

## New Kings of the World | Part Two

SEASON 2  
episode four

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Nick Lemann

Hi, this is Nick Lemann. We're on Underreported, the podcast from Columbia Global Reports. And I'm here talking to Fatima Bhutto about her book, *New Kings of the World: Dispatches from Bollywood, Dizi, and K-Pop*.

Let me switch to K-pop. So one thing that strikes me as an American with two teenage kids is they don't know from Bollywood. They have never heard of any of it, but they know all about K-pop, especially my daughter. And, you know, in reading the book, if I'm reading you correctly, you're more ambivalent about K-pop on the question of is it an authentic expression of Korean culture or is it just kind of Hollywood half a world away

So could you talk about that, the differences between Bollywood and K-pop and why K-pop seems to have a bigger American audience?

Fatima Bhutto

Well, K-pop is huge in America. I mean, it's got an enormous, enormous number of fans here. It plays very big in terms of Spotify and iTunes. I think most of their K-pop numbers come from North America in terms of listenership.

But K-pop is interesting, because it is a bait-and-switch, essentially. Whereas dizi and Bollywood may share certain things with American culture, they produce a very unique product at the end of the day, that's distinctly Turkish or distinctly Indian. Whereas K-pop isn't. It isn't that distinct.

That partly comes from Korean history and it partly comes from its origins. So it comes you know – America obviously had a huge influence in South Korea. They ran a full military government there from 1945 to '48. Today, there are more American military personnel stationed in Korea than there are in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. They had huge numbers there through the sixties and those military bases with all that personnel needed entertaining. They brought Hollywood movies to the peninsula.

So Hollywood was bigger back then, I mean, in the sixties and seventies, in South Korea than it was in Japan or China, let's say. And Korean music at that time in the

sixties, fifties was called “trot” and that was a stodgy blend of foxtrot and Japanese music. And if you wanted to hear or play anything besides trot, you had one place to do that, and that was the American bases.

So their history is closely tied to America, one. And number two, K-pop is born out of the financial crisis of the late 1990s. Korea at that point had been very dependent on heavy industry, which was badly hit in 1997. And as they were thinking how to reform, how to come out of the crisis, their president had a really inventive idea. He was inspired by Hollywood movies and by Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musicals, West End musicals in England.

And he decided to refocus the country’s attentions towards information technology and culture because he figured it needed time and talent. And they invested millions and millions of dollars into the talent and into the technology to support it. So they had very high broadband laid very early. Much before you had fast, fast broadband here, you had it in Korea. And so it’s produced in a very industrial factory sort of way. There’s an algebra for success.

One of the biggest studios that makes K-pop has this book called Cultural Technology. It’s a manifesto. And it’s sort of, you know, it’s spoken about with religious reverence. It’s CT for short. It’s not allowed to be taken out of the studios. Everyone studies it. And down to what eyeshadow should be worn by what performer, you know in what country.

Nick Lemann

These kids have a horrible life, right, living inside this system?

Fatima Bhutto

It’s tough. Yeah, it’s tough.

Nick Lemann

They get plastic surgery, and...

Fatima Bhutto

Yeah. They spend five years being trained in everything – in how to talk and how to dance and how to sing and how to eat and how to stand and how to sit – before you’ve ever even heard of them. So by the time they’re released and they now have

fans, they've been through a grueling system designed for success, for commercial success. So yeah, it's a curious phenomena, but out of everything that I studied for this book, it was the one thing that seemed to be just everywhere.

So dizi, which I was most interested by, hasn't really hit the English-speaking world. It's made it pretty much everywhere else. It's very big in Asia, it's very big in Eastern Europe. It's now quite popular in certain Western European countries like Spain and Italy. It's huge in South America. But nowhere where people speak English. I mean, no one in America is really watching dizi yet. And, you know, Bollywood, the same. Bollywood is huge in Africa, let's say. It's massive in South America. But you're not watching it in New York. But K-pop genuinely is everywhere.

Nick Lemann

One more thing on K-pop, just sort of curiosity. Is it okay to understand Psy, the biggest superstar, at least formerly, as part of K-pop, or as a separate thing?

Fatima Bhutto

He's considered totally separate. He doesn't come through the studio system. He's an outlier. He doesn't really follow the traditional ethics and rules of K-Pop. He kind of burst onto the scene.

But one of my favorite facts about K-pop is after he became successful, the stock value of his father's company doubled because people just assumed that a man who raised such a successful son would obviously run a successful company.

And, you know, I think the K-pop world wouldn't include him, but I think they do owe him something. You know, he famously broke the YouTube counter. YouTube didn't even know they could have a billion views for a video until Psy. So they had to re-set their counters after him. And I think he made it – he took K-pop places where it hadn't reached.

Nick Lemann

You write about what I guess is the most famous show or biggest hit in the history of dizi, which is called Magnificent Century. So first, tell us about that a little bit. And then I have a couple more questions about it.

Fatima Bhutto

So that's one of the big shows, and it's about Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. And

it covers his entire rule. So his ascension just up until his death. And it focuses on the love story he had with his wife, Hurrem, who was a concubine who he married. Sultans didn't marry at the time. They had children, and then the mother and the child would go out to a province to rule that state or that area and live there.

But he married Hurrem, and she's a controversial figure, even today, even though great architectural works in Istanbul are attributed to her. And it focuses on their love story, while also on his rule and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. Famously, Suleiman nearly conquered Vienna, and had he made it through to Vienna, would have barreled through Western Europe.

Nick Lemann

One thinks probably incorrectly, that, if soap opera is a fair term, which it may not be, they what binds soap operas to their audience is the audience is getting its life played back to it, basically. It's you know, these are people like you. They might be a little better looking, but, you know, they have the same screwed up lives you have. And it's very sort of in the present.

So it is that part of what's coming out of Istanbul? And also, why would a historical drama be so popular?

Fatima Bhutto

Well, they hate the term soap opera out there. And that's because dizi is quite unique. It has its own score, its own set up. First of all, they're much longer than soap operas. So every episode is about 2 hours and a bit, 2 hours and 15 minutes. They're really like films, each episode.

And unlike soap operas, these are very slow burning. So it's not your traditional, you know, family finds out father is actually brother, company falls apart in one episode. That stuff takes weeks in a dizi. And they're based, a lot of them are based on literary epics, Turkish literary epics.

They're all filmed pretty much in Turkey, so they don't go to shoot, as Bollywood does, all over Europe. And what I think people really responded to about Magnificent Century was that it was about a glorious time in history, especially for the Muslim world.

Or let's even say if you're somebody sitting in Chile where it's very big, or in Nairobi, you may not be from the Muslim world, but you're from the Global South. And this

is capturing a period where people were proud and, well, quite free as well, and they were not put-down conquered people. And many people responded to that show because of that.

They also really liked the love story and the costumes, for some reason. Though, they look a little kitsch when one watches the show now. There was a whole subculture of jewelry that was born of the show. In the Middle East, for example, people were wearing jewelry that looked like it had come from Magnificent Century. So I think it was elaborate and exciting to watch visually as well.

Nick Lemann

What are the non-historic shows like?

Fatima Bhutto

They're very good, actually. So one of the shows that I visited when I was in Istanbul is a show called *Çukur*, which means The Pit. And it's a show modeled on *The Godfather*. You know, there's a family head who has to pass some power down to his sons. The great son, of course, is the one not involved who has to be brought back because the father is injured, very much like Michael Corleone is. And it's a story set in a ghetto in Istanbul. It's about family, it's about power, it's about crime. And it's really well done, actually.

There are many, many other shows. There's shows set in women's prisons. There are shows set in, you know, police or military environments. Two of the, well one of the biggest shows right now is a historical show. It's the beginning of the Ottoman Empire. And it's a show that has I mean, if not outright government support, then then government's blessing. It's called *Ertugrul* or I think *Resurrection* is its English title. And it's on Netflix, and millions and millions of people all over the world are watching it.

Nick Lemann

This is a – I apologize for such a US-centric question. But when will we see the day that other than K-pop, these other forms of global pop culture, and I'm sure there's more out there, will penetrate our consciousness here?

Fatima Bhutto

I think the Turks are trying. So they have an English adaptation of *Magnificent*

Century planned. You know, they've made a lot of inroads into Netflix and Amazon Prime. And so I think they are pushing to make their way here. Some of their shows have been adapted for American TV. You just don't know that they're Turkish or they haven't been so successful that people have woken up to the fact that this is an industry.

But they're keenly attuned to the English-speaking world, and I think it's a matter of time before they break through. When I asked people in Istanbul, including one of the heads of one of the biggest studios in Istanbul, why it was that the English-speaking world isn't on board, they were you know, they had a couple of theories.

One was that you have to read subtitles and there isn't a lot of appetite for shows with subtitles. You might watch a film, but you're not going to sit down for, you know, 200 hours with subtitles. I don't know if that's true, because things like Narcos are subtitled and people sit down to watch that.

And the other angle was, is it because this is coming from the Muslim world and people are uncomfortable? People don't know how to engage with those products yet. I think that could be part of it. But I think their inroads to Western Europe are exciting and point to success in the future.

Nick Lemann

So there's more of this saga to come.

Fatima Bhutto

Oh, much more. Much more.

Nick Lemann

Okay. Well, thanks very much, Fatima, for being on our podcast and for writing this wonderful book. We really appreciate working with you.

Fatima Bhutto

Oh, thank you. It was a pleasure.

Nick Lemann

Fatima Bhutto's *New Kings of the World: Dispatches from Bollywood, Dizi, and K-Pop* is available everywhere now. Ready for more Underreported? Subscribe to this

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