



How We Became Bulletproof: A Critical Conversation Among Three Hmong American ARMY Siblings

ACADEMIC ARTICLE: ESSAY

Kong Pheng Pha

Assistant Professor, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, @konghengpha (United States)

Kaochi Pha

M.Ed. Candidate, University of Minnesota—Twin Cities, @kaochipha (United States)

Meria Khaosue Pha

Anime & K-pop Fan, Bias: J-Hope, Troop 100 Hmong Scout, Aspiring Comics Creator (United States)

ABSTRACT

As a relatively small subset of the larger Asian American racial group, Hmong Americans have engaged in a range of Asian pop music since the late 1990s. K-pop is the latest phenomenon to infiltrate Hmong Americans' musical tastes. Hmong Americans, being a stateless ethnic minority who are oftentimes racialized as "Asian Americans," possess a unique lens to understand pop culture's multi-layered effects on fandoms. This essay is a hybrid text in the form of a critical conversation which maps out the influence of BTS on the lives of three Hmong American siblings. This critical conversation reveals how the music, artistry, and advocacy of BTS have reconceptualized notions of both Hmong American and Asian American identities, gender, race, affect and fandom, and the politics of social justice in the United States. Additionally, the American national context is centralized in this essay in order to contextualize the political, ideological, and intersubjective effects found within Hmong American engagements with BTS and K-pop. We conclude by showing that BTS has enabled us to embrace our truths in both micro and macro ways, thus making us bulletproof.

KEYWORDS

Hmong American, social justice, Asian American, identity, conversation

Publisher's Note

This frank and open conversation touches upon many topics related to BTS, their music, their performances, and their influence on ideas about social justice. The opinions expressed here belong to the authors. We support the expression of all types of ideas and opinions within The R³ Journal.

*The creators are labeled as **KPP**, **KCP**, and **MKP** throughout the article.*

Introduction

It seems that BTS has infiltrated every corner of the Earth. News articles and academic studies have attempted to map out the influence of BTS on nearly every aspect of life, from South Korea's booming tourism industry to international politics and diplomacy and to the globalization of Korean culture (Abramovitch, 2019; Kelley, 2018; Kim, 2019; Kim & Jin, 2016; Ro, 2020; Suntikul, 2019). Additionally, academic studies and fan testimonies have also revealed the micro impacts of BTS on specific localized communities and in the everyday lives of lay people around the world (Bangun, 2019; Elxse, 2020; Haoni et al., 2020; Kim, 2018; Kuo et al., 2020). These recent projects exploring the extent of BTS's influence on people's mundane lives constitute some of the most interesting and dynamic directions of fandom studies. However, in the context of the United States, ethnic minorities continue to be largely absent in these studies. For example, as a largely marginalized and unknown population of refugees in the United States, Hmong Americans may not be considered relevant in any kind of academic or critical study of popular culture.

Hmong Americans are a stateless ethnic minority with origins in Northeastern China and Southeast Asia. Since Hmong people's entanglement in the United States' secret war in Laos in the 1960s and 1970s, Hmong have been violently displaced into five continents and over ten different countries across the globe (Vang, 2010). Hmong cultural experiences have been transformed through their interactions with the dominant group within its host countries. In the United States, Hmong American communities are able to access a wide range of globalized pop, hip hop, and country music through the circulation of cassette tapes and compact discs, television, music streaming websites, and social media (Bultena, 2018). It is not surprising then that Hmong people are influenced by a diverse range of music across the world. K-pop, like other Asian musical persuasions, including Bollywood music, Mandopop, and Cantopop, has had a considerable influence on Hmong people's sense of selves within the diaspora (Desai, 2019). Hmong Americans have also been interpolated into the larger category of "Asian American" since their arrival to the U.S. In this sense, Hmong American subjectivity has become layered, at times being impacted by popular culture's grip on shaping their simultaneous American, Asian American, and Hmong American identities.

We are three Hmong American siblings, who, as BTS ARMYs, can attest to the transformative effects that BTS have had in our lives. We further testify that BTS have indeed generated impacts in our lives in profound and creative ways that cannot readily be measured. We are inspired by BTS to envision alternative forms of self-love and further explore questions of feminism, racial, queer, and immigrant justice. The social consciousness of BTS inspires us to imagine different and more creative ways

of living our lives as a relatively small community of displaced and stateless refugees. We conceived of the idea to have a conversation amongst ourselves about the micro and macro ways in which BTS has affected our lives. This essay details our critical conversation, which maps out the effects of BTS's music and artistry on our small — and perhaps “random” community — of Hmong Americans living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. We also hope to contribute to the ongoing knowledge of fandoms by capturing the personal, experiential, affective, and ephemeral dimensions of our BTS fandom.

We do not intend for this essay to be read as an “academic” essay in the traditional sense of the word, but our background in academia means we are familiar with and readily draw from theory and politics to engage each other in a critical conversation. We possess personal and scholarly investment in the life of BTS. While we are siblings, we have divergent positionalities and we each have distinctive relationships to BTS. Kong Pheng Pha (KPP) identifies as a queer Hmong American man who is also a scholar and professor of ethnic studies and feminist studies at a regional university. Kaochi Pha (KCP) identifies as a Hmong American woman who received degrees in gender, women, and sexuality studies and Asian American studies and is working towards a graduate degree and career in youth development leadership. Lastly, Meria Khaosue Pha (MKP) currently identifies as a questioning Hmong American girl and is a middle school student who is already imagining a future in the comics world. **KCP** and **MKP** are lightyears ahead in their fandom and knowledge about BTS, while **KPP** is a relatively new ARMY and is still defining his relationship to BTS. We recorded a nearly two-hour conversation during one frigid autumn night in 2020, transcribed the audio, and carefully revised the transcription for clarity. The conversation itself also contained moments where **KPP** acted as interviewer and facilitator in order to encourage **KCP** and **MKP** to expand on their intriguing ideas. After reviewing the entire edited transcript, we added supplementary language to our dialogue to refine any confusing and incomplete thoughts we had during the actual conversation itself.

Admittedly, there were moments in which our conversation tangentially strayed into a territory of just fawning over BTS. This essay strives to preserve our organic conversation and those sporadic quirky moments as ARMY while also highlighting the more sensible topics around identity, gender, and activism. The result is this purposefully curated critical conversation which has enabled us to reflect on how BTS's music, artistry, and activism has impacted our personal conceptions of Hmong American and Asian American racial identities, gender, affect and emotion, and visions of social justice.

Critical Conversation

KPP: There is an emergent fascination among Hmong Americans towards K-pop, and BTS in particular. Let us begin our conversation by historicizing the K-pop phenomenon in our community. What is the history of this emergent K-pop and BTS fanaticism among Hmong Americans?

KCP: From my observation, there are three waves of K-pop that penetrated Hmong Americans. The first wave of Hmong American K-pop fans emerged in the late 1990s during the Korean Wave, and this first wave spilled into the early 2000s. Some of the first Korean musical artists that Hmong Americans were familiar with were groups such as H.O.T., Baby V.O.X., and S.E.S. The second wave of K-pop emerged around

2005 and ended around 2012. Big Bang, 2PM, Girls' Generation, and 2NE1 are K-Pop artists who emerged as top groups among Hmong Americans during the second wave. From 2013 to the present can be categorized as the BTS era, although musical groups such as EXO, TWICE, and BLACKPINK can also be included in this era. I consider this era to be the third wave. So, to answer the question of how Hmong Americans discovered K-pop, we should examine the ways Hmong Americans, like most other young Americans, are fascinated by U.S.-based pop music. Most people enjoy pop music. K-pop still contained some familiar pop "vibes" found in English language pop music, but K-pop differed from U.S.-based pop music in the sense that the artists were Asian pop stars who sang in Korean.

KPP: That makes complete sense. Hmong Americans, and youth in particular, are already enamored with western and/or U.S.-based pop music. Therefore, this creates the framework for K-pop to emerge as somewhat of an extension of this familiar form of pop music. Yet, there also seems to be a very unique development about K-pop as an entirely different genre of music that is exterior to U.S.-based pop music. This fascination with pop music and its intersection with the musical artists being Asians then drew Hmong Americans into K-pop. To me, that racial visibility is very important in the American context. That is why I became fascinated with Mandopop and Cantopop stars like Jacky Cheung, Eason Chan, and Nicolas Tse in the 1990s. I later became a huge fan of K-pop group Big Bang. As a Hmong American, I identified with that element of Asian pop music more than I did with American pop music. I listened to Mandopop and Cantopop while all the White kids around me were engulfed in the "teen pop" phenomenon and were obsessed with artists like Backstreet Boys, NSYNC, Christina Aguilera, and Britney Spears in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

MKP: Right, that is why young Hmong Americans like me are drawn to K-pop, and to BTS specifically. The music, the "look" of the artists, and also the dance all appeal to me! Hmong American youth really care about how Korean pop singers "look." Korean pop singers are really cute, beautiful and good-looking, but they also sing and dance very well. They give us the "Asian" vibe and aesthetic that is missing in U.S. pop music. BTS creates an image in my mind that I can also do that.

KPP: That summons the question of how BTS enables the forging of a new kind of Hmong American or even Asian American identity. How do BTS transform your sense of being an Asian person living in the United States? I sense that the kind of music that emerges from K-pop, and BTS specifically, reflects the notion that Asians can also be successful within the American music industry.

MKP: It is certainly true that I connect with BTS because they are Asian. When we examine the current roster of artists in the United States, we see White and Black folks, but there are no Asian or Asian American representation. Now that BTS has exploded on the American music scene, when you ask me, "Name an Asian celebrity," I can name BTS. BTS brings Asian representation into the Western media. I feel as if I can participate in music like them too. Although they may not be considered "Asian Americans," nonetheless they have influenced the American music industry in such a new and interesting way. Even though BTS is still seen as "outsiders" because they are a Korean-speaking musical group in the American music industry, I am more included in their music than other pop music in the United States.

KCP: I identify very strongly as Hmong American. BTS's music does not take away from my ethnic identity. In fact, it strengthens it because their music constantly stresses the love of one's self. They speak out to me even though they are from Korea. Additionally, their music is quite complicated because they also create a pan-Asian relationship between us. I feel more present within their music and their fanbase, ARMY, than I do with American artist fanbases or music. ARMY is a unique body that is inclusive of women of color, unlike the White fanbases of other pop artists. Thus, my sense of self is strengthened beyond just my siloed Hmong American identity.

KPP: BTS somehow outshined all the other Korean idol artists and groups. What are unique elements of their artistry that stand out the most to you both?

KCP: One element that is present within K-pop as a broader domain, but even more so within BTS, is the deconstruction of gender and sexuality, both within Korean and Western contexts. What does it mean to be a man from the perspective of BTS? That question is central to their identity as a Korean musical group. Admittedly, BTS displayed problematic forms of masculinity in their earlier music, such as in the song "War of Hormone." However, BTS truly understood that masculinity can be transformed after receiving feedback from fans. Since then, BTS has broken barriers of what it means to be a man. For example, during an episode of *Bon Voyage 1*, Jimin disagreed with Jungkook, V, and J-Hope when they stated that men should not check selfies, replying "What is a man?" Additionally, in their *Esquire* interview about masculinity, Suga stated, "There is this culture where masculinity is defined by certain emotions, characteristics. I'm not fond of these expressions. What does being masculine mean? People's conditions vary day by day" (Holmes, 2020). BTS deconstructs gender and sexual norms through their artistry and embodiment. BTS has a very profound understanding of gender and sexual politics.

MKP: BTS does not incorporate normative forms of "masculinity" or "femininity" in their recent art. Their gendered representation is flexible and inclusive. It is hard to say, but in a sense, their music, dancing, and styles are not bound to those normative masculine or feminine forms. There truly is no term for what they do, I just simply call it "art." And additionally, for me, I am still discovering that part of myself – my gender and sexuality – as a 13-year-old. And while they do not explicitly state their sexualities, their music and overall persona help me along the way to discovering that part of myself. Everything about challenging gender and sexuality is there: it does not matter what kind of masculinity Suga wants to portray. His quote is powerful enough in and of itself.

KCP: They are also one of the first Korean musical acts to utilize social media to engage with their fans. That is why they are able to create and sustain such an enormous fanbase over time. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube were effective in their early years. BTS created vlogs on YouTube to detail upcoming albums and singles. I was obsessed with their weekly vlogs! No other groups operated social media to that degree. Additionally, they also write their own music. They created an intentional platform in which they wrote for young people. Even their name BTS – Bangtan Sonyeondan – literally means the Bulletproof Boy Scouts. That means they are the protector of the youth. They had a plan for their music to create some type of movement. BTS was truly established on movement building. They decided that they

were going to talk about youth issues. Their entire *Love Yourself* trilogy forwards a social message that we do not have to be perfect. Obviously, they do have some careful self-presentation since they are good-looking, they create vibrant music videos, and they are well-dressed. However, that does not necessarily mean that they are striving for perfection. Their trilogy *Love Yourself: Her*, *Love Yourself: Tear*, and *Love Yourself: Answer* detailed the complexities of what it means to love yourself. *Love Yourself: Tear*, for example, draws out the difficulties of being sad, but then *Love Yourself: Answer* enables the listener to come to terms with who they are and how to practice self-love. This message speaks to folks like me who make up the majority of ARMY. And it also makes sense that this message would resonate with folks, considering that American ARMYs in particular consists largely of black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), especially women of color, who suffer within a racist and sexist society. The message of self-love truly speaks out to us.

MKP: Right, BTS have beautiful aesthetics, and they are all very handsome. They are very good at singing and dancing, but they also admit that this does not make them perfect. That honesty makes them stand out to me because our feelings at this age are very important. I know they are speaking out to me as a 13-year-old Hmong American teenager. They are role models to the youth of my generation, myself and my friends because of that genuine message. My age group obviously looks for aesthetics in music because that is what really sticks out to us at this age, but we also look up to them as role models beyond their aesthetics.

KCP: Each BTS member has their own complex storyline that is woven throughout their music. For example, Suga's storyline evokes the significance of the piano. He really loves the piano in reality. Thus, BTS translates their realities and truths into their music to produce intensely powerful fictional narratives.

KPP: That is fascinating, because previous generations of K-pop that I listened to did not contain those personal elements that are found in the creative and intellectual work of BTS. I did not know the personal lives and struggles of older Korean idol artists like how I recognize the lives and struggles of BTS members now. And even in those fleeting moments where fans were able to find ways to connect with older Korean idol artists on a more intimate level, their image was still strictly monitored or controlled by their entertainment companies, unlike BTS. Thus, the engagement did not reflect that level of "authenticity." I am curious to hear more about any moments where BTS shows up in your lives in ways that are empowering, unique, or random.

KCP: I read college applications as part of my job as a college admissions counselor. I actually have been surprised to read a few college applications that I will never forget. All of these applications are from Hmong American high school students who described the ways BTS enabled them to love themselves. Most White admissions counselors who are reading these college essays probably have no idea who BTS is. This was before BTS became a big hit in the United States. In one application, a student detailed her pressures of needing to conform to the dominant White culture as one of the few Asian Americans growing up in a small town. She resented being Hmong American all her life. This is relatable because many people have never heard of Hmong Americans before. BTS's song "So What" saved her from these feelings of

isolation and empowered her to truly embrace her Hmong American culture and her true self. College is a crucial time in the lives of youth. Thus, it is special when a young Hmong American high school student writes about her depression and her upbringing as a person from a low-income Hmong American family, and then reveals how BTS taught her how to love herself and power through this challenging life stage. This college essay in particular demonstrates the transformative power that BTS wields in their music and their potential to uphold young people.

KPP: As Hmong Americans who do not speak Korean or Japanese, we do not know what they are singing. While “Dynamite” is sung entirely in English, RM stated that BTS is not singing in English just so they can be legible in the U.S. (Bruner, 2019). So then how do the lyrics or the music speak to you both, and/or to the larger sector of ARMY who do not speak Korean or Japanese?

MKP: At the end of the day, language is not the most significant element of their music to me. The sounds of the music and their overall message of self-love speaks out to me the most. It is not just only the language. Their songs are catchy, the aesthetics are pleasing, their choreography is attractive, and their song melodies themselves produce a meaningful experience for me already. It is so meaningful to the point where I feel like crying listening to their songs even though I do not know what they’re saying. It just *feels* meaningful, you know?

KPP: Right, BTS already produces very meaningful messages to their ARMY fanbase because their platform is truly centered on empowering and upholding the youth. Thus, there is an emotional and affective element that is present within their artistry. In a sense, their music provides a form of validation that your emotions are real. And that your emotions are part of who you are as a teenager, and also as evidenced in **KCP**’s story about the college essay. The *affective* dimension is just as important as the comprehension of language. That is why, for example, I also love listening to instrumentals that are beautiful and moving, like the instrumentals for “Save Me.” I would say that is also why Hmong Americans fell in love with Mandopop and Cantopop back in the 1990s.

MKP: Right. That is why BTS resonates with kids like me. Because we like new music, with new aesthetics, melodies, sounds, and messages. I can tell that the new music that is released nowadays is not really the best that the artist can produce. BTS strives to make the best music that they can. BTS makes the best music for *this* generation. That is why their music appeals to us. They incorporate emotional elements in their music very well. Our tastes as teenagers and the way we think changes very quickly, and BTS’s music is able to keep up with our interests and our tastes.

KCP: BTS’s sound is also very different. There are three rappers, RM, Suga, and J-Hope in the group, which may be atypical for a seven-member K-pop group. Their solo rap music is very different from each other. Thus, when they come together to sing or to rap in a song, you can distinguish their voices, styles, and tones of rap. This contrast becomes unique to the performance of BTS. Additionally, tenors are usually the dominant members within most K-pop musical groups that I listen to. However, BTS possesses different voices from the K-pop that I am familiar with. For example, V’s voice is baritone. That is not the usual vocal range in the K-pop that I have listened

to so far. Thus, BTS carries a very distinct sound, but the members' voices blend together fluidly as well. We can differentiate the emotional elements behind every voice within every song.

KPP: Let me go back to **MKP's** point about the “newness” of BTS's music. Even as a very young person, you can already sense the distinctness and uniqueness of their artistry, right? It is not the same old predictable sounds, styles, and elements found in U.S.-based pop music or even in the larger world of K-pop that we are personally used to. Their songs also contain very empowering lyrics. The emergence of new media platforms such as YouTube have enabled fans to translate BTS's lyrics in ways that now are accessible to audiences who do not speak Korean. Their songs and music videos enable emotional connections which previously may not be possible. Teenagers like yourself go through very rapid developmental stages, and their music is able to follow along in your growth. So, it is always “new” and “up to date” in that sense? Is that part of what you are stating with this idea of “newness”?

MKP: Exactly. And a music video that demonstrates this kind of feeling of “new” is “Blood Sweat & Tears.” The song is a part of their central message of defining the experience of youth, in terms of temptation, innocence, and determination. The emotions are all there. The “Blood Sweat & Tears” music video is darker than their other music videos. The aesthetics are scarier. It is almost as if they are introducing a kind of freak concept into K-pop. That is why “Blood Sweat & Tears” stands out to me. The narrative is fictional, but the storyline about what it means to have noble morals in life is a unique storyline to me as a teenage K-pop listener. I look to pop culture for moral direction. BTS does it for me. The music video contains a lot of colorful splashes too, which is weird considering that the narrative is meant to be “dark.” So, the song is aesthetically pleasing and up to date with our changing and “new” musical tastes.

KCP: “Intro: Boy Meets Evil” is just a solo video of J-Hope dancing, but the video was superb. It was produced during the *Wings* era when “Blood Sweat & Tears” was released. It is the dark, evil era where they were attempting to define the meaning of evil, pain, and trauma. J-Hope is dancing so passionately and fiercely, which captures the anger and the trauma of the transitions between youth and adulthood. I saw the terror, disturbance, and fear in the way he danced. I can feel the shivers. It was that good. In the music video “Blood Sweat & Tears,” V explores the concept of the devil or the demon in the narrative and extends the narrative from “I Need U” in which he ends up killing his abusive father. The various music videos and their narratives investigate the complexities of fear and depression and create an entire narrative throughout various music videos into an intricate storyline for the viewers. So, they are showcasing a diverse range of emotions, even though their music is meant for young people.

KPP: In a sense, the viewers and listeners receive such intense feelings and emotions from their intellectual and creative work. Their work produces an infinite emotional range that is extremely powerful. And they do not shy away from introducing diverse modes of feelings for youth, even when they are dark, violent, or painful. That is something that I surmise many music artists refrain from doing.

KCP: I also really connect with “Boy With Luv” because BTS previously never wore pink. That contrasts to their earlier song “Boy In Luv,” which is an angry high school

song. “Boy In Luv” contains those infuriating emotions that are found in our high school years when we were still rebellious teenagers. Fans also accused BTS of being misogynistic in their early years as well. And then they released “Boy With Luv” years later and it is the complete opposite of “Boy In Luv.” The aesthetics are very different. They are all wearing pink. They are demonstrating that they have outgrown that toxic, masculinist, and naive high school stage. There is an emotional evolution in the concept of “love” in both creative narrative arcs. “Boy With Luv” is very bright and pink. It is a totally different reconceptualization of the song “Boy In Luv,” even though both songs have very similar titles.

MKP: One song that stands out to me is “Euphoria” by Jungkook. I love the “Euphoria” music video. It is a very upbeat song. When I listen to it, I imagine rainbow colors and sparkles. That is what the song was trying to accomplish. Their songs are also about happiness and joy, not just anger or pain.

KPP: I love strong, powerful, and heartfelt ballads. “Spring Day” from *You Never Walk Alone* stands out to me, lyrically of course, but also conceptually. The song comprises a profound sense of grief and also recovery, remixed with beautiful imagery in the music video of transitions, on the train and through a diverse range of geography. As Hmong people who are displaced into five continents due to an unjust war in Laos, I think of the personal losses that our people have had to endure in order to remake our lives in the U.S. In the video, Jimin picks up a pair of shoes to symbolize the recovery of lives that are lost. In a similar vein, Hmong people crossed the dangerous Mekong River to escape the war, with many drowning along the journey (Vang, 2010). Thus, the song evokes these intense feelings about death, but also about recreating our lives in the aftermath of death. The emotions that are embedded in their oeuvre are diverse and wide-ranging. We are able to witness evil and dark emotions in videos like “Intro: Boy Meets Evil” and “Blood Sweat & Tears.” Angry affect is found in “Boy in Luv.” And lastly, happy emotions are found in “Boy with Luv,” “Euphoria,” and “Dynamite.” Thus, their music truly captures the turbulence of emotions that are found in the lives of marginalized people, particularly for youth in the transitory stages between childhood and adulthood. These emotions represent the confusion, trauma, hope, and joy that accompany the realities of youth in our globalized and polarized world. But let us explore a different dimension of BTS. I am curious to hear how their presence, songs, and music are manifested live, in concerts, in the flesh.

KCP: The first time I have ever seen BTS in person was a fan meeting in Tokyo, Japan. They only perform four or five songs during fan meetings. Fan meetings are not performance-based. They mostly talk and play games with the fans, so it is more interactive. Obviously, I do not understand the Japanese language, but I still really enjoyed the fan meeting because I witnessed their joy in connecting with ARMY. The second time I saw BTS live was when I returned from Japan and attended the *Wings* concert in Rosemont, Illinois in March, 2017. That was really exhilarating because I was standing on the floor during the entire concert. I arrived at 9 a.m. to stand in line and waited all day to enter the arena. Fans even camped outside the arena the night before. The *Wings* concert was the first concert where each member also performed solo songs. At this time, BTS was not performing in huge domes or stadiums yet. The *Wings* concert was more personal. During the encore, fans concocted an idea where ARMY placed different colored paper bags over their Army Bomb glowsticks. Different

sections had different colors, so ultimately, the entire stadium became a rainbow. We did that for BTS. BTS did not know about the plan at all. ARMY wanted to show them that we love them too. Thus, we took the initiative to create joy for BTS. The *Wings* concert occurred shortly before they won the Billboard Music Award for Top Social Artist. In a sense, the award signified that they had arrived on the American music scene. It was powerful to witness this sold-out concert before they became “big” after winning the Billboard Music Award.

MKP: My first BTS concert was the *Love Yourself* concert in October, 2018, in Chicago that I attended with **KCP**, which by now was already the third time **KCP** has seen them live. I was excited because I had loved and listened to BTS for nearly two years already. Now I was finally going to see them live in concert. I had so many emotions during the concert itself. When they were singing ballads, I truly felt sad with them. And when they were singing upbeat songs, I jumped and sang along. I felt intense pleasure witnessing Jin sing “Epiphany” and then transitioning the performance to “The Truth Untold.” I particularly resonated with that portion of the concert because they were so emotional. I was so at peace with myself in that moment and did not want the concert to end.

KCP: I was very excited because I was attending the *Love Yourself* concert with my little sister. Sometimes I feel like I have to be a closet BTS or K-pop fan because it is not the norm. It is weird. Some folks may question why I like things like K-pop. I do not reveal to others that I enjoy K-pop or BTS. For example, **MKP** and I attended another K-pop concert, it was an Itzy concert. We were having a conversation with other fans around us, and one individual commented that I appeared more like MKP’s chaperone than I was there for the music. I did not appear to be a K-pop fan myself. However, you can naturally “be yourself” at the BTS concerts.

MKP: Our most recent concert was the extended *Love Yourself: Speak Yourself* tour that was also held in Chicago in May, 2019. It was raining all day before the concert. RM had emerged to speak to the fans, stating that the presence of ARMY was so powerful, he knows the rain will stop before the concert, and it did! I cannot believe he came out and actually said that to us! We were willing to wait for BTS in the rain, and they were willing to wait for us too. That is what our relationship is about. We understand each other.

KCP: One memorable moment occurred when we were sitting at the top section of Soldier Field awaiting the beginning of the concert. There were suites located overhead. While we were sitting, we heard fans screaming and then we looked overhead, behind us, and BTS was up in a suite overlooking and waving at us! As they changed for the encore, they went back up there and waved to us again! Even during the break times when they were supposed to be resting, they still put in efforts to engage ARMY.

MKP: One heartfelt moment during the concert was Jungkook’s performance of “Euphoria,” as I stated earlier that I loved the song. He truly outperformed himself there. The song itself already contained a chorus that resembles a choir of angels. During the concert, Jungkook was unexpectedly lifted into the air during the performance. It was as if he was an angel flying in the sky! Even in person, they still appeared magical and larger than life.

KPP: I am quite fascinated by the entire BTS economy and the engaged ARMY fanbase. When I think of the Hmong people, we are also a global and diasporic stateless community. There is already that sort of “imagined community” among the diasporic Hmong people across the globe (Anderson, 1983). National borders do not separate Hmong as much as they used to since we now can circulate our stories, music, and films through online platforms. ARMY is an entity of millions of fans all over the world where geographic boundaries become less significant as well in the digital age. In particular, BTS has crafted a powerful social justice platform that highlights relevant and timely activism that connects ARMY as a politically conscious global network. Their fans have built a connection as a global imagined community. Let us explore these political dimensions of ARMY.

KCP: We can certainly examine these dimensions through the example of the Black Lives Matter movement and the civil unrest and uprisings occurring in our hometown of Minneapolis (Andrews, 2020). Social justice is a crucial facet of my life. I studied social justice as a Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies major and Asian American Studies minor in college. Social justice informs my core values and beliefs. BTS also stands for social justice. The entire world has recognized BTS as a global leader in social justice issues, including UNICEF and the United Nations. Through these platforms, they are not promoting their music, but rather, their social justice values. The current uprisings that are transpiring in our city present a direct connection between BTS and me. Fans on Weverse called on BTS to speak up about Black Lives Matter, since there are also many Black ARMYs. BTS genuinely cares about ARMY, so that was a tremendous catalyst in BTS’s decision to support the Black Lives Matter movement. BTS donated one million dollars to the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Additionally, the organization “One In An ARMY” matched their donation by organizing online social media fundraising campaigns to support Black Lives Matter organizations. And of course, since one of the police officers involved in Floyd’s murder was Hmong American officer Tou Thao, BTS’s attention to this moment meant so much more to me. The fact that ARMY also cares about social justice is so powerful. I truly feel that I am a part of this politicized global network not only because we share a deep love for BTS, but because they truly care about the same social justice issues that I do.

KPP: ARMY is such an engaged fanbase. Through BTS, ARMY is able to politicize issues relevant to our social world and highlight issues of social and racial justice. This political dimension connects ARMY as one global entity. ARMY is a complicated body of fans who can organize rapidly through social media to intervene in social injustice. BTS provided the structure for this political mobilization, but the individual bodies of the fans, when brought together, are the ones who are transforming social relations across boundaries.

KCP: Right. I had already donated to multiple local Black Lives Matter organizations here in Minneapolis. I am also following the activities of the group Hmong For Black Lives. However, as a member of the global ARMY network, I also donated to the #MatchAMillion links that were circulated on ARMY-run BTS fanpages on Facebook and Twitter. Because ARMY is a “group” or global “body” that I am fundamentally a part of, I needed to participate in this act of solidarity. So, I am involved in Black Lives Matter from multiple angles.

MKP: I have witnessed many uprisings and injustices occurring right here in Minneapolis. I was so angry when Minneapolis police murdered Floyd down in South Minneapolis. And Hmong people were put into the spotlight in a negative way because of officer Thao's involvement in Floyd's murder. But BTS spoke out against racism in such a way that actually made me feel like I have the power to fight against anti-Black racism in my own community. I feel connected to ARMY knowing that it was BTS who brought us together under a common cause of social justice. As just simply an *American*, I care about what is happening in my city and country when it comes to police violence. BTS truly speaks to me because they highlight the importance of Black Lives Matter and they paid their respects to Floyd. They are willing to donate money to a cause that is happening here in my city, which is important to me. So, as I stated earlier, this is a great way to be a role model for my generation.

KPP: In a sense, not only does the music and message resonate with you and your generation, but also the ways in which they enact politics and racial justice. The ways BTS models social justice ideals, values, and beliefs are empowering to the younger sector of ARMY. The #MatchAMillion campaign created by ARMYs also brought attention to how social justice can be achieved on a global scale (Park et al, 2020). I did visit Floyd's memorial in South Minneapolis just a few days after his murder and was overcome with emotions. BTS's stance against police violence, support of Black Lives Matter, and respect towards Floyd here in Minneapolis really makes us feel closer to them within the global network of ARMY.

KCP: In another event, American ARMYs in particular were able to mobilize and intervene in President Donald Trump's White supremacist rallies in summer 2020. The visit in Tulsa, Oklahoma, became the site where K-pop fans, and American ARMYs specifically, sabotaged President Trump's rally. Trump mistakenly believed that the BOK (Bank of Oklahoma) Center was going to be full of his supporters, but in reality, these seats were just fake tickets! Only half of the stadium was filled. This cyber activism was revealed to the public by anonymous hacktivist and social justice groups.

MKP: In a sense, ARMYs did not even publicize their activism. This is even more meaningful because there is no need to tell the world that you are engaging in activism. Sometimes, you participate in activism because it is your values and morals. Trump is clearly a White supremacist. ARMY participated in this anonymous online activism because they wanted to take a stand against racism. They were able to distort the public persona of President Trump. They truly made him look stupid, which for Trump, looking like a fool and being publicly humiliated is the biggest blow above all else. Yet, we do not want to make this situation about us. We want to send the message that ARMY is so powerful, we could do something impactful whenever we want to.

KCP: Certainly! And when we think about the concept of the "pop fan base," you think of annoying fans that are just super-duper obsessed with music, shallow looks, and fame. For example, think of Justin Bieber's fanbase, the Beliebers, who are characterized as crazed and obsessed fans participating in bizarre and outrageous antics. That is the stereotypical representation of what a "pop fan" is. Yet, ARMY shatters this stereotype and crafts a new image of what a politically engaged pop fan base can look like in the Black Lives Matter era. Furthermore, BTS has never stated,

“We despise Donald Trump,” or “We do not support Donald Trump.” BTS has never even pointed to that direction at all. ARMY took it upon themselves to advocate for what they believe in.

KPP: That action demonstrates the political power of ARMY beyond capitalism, beyond just selling out concerts and the CD sales that we traditionally associate with the music industry and which often is really the goal of accumulating a “fanbase.” The pop music industry is a gigantic capitalistic machine in that sense. In the dominant perspective, pop fans are a means to an end in the life of capitalism. However, ARMY is a political force that is very engaged with social justice issues and renders capitalism as suspect, and even as a contributor to the state of White supremacy and racism in the United States and globally. So, the example of Black Lives Matter and the sabotaging of Donald Trump’s Tulsa rally truly demonstrates how ARMY utilizes ethical strategies to care for each other in our oppressive, capitalistic world. BTS and politics meet at this very dangerous crossroad to formulate an intervention to Trump’s White nationalist violence (Lipsitz, 1994). For me, I interpret their ethical and creative maneuvers as forms of anti-racist and anti-capitalist politics.

MKP: BTS just brought us together as a global activist network of ARMY. However, we can also do things outside and beyond BTS. BTS does not direct us to any kind of political or charitable cause, but they open the door for ARMY to help the world on our own. BTS is what we have in common, but our social justice activism varies throughout the entire world. We are a force and an alternate universe altogether even beyond BTS.

KPP: The fact that ARMY extends beyond BTS is a testament to the fact that their fanbase is a unique entity that has an enduring political life beyond the artists themselves (Bhandari, 2020; Bruner, 2020). And we certainly do not link this complex element to traditional pop fanbases. While BTS can be disparaged as “yet another K-pop group,” our conversation has proved that their artistry is very unique and empowering. I am struck by the affective structures that frame their artistry, their gendered personas, their music and aesthetics, their live concert performances, and their social justice activism. For me, their role in Black Lives Matter impacted me the most as a Hmong American because one of the officers who helped murder Floyd was Hmong American. This event catapulted Hmong Americans into the spotlight, which made BTS’s contribution to this moment all the more special and significant for me. Being a part of ARMY feels so much more meaningful after BTS publicly condemned racism and police violence, particularly because we have participated in many Black Lives Matter protests right here in Minneapolis. This certainly has been a refreshing conversation. It truly sucks that BTS had to postpone their Map of the Soul World Tour — where you both already purchased tickets to the Chicago concert — because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Live concerts are truly a divine and supernatural experience. I hope to attend a BTS concert soon too!

Conclusion

Our critical conversation revealed that Hmong American engagements with BTS are multi-layered and multi-dimensional. We did not expect the various directions that our conversation would take to include gender, our emotions of seeing them live, or the meanings of their support for Black Lives Matter to our own lives. Since we are a relatively marginalized and unknown stateless refugee community living in the

U.S., we oftentimes have to strategically label ourselves as “Asian American” or simply “American” in order to gain recognition, visibility, and legibility. In this sense, we feel included in the ways BTS engages with their manifold fanbases in the U.S. and around the world because ARMY as a network compels us to participate in social justice in both micro and macro ways. We have shown how BTS impacts our unique Hmong American lives, but we also appreciate how BTS created a space for us to engage in something larger beyond our immediate and ordinary lives. The most important element BTS has taught us is that embracing our truths as Hmong Americans living in challenging times is enough, and that has made us bulletproof.

References

- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso Books.
- Abramovitch, S. (2019, October 2). BTS is back: Music’s billion-dollar boy band takes the next step. *The Hollywood Reporter*.
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/bts-is-back-musics-billion-dollar-boy-band-takes-next-step-1244580>
- Andrews, T.M. (2020, June 7). BTS donates \$1 million to Black Lives Matter after K-pop fans flood hashtags to support movement. *The Washington Post*.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/06/07/bts-donation-k-pop-fans-black-lives-matter/>
- Bhandari, A. (2020, July 14). *The Mobilizing Power of the BTS ARMY*. Reuters Graphics.
<https://graphics.reuters.com/GLOBAL-RACE/BTS-FANS/nmopajgmxxv/>
- Bruner, R. (2019, March 28). BTS explains why they’re not going to start singing in English. *Time*.
<https://time.com/5560818/bts-singing-english/>
- Bruner, R. (2020, July 25). How K-pop fans actually work as a force for political activism in 2020. *Time*.
<https://time.com/5866955/k-pop-political/>
- Bultena, K. (2018). Hmong musicians blend tradition with modern styles. *Wisconsin Public Radio*.
<https://www.wpr.org/hmong-musicians-blend-tradition-modern-styles>
- Desai, J. (2019). Bollywood and Asian American culture. In J. Lee (Ed), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature and Culture*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.10.1093/acrefore/90780190201098.013.797>
- Elkse. (2020). How I learned to love myself thanks to BTS. *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review* [20130613], (1). <https://ther3journal.com/>.
- Haoni, S., Johnson, M., Moon, A., Patron, E. J., & Rahmanindita, A. (2020). Walking the borasaek road with BTS. *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review* [20130613], (1). <https://ther3journal.com/>.
- Holmes, D. (2020). The boundless optimism of BTS. *Esquire*.
<https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a34654383/bts-members-be-album-interview-2020/>

- Kelley, C. (2018). As torchbearers of Hallyu's legacy, BTS received the order of cultural merit. *Forbes*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/caitlinkelley/2018/10/27/bts-order-of-cultural-merit/?sh=7f2dff78e2d9>
- Kim, H. (2019, July 29). *The exponential power of networks: Lessons learned from BTS fandom*. University of Southern California Center for Public Diplomacy.
<https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/exponential-power-networks-lessons-learned-bts-fandom>
- Kim, J. (2018). *Hallyu and Korean America: Transnational connections through cultural consumption in New York City*. In R.M. Joo & S.S. Lee (Eds.), *A Companion to Korean American Studies* (pp. 207-230). Brill.
- Kim, T. Y. & Jin, D.Y. (2016). Cultural policy in the Korean wave: An analysis of cultural diplomacy embedded in presidential speeches. *International Journal of Communication* 10, 5514-5534.
- Kuo, L., Perez-Garcia, S., Burke, L., Yamasaki, V., & Le, T. (2020). Performance, fantasy, or narrative: LGBTQ+ Asian American identity through K-pop media and fandom. *Journal of Homosexuality*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2020.1815428>
- Lipsitz, G. (1994). *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular music, postmodernism, and the poetics of place*. Verso.
- Park, S.Y, Kaneshiro, B., Santero, N. & Lee, J.H. (2021). *Armed in ARMY: A case study of how BTS fans successfully collaborated to #MatchAMillion for Black Lives Matter*. CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Yokohama, Japan (pp. 1-14).
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3445353>
- Ro, C. (2020, March 9). BTS and EXO: The soft power roots of K-pop. BBC.
<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200309-the-soft-power-roots-of-k-pop>
- Suntikul, W. (2019, March 1). BTS and the global spread of Korean soft power. *The Diplomat*.
<https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/bts-and-the-global-spread-of-korean-soft-power/>
- Vang, C. (2010). *Hmong America: Reconstructing community in diaspora*. University of Illinois Press.

Suggested Citation

APA

- Pha, K. P., Pha, K., & Pha, M. K. (2021). How we became bulletproof: A critical conversation among three Hmong ARMY siblings. *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review* [20130613], (2).
<https://ther3journal.com/issue-2/how-we-became-bulletproof>

MLA

Pha, Kong Pheng, et al. "How We Became Bulletproof: A Critical Conversation Among Three Hmong American ARMY Siblings." *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review* [20130613], no. 2, 2021.
<https://ther3journal.com/issue-2/how-we-became-bulletproof>.

Acknowledgements

N/A

Conflict of Interest Statement

The creators have no relevant conflicts of interest to disclose.

© Kong Pheng Pha, Kaochi Pha, Meria Khaosue Pha, 2021
How We Became Bulletproof: A Critical Conversation Among Three Hmong American ARMY Siblings by Kong Pheng Pha, Meria Khaosue Pha, Kaochi Pha is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>