as "a genre of Korean popular music, known for its use of repetitive rhythm and vocal inflections", which originated "during the Japanese occupation of Korea in the first half of the 20th century" and was "influenced by many genres of Korean, Japanese, American, and European music".

Feature	What the article says
The name	A shortened form of "foxtrot", the ballroom dance that influenced trot's simple two-beat rhythm. The article adds that, apart from the two-beat rhythm, trot and foxtrot "do not share any other notable characteristics".
The sound	Two-beat (duple) rhythm. In its early days it often used the pentatonic scale and minor keys; after the occupation it used major keys more. A singing technique called *kkeokk-ki* (꺾기, "flexing") ornaments the transition between notes.

Feature	What the article says
The lyrics	"Love and parting" and "longing for a sweet home". The article offers two possible origins for the sad mood: the "colonial tragedy", and the older Korean tradition of deep sorrow (*han*, 한). It also names the "new stream" theatre (*sinpa*), introduced from Japan in the 1910s, as an influence.
Performance	Mostly one singer or a duet, with an orchestra or big band, backing vocalists and often dancers on television shows.

Yun Sim-deok's article says her 1926 recording "Hymn of Death" (사의 찬미) "is considered the first 'popular' (*yuhaeng changga*) Korean song". It was recorded in Osaka by the Japanese Nitto company, to the tune of "Waves of the Danube", and the article says it sold a record 100,000 copies after her death in 1926. Yun was a trained soprano who had turned to popular singing because she could not make a living from Western classical music.

> **Where the article is cautious**
>
> Trot's Japanese connection is a sensitive subject, and the article says only that the genre was "influenced by" many traditions, without settling which came first. I follow that wording and make no claim about who invented what. The article's remarks on North Korea are brief, so I rely on only one fact from them: that the genre began before the division and is now mainly sung in South Korea.

The article says that after liberation and the Korean War (1950 to 1953), artists such as Lee Mi-ja, Choi Sook-ja, Bae Ho, Nam Jin, Na Hun-a and Joo Hyun-mi "helped to make trot popular". It also says that with the rise of K-pop from the 1990s, trot "lost some popularity and was viewed as more old-fashioned", and that from the 2000s younger singers renewed interest in it. So trot is not a dead ancestor: it runs alongside K-pop to this day.

The US Military Stages

The article on Korean rock says rock music reached South Korea through "U.S. soldiers fighting in the Korean War and stationing in U.S. military bases in South Korea after the war". Around the bases, local musicians "could have opportunities to learn American rock music and perform it on stage for U.S. soldiers."

Name	What the articles say
Shin Jung-hyeon (Shin Joong-hyun), born 1938	Debuted at a US military base in 1957 at age 19 under the stage name Jackie Shin, because bases were "one of the few places where South Korean musicians could find regular work". He was inspired by American music on the American Forces Korea Network radio, and later said "the U.S. military bases were where Korean rock was born." He is often called Korea's "Godfather of Rock".
The Kim Sisters	The Korean rock article says this girl group debuted on a US base stage, practised there, then started a musical career in the United States.

Group Sound and the Folk Scene

- **Group Sound.** The Korean rock article says "Group Sound" bands emerged in the 1960s, including Key Boys, HE6, Pearl Sisters and K'okkiri Brothers, influenced by American and British rock. Unlike the base performers, they began to play for South Korean audiences.
- **"First rock band".** Shin formed Add4 in 1962, and its first album, *The Woman in the Rain*, came out in 1964. The articles call Add4 "considered to be" and "the first" Korean rock band. The hedge "considered" matters, because "first" labels are often disputed.
- **A hit, as claimed.** Shin's article says the 1968 album *My Dear*, which he produced for the duo The Pearl Sisters, "went on to sell more than 1 million copies". This is the article's claim, with no source visible in what I read, and I take it as such.
- **Folk.** Kim Min-ki's article says his 1970 song "Morning Dew" (아침 이슬), performed by Yang Hee-eun, was "a major pop music hit in Korea in the 70s", and that he blended Korean folk and pop. Han Dae-soo, born in 1948 and brought up partly in New York, returned to Korea in 1968, and his songs were covered by artists including Yang Hee-eun and Kim Min-ki. His first album, *Long Way*, came out in 1974.
- **Listening at home.** The Korean rock article says that from the 1970s, "the spread of the phonograph to middle-class families, the distribution of pirated foreign music, and the popularity of playing rock and pop music in music cafes" grew the number of rock fans.

Censorship

The Korean rock article says that "during the 1970s, music was heavily censored by [the] Park Chung Hee administration," and that rock and its subculture were classed as "depraved youth

culture" under military administration. The cases below are reported as the articles report them, with owners.

Artist	What the articles say
Shin Jung-hyeon	In 1972, according to his article, the president's office asked him for a song praising the president. He refused and wrote the ten-minute "Beautiful Rivers and Mountains". Afterwards police confiscated his guitars and cut his long hair, which the government banned at the time. In 1975 he was arrested for marijuana possession; the article says it was "not yet illegal" at the time of his arrest, and says he was imprisoned and tortured. He was banned from performing until after Park's assassination in 1979. The article also says his music was "banned until the 1980s".
Han Dae-soo	His songs "Give Me Water", "Land of Happiness" and "Song of Hope" were banned "for overturning the system" and he was placed on a blacklist, according to his article.
Kim Min-ki	Nine albums were released before 1975, when the government censored his music. Albums were pulled from stores, radio play and public singing were banned, and he was not allowed to release material under his own name. The ban lasted, the article says, until 26 June 1987.

Two articles, two stories about Han Dae-soo

The Korean rock article says Han "moved to New York in self-exile after two of his albums were banned by the government". Han's own article says he went back to New York "at the persuasion of his wife" after his songs were banned and he was blacklisted. Both agree on the bans, but they give different reasons for the move. I cannot tell from these articles which is fuller, so I say only that he returned to New York after the bans. Another difference: Shin's article says he was forbidden to perform until 1979, but that his music was "banned until the 1980s". The two statements cover different things, so check which one a claim refers to.

The Korean rock article says that in the 1980s "censorship was somewhat eased compared to the Park Chung Hee administration" and that rock came closest to the mainstream then, with heavy metal bands such as Boohwal, Sinawe and Baekdoosan prominent. It also says dance music came to dominate Korean popular music in the 1980s. How far and when the control ended is argued, and Chapter 3 returns to the changes of the early 1990s.

What This Gives K-Pop

Nothing in this chapter is "K-pop" in the narrow sense of Chapter 1. Three things, though, carry forward and are worth holding on to:

1. **Foreign sounds, local singers.** From trot's foxtrot rhythm to rock learned on US bases, Korean popular music has always been a mix of imported and local material.
2. **A state with views on music.** Control of what could be sung, worn and heard is part of the background, and Chapter 3 shows what happened when it loosened.
3. **A gap in the record.** Much of what we know about this period comes from a few artists' own accounts and from short articles. This chapter flags where they differ and does not smooth the differences over.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe trot in four points: where its name comes from, its rhythm, its usual lyric themes, and what the Yun Sim-deok article calls her 1926 recording. Then explain why the article is cautious about trot's Japanese connection.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain why US military bases mattered to Korean popular music in the 1950s. Use Shin Jung-hyeon as your example, and say what "Group Sound" was and how it differed from the base performers. Then explain why "first Korean rock band" needs a hedge.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Summarise the censorship of Shin Jung-hyeon, Han Dae-soo and Kim Min-ki in one sentence each. Then point out one place where two Wikipedia articles in this chapter differ, and say how you would handle it in your own writing.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Trot (트로트, *ppongjjak*):** from the colonial period; name from "foxtrot"; two-beat rhythm; *kkeokk-ki* ornament; themes of love, parting and home
- **"Hymn of Death" (1926):** Yun Sim-deok; called the first "popular" (*yuhaeng changga*) Korean song; recorded in Osaka
- **US bases:** few places with regular work; Shin Jung-hyeon debuted on one in 1957
- **Group Sound:** 1960s bands for Korean audiences (Key Boys, HE6, Pearl Sisters, K'okkiri Brothers)
- **Add4:** formed 1962; first album 1964; "considered" the first Korean rock band
- **Folk:** Kim Min-ki's "Morning Dew" (1970); Han Dae-soo's *Long Way* (1974)
- **Censorship:** Shin (1972 song, 1975 arrest, performing ban to 1979); Han (songs banned, blacklisted); Kim (censored from 1975, restrictions lifted 26 June 1987)
- **Check:** the sales figures, the "first" labels, and why Han Dae-soo went back to New York

Next chapter: Seo Taiji and Boys and the 1990s Turn, which follows the 1992 breakthrough, the arrival of hip-hop and R&B, the first idol groups and the changing rules of the music industry.

Chapter 1 named Seo Taiji and Boys as the group the K-pop article credits with the "rap dance" that began the genre. This chapter looks at what the group did between 1992 and 1996, how it ran into the censorship described in Chapter 2, and how the first idol groups followed almost at once.

> **How this chapter was checked**
>
> The facts here come from Wikipedia's articles on Seo Taiji and Boys, Seo Taiji, H.O.T. and SM Entertainment, as I read them. I read most of the first article and the opening sections of the others, and no books, chart databases or recordings. Sales and ranking figures are the articles' claims, with owners named. The outline also planned to cover new television music shows; I found nothing reliable on them in these articles, so I leave that to a later source rather than guess.

Who They Were

Seo Taiji and Boys (서태지와 아이들) was, in the article's words, "a South Korean music group active from 1992 to 1996". Its three members were Seo Taiji, Yang Hyun-suk and Lee Juno. Seo, born Jeong Hyeon-cheol in 1972, had played in the heavy metal band Sinawe before forming the group with Yang and Lee, who were dancers and backing vocalists. The article says Seo met MIDI technology in the early 1990s and began experimenting with new sounds, and that he "initially had no plans to debut as a dance/pop boy group", so the group's mainstream success was "a surprise".

Four Albums, Four Turns

Year	What the article says
1992	The trio debuted on an MBC talent show on 11 April 1992 with "Nan Arayo" (난 알아요, "I Know") and "got the lowest rating from the jury". The song and the self-titled album were nonetheless a hit. The article calls "Nan Arayo" "one of the first Korean rap songs", with new

Year	What the article says
	jack swing-style beats, rap verses, pop choruses and new dance moves, and says the album sold over 1.5 million copies within a month (the article's claim).
1993	"Hayeoga" (하여가) mixed heavy metal with folk elements, using the *taepyeongso*, a double-reed wind instrument. The group was banned from the national channel KBS-TV because they wore earrings, ripped jeans and dreadlocks, which ethics committees associated with "reggae, resistance movements, and rejection of social norms". The article calls this "the first of the numerous controversies". It also mentions an accusation that the guitar solo copied another band, which the guitarist denied.
1994	A more heavy metal and rock album. "Dreaming of Bal-Hae" expressed a hope of reuniting North and South Korea. "Classroom Idea" (교실 이데아) criticised the education system and the pressure of university entrance exams, and was "banned from being played on TV and radio (but passed by ethics committees)". The group was also accused of hiding Satanic messages by backmasking, an accusation the article says the mainstream news media later "proved ... groundless", though "the moral panic proved difficult to eliminate".
1995	"Come Back Home" took in gangsta rap, and "Pilseung" had an alternative rock sound. "Regret of the Times" (시대유감) was banned by the Public Performance Ethics Committee for lyrics that criticised the government. Seo refused to rewrite three lines, so the album version was instrumental only.

Read the claims carefully

The article credits the group with "pioneering the use of rap in Korean popular music", while also calling "Nan Arayo" "one of the first Korean rap songs". The first is a claim of priority and the second is a hedge. Chapter 2 already named Han Dae-soo and others who came before, and another article lists Korean-American acts with American-style music and English lyrics (Chapter 1), so "first" here means "first to reach a mass audience", not "first ever".

The End of Pre-Censorship

The article says the backlash from fans over "Regret of the Times" "was immense, and the system of 'pre-censorship' (사전심의제) was abolished in June 1996, partially as a result of this reaction". An EP carrying the original version of the song followed a month later. Seo Taiji's own

article goes further, saying widespread youth backlash to the suppression of his music "became a catalyst for the abolishment of censorship of Korean popular music lyrics."

> **"Partially" and "a catalyst" are not "caused"**
>
> Both articles are careful: one says "partially as a result", the other says "a catalyst". Neither says the group alone ended censorship. The articles do not describe the other pressures on the system, so I cannot weigh them here. A sentence that says "Seo Taiji ended censorship" claims more than the sources do.

The Group's Own Verdicts

- **Sales.** The article says *Billboard* reported in April 1996 that the first three albums had each sold over 1.6 million copies, with the fourth nearing two million. It also says the 1993 album was the first "double million" seller in Korea. These are reported claims.
- **A change of taste.** Seo Taiji's article says the group's popularity "marked a departure from the trot style of music that previously dominated Korea's popular music scene." Chapter 2 showed that trot did not disappear, so read this as a change in what led the youth market.
- **Importance.** A 1997 survey by the Samsung Economic Research Institute, the article says, voted the group the most crucial Korean cultural product. This is a single survey, and the article gives no details of it.
- **Ending.** The group announced its retirement in January 1996, at its height. Seo Taiji went to the United States and returned to music with a solo album in 1998. Yang Hyun-suk founded YG Entertainment, which Chapter 4 meets.

The First Idol Groups

The agency side of the story starts at about the same time. The SM Entertainment article says Lee Soo-man, who founded the company, first signed a hip hop singer, then "decided to focus on debuting Japanese-style idols", with artists "nurtured by a training system". The company took the name SM Entertainment in February 1995, and the article says it "developed an in-house system that looked after all aspects of its artists' careers", aimed at teenage audiences.

Group	What the articles say
H.O.T. (1996)	Created by SM Entertainment in 1996, five members. "They are considered to be the first K-pop idol group". Lee Soo-man formed the group "by using information that he had obtained from polling high school students" about what their idol group should be like. TV debut on 7 September 1996. Debut album sold 1.5 million copies (the article's figure). Broke up in 2001 after a contract disagreement, which prompted "hundreds of fans" to protest against the company.
S.E.S. (1997)	The SM article lists it as a girl group launched in 1997, followed by Shinhwa (1998), Fly to the Sky (1999) and BoA (2000).

Seo Taiji or H.O.T.?

The two articles tell the story in different places. The K-pop article says K-pop "can trace its origins" to Seo Taiji and Boys, and that Lee Soo-man's H.O.T. and S.E.S. were the "first generation". The H.O.T. article calls H.O.T. the "first K-pop idol group". Both can be true: one is about the musical style and the other is about the idol system. Another small difference: Yang Hyun-suk's YG is called "one of the three biggest record companies" in the Seo Taiji and Boys article, while the K-pop article, as Chapter 1 said, names four dominant companies. The counts differ because the articles describe different times.

What Changed

1. **The sound.** Rap, new jack swing, metal, rock and folk instruments entered mass-market Korean pop within four years.
2. **The rules.** The group's run-ins with ethics committees, and the end of pre-censorship in 1996, changed what could be recorded and broadcast.
3. **The business.** Two members started agencies (YG, and a label by Lee Juno), and SM built a training-based system. Chapter 4 looks at how those systems work.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Name the three members of Seo Taiji and Boys, the song and date of the group's 1992 debut, and how the jury rated it. Then explain why the article's wording ("one of the first Korean rap songs") is more careful than "the first".

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Choose two of the group's songs from the table and describe, for each, the controversy it caused and the body that objected. Then explain why "Seo Taiji ended censorship" claims more than the articles say.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe how H.O.T. was formed and what the article says about its breakup. Then explain how the articles can both call Seo Taiji and Boys the origin of K-pop and H.O.T. the "first K-pop idol group".

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Seo Taiji and Boys:** Seo Taiji, Yang Hyun-suk, Lee Juno; active 1992 to 1996; retirement announced January 1996
- **Debut:** "Nan Arayo" on an MBC talent show, 11 April 1992; lowest jury rating, then a hit
- **Songs and controversies:** "Hayeoga" (1993, KBS ban over looks); "Classroom Idea" (1994, banned from TV and radio); "Regret of the Times" (1995, banned by the Public Performance Ethics Committee)
- **Pre-censorship:** abolished June 1996, "partially as a result" of the reaction
- **SM Entertainment:** named in February 1995 by Lee Soo-man; training-system idols; H.O.T. (1996), S.E.S. (1997)

- **H.O.T.:** "considered to be the first K-pop idol group"; formed from a poll of high school students; broke up in 2001
- **Check:** the sales figures, and how much other pressures mattered in ending pre-censorship

Next chapter: The Agency System, which looks at how the big agencies work: trainee systems, auditions, contracts and the reforms that followed.

K-Pop

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · The Agency System

Chapter 3 ended with Lee Soo-man's training-based company and Yang Hyun-suk's new label. This chapter looks at the system they and others built: how someone becomes a trainee, what a contract commits them to, what a 2009 lawsuit changed, and where the large agencies came from. It keeps what the sources document apart from what is rumour.

> **How this chapter was checked**
>
> The facts here come from Wikipedia's articles on K-pop, Korean idol, TVXQ, SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, JYP Entertainment and Hybe Corporation, as I read them. For the long K-pop and TVXQ articles I read the relevant sections only. I read no court judgments, contracts, books or company reports, and I report claims about working conditions as the articles report them, with owners named.

Becoming a Trainee

The article on Korean idols defines an idol as an entertainer in Korean popular music who "typically work[s] for an entertainment agency that operates a highly managed star system that idols are produced by and debut under." The K-pop article says the mainstream route is to become a trainee "through agency auditions, online auditions, or street casting".

Stage	What the articles say
Audition	"Hundreds of candidates each day attend the global auditions held by Korean entertainment agencies", for a chance to become a trainee.
Training	Lasts "an indefinite period of time, ranging from months to years". It usually involves vocal, dance and language classes while living with other trainees, who "sometimes attend school at the same time", though some leave school.
Regulation	Trainees are "regulated in multiple aspects, including personal life, physical condition, and visual appearance", and must keep a "wholesome image" while staying "private about their lives and thoughts".

Stage	What the articles say
Debut	New groups are given personalities by the company, and each member plays a character, kept consistent partly through company-managed social media.

The Korean idol article credits Lee Soo-man with popularising the trainee business model "from the Japanese idol industry that was founded by Johnny Kitagawa", inspired by the heyday of MTV in the United States. It says the 1990s also saw the government introduce state cultural policies "to promote the industrialization and internationalization of Korean pop culture", and that an idol-training model began developing in that context. The same article notes that the earliest mainstream Korean "idols" were vocal groups of the 1930s to 1950s, so the idea of a group built for the public is older than the 1990s system.

> **Reports about the system, as the articles give them**
>
> The Korean idol article says former trainees reported being required to have plastic surgery, and that harsh weight limits sometimes caused trainees to pass out from exhaustion or dehydration. These are reports from former trainees as the article gives them, and the article does not say how common they were or at which agencies. Chapter 9 returns to working conditions and mental health.

What It Costs

Both K-pop and Korean idol articles cite a 2012 *Wall Street Journal* report on training costs at SM Entertainment, but they word it differently. This is worth noticing, because Chapter 1 repeated the first wording.

Article	Wording
K-pop	The cost of training one Korean idol under SM "averaged US$3 million".
Korean idol	"The cost of training one member of Girls' Generation under SM Entertainment was US$3 million."

> **An average, or one case?**

One article gives an average for SM, the other gives a figure for one member of one group. They cannot both be an accurate summary of the original report, which I have not read. Treat the figure as a newspaper's report from 2012, not an audited cost, and not as a general rule for all agencies. Chapter 1's wording ("averaged") followed the K-pop article.

The K-pop article also records the industry's own defence. SM's CEO at the time, Kim Young-min, is quoted as arguing that people trained in the system are "no different" from school pupils who attend after-school programmes to cram for college entrance exams, and that the company's costs during the trainee period (facilities, equipment, costumes) must be considered.

Contracts and the 2009 Lawsuit

The K-pop article says agencies "offer binding contracts to potential artists, sometimes at a young age", and that management companies "have also been criticized for exploitation of idols through overwork and restrictive contracts, described as 'slave contracts' in a BBC report."

- **The case.** The TVXQ article says that in July 2009 members Jaejoong, Yoochun and Junsu tried to split from SM, "claiming that their thirteen-year contract was excessively long, schedules were held out without permission of the members, and profits were unfairly distributed." In October 2009 the Seoul Central District Court granted the trio a temporary contract injunction, and TVXQ's group activities in Korea stopped. Yunho and Changmin released a statement in support of SM.
- **The reforms.** The K-pop article says the court decision "determined their contract with SM Entertainment void", that the Fair Trade Commission then released contract templates "to regulate industry conditions", and that in 2014 South Korea passed a law to protect performers under 19 from unhealthy labour practices and overly sexualised performances, guaranteeing "the basic rights to learn, rest and sleep". Breaking it may lead to a fine equal to about US$10,000.
- **Corruption.** The K-pop article also reports that in 2002 *Time* described the arrest of TV producers for "accepting under-the-table payments guaranteeing TV appearances", with companies investigated including SidusHQ and SM Entertainment. The article names the companies as investigated, not as convicted.

Where the two articles do not agree

> The TVXQ article describes a *temporary injunction* granted by the Seoul Central District Court in October 2009 and names three members. The K-pop article says the court "determined their contract ... void" and says the case was brought by "TVXQ and a Super Junior member", alleging adverse health effects from working conditions. The articles give different claims, a different wording of the ruling and different members, and I have not read the judgment. I rely on what both support: a 2009 lawsuit against SM, a temporary injunction, and later contract templates. The date, the number of members and the exact ruling should be checked in a primary source.

The Large Agencies

The K-pop article says the industry "is dominated by four companies: SM, YG, JYP and Hybe". Their own articles give their origins.

Company	What the articles say
SM Entertainment	Founded by Lee Soo-man, who set up "SM Studio" in 1989 and renamed it SM Entertainment in February 1995. Launched H.O.T. (1996), S.E.S. (1997), Shinhwa (1998), Fly to the Sky (1999) and BoA (2000). In 2000 it became the first entertainment company listed on KOSDAQ. Debuted TVXQ in 2003 and Super Junior in 2005.
YG Entertainment	Founded on 24 February 1996 by Yang Hyun-suk, formerly of Seo Taiji and Boys, under the name Hyun Planning. Its first act, the hip-hop trio Keep Six, "did not attract much popularity", and the failure left Yang in debt of 400 million won. Later names included MF Planning and Yang Goon Planning, then YG Entertainment in 2001. Current artists include BigBang, 2NE1 and Blackpink.
JYP Entertainment	Founded in 1997 by J.Y. Park as Tae-Hong Planning Corporation; renamed JYP Entertainment in 2001. Its first artist was Pearl. In 2006 it formed its first girl group, Wonder Girls, which the article says was the first South Korean group to enter the Billboard Hot 100 in 2009 (the sentence is cut off in what I read, so I treat the year as unconfirmed).
Hybe	Founded as Big Hit Entertainment on 1 February 2005. Its founder Bang Si-hyuk signed RM as the first member of BTS in 2010, and BTS debuted under Big Hit on 13 June 2013. It has since grown "from a traditional music entertainment company into a tech-driven lifestyle platform corporation".

Two things stand out. The companies were each built by a person from music or production, not by a TV network or a record label. And the earlier stories show how often acts failed: Keep Six, Noel and others in these articles did not catch on, so the "system" has a high failure rate that tends to be left out of the success stories.

Record, Rumour and Marketing

1. **Record.** A court case, a law and a company's founding date are checkable. Use them.
2. **Reports.** A newspaper figure, a BBC phrase ("slave contracts") or a former trainee's account is evidence of what someone said. It is worth reporting with its owner, but not as a general fact.
3. **Rumour.** Claims about named individuals' private contracts, debts or health that have no source belong in none of the above. This course leaves them out.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the path from audition to debut in four steps, using the articles' wording where you can. Then say where the trainee model is said to have come from and who is credited with bringing it to Korea.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Summarise the 2009 TVXQ lawsuit and the reforms the K-pop article connects to it. Then point out two places where the K-pop and TVXQ articles differ, and say what you would write so as not to claim more than you can support.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose two of the four large agencies and give for each its founder, its founding year and one early act. Then explain why the US$3 million training-cost figure should be reported with its owner and wording.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Trainee route:** audition (agency, online, street casting) → training (vocal, dance, language; living together) → debut with a company-given character
- **Origin of the model:** from the Japanese idol industry; popularised in Korea by Lee Soo-man of SM
- **2009 lawsuit:** TVXQ members vs SM; October 2009 temporary injunction (TVXQ article); contract "void" (K-pop article)
- **Reforms:** Fair Trade Commission contract templates; 2014 law protecting performers under 19
- **The four:** SM (Lee Soo-man, 1995), YG (Yang Hyun-suk, 1996), JYP (J.Y. Park, 1997), Hybe (Bang Si-hyuk, 2005, as Big Hit)
- **Training cost:** US$3 million (WSJ, 2012): an "average" in one article, one group member in another
- **Check:** the exact ruling and members in the 2009 case, and the training-cost wording

Next chapter: Anatomy of an Idol Group, which covers group formation, positions and concepts, choreography, the comeback cycle, and how a release is made and promoted.

K-Pop

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Anatomy of an Idol Group

Chapter 4 followed a trainee to the edge of debut. This chapter looks at what happens next: how a group is introduced, given a "concept", taught to dance in formation, and promoted in cycles that the industry calls comebacks. It is written from the articles I could check, and it says where they stop.

> **How this chapter was checked**
>
> The facts here come from the Marketing, Dance, Fashion, Music shows and Criticism sections of Wikipedia's K-pop article and from its Korean idol article, as I read them. I read no books, interviews or company material. These articles do not cover group roles (such as a "leader" or "visual") or lightsticks in anything I could read, so I do not describe them in detail here. Fandom is the subject of Chapter 7, and I will check it against a source then.

Introducing a Group

The K-pop article says many agencies have presented new idol groups through a "debut showcase", made up of "online marketing and television broadcast promotions as opposed to radio". It then describes the parts of the introduction.

- **A name and a concept.** "Groups are given a name and a 'concept' along with a marketing hook." Concepts are "the type of visual and musical theme that idol groups utilize during their debut or comeback", can change between releases, and are divided into general concepts and theme concepts, "such as cute or fantasy". Fans, the article says, often distinguish between boy group and girl group concepts.
- **A safe first step.** "New idol groups will often debut with a concept well known to the market to secure a successful debut."
- **Online marketing.** Music videos are posted on YouTube to reach a worldwide audience. "Prior to the actual video, the group releases teaser photos and trailers."
- **Sub-units.** Companies sometimes form sub-groups among existing members. The article gives Super Junior-K.R.Y. and Super Junior-M, the latter described as "one of the best-selling K-pop subgroups in China" (the article's claim).

"Comeback" does not mean what it sounds like

The article says "promotional cycles of subsequent singles are called comebacks even when the musician or group in question did not go on hiatus." So a comeback is a new release cycle, not a return after a break. A reader who takes the English word literally will misread news about "comebacks".

Dance

The K-pop article calls dance "an integral part of K-pop". It names two features.

Term	What the article says
Formation changing (자리바꿈, *jaribakkum*)	When several singers perform together, they "often switch their positions while singing and dancing by making prompt movements in synchrony".
Point dance (포인트 안무, *pointeu anmu*)	"A dance made up of hooking and repetitive movements within the choreography that matches the characteristics of the lyrics of the song." The article gives Super Junior's "Sorry Sorry" and Brown Eyed Girls' "Abracadabra" as examples.

The article cites the choreographer Ellen Kim as saying that a fan's ability to do the same steps must be considered, so choreographers "have to simplify movements", and the choreographer Rino Nakasone as saying that the company and the artists themselves have input on the choreography. May J. Lee is quoted as saying her work often starts from "expressing the feeling or the meaning of the lyrics". These are individual choreographers' accounts of their own work, not a description of every group.

Look and Fashion

The article says Seo Taiji and Boys' outfits for "I Know" (Chapter 3) included "vibrant streetwear such as oversized T-shirts and sweatshirts, windbreakers, overalls worn with one strap", and American sports jerseys. It treats fashion as a way the group's adoption of American hip-hop style carried over from the music. Chapter 4's warning about image control applies here too: the

Korean idol article says "personal image" is built by the company, and members each play a character.

Music Shows

Promotion on television runs through weekly music programmes. The K-pop article lists, among others: KBS2's *Music Bank*, SBS's *Inkigayo*, MBC's *Show! Music Core*, Mnet's *M Countdown*, JTBC's *Music on Top*, MBC M's *Show Champion* and SBS M's *The Show*, plus the Arirang TV programmes *Pops in Seoul* and *Simply K-Pop*. The article gives only the list. I read nothing in it on how these shows score or rank acts, so the details are left for Chapter 7, which covers charts.

> **The "list" is not a ranking**
>
> The order above is the article's order. It does not say which shows matter most, and it lists some programmes that, as far as these articles say, I cannot confirm are still on the air. Check a current source before saying a show "is" broadcast.

Groups Built on Television

The K-pop article also notes a newer route to a group: survival television programmes. It names the girl groups I.O.I and Iz*One and the boy groups Wanna One and X1 as groups made through such shows. It says these shows, which "often involve larger agencies contracting smaller agencies' trainees into project groups and taking a larger portion of the revenues", have "led to criticisms over the former monopolizing the industry". This is the critics' argument as the article reports it, and I read nothing on how the agencies responded.

Control of the Image

Both articles report how closely groups' public lives are managed, and both attribute the claims to named sources or to general belief.

- **Dating.** The Korean idol article says "many companies have implemented policies that prohibit any sort of dating", because reputation is crucial and a scandal could harm an idol's career. The K-pop article attributes a similar view to Michael Hurt, a cultural theory

lecturer, that most stars "are not allowed to date publicly". These are descriptions of common policy, not documents from particular companies.

- **Speaking out.** The K-pop article quotes the professor Kwon Joon-won that a star who makes controversial statements should expect to lose half of their fandom, and suggests this may be why groups are more outspoken about social issues abroad than at home.
- **Appearance.** The K-pop article says the industry has been criticised for sexualisation, including of minors, and that in 2014 South Korea passed a law to protect idols under 19 from overtly sexualised performances (Chapter 4). It also says that in 2019 the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family announced non-mandatory guidelines against "lookism", and that many fans protested with an online petition. The Korean idol article reports the song "Miniskirt" by AOA being kept off public television until the group changed its outfits and choreography.

How to Read a Release

1. **Look for the concept.** The theme (visual, musical, story) is chosen by the company, and a comeback usually changes it.
2. **Look for the cycle.** Teasers, a video, music-show stages and a new "comeback" make up one promotion cycle.
3. **Look at the choreography.** Formation changes and a point dance are the parts built to be copied and shared.
4. **Keep claims separate from policy.** Whether a group "is not allowed to date" is a general statement about the industry, not a fact about any named group.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain what a debut showcase, a concept and a comeback are, using the K-pop article's wording. Then say why the English word "comeback" can mislead.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Define formation changing and point dance, name one song the article gives as an example of point choreography, and explain why choreographers are said to simplify movements.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe how survival-show groups differ from agency-built groups, and give the criticism of them as the K-pop article reports it. Then give one claim about control of idols' public image, say who the article attributes it to, and explain why it should not be repeated as a fact about a named group.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Debut showcase:** online marketing plus television promotion rather than radio
- **Concept:** the visual and musical theme of a debut or comeback; new groups often use a well-known concept
- **Teasers:** photos and trailers before the video; the video goes on YouTube
- **Comeback:** a new promotion cycle, even without a hiatus
- **Formation changing (자리바꿈) / point dance (포인트 안무):** position switches while performing / repeated, hooking moves matched to the lyrics
- **Music shows:** *Music Bank*, *Inkigayo*, *Show! Music Core*, *M Countdown*, among others
- **Survival-show groups:** I.O.I, Iz*One, Wanna One, X1; criticised for agency monopoly
- **Image control:** dating policies and limits on speaking out, as the articles report
- **Check:** group roles, lightsticks and show rankings (not sourced here)

Next chapter: The Sound, which covers song-writing camps, genre mixing, song structure, and the role of English and rap.

K-Pop

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · The Sound

This chapter asks what K-pop sounds like, and how its makers got there. The sources I could check say a good deal about genre mixing, rap and the spread of English, and very little about how songs are put together. The chapter says plainly where that gap is.

> **How this chapter was checked, and what is missing**
>
> The facts here come from the Characteristics and History sections of Wikipedia's K-pop article, as I read them. The outline planned to cover song-writing camps and the verse-hook-drop structure. I found nothing on either in the articles I read, and a search for a "Songwriting camp" article returned nothing. I therefore do not describe them, because I would be writing from memory. If you have a source you trust, I can add a section later. I read no musicology, interviews or recordings.

Defining the Sound

The K-pop article quotes the French Institut national de l'audiovisuel, which defines K-pop as a "fusion of synthesized music, sharp dance routines and fashionable, colorful outfits." The article adds that songs "typically consist of one or a mixture of pop, rock, hip-hop, R&B, and electronic music genres" and that the genre is "characterized by its melodic quality and cultural hybridity."

Claim	Owner and wording
A mixture of influences	The article lists "modern Western sounds and African-American influences" including hip-hop, R&B, jazz, soul, funk, techno, disco, house and Afrobeats, combined with "a Korean aspect of performance" (synchronised dance, formation changes, point choreography).
Hybrid or imitation?	The article reports one view that the genre is "a distilled version of Western music", and another, from some authors, that it is a new kind of "transnational culture". It also says "some have argued that K-pop is distinct in mood and energy".
A formulaic product?	The article says K-pop "has at times faced criticisms from journalists who perceive the music to be formulaic and unoriginal", and that some groups "have been accused of

Claim	Owner and wording
	plagiarizing Western music acts". It gives no detail and no finding on any particular case.

> **Opinion, not measurement**
>
> "Formulaic", "distilled" and "distinct in mood and energy" are judgments. None of them is a measurement, and the article does not attach one to any of them. They are worth reading as the arguments critics make, with their owners.

The Layers Underneath

The K-pop article's History section places the sound on top of earlier layers, which links back to Chapters 2 and 3.

- **Ballads in the 1980s.** The article says the 1980s "saw the rise of ballad singers", naming Lee Gwang-jo (whose 1985 album sold more than 300,000 copies, the article's figure), Lee Moon-se and Byun Jin-sub, "nicknamed the 'Prince of Ballads'".
- **A singer across styles.** The article describes Cho Yong-pil as having a repertoire of "rock, dance, trot and folk-pop", whose initial popularity "came from his trot songs", and who in 1988 sang "Seoul Seoul Seoul" in Korean, English and Japanese for the Seoul Olympics.
- **The 1990s.** Korean pop musicians "incorporated partially Europop and mostly American popular music styles such as hip-hop, rock, jazz, and electronic dance". The success of "I Know" is attributed to "its new jack swing-inspired beats and memorable chorus, as well as innovative lyrics which dealt with the problems of Korean society", and a wave of hip-hop and R&B artists followed, including Yoo Seung-jun, Jinusean, Solid, Deux, 1TYM and Drunken Tiger.
- **H.O.T.'s "Candy".** The article says it "presented a softer and gentler form of pop music with upbeat and cheerful melodies accompanied by energetic dance steps – a formula adopted by many subsequent idol groups."

Songwriters Without Borders

Chapter 1 noted the debate over how "Korean" K-pop is. The sound section of the article gives concrete examples. It says "foreign songwriters and producers" are increasingly employed to work on songs for K-pop idols, "such as will.i.am and Sean Garrett", and that foreign musicians, including the rappers Akon, Kanye West, Ludacris and Snoop Dogg, "have also featured on K-pop songs". The same article calls the share of "Western songwriters, non-Korean artists, songs in English and marketing for a global audience" a reason the "Koreanness" of K-pop "has been debated". I found no figure for how many songs are written abroad, so I do not give one.

English in the Charts

The article says modern K-pop "is marked by its use of English phrases", and it gives figures for the top fifty charts. It does not say which chart or source, so treat them as the article's claim.

Year	Singers with English names (top 50)	Song titles using English
1990	None	Not given
1995	14	8%
2000	17	30%
2005	31	18%
2010	41	44%

Two series, one of them uneven

English names rise steadily across the table. English in titles does not: it goes 8%, 30%, 18%, 44%. The article says usage "has grown quickly" since the late 1990s but does not explain the dip in 2005. It may be a real change, a change in which songs charted, or a difference in how the counts were made. Reading the figures as a smooth rise would claim more than the article shows. The 2010 figure also comes with a note that only three or four acts had more than one or two songs on the chart at once, which shows the counts are of singers, not songs.

The article also gives reasons, with owners, for the shift:

- **Policy and economy.** "After the 1997 financial crisis, the government stopped censoring English lyrics and Korea started to have a boom in English."
- **Background of the performers.** Jin Dal Yong is quoted that the use may be influenced by Korean-Americans, or Koreans who studied in the US, who "take full advantage of their English fluency". Chapter 1 noted this list: Fly to the Sky, g.o.d, Rich, Yoo Seung-jun and Drunken Tiger.
- **Markets.** The article says "singers need to use English since the companies want to occupy markets in the other parts of Asia, which enables them to open the Western market", and that bands increasingly use English names "to be marketed to a wider audience". It then says English "has not guaranteed" popularity in North America, since Western audiences "place emphasis on authenticity and individual expression".
- **Language attitudes.** Elaine W. Chun's research is cited for the point that, although hybrid language appears more often and fans may admire it as "fresh, new and interesting", "ideals of linguistic purity are still difficult to alter".
- **Criticism.** The article says critics have called the use of English in titles "meaningless". The example it gives of a song with a large share of English is Kara's "Jumping", released in Korea and Japan together.

Rap

Rap is a thread across several chapters. Chapter 3 gave the article's claim that Seo Taiji and Boys "popularized" rap dance. This article adds that "Nan Arayo" ("I Know") is credited with "innovative lyrics which dealt with the problems of Korean society" and with starting a wave of hip-hop and R&B artists. The articles I read give no detail on the structure of Korean rap or on how rappers are placed within groups, so I do not describe either.

Reading Claims About the Sound

1. **Ask who is judging.** "Formulaic" or "authentic" is a critic's view, not a fact about the music.
2. **Ask what is counted.** "More English" can mean names, titles or lyrics, and the three move differently.
3. **Ask about the gap.** If a source describes how songs are written and gives no reference, treat it as the author's account.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Give the INA definition of K-pop and name five genres or influences the article lists. Then explain why "formulaic" and "distilled version of Western music" are opinions and not facts.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Using the table, describe how English names and English titles changed between 1995 and 2010. Then explain why the title figures should not be read as a smooth rise, and name two reasons the article gives for the growth of English.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Name two earlier layers of Korean pop that the article says sit under K-pop (from the 1980s or 1990s), and give one example of the use of foreign songwriters or performers. Then list two topics from the original outline that this chapter leaves out, and say why.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **INA definition:** "fusion of synthesized music, sharp dance routines and fashionable, colorful outfits"
- **Mixture:** pop, rock, hip-hop, R&B, electronic; plus jazz, soul, funk, techno, disco, house, Afrobeats
- **Earlier layers:** 1980s ballads (Lee Gwang-jo, Byun Jin-sub); Cho Yong-pil's trot and rock; 1990s hip-hop and R&B

- **"Candy" (H.O.T.):** a soft, cheerful pop formula many groups followed (as the article says)
- **Foreign help:** will.i.am and Sean Garrett as writers/producers; Akon, Kanye West, Ludacris and Snoop Dogg as guests
- **English:** names 0 → 41 of the top 50 (1990 to 2010); titles 8%, 30%, 18%, 44% (1995, 2000, 2005, 2010)
- **Reasons given:** end of censoring English lyrics after 1997, performers' backgrounds, regional marketing
- **Not covered:** song-writing camps, verse-hook-drop structure (no source found)

Next chapter: Fandom and Business, which covers fan clubs, chants and voting, albums as merchandise, concerts and the chart system.

K-Pop

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Fandom and Business

K-pop is also a business. This chapter looks at how large the industry is claimed to be, who dominates it, how its charts work and how they can be gamed, and what the sources say about the fans whose spending and attention keep it going. As in earlier chapters, every number has an owner.

> **How this chapter was checked, and what is missing**
>
> The facts here come from the Industry sections of Wikipedia's K-pop article (Agencies, Sales and market value, Record charts, Television), its Korean idol article (relationship with fans) and its Circle Chart article, as I read them. I found little in these articles on fan chants, fan-club structure, lightsticks or albums as merchandise, and a search for dedicated articles returned nothing useful. I therefore say only what the articles say about fans and do not describe the rest from memory. I read no financial filings, chart databases or fan-community sources.

How Big, and Said By Whom

The K-pop article gives several figures for the size of the industry. They come from different years and different sources, and they measure different things, so they should not be added or compared directly.

Year	Claim as the article gives it
2012	According to *Billboard*, the Korean music industry grossed nearly US$3.4 billion in the first half of 2012, up 27.8% on the previous year. *Time* magazine called it "South Korea's Greatest Export". The average cost of obtaining a K-pop song in South Korea was US$0.10 for a download, or US$0.002 streamed.
2017	"It was estimated that the K-pop music industry had a revenue of US$5 billion."
2019	IFPI listed South Korea as the sixth-largest music market in the world. The article adds that BTS "alone" accounted for "$4.65 billion, or 0.3%, of South Korea's GDP".

Year	Claim as the article gives it
2024	IFPI "declared K-pop the leading global genre in unit sales, across both physical and digital formats", and the article says seventeen of the top twenty albums on its Global Album Sales Chart belonged to the genre.

Read these numbers carefully

The 2012 figure is for the Korean music industry in half a year, the 2017 figure is an estimate for the K-pop industry, and the 2019 figure for BTS is a share of the national economy. These are three different definitions, from three different owners, and the article gives no method for any of them. The BTS figure in particular is a claim about one group's effect on the economy that I could not check against its original source. The lead of the article (Chapter 1) has a sentence about a 2020 market growth figure with a missing verb, so I give no 2020 figure.

Who Dominates

The article's Agencies section says the three biggest companies "in terms of sales and revenue" are SM, YG and JYP, "often referred to as the 'Big Three'", and that with the growth of Hybe it has also come to be called the "Big Four". It adds that "currently, the agency with the greatest market share is S.M. Entertainment." In 2011, the Big Three founded, with Star J Entertainment, AM Entertainment and Key East, the joint management company United Asia Management.

Three or four?

Chapter 4 noted that one article calls YG "one of the three biggest" and another names four. This section explains the gap: "Big Three" is the older label and "Big Four" the newer. The article gives no sales table behind either label, so the labels show common usage, not a measured ranking. The market-share claim for SM is likewise unsourced in what I read.

The same section describes how agencies make their money, as the article puts it: they "recruit, finance, train and market new artists, and manage their musical activities and public relations", and the industry around them includes "music production houses, event management companies, music distributors, and other merchandise and service providers". Chapter 4's point

that agencies pay for training for years before earning anything belongs here too. The article's own phrase is that the "significant financial investment" in trainees makes agencies launch artists "with deliberate care".

The Charts

The charts decide what counts as a "hit", so how they work matters.

Chart	What the articles say
Gaon Chart, now Circle Chart	Launched in February 2010 by the Korea Music Content Association, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, "to create a domestic national chart similar to the Billboard charts of the United States and the Oricon charts of Japan". The name *gaon* means "middle" or "center" and was chosen "to represent fairness and reliability". Rebranded as Circle Chart on 7 July 2022, with a new Global K-pop Chart added.
Circle Digital Chart	The K-pop article says it compiles data from platforms including Apple Music, Spotify, MelOn, Bugs, Vibe, Genie, Flo and Samsung Music, with hourly and daily charts compiled by the company iChart.
Circle Social Chart	A weekly chart of the top 50 K-pop artists using data from YouTube, Mubeat, Higher and Keytalk AI.
Certification	Since April 2018 the Korea Music Content Association has awarded certifications for albums, downloads and streams. Album certifications are based on shipment figures provided by labels and distributors, and apply to releases from 1 January 2018.
Billboard K-pop Hot 100	Listed with the Circle Digital Chart as a Korean record chart. The article says K-pop records have also appeared on Japan's Oricon Albums Chart and the Billboard Hot 100 in the United States.

The K-pop article describes three achievements on the iChart system:

- **All-Kill.** A song "simultaneously places first on all of South Korea's major music platforms real-time charts".
- **Certified All-Kill.** The same, on real-time and daily charts.
- **Perfect All-Kill.** The highest: first place on real-time, daily and weekly charts.

Gaon, Circle and what changed

Older sources and many articles say "Gaon". After 7 July 2022 the same chart is the Circle Chart, and the K-pop article uses "Circle". The articles describe the change as a rebranding, so a claim about a "Gaon number one" before 2022 and a "Circle number one" after it refers to the same chart, though the platforms feeding it may have changed. Check the date.

Gaming the Charts

The K-pop article says *sajaegi* (사재기) is "the Korean term for chart manipulation by way of bulk purchasing of albums or using bots to boost streams, which has potential to question [the] credibility of charts." It gives no cases, so I name none. It follows from the article's own description that a number-one position is evidence of what a chart counted, not a measure of how many people listened. The article's earlier report about television producers who were arrested in 2002 for accepting payments for TV appearances (Chapter 4) is a separate matter, but it shows that charts and airtime have been tied to money before.

The Fans

The Korean idol article describes the relationship between idols and fans as "parasocial kin": fans "create a familial connection with their idols rather than just being 'look-from-afar' fans". It lists the ways fans and idols meet: fan meetings (called artist engagements), concerts, fan sites, artist cafés, and the annual convention KCON. It says fans often take part in the production of idol groups, and that some trainees already have their own fans before debut, so the "kinship starts early".

- **Company approval.** The article says some fan projects "must also be approved by the venue or the idols' company", to "minimize any harm to the idols and fan participants", and that fan connections with idols "would most likely still have to go through their company to be approved".
- **Fans as watchdogs.** The article says that when something happens, fans "have their own unique ways" of showing their views on "unfair" actions by management companies, and "often appear to be protecting idols from company mistreatment". Chapter 3 gave an example: "hundreds of fans" protested against SM after H.O.T. broke up.

- **Language.** The article says fans have shown commitment by learning Korean, "often with the help of romanization", to understand song lyrics.
- **The business reason.** The Korean idol article says that as domestic fandom "is not generally enough to produce the profits that these corporations ... require", branding and marketing of the artist or group "has become central to industry profits".

What I could not check

The outline listed fan-chants, voting, albums as merchandise and lightsticks. The articles I read do not describe any of them in detail, so I have not written about them. The survival shows in Chapter 5 involve audience votes, but I read nothing on how the voting works. If you have a source you trust on fan voting and album sales, I can add a section.

Reading Claims About Money and Fame

1. **Check the definition.** "Industry", "market" and "economic effect" are different quantities.
2. **Check the owner and year.** A *Billboard* figure for 2012 and an IFPI claim for 2024 do not combine.
3. **Check what a chart counts.** Platforms, sales and streams are counted differently, and the article itself says charts can be manipulated.
4. **Check the unit.** "Units sold" does not say who bought them or why.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Pick two figures from the size table and explain why they cannot be directly compared. Then say what the article means by the "Big Three" and the "Big Four", and why neither label is a measured ranking.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain the three kinds of "All-Kill", and what the Gaon Chart became in 2022. Then describe *sajaegi* and explain what it means for how you read a "number one".

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe what the Korean idol article means by "parasocial kin", give two ways fans and idols meet, and give one way companies limit fan activity. Then list two fandom topics this chapter does not cover and say why.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Size claims:** 2012 US$3.4bn first half (*Billboard*); 2017 US$5bn (estimate); 2019 sixth-largest market (IFPI); 2024 leading global genre in unit sales (IFPI)
- **Big Three / Big Four:** SM, YG, JYP / plus Hybe; labels of common usage
- **Gaon Chart:** launched February 2010 by the Korea Music Content Association; renamed Circle Chart 7 July 2022
- **All-Kill:** first on real-time charts; Certified adds daily; Perfect adds weekly
- **Sajaegi (사재기):** chart manipulation by bulk buying or bots
- **Fans:** "parasocial kin"; fan meetings, concerts, fan sites, artist cafés, KCON; company approval often needed
- **Check:** the BTS economic figure, SM's market share and all fan-voting details

Next chapter: The Wave Goes Abroad, which follows Hallyu in Asia, then YouTube and *Gangnam Style*, BTS and Blackpink, and the language question.

K-Pop

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · The Wave Goes Abroad

Chapter 1 of the sibling course K-Drama and Korean Film introduced the Korean Wave. This chapter follows its musical side: K-pop's first foreign audiences in Asia, the viral moment of "Gangnam Style" in 2012, the American chart success of BTS and Blackpink, and the question of what language the music is sung in. Every record in it is a claim with an owner, and the "firsts" are the articles' wording.

> **How this chapter was checked, and what is missing**
>
> The facts here come from Wikipedia's articles on the Korean Wave, "Gangnam Style", BTS and Blackpink (mostly their opening sections), plus the K-pop and H.O.T. articles used earlier, as I read them. I read no chart databases, Billboard archives or company announcements, so every chart position and "first" is the articles' claim. The outline mentioned the translator's role. I found nothing on it in these articles, so I say what they do contain about language and leave translators out rather than invent a section.

First Audiences: Asia

The Korean Wave article says K-pop "first gained popularity in China after the 1997 radio program *Seoul Music Room* began broadcasting in Beijing". It names debuts that were "major breakthroughs for K-pop in Asia": BoA (2000), Rain (2002), TVXQ (2003), Super Junior (2005), BigBang (2006), and Wonder Girls and Girls' Generation (2007).

- **Japan.** BoA "became the first South Korean pop star to break into the Japanese market" with the album *Listen to My Heart* (2002), "following the fall of barriers that had restricted the import and export of entertainment between the countries since the end of World War II". The article adds that in the 2008 fiscal year, "68 percent of all K-pop exports from South Korea were exported to Japan" (the article's figure; I read no source for it).
- **Elsewhere in Asia.** The H.O.T. article says the group was commercially successful in China and Taiwan and "among the first stars of the Korean Wave in Asia" (Chapter 3). The K-pop article says TVXQ and BoA had succeeded in Japan by the early 2000s.
- **Hallyu 1.0 and 2.0.** The Korean Wave article says the first generation, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, "remained confined to Asia" and meant mainly dramas and films. The

second, from 2008, "was driven primarily by the popularity of K-pop distributed on online platforms like YouTube", with a shift in government policy "from indifference to enthusiastic support" under the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations.

"First" claims differ in size

"First South Korean pop star to break into the Japanese market" is a narrow claim about one market and one person. The article's own sentence also says that barriers between the two countries' entertainment markets had only recently fallen. It does not say whether earlier Korean artists had tried before. Read it as "first of the new wave", not "first ever".

"Gangnam Style" (2012)

The "Gangnam Style" article gives the main facts, and several of its claims are about firsts.

Item	What the article says
The release	A song by Psy, released on 15 July 2012 by YG Entertainment as the lead single of his sixth album. Teasers were posted on YouTube four days earlier, on 11 July. The video was seen "about 500,000" times on its first day.
The intention	Psy told Reuters the song "was originally produced only for local K-pop fans". The title, he said in an interview, was a joke that pokes fun at "posers and wannabes" who claim a Gangnam lifestyle. "Gangnam Style" is a Korean coinage for the lavish lifestyle associated with the Gangnam district of Seoul.
Charts	Debuted at number one on the Gaon Chart (Chapter 7). In the United States it "peaked at number two on the Billboard Hot 100, which at the time, was the highest charting song by a South Korean artist". By the end of 2012 it had topped the charts of "more than 30 countries".
YouTube	On 21 December 2012, it "became the first YouTube video to reach a billion views", and it was the most-viewed video from 24 November 2012 until 10 July 2017.
Politicians	Its dance was attempted by British Prime Minister David Cameron and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and President Obama cited it in 2013 as an example of how people are "swept up" by the Korean Wave.

Viral is not the same as a plan

The same article says the song went viral in August 2012 and that Psy first made it for a local audience. An agency's global strategy did not produce this hit. The article also notes that in Germany thousands of videos, including this one, were blocked on YouTube because of a copyright dispute with the performance rights organisation GEMA, until an agreement on 31 October 2016. So a "billion views" number can also reflect which countries could see the video.

BTS

The BTS article says the band formed in 2010, debuted in 2013 under Big Hit Entertainment (Chapter 4), and that "by 2017, BTS had crossed into the global music market and led the Korean Wave into the United States". It lists a series of "firsts", all as the article gives them.

- "The first Korean ensemble to receive a Gold certification from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA)", for "Mic Drop".
- "The first act from South Korea to top the Billboard 200", with *Love Yourself: Tear* (2018).
- In 2020, "the first all-South Korean act to reach number one on both the Billboard Hot 100 and Billboard Global 200", with "Dynamite".
- The best-selling musical act in South Korean history "according to the Circle Chart", with more than 40 million albums sold as of 2023 (Chapter 7's caution about chart counts applies).
- "The first non-English-speaking and Asian act to sell out concerts at Wembley Stadium and the Rose Bowl" (2019).
- Named IFPI's Global Recording Artist of the Year for 2020 and 2021.

The article also says the group announced a pause on 14 June 2022 so the members could do 18 months of mandatory military service, which "they all completed by June 2025". Chapter 9 returns to that law.

Blackpink

The Blackpink article calls the group, formed by YG Entertainment and debuting in August 2016, "regarded by various publications as the 'biggest girl group in the world'". Among the claims it

records:

- "Ddu-Du Ddu-Du" (2018) was "the first song by a Korean female group to enter the UK Singles Chart and receive a certification from the RIAA", and its video was the first by a Korean group to pass one and two billion YouTube views.
- *The Album* (2020) was the first album by a Korean girl group to sell one million copies. *Born Pink* (2022) was the first to sell two million and the first by a Korean girl group to reach number one on the Billboard 200 and the UK Albums Chart.
- The group was "the first Asian act to headline Coachella in 2023".
- "Over 40 billion streams and 20 million records sold worldwide".

> **A note on the pattern**
>
> Both articles lead with chains of "first" claims and sales totals, which is how fan, label and press accounts often talk about success. The K-pop article lists "Coachella 2023: Blackpink (first K-pop act to headline)", the Blackpink article says "first Asian act to headline", and the two are not the same claim. Each "first" has a boundary (a country, a gender, a chart, a year), and the boundary is part of the claim.

The Language Question

What language should a song reaching the world be sung in? The articles give pieces of an answer.

- **English phrases.** Chapter 6 gave the K-pop article's account of English in names, titles and lyrics, and its note that English "has not guaranteed" popularity in North America.
- **Fans learning Korean.** The Korean idol article says fans "have demonstrated their commitment to K-pop idols by taking the initiative to learn the Korean language, often with the help of romanization, to comprehend the meaning behind K-pop songs".
- **Multi-language trainees.** The K-pop article says trainees are commonly taught foreign languages including Mandarin, English and Japanese. It also says "many K-pop idols are not ethnically Korean or Asian".
- **Translation in a title.** The "Gangnam Style" article notes that the refrain "오빤 강남 스타일" has been translated as "Big brother is Gangnam style", with Psy referring to himself. The word *oppa* carries a meaning in Korean that this translation only partly shows, and I read nothing in these articles on how the word is understood.

- **Purity and hybridity.** Elaine W. Chun's research (Chapter 6) says that hybrid language may even make fans admire the stars, but "ideals of linguistic purity are still difficult to alter".

Reading "Global" Claims

1. **Find the boundary.** What does "first" cover: Asia, Korea, a gender, a chart, a year?
2. **Find the owner.** Chart positions belong to Billboard, the Circle Chart or IFPI. Fan counts belong to the platform.
3. **Keep reach and depth apart.** A billion views or a number one says how many saw or bought, not why.
4. **Remember the plan was not always the result.** "Gangnam Style" was meant for a local audience, which is a reminder that luck and platforms matter.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe K-pop's early spread in Asia: name two debuts the Korean Wave article calls breakthroughs, say what BoA is credited with, and explain why the Hallyu 2.0 article ties the second wave to YouTube. Then explain why "first South Korean pop star to break into the Japanese market" is a narrow claim.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Give four facts about "Gangnam Style" from the table, including who released it and when. Then explain what Psy said about the song's intended audience and why that matters for reading "global strategy" claims.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose one "first" claim about BTS and one about Blackpink, and for each identify its boundary and its owner. Then give two pieces of evidence from the articles about language in K-pop, and say what this chapter leaves out about translation and why.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Asia:** K-pop gained popularity in China after the 1997 radio programme *Seoul Music Room*; BoA (2000), Rain (2002), TVXQ (2003) as breakthroughs
- **Japan:** BoA's *Listen to My Heart* (2002); 68% of K-pop exports went to Japan in fiscal 2008 (as claimed)
- **Hallyu 2.0:** from 2008, driven by K-pop on YouTube
- **"Gangnam Style":** Psy, YG, 15 July 2012; number two on the Billboard Hot 100; first video to reach a billion views (21 December 2012)
- **BTS:** debut 2013; first South Korean act to top the Billboard 200 (2018); "Dynamite" topped the Hot 100 and Global 200 (2020)
- **Blackpink:** debut August 2016; *Born Pink* (2022) first Korean girl-group album to top the Billboard 200; Coachella headliner 2023
- **Language:** English phrases, fans learning Korean, multi-language trainees, linguistic purity still a barrier
- **Check:** every chart position and "first" against Billboard or Circle; translators' role not covered

Next chapter: Pressure and Argument, which covers working conditions, mental health and the deaths that prompted public debate, military service law, and controversies, handled factually and with care.

K-Pop

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Pressure and Argument

This is the hardest chapter of the course, and it is written with care. It covers the pressures on K-pop artists that the sources describe, the public arguments that followed, and the law on military service. It reports what the sources say, with owners, and it does not guess at the reasons behind any individual's life or death.

A note before you read

This chapter mentions deaths by suicide, as the source articles do. It gives no details of how anyone died, and it does not speculate. If you or someone you know is struggling, please contact a local crisis line or a doctor. In the United Kingdom, Samaritans can be reached free on 116 123; elsewhere, a search for "suicide crisis line" plus your country will find one.

How this chapter was checked

The facts here come from Wikipedia's K-pop article (Working conditions, Control over public image, Sexualization, Mental health sections), its Korean idol and BTS articles, and its article on Conscription in South Korea, as I read them. I read no court documents, news reports, medical sources or interviews. The articles name individuals only where they are public figures whose deaths or statements they report, and I add nothing beyond them.

Contracts and Trainees: The Law Responds

Chapter 4 followed the 2009 lawsuit to the Fair Trade Commission's contract templates and the 2014 law protecting performers under 19. The K-pop article describes a further step.

- **2017 rules for trainees.** On 7 March 2017 the Korea Fair Trade Commission "passed new regulations in order to protect trainee idols from unfair terms and working conditions". The article says that before them, trainees at eight agencies "were not permitted to seek contracts at any other agency while at training" and agencies "were able to terminate a trainee contract at any time for any reason". The Ministry of Culture applied the rules to all existing agencies through 2018.

- **The agencies' concerns.** The article records the industry's worry that a trainee might train undercover at another agency, and its argument that each trainee, who trains for three years on average, is "a very large investment".
- **A testimony.** The article reports that in September 2024 a member of NewJeans, Hanni, testified to Korean lawmakers about "workplace harassment and mistreatment during her time at Hybe", describing being ignored by managers and senior idols, and said she hoped younger trainees would not suffer the same. This is her testimony as reported. I read no response from the company, and I make no finding.

Mental Health

The K-pop article says some artists have suggested that "the uncertainty and pressures of their jobs as entertainers may be detrimental to their mental health". It gives two artists' own words:

Speaker	What the article quotes
Park Kyung (Block B)	"There are many people who debuted with no sense of self yet, and they come to realize later that every move and every word they say is being observed so they become cautious and lose their freedom."
Suga (BTS), in an interview with Yonhap News	"Anxiety and loneliness seem to be with me for life...Emotions are so different in every situation and every moment, so I think to agonise every moment is what life is."

These are two people speaking about their own experience. They do not describe every artist.

Deaths and Public Debate

The article says "the suicides of prominent K-pop musicians have drawn attention to both industry and societal pressures". It names the following, and I repeat only what it says.

Year	What the article says
1996	The singer Charles Park, also known as Seo Ji-won, died at the age of 19, before the release of his second album.

Year	What the article says
2017	Kim Jong-hyun, who "had previously been open about his history of depression", died in December at the age of 27. In the spring of 2018 "a number of prominent Korean musicians participated in a free concert series to raise awareness of suicide prevention."
2019	Sulli of f(x) died, followed one month later by her close friend Goo Hara. The article says both "were subjected to cyberbullying, which added to calls for reform".
2023	The death of Moonbin "renewed scrutiny on the highly competitive world of Korean show business and the pressures its performers face."

What the sources do and do not say

The article presents these deaths as having "drawn attention" to pressures and as prompting calls for reform. It does not say that any one factor caused any one death, and neither do I. The article offers "one reason" for the pressure (that K-pop amplifies a demand for perfection already intense in Korean society) and a case of online abuse after Sulli's relationship became public, where idols are "expected not to be in a relationship for years". These are explanations the article gives, not findings. A jewellery designer who works with K-pop stars is quoted as saying threats and angry mail are "normal for many idols", which is one person's account. Anyone writing about a death should stay with what sources report and avoid guessing about private lives.

Military Service

The conscription article says that since 1957 South Korea "has required male citizens between the ages of 18 and 35 to perform compulsory military service", and that the Military Service Act allows few exceptions: "no special case concerning mandatory military service shall be prescribed" except as the Act provides. The Korean idol article notes that the Constitution makes service mandatory for all men and "no exceptions are made" for idols, and that a former K-pop star, Yoo Seung-jun, "attempted to evade military service by obtaining American citizenship" and was banned from entering South Korea.

- **The 2020 amendment.** The conscription article says a law passed in December 2020 allows "a two-year extension for notable K-pop artists", raising the enlistment age from 28 to 30. It adds that "some resources and media outlets claim" the main reason was Jin of

BTS, who was about to turn 28. That is a claim about motive, with its owner given as unnamed outlets, and I do not rely on it.

- **Exemptions elsewhere.** Exemptions are granted to some sports medallists and to classical musicians and ballet performers who win first place in stipulated international competitions. K-pop artists are not on that list. The article says 220 exemptions were granted from 2008 to 2018 (the figure is the article's).
- **BTS.** In October 2022 their label announced Jin had withdrawn his deferral request and would enlist first. The BTS article says the group announced a pause on 14 June 2022 and that all members "completed their service by June 2025".
- **The money argument.** The BTS article says that, according to an estimate, if members completed service Hybe would lose nearly US$10 billion over ten years, with nearly US$39 billion to the South Korean economy. It gives these as an estimate with no method, and the article also says Hybe's stock fell below its IPO price amid speculation.

Other Arguments

- **Appearance and sexualisation.** Chapter 5 recorded the K-pop article's account of criticism of sexualisation, the 2014 law for under-19s and the 2019 "lookism" guidelines. The Korean idol article adds that some performers have been harassed for not fitting expectations, and names one example, and says LGBT artists "still face significant discrimination and prejudice", citing the singer Holland, who debuted in 2018 as a gay man.
- **Cultural appropriation.** The K-pop article says groups have been "regularly accused" of appropriating African-American culture through styling such as cornrows and bandanas, and that "some have used blackface and racial slurs as part of their performances". It also records the view of Crystal S. Anderson that borrowing elements "does not automatically constitute negative cultural appropriation". This is an open argument.
- **Plagiarism.** The article says some groups "have been accused of plagiarizing Western music acts". It names no case and gives no finding.
- **Earnings.** The Korean idol article says the National Tax Service reported the average annual earnings for a Korean idol in 2013 at KR₩46.74 million (about US$42,000), up from KR₩26.97 million in 2010, and that "not much has changed for all but the most successful handful". That is the article's figure, and an average hides wide differences.

What Changed, What Is Disputed

Changed (per the articles)	Disputed or unclear
Standard contract templates (after 2009); protections for performers under 19 (2014); rules for trainees (2017); extended enlistment age for notable K-pop artists (2020)	How far the rules are followed; what they cost agencies; whether 2020's amendment was made for BTS
Open discussion by artists of mental health; concerts for suicide-prevention awareness (2018)	Why individual people died; how much the industry, the culture or online abuse each contributed
Greater artist autonomy in the 2020s (K-pop article, Chapter 1)	Whether that autonomy is real or small; testimony such as Hanni's is reported without a finding

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the 2017 trainee regulations and what the K-pop article says trainees could not do before them. Then give the industry's concern about the rules, and say why a testimony reported without a company response should not be treated as a finding.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain what the K-pop article says the deaths of prominent musicians "drew attention to", and what it says about cyberbullying. Then explain, in your own words, why this chapter does not say what caused any individual death, and what a careful writer should do instead.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Summarise the military service rules and the December 2020 amendment, including which claim about its purpose is attributed to unnamed outlets. Then give one other

argument from this chapter and say whether the article treats it as settled.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Trainee rules:** Fair Trade Commission, 7 March 2017; before them, no seeking other contracts and termination at any time; applied to all agencies through 2018
- **Artists' words:** Park Kyung and Suga on pressure and mental health
- **Deaths named by the article:** 1996, 2017, 2019 (two, a month apart), 2023; "drew attention to" pressures; no single cause stated
- **Cyberbullying:** cited as adding to calls for reform
- **Military service:** men 18 to 35 since 1957; December 2020 amendment lets notable K-pop artists defer to 30; BTS members completed service by June 2025
- **Other disputes:** sexualisation, cultural appropriation, plagiarism accusations, average earnings
- **Care:** report with owners; do not speculate about private lives or causes

Next chapter: Capstone: A Pop Industry Argues With Itself, which draws the threads of the course together and gives a checklist for reading any claim about K-pop.

This last chapter looks back over the course. It follows five threads that ran through the nine chapters before it (the state, the market, the fans, labour and language), then turns the course's habits into a checklist for reading any claim about K-pop.

> **How this chapter was checked**
>
> This chapter adds no new sources. Every fact in it was given, with its owner, in an earlier chapter, and the chapter number is shown so you can look it up. The earlier chapters rest on Wikipedia articles as I read them, with no books, chart databases, court documents or recordings, and that limit applies to everything below.

Thread 1: The State

The state appears first as a censor and later as a patron.

- **Censor.** Chapter 2: music was "heavily censored" in the 1970s; Shin Jung-hyeon, Han Dae-soo and Kim Min-ki were each banned or blacklisted, and Kim's restrictions lasted until 26 June 1987. Chapter 3: Seo Taiji and Boys ran into ethics committees, and pre-censorship ended in June 1996, "partially as a result" of fans' reaction.
- **Patron and regulator.** Chapter 3: the 1990s saw state cultural policies to promote the industry (Korean idol article). Chapter 4: Fair Trade Commission contract templates and a 2014 law for performers under 19. Chapter 7: the Gaon Chart was launched in 2010 under a ministry's sponsorship. Chapter 8: Hallyu 2.0 saw government policy move "from indifference to enthusiastic support".
- **Conscription.** Chapter 9: the military service law applies to idols with few exceptions, and the 2020 amendment extended the enlistment age for notable K-pop artists.

Thread 2: The Market

- Chapter 4: agencies recruit, finance, train and manage, and the four big companies grew from individuals' firms (SM 1995, YG 1996, JYP 1997, Hybe 2005 as Big Hit).
- Chapter 5: concepts, teasers and comeback cycles are how a release is planned.

- Chapter 7: industry-size figures from *Billboard* (2012), an estimate (2017) and IFPI (2019, 2024) measure different things; charts can be manipulated by *sajaegi*.
- Chapter 8: "Gangnam Style" was meant for a local audience and became a global hit on YouTube, so a global result need not mean a global plan.

Thread 3: The Fans

- Chapter 3: fans' reaction to the ban of "Regret of the Times" is credited as part of why pre-censorship ended.
- Chapter 3: after H.O.T. broke up, "hundreds of fans" protested against SM.
- Chapter 7: the Korean idol article describes fans as "parasocial kin" who often act to protect idols from "unfair" company actions, with company approval needed for many fan activities.
- Chapter 8: fans learn Korean, often using romanisation.

Thread 4: Labour

- Chapter 4: trainee systems, long contracts and the 2009 TVXQ lawsuit; "slave contracts" is a BBC phrase quoted by the K-pop article.
- Chapter 5: companies regulate dating and public statements, as the articles report.
- Chapter 9: 2017 trainee rules, artists' words about pressure, and the public debate after deaths, where the sources say attention was drawn to pressures and name no single cause.
- Chapter 9: average idol earnings in 2013 were KR₩46.74 million, with most of the money going to "the most successful handful" (the Korean idol article's figure).

Thread 5: Language

- Chapter 1: *gayo* inside Korea, "K-pop" outside it; the label itself has three senses.
- Chapter 6: English in names, titles and lyrics rose (names 0 to 41 of the top 50 between 1990 and 2010), while the share of English in titles moved unevenly.
- Chapter 8: language is both a barrier and a draw, since English "has not guaranteed" success in North America, while fans learn Korean.

The Industry Argues With Itself

The title of this chapter comes from a pattern that appeared throughout the course: the same facts are used on opposite sides.

Question	One side (as the articles report it)	The other side
Is the training system fair?	SM's CEO: trainees are "no different" from students at after-school cram programmes, and costs must be counted (Chapter 4).	Critics call contracts "slave contracts"; the 2017 rules ended terms such as termination "at any time for any reason" (Chapters 4 and 9).
Is K-pop "Korean"?	Some argue it is "distinct in mood and energy" (Chapter 1).	Others point to Western songwriters, English and global marketing (Chapters 1 and 6).
Who made K-pop?	Seo Taiji and Boys, "rap dance" (Chapter 3).	SM's idol system and H.O.T. as the "first K-pop idol group" (Chapter 3), or trot and rock before them (Chapter 2).
Did censorship end because of fans?	"Partially as a result" of the reaction (Chapter 3).	The articles describe no other pressures, so the cause is unsettled.
What do charts show?	Records such as All-Kill and first-place finishes (Chapter 7).	*Sajaegi* may question their credibility (Chapter 7).

What was never settled

Across the course the sources disagreed or went quiet about several things: the exact ruling in the 2009 TVXQ case (Chapter 4), why Han Dae-soo went back to New York (Chapter 2), the training-cost figure (Chapters 1 and 4), the BTS economic figure (Chapter 7), and the causes of individual deaths (Chapter 9), which are not established and which this course does not guess at. Topics the outline promised but I could not source (song-writing camps, verse-hook-drop structure, group roles, lightsticks, fan voting and the translator's role) were left out and flagged at the time.

A Checklist for Any Claim About K-Pop

These questions come from the habits built across the course. Use them on a news story, a fan post, a documentary or an encyclopedia article.

1. **Which "K-pop"?** Korean pop in general, a style from the 1990s, or the idol system (Chapter 1)?
2. **Whose number is it?** Name the owner (*Billboard*, Circle, IFPI, a newspaper) and the year. Do not add figures that measure different things (Chapter 7).
3. **What are the boundaries of "first"?** Country, gender, chart, venue and year (Chapters 3 and 8).
4. **Is it a record, a report or a rumour?** A court case or law can be checked; a newspaper figure or testimony is a report; an unsourced story is a rumour (Chapter 4).
5. **Is this an opinion?** "Formulaic", "authentic" and "the biggest" are judgments (Chapters 6 and 8).
6. **Do two sources disagree?** If so, report what both support and say where they differ (Chapters 2 and 4).
7. **Is a person's private life being guessed at?** If so, stop. Report public careers and sourced events only (Chapter 9).
8. **What is missing?** Say what you could not check.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose two of the five threads and give three examples of each from different chapters of the course. Then choose one row of the "industry argues with itself" table and explain both sides in your own words.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Take this claim: "BTS single-handedly made K-pop global." Apply at least five questions from the checklist to it, and rewrite it as a version that the course's sources would support.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Give four examples from the course of a figure or claim that was disputed, contradicted by another article, or measured in different units, and say what the checklist calls for in each case.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **State:** censorship (to 1987 and 1996), then regulation and patronage; conscription law
- **Market:** four big agencies; planned release cycles; figures that measure different things; charts that can be gamed
- **Fans:** "parasocial kin"; fan reaction credited as part of the end of pre-censorship
- **Labour:** long contracts, 2009 lawsuit, 2014 law, 2017 trainee rules, public debate after deaths
- **Language:** gayo vs K-pop; rise of English; fans learning Korean
- **Checklist:** which K-pop; whose number; boundary of "first"; record, report or rumour; opinion; disagreement; private lives; what is missing

Where next: this completes *K-Pop*. The planned Korea courses on webtoons, taekwondo and festivals can build on the same method, and K-Drama and Korean Film covers the screen side of the Korean Wave.