

## Book Review

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*K-Pop Dance: Fandoming Yourself on Social Media*. Routledge.

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### ABSTRACT

Chuyun Oh's *K-Pop Dance: Fandoming Yourself on Social Media*, is the first book by a scholar solely dedicated to understanding the significance of the K-Pop cover dance phenomenon. Oh asserts that fans eventually fandom themselves and their bodies by copying and idolizing K-Pop dance. She introduces the framework of 'social media dance' to understand how dance is performed and consumed on social media, emphasizing that unlike professional dancers performing in front of an audience in a theater, on social media, the public can be *both* dancers and audience members (Oh, p. 3). The book details the transformation of dance in K-Pop from the 1980s to the early 2020s and is the result of substantial ethnographic research including interviews and "participation-observation" with forty amateur and professional K-Pop dancers based in Seoul, California, and New York (Oh, pp. 6-7). Despite the presence of a few incorrect facts, spelling mistakes, and incorrect grammar in the book, Oh has undeniably created an essential resource regarding the scholarship of K-Pop dance for students and scholars of Communication Studies, Media Studies, Performance Studies, Dance, and Korean studies.

### KEYWORDS

K-Pop dance, social media dance, cover dance, cover dancers, fandom

Hallyu, since its inception in the 1990s, aimed to garner international attention and support towards South Korea. The term Hallyu, literally translates to the Korean Wave in Chinese, and refers to the South Korean government strategically fostering and exporting the nation's cultural industries worldwide. Over time, South Korea's soft power has successfully materialized and today most parts of the world can recognize at least one facet of Korea via its media, technology, cuisine, and beyond. K-Pop is one of the leading factors of Hallyu, with BTS and BLACKPINK currently regarded as the biggest boy and girl bands in the world respectively. The K-Pop industry's unique and extensive strategies to foster zealous fandoms has resulted in

fans across the world. Chuyun Oh's *K-Pop Dance: Fandoming Yourself on Social Media*, is the first academic book solely dedicated to understanding the significance of dance in K-Pop, especially among fans who perform cover dances.

In the book, Oh asserts that fans, in due course, fandom themselves and their bodies by emulating and idolizing K-Pop dance. She introduces a new framework — “social media dance” — to understand how dance is performed and consumed on social media, emphasizing that unlike professional dancers performing in front of an audience in a theater, on social media, the public can be *both* dancers and audience members (Oh, p. 3). Oh theorizes that the “gestural point choreography,” a distinctive aspect of K-Pop dance, involving “front-driven, two-dimensional, decorative and charming movements of the upper body and face” is an example of social media dance (Oh, p. 3). The book delineates the transformation of dance in K-Pop from the 1980s to the early 2020s and is the result of substantial ethnographic research including interviews and “participation-observation” with forty amateur and professional K-Pop dancers based in Seoul, California, and New York (Oh, pp. 6-7).

Oh employs two theoretical frameworks to address the K-Pop cover dance phenomenon:

identity passing and hybridity/authenticity. She utilizes the former framework to explain how fans become akin to K-Pop idols by emulating them through dance. She uses the latter framework to explain that although K-Pop arose partly as an attempt to be similar to the US, K-Pop, especially its dance, must not be defined as hybrid. She aptly expands on this assertion by declaring that the idea of authenticity is racialized. In this framework, whiteness is assumed as authentic as it is associated with originality, meanwhile ethnic minorities are generally considered as copycats and at best considered hybrid. She critiques the racialized binary of the West as authentic originators and Asia as a hybrid imitators as culture is inherently evolving. She also judiciously

clarifies that K-Pop dance is a type of social media dance. After all, diversity is the driving force that promotes and connects artists with each other and to the public once content is uploaded on social media.

Oh starts the book with an introduction, where she shares insights on her experiences learning K-Pop dances and dance fans on social media, elucidates her method and theoretical frameworks, and provides chapter summaries. In “Part I: K-Pop Dance,” she delves into how Tik-Tok Dance challenges on social media have changed the landscape of dance, traces the development of K-Pop dance from the 1980s to the early 2020s, and conducts a case study on BTS as a prime example of K-Pop dance. In “Part II: K-Pop Dance Fandom,” she unpacks how K-Pop cover dance manifests as intercultural performance and the experiences of K-Pop cover dancers in the West and Asia. Oh concludes the book with an epilogue detailing the challenges and limitations she faced and continues to overcome as an ethnographer and dance researcher analyzing K-Pop as a formal dance genre.

In Chapter 1, “Social Media Dance: TikTok Dance Challenges,” Oh outlines the foundational characteristics of social media dance via her analysis of Quang Dang’s 2020 “handwashing dance challenge” on TikTok (Oh, pp. 23-46). She points out five unique features of a social media dance: (1) a socially accepted dance of the global youth, (2) the common person’s participation over a critic’s assessment, (3) a dance that is homogenized, simple and has the ability to transform, (4) limited space and time, and (5) charming face displaying a multitude of expressions. Oh claims K-Pop dance is another type of social media dance by examining Quang Dang’s “handwashing dance challenge” as a case study (Oh, p. 35). She also draws out comparisons between concert dance — a theatrical performance in front of an audience in a theater — to social media dance and how the dance genres, performers, bodies, techniques,

time, space, sponsors, audience, spectatorship, and values are extremely different from each other.

Although this chapter is crucial to understanding K-Pop dance, it would be more effective if Oh dedicates a few chapters to tracing the history of K-Pop dance from its beginning to the current day. This is extremely crucial for three reasons. First, while there have been several journal articles published on various aspects of K-Pop dance, Oh's *K-Pop Dance: Fandoming Yourself on Social Media*, is currently the only scholarly book solely devoted to the subject. Second, readers, especially those unfamiliar with Korean popular music and dance, miss out on key developments that led K-Pop dance to become a form of social media dance. Third, to gain a deeper understanding of K-Pop dance, readers would need to find and reference other academic scholarship, which makes learning on the matter, an inefficient process. Additionally, Oh incorrectly states the racial, ethnic, and cultural ties of the BLACKPINK members in her analysis of their "Kill This Love" dance challenge (Oh, p. 35). Oh claims that the members come from Thailand, New Zealand, the US, and South Korea (Oh, p. 35). However, none of the members come from the United States, and two of the members have strong ties to Australia and New Zealand. Although this mistake may seem like a minor issue, it is incredibly noteworthy considering the K-Pop industry's obsession to expand in the United States (Jin, 2016, pp. 122-123). A K-Pop group garnering significant attention in the United States is a probable method to succeed across the world due to translated soft power. To expand further, many parts of the world are familiar with the English language due to British and American colonization. As a result, Hollywood, America's soft power, is widely consumed globally because its media is mostly in the English language. A K-Pop group's significant existence in America will result in the rest of the world, unfamiliar with K-Pop, to take notice. Generally, K-Pop entertainment agencies would cater to the American audience by having one or more

Korean-American or Asian-American members. While none of the members have direct ties to the United States, they can increase and maintain their immense popularity in the country due to members' familiarity with Western culture and the English language. As a result, the BLACKPINK members often appear in the American media, further solidifying their global presence.

In Chapter 2, "The Evolution of K-Pop Dance from the 1980s to the 2020s," Oh delves into the history of K-Pop dance with a focus on the dancers, choreography, and how virtual and international dance collaborations due to advancements in IT have shaped the landscape of K-Pop dance (Oh, pp. 47-73). Oh provides crucial information on K-Pop dance by highlighting the people responsible for advancing it: performance directors, K-Pop trainees, broadcasting company backup dancers, underground street dancers, and anonymous foreign dance crews. Oh also provides key details regarding the amelioration of backup dancing formations, inception of gestural point choreography, major music labels' iconic dance styles and gendered choreographies, as well as the ideal "K-Pop body" (Oh, p. 12). Although this chapter is filled with remarkable insights on the behind-the-scenes aspects of K-Pop dance, it appears rushed at many points. It would have been more efficacious if Oh dedicates the entirety of "Part I" to the progression of K-Pop Dance. She could have divided the first part of the book into six chapters: (1) the types of dancers, (2) the types of choreographers, (3) how choreography has evolved, (4) the previous and current struggles and treatments of dancers and choreographers such as ambiguous copyright protection and royalties, (5) how IT has transformed K-Pop dance, and (6) how the audience have responded over the decades (문명특급 - MMTG, 2021, 0:10:20). If Oh followed this structure or a similar one, not only would she have successfully provided the reader with a comprehensive historical understanding of K-Pop dance, but also her transition to "Part II: K-Pop Dance Fandom,"

would be more seamless.

On a different note, Oh once again provides incomplete and incorrect information regarding K-Pop groups. In her brief discussion of the evolution of the K-Pop industry, Oh claims that “In the 2020s, there are entirely non-Korean K-Pop groups formed outside of Korea,” and provides examples such as Boy Story, NiziU, and EXP EDITION (Oh, p. 68). Oh does not provide the management label for Boy Story and EXP EDITION, and also claims that NiziU is managed by YG Entertainment. However, Boy Story is a Mandarin pop group co-managed by JYP Entertainment and Tencent Music Entertainment, while NiziU is a Japanese pop group co-managed by JYP Entertainment and Sony Music Entertainment Japan. On the other hand, EXP EDITION, a non-ethnically Korean K-Pop group, was created by Bora Kim, an interdisciplinary artist for her MFA at Columbia University to explore and push the boundaries of the definition of a K-Pop group (Kim, 2020; St Michel, 2021; GW Institute for Korean Studies, 2021, 0:00:02). This is extremely significant to consider because historically JYP Entertainment strategically targets Chinese-speaking regions and Japan via their K-Pop groups by having Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese members. Both Boy Story and NiziU are extremely successful especially in the Chinese and Japanese markets respectively which underscores JYP Entertainment and in extension, the K-Pop industry’s incredible influence of thinking globally and acting locally (Kim, 2020; St Michel, 2021). While Boy Story and NiziU are not K-Pop, EXP Edition’s association as a K-Pop group is highly debatable (GW Institute for Korean Studies, 2021, 0:00:02). It would have been better if Oh discussed these nuances to explain the evolution of the K-Pop industry thoroughly.

In Chapter 3, “BTS: The Modern Dancers,” Oh conducts descriptive analysis of how BTS’s through their choreographies to “Black Swan” (2020), “On” (2020), “IDOL” (2018), and more

transcend the “gestural point choreography,” by occupying space (Oh, pp. 74-98). Here, the term “space,” extends to movements of their legs, feet, and heads along with a sizable back up dancers (Oh, pp. 88-89). Oh argues that BTS convey a primeval and egalitarian ability of dancing via the technology of social media. This chapter brings up vital discussion concerning BTS’ caliber in performing Western dance styles such ballet-inspired to hip-hop while also displaying Korean dance styles like *Pungmul* and *Salpuri*. Additionally, this chapter situates the reader with more historical context as to how BTS are able to embody the essence of being a modern dancer and a Korean folk dancer. In doing so, the BTS members are able to become global activists in promoting dance as an instrument of self-expression.

Unlike the first part, Chapter 4, “K-Pop Cover Dance as Intercultural Performance,” and Chapter 5, “A White K-Pop Fan-Dancer in Japan,” in “Part II: K-Pop Dance Fandom,” directly relates to the subject of the book (Oh, pp. 101-141). Oh surveys a multitude of K-Pop cover dancers ranging from individuals who are Korean, Korean-American, Chinese-American, Latinx, White-American, light-skinned, dark-skinned, financially well-off, financially struggling, part of a dance team, a solo dancer, and more. Oh aptly covers how these diverse perspectives regard K-Pop as a proponent for racial exoticization and fetishization of Koreans while simultaneously viewing it as an avenue for self-expression and inspiration to have creative careers. Oh creates a remarkable dialogue concerning the extent to which these cover dancers embody Edward Said’s theory of orientalism and bell hooks’ theory of “eating the other” in an attempt to be like their idols (Oh, p. 136).

Unfortunately, Chapter 6, “A Refuge for Refugee Teens,” detracts from the theme of the book. In this chapter, Oh evaluates a yearlong (auto) ethnographic performance named *Love Means Love* (2017) by a Thai Karen refugee K-Pop cover

dance team in New York (Oh, pp. 142-162). Oh's goal for this chapter is to demonstrate how the teens attempt to subdue their traumas, reduce the public's pessimistic attitudes towards refugees, and negotiate diasporic identities by utilizing K-Pop dance as an Asian culture. However, she fails to do so by heavily discussing her experiences choreographing a piece and performing it with a couple of refugees for the *Love Means Love* (2017) showcase. In the chapter, she applies Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of Zarathustra, to contend how *Love Means Love* exhibits how resistant and bold hope combined with boundless determination resonates with the "liberatory history of dancers who fought against oppression and dance bans across the world" (Oh, p. 14). This argument simply appears to be unsuitable within the context of the book because Oh did not perform K-Pop dance with the teen refugees. It would have been more beneficial if Oh expanded as to why the Thai-Karen teenagers are drawn to K-Pop dance and their experiences as cover dancers.

Oh carried an enormous undertaking publishing the first scholarly book on K-Pop dance and her book certainly fills a tremendous gap in scholarship regarding the subject matter.

However, it would be favorable if *K-Pop Dance: Fandoming Yourself on Social Media*, had a Part III which provided insights on (1) how K-Pop fans who are cover dancers respond to other cover dancers across the world, (2) why K-Pop fans consume cover dances and how they respond to it, (3) an examination as to why some K-Pop fans perform cover songs versus cover dances, (4) and lastly how cover dances in comparison to cover songs, especially in the TikTok era, are performed and consumed more by K-Pop fans. In addition, although spelling mistakes, and incorrect grammar are infrequent in the book, it is also glaringly noticeable, prompting the reader to read the sentence a couple of times to process it. Despite its shortcomings, Oh has undeniably created an essential resource regarding the scholarship of K-Pop dance for students

and scholars of Communication Studies, Media Studies, Performance Studies, Dance, and Korean studies.

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