



Tübingen Korean Studies Lecture Series

Summer Semester 2026, Wednesdays 18:00 c.t., Wilhelmstraße 133, R. 30

What Is “K”?: Hybridity, Identity, and Global Perceptions of K-Pop

Gyu Tag Lee

George Mason University Korea

July 22nd, 2026



Biography: **Gyu Tag Lee** is a Professor of Global Affairs and Director of the Center for Korean Culture and Society at George Mason University Korea. His primary research interests include popular music, critical media studies, and the globalization of culture, with a particular focus on K-Pop and Hallyu. He has authored numerous books and scholarly articles on K-Pop, popular music, and the Korean Wave, including *The K-Pop Age 케이팝의 시대* (2016), *K-Pop in Conflict 갈등하는 케이팝* (2020), and *Z With Luv: Post-BTS and the Future of K-Pop Z를 위한 시: 포스트-BTS와 케이팝의 미래* (2023). He is also a co-author of *Exploring Hallyu 한류 탐색* (2024). All of these publications are in Korean.

Abstract: This talk explains how the meaning and boundaries of K-pop are constituted through the interplay of musical hybridity, industrial structure, and audience recognition. Moving beyond descriptive accounts of K-pop's global success, it proposes a comparative and theoretically grounded framework that situates K-pop within the broader landscape of global popular music. Through analyses of its relationship with Swedish pop, Latin pop, and world music, this talk shows that K-pop is neither defined by fixed musical or linguistic features nor confined to Korean ethnicity or geography. Instead, its distinctiveness lies in a business model—an integrated “agency-idol system” based on “total management strategy” that combines long-term training, synchronized choreography, audiovisual storytelling, and coordinated multimedia rollouts. While this model anchors K-pop's Korean provenance, it simultaneously enables transnational adaptability. This talk further explores how the “K” functions as a polyvalent signifier: a marker of national authorship for domestic audiences, a symbol of cosmopolitan modernity for global fans, and a representation of cultural visibility for diasporic communities. By reframing K-pop as both a cultural product and an institutional practice, this talk concludes K-pop as the cultural phenomenon showing hybridity, globalization, and cultural identity in popular music.