

Book Review**Hong, S.-K. (2023). *BTS on the Road* (O. Han, Trans.). Seoul National University Press. (Original work published 2020)**Ju Oak Kim¹⁰

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The Korean Wave phenomenon has become one of the most turbulent transnational cultural flows under the conditions of globalization and digitalization. In her previous work, *Hallyu in Globalization and the Digital Culture Era*, Hong (2013) initiated her investigation of what has driven the transnational expansion of Korean popular culture over the past two decades. In the concluding chapter of that book, she expressed concerns about “K-pop’s apolitical politics” and suggested that Korean practitioners create more socio-politically provoking products to sustain the longevity of this cultural phenomenon (as cited in Hong, 2020/2023, p. 18). Once K-pop became a prominent phenomenon in the global pop industry, Hong recalled the question that she had left in her earlier work: Can K-pop groups establish their legacy outside East Asia by constructing gigantic and mobilized fandoms and by releasing music with powerful messages in response to social conflicts and generation gaps?

The book *BTS on the Road* is one conclusion that Hong has reached by employing BTS as a lens to comprehend the complexity of cultural interactions and transactions in the digitally networked and globally condensed world. By examining the process of how BTS became a global phenomenon, she invited readers to recognize the power of popular culture that represents “the hopes, worries, love, and solidarity of races, genders, social classes, and generations for the past and futures of individuals and groups” (p. 17). As Hong pointed out, BTS has expanded transnational cultural waves in the contemporary architecture of the global media industries and complicated the political dynamics of identity construction in various parts of the world. In this sense, Hong’s interpretive analysis of the BTS phenomenon helps comprehend the social, industrial, and cultural contexts in which the K-pop group has contributed to diversifying views, experiences, and stories and even challenging the ideological dominance of Western pop artists in the

global pop sphere.

The book was mainly developed based on Hong's participatory observation of several concerts during the *LOVE YOURSELF World Tour*. While on this tour, she conducted interviews with attendees, mostly members of BTS's fandom, ARMY. In writing her book, Hong expressed her indebtedness to these interviewees, who shared personal stories reflecting not only BTS' distinctive achievements in the global pop market but also the context of the group's hardships, successes, and future direction. Her book includes direct quotes from these interviewees regarding the "impressions from the scene, fan testimonies, the words and lyrics by BTS members," and various types of video content that BTS released (p. 22). These data help readers experience the ups and downs that BTS members have dealt with; these data also map out "the spaces where these present and future battles take place" (p. 22).

The six chapters are organized thematically, with topical frameworks that help unveil the social implications of the BTS phenomenon. The themes include production (Chapter 1), transmedia (Chapter 2), class (Chapter 3), fandom (Chapter 4), race (Chapter 5), and masculinity (Chapter 6).

Chapter One explores how the K-pop industry has intersected with the BTS phenomenon. Hong claimed that digital platforms have reshaped the landscape of pop culture production and distribution. Although North American and Western European pop industries have long solidified their dominance in the global music market by "absorb[ing] the best ideas and talent from around the world" (p. 29), digital technologies have blurred the boundary between producers and consumers, promoting "the migratory dynamics of attractive cultural goods from all around the world" (p. 30). In this new industrial landscape, BTS surpassed the Western perception of K-pop idols to a certain level, tackling criticism against their contradictory identities. While admitting that BTS has distinguished itself from other K-pop

idols in many ways, the author clarified the solid connection between BTS and K-pop culture in which the K-pop group has developed its legacy under the influence of Korean media culture, K-pop fandom culture, and K-pop's economy.

Chapter Two considers transmedia storytelling as a powerful strategy in making a distinction between BTS and other K-pop groups. The members of BTS have played fictional characters in various types of media content; however, these characters have often intersected with their real stories. Hong pointed out that the mixture of fiction and reality is the key to expanding BTS' transmedia world. Hong discussed three layers of BTS' transmedia world that HYBE—Korea's leading entertainment company—has sophisticatedly designed. In their earliest stage, the members of BTS performed their characters as teenagers struggling with a rigid school system. Next, HYBE then individualized each member's character to develop a story for growth as a team. Later, reality TV shows and behind-the-scenes videos constructed narratives of BTS' members as ordinary people. Hong stated that BTS' transmedia world invites audiences to create their own linked stories across various media spaces.

Chapter Three analyzes BTS' song lyrics and music videos to unveil why this K-pop group has drawn attention to the hardships, anxiety, and depression experienced by the younger generations in neoliberal societies. According to Hong, BTS' *School* trilogy criticizes the stiff competition of the contemporary school system that has forced young people to "internalize the feeling of being constantly demotivated and lost" (p. 97). In their songs, "Not Today" and "DOPE," BTS engages with the class divide by portraying precarious young laborers and bringing up the spoon discourse. In their *Most Beautiful Moment in Life* trilogy, BTS focuses on their story of growing together, with each member emphasizing his commitment to the group. According to Hong, these narratives of cohesion are healing for young people who have suffered under the stark

reality of competition and antagonization. Hong concluded that “the growth of BTS as a band” and the message to “love yourself” have inspired young people to develop their own networks of friends within BTS’ world (p. 113).

Chapter Four examines how ARMY’s fandom has become part of the BTS phenomenon. Hong, who considers the Korean Wave a phenomenon of reception, spotlighted their fandom’s prominent contribution to making BTS visible in the Western music industry. Owing to participatory fan culture, BTS has won several Billboard Top Social Artist awards, and the group members have appeared several times on U.S. primetime television. As fan scholar Jenkins (2006) argued, “fan creativity, online communities, and participatory culture” are the core constructs of fandom culture (p. 3), and ARMY’s fandom is a recent example of how fandom can change the media industry landscape in the digital era. Based on in-depth interviews with fans in the United States and Western Europe, she mapped out the trajectory of becoming an ARMY fan; most fans first learned about the K-pop group through consuming music videos and other media content on YouTube and Twitter. They then experienced emotional healing while developing intimate relationships with BTS’ members. After constructing their fan identity, these fans have functioned as mediators in spreading Korean culture, building up communicative spaces beyond geographic conditions and social identities.

Chapter Five investigates how BTS has shifted the racial imagination of East Asians and Koreans in the Caucasian-dominated world. Revisiting the Recording Academy’s exclusion of BTS from all categories of the Grammys in 2019, Hong problematized the dominance of white middle-class pop culture in the global pop industry. What she claimed here is that in the industrial landscape where English-speaking countries have ruled over the global market, BTS has contributed to diversifying pop culture by introducing the style of traditional Korean music and dance and

African rhythms. She also pointed out that BTS has tackled white centering on the formation of racial imagination by generating debates on the beauty and attraction of Asian skin and faces. Her main point here is that the K-pop industry’s visual strategy of whitening can be viewed as “the achievement of expressing East Asian skin in a beautiful way and empowering East Asians” (p. 166). Her standpoint helps overcome the colonial interpretation of whitening as the internalization of the white-bound aesthetic standard.

Chapter Six discusses the development of new masculinity under the BTS phenomenon. Hong reminds readers that a male’s sexual attraction is deeply connected with the idea of charisma in Western society; a man’s superior physical qualities and professional abilities constitute hegemonic masculinity. Hollywood stars who have embodied an ideal type of hegemonic masculinity have contributed to shaping it as a universal value across the world. Hong then calls on the concept of soft masculinity to characterize the ways in which BTS’ members and other K-pop idols have displayed their bodies and intimate personalities under the gaze of females. While Jung (2011) examined the Yongsama syndrome in Japan, she proposed soft masculinity as “a hybrid product constructed through a transcultural amalgamation of South Korea’s traditional *seonbi* masculinity (which is heavily influenced by Chinese Confucian *wen* masculinity), Japan’s *bishōnen* (pretty boy) masculinity, and global metrosexual masculinity” (p. 39). Hong then defined sexual attraction as “a type of power” for constructing social values (p. 184) and claimed that BTS’ members had challenged the dominant discourse of hegemonic masculinity in several ways: wearing make-up, expressing emotions, and demonstrating their closeness with other members.

In the epilogue, Hong devoted attention to a new chapter that BTS had written in the process of entering the U.S. pop market during the pandemic. Once many nations adopted policies

of self-isolation and social distancing to prevent the spread of COVID, BTS held online live concerts and released their first English digital single, “Dynamite,” to stay connected with their fans all around the world and deliver messages of “consolation and empathy” to the larger audience during such a difficult time (p. 199). The author then concluded that BTS’ success, in alliance with their fandom, teaches the world about the possibilities of rebuilding trust and bonding with others.

One merit of this book is that, instead of taking a conventional route to conduct academic research, Hong utilized her personalized voice to document the moments in which the members of BTS conveyed “a generational desire” (p. 20). By doing so, she invited the larger audience to the journey BTS and their fandom, ARMY, have taken in solidarity. The author’s attention to BTS’ musical artistry and cultural power is also noteworthy, considering the intellectual community’s (in particular Western media and critics) long-standing criticism of the K-pop training program as an inhumane and manufactured production process.

However, the author should have examined the celebrity–fan relationship more critically because fans tend to glamorize celebrity power and overestimate fan participatory culture. Relatedly, the group’s inroads to new markets, including the Americas and Europe, need to be further discussed in the industrial context. By looking into how the K-pop group has launched its worldwide concert tour, the author could unveil the industrial forces that have created the BTS phenomenon.

Hong allows her peer researchers and the public to listen to BTS fans’ stories in their own words and examine various music events held in the United States and Western Europe. The publication of its English translation invites wider audiences to that journey. Given that BTS’ members are currently suspending their musical activities to complete their military service, the book has not only resonated with what the

group has achieved in past years but has also left an essential question in readers’ minds: Can BTS expand a new type of solidarity, breaking down the barriers of race, class, nationality, age, and gender, once the group members come back to the global pop industry? In exploring this question, K-pop scholars should develop theoretical anchors to discuss the consistent impact of the K-pop phenomenon on the global cultural sphere.

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