

"Golden" from "KPop Demon Hunters" Won an Oscar and a Grammy, But is It K-pop?

An expert weighs in on what defines K-pop as we know it today

JAE-HA KIM

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EJAE after winning an Academy Award for "Golden." Photograph: Angela Weiss/AFP/Getty Images [Courtesy: The Guardian]

On Sunday, *KPop Demon Hunters* won two major awards at the Oscars: Best Animated Feature and Best Original Song for "Golden." Last month, "Golden" won a Grammy

Award for Best Song Written for Visual Media. [It also had been nominated for Song of the Year, Best Pop Duo/Group Performance, and Best Remixed Recording.]

“Golden” was not performed by a K-pop group, but rather a fictional trio called HUNTR/X, which featured the singing voices of former K-pop trainee, EJAE, and fellow Korean Americans Audrey Nuna and Rei Ami.

The movie’s phenomenal success was an unexpected surprise. *KPop Demon Hunters* premiered on Netflix on June 20, 2025. And by August 26, the film became the streaming platform’s most-viewed movie *ever*. That same month, the film’s soundtrack produced four songs on the *Billboard 100*, including HUNTR/X’s “Golden” (No. 1) and “How It’s Done” (No. 10), and their fictional male counterparts, the Saja Boys’, “Your Idol” (No. 4)¹ and “Soda Pop (No. 5).”

Around that same time, some K-pop fans bristled at the fact that “Golden” bypassed the Grammys’ niche K-pop category to be nominated in more prestigious categories like Song of the Year. *How could this be?* HUNTR/X is a cartoon group! The vocalists are Korean American, rather than Korean nationals! Neither HUNTR/X or the Saja Boys hailed from the rigorous K-pop system! *So why* was HUNTR/X getting all this award attention that had evaded real-life Korean groups?

[Note: EJAE trained for 10 years in Korea, hoping to debut in an idol group, before essentially aging out and returning to the U.S. to carve out a career as a songwriter and producer for other vocalists. And Kevin Woo — the singing voice for Mystery Saja — was a real-life idol during his U-KISS days.]

All of this reminded me of a question I was asked at the University of Southern California’s “[Behind the Scenes of K-pop](#)” — an all-day symposium that featured insiders and experts who fostered conversations about the art, culture, business, and the future of K-pop. A student asked me what made K-pop, well, *K-pop*. The gist of what I said was that K-pop has to maintain a Korean element.

Do I think “Golden” would’ve gotten all this attention if it hadn’t been in a hit film? *No*. Does that take away from any of the song’s brilliance? *Absolutely not*. Do I think “Golden” is a K-pop song? *Yes*.² Korean culture is reflected in the lyrics. The artists singing the song are Korean diaspora. The primary creatives behind *KPop Demon*

Hunters and the music are ethnically Korean. Living outside of South Korea doesn't negate their Korean identity.

[I discuss this question of identity further in my [newsletter](#) about Korean adoptee [Kat Turner 문순자](#), who was accused of not being a *real* Korean because she didn't pronounce "Arirang" in a manner that her detractors found suitable. *Yes, you read that correctly.*]

*"Whenever a new category enters an established industry like the Grammys or the Oscars, full acceptance usually takes time. So this feels like another step in that broader process." —
Cornell University's Heeyon Kim*

Interestingly enough, while some fans bickered about the film's soundtrack, real-life K-pop idols lavished praise on both the movie and its music. Cha Eun-woo covered "Free" [with [Arden Cho](#), who is the voice actor for HUNTR/X's Rumi]. [Wonho](#) created an eye-popping video of "Soda Pop" and "Your Idol." And Jihyo, Jeongyeon, and Chaeyoung from the real-life Korean supergroup TWICE contributed "Takedown" to the film's soundtrack *and* appeared as their non-animated selves at the end of the film.

"I'm actually really awestruck ... Whenever I read articles or see that the songs from the movie are topping the *Billboard* chart, I am really grateful we had this opportunity," Chaeyoung told me when I interviewed her for [Rolling Stone](#). "We never imagined that *KPop Demon Hunters* was going to become an international sensation. We didn't accept this because we knew it would be such a huge success. It just sounded like a lot of fun. The soundtrack itself is very different from our style, so it was an opportunity to challenge ourselves."



Jeongyeon, Jihyo, and Chaeyoung of TWICE.

With all of this in mind, I interviewed Cornell University's Heeyon Kim, about what makes K-pop *K-pop*. "I just taught a class on global expansion using the example of K-pop and BTS," the assistant professor told me. "Our discussion ended with the topic of K-pop becoming increasingly hybrid — incorporating foreign artists, production studios, and distribution — and how we draw the boundaries of the genre."

There has been a lot of discussion about whether "Golden" is truly a K-pop song. What is your take on this?

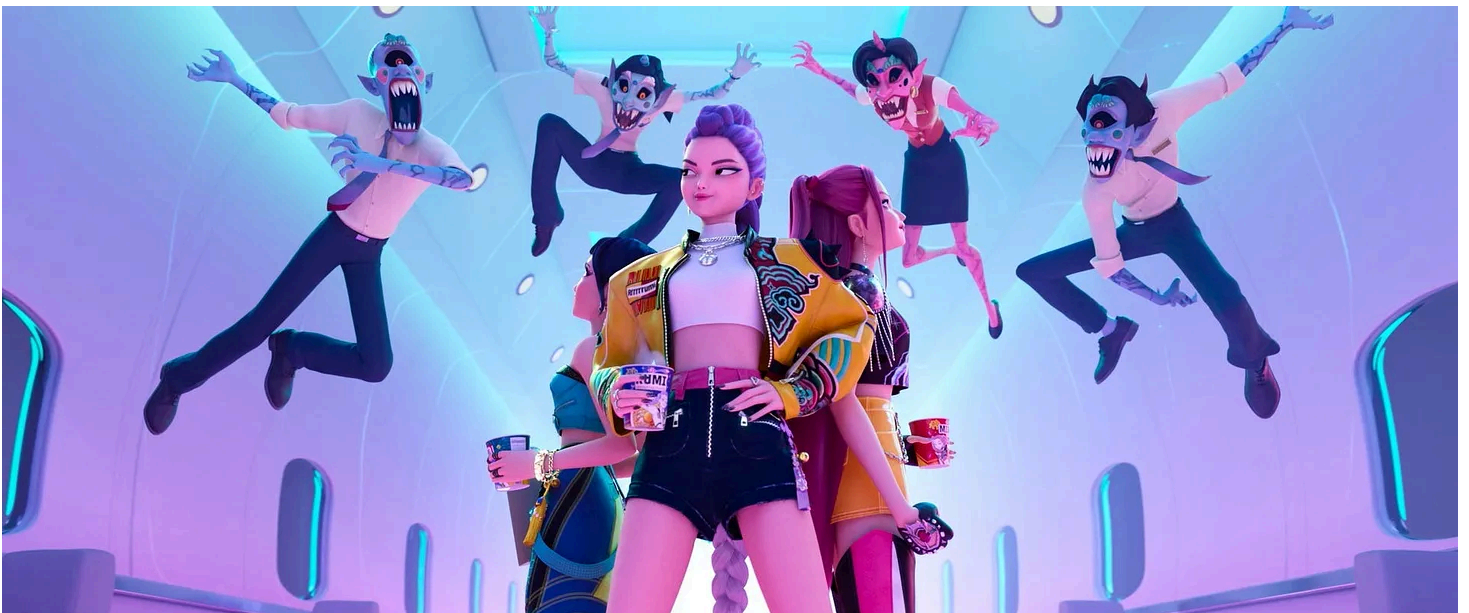
I'm not surprised people are debating what is and what is not K-pop. The boundaries of K-pop are getting increasingly blurry now that the industry is so global. "Golden" was written and produced by people who work in the K-pop system, but it was created for a global animated film rather than released by a typical Korean entertainment company. So I would probably think of it as something like K-pop-influenced pop. More generally, as K-pop has become more successful globally ... defining K-pop becomes more difficult.

If a Korean group sings the song in English, is it still K-pop?

Language alone doesn't really determine whether something is K-pop. Even early K-pop songs often had English lyrics, and many songs were written by foreign composers. Groups also frequently had members who grew up abroad or had international backgrounds. To me, what defines K-pop more is the unique production system, like the entertainment companies, the training system, the synchronized choreography, etc. Now that the industry has global recognition, groups are targeting international audiences more directly. That's why you see more English-language songs, collaborations with foreign artists, and partnerships with international labels and production companies.

Is it still K-pop if none of the singers are ethnically Korean?

I don't think ethnicity has ever been a strict requirement. Many K-pop groups have had members from China, Japan, Thailand, and other countries for quite a long time — though the majority has been Korean. The industry itself has always been influenced by global music, especially American pop, hip-hop, and R&B. More recently, we're even seeing groups like Katseye with only one member [being] Korean, but the group is still often discussed in the context of K-pop because it was formed through a Korean entertainment company and follows many of the same training and production practices. This shows how the industry is evolving and becoming more global. Again, I think what matters more is whether the artist or song is connected to the K-pop's typical production system and performance style rather than the ethnicity of the members.



HUNTR/X ready to battle demons posing as flight attendants.

Would “Golden” have been nominated if it hadn’t been in a hit film? Was it the song or the film that it sprang from that was being honored?

It’s probably difficult to separate the two. In categories like Best Song Written for Visual Media, the song and the film work together. The film for sure made the song resonate more strongly with audiences. The song itself is strong, but the success of the film helped amplify its visibility, as with any song from a film soundtrack. So the recognition probably reflects both the quality of the song and the broader success of the film.

“Golden” is the only K-pop, or K-pop adjacent song to win a Grammy — something that has eluded even the biggest names in K-pop. What, if anything, does this say about the acceptance of K-pop in the U.S.?

I should note that **BTS** did receive Grammy nominations ³, which in itself was already a sign that K-pop reached a new level of recognition in American pop culture. I think “Golden” winning reflects the continued growth of that recognition. At the same time, whenever a new category/genre enters an established industry like the Grammys/Oscars, full acceptance usually takes time. So this feels like another step in that broader process.

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- 1 I talked about this on **NPR**. I favored “Your Idol” over the more popular “Golden.”
- 2 But you cannot deny that “Golden” is also a song that’s very American, because Korean Americans are both Korean and American.
- 3 BTS received 5 Grammy nominations.

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