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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Introduction to “The Globalization of K-pop: Local and Transnational Articulations of South Korean Popular Music”

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The global pop-music sensation of 2012 was Psy’s “Gangnam Style.” I am not sure if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but the sheer proliferation of downloads and impersonations, copycat videos and parodic performances—the very constitution of virality—established K-pop (South Korean popular music) as a global pop culture phenomenon. Walking by a German-language school in my Northern California neighborhood, I, a middle-aged man of East Asian descent, am greeted by young expatriate German pupils rehashing the pony-gallop dance steps and the “oop-oo” of Psy’s hip-hop and techno-pop infused music. Visiting an elderly acquaintance in North Oxford, England, I discover that her declining cognitive faculty finds curious recognition in any screen showing the ubiquitous music video—whether the small television showing “Coronation Street” or her CAT scan—leading her to inevitably utter: “That’s, that’s... ‘Gangnam Style!’”¹ Certainly, it is difficult to dismiss all the media reports—from Germany to France to Thailand to Peru—documenting K-pop’s significant followings around the world (Tucic 2012). Psy’s impact may even have encroached on academia itself: we are awash with reports that enrollment in Korean-language classes, especially among nonethnic Koreans, has grown explosively.² Many observers are wont to attribute at least some of the increase to the influence of “Gangnam Style,” in particular, and K-pop, in general (Rogers 2013; “K-Pop Confidential” 2013; Bougon 2012; Briceno 2013).

It is one thing to acknowledge the immense popularity of “Gangnam Style,” but would it be wise to see this as a harbinger of a larger phenomenon—namely, the globalization of South Korean popular culture? The rumor that South Korean popular culture was establishing

beachheads across Northeast and Southeast Asia began to surface in the mid-1990s, but few could deny its prevalence and resilience a decade later. Particularly noteworthy was the tsunami-like impact of *Fuyu no sonata* (K. *Kyŏul yŏng'a*; E. *Winter Sonata*). By 2005, the Korean Wave had become a widely recognized subcultural presence in Japan, a phenomenon analyzed in my paper in this special issue. While the original content of the Korean Wave was predominantly visual—films and, more importantly, serialized television dramas—the shifting tide brought what some call Korean Wave 2.0: a swelling interest in South Korean popular music. Knowledgeable observers were therefore keen to point out that Psy was merely froth on the larger wave of export-oriented South Korean K-pop (see Lie, 2014).

Nonetheless, as I elaborate in my paper, Psy is an exception rather than the rule. K-pop is a figment of the unabashedly commercial culture industry that valorizes high-quality pop music with an irresistible visual patina—not only the professional sheen of the music videos but also the blemish-free aesthetic of K-pop stars. Hence, those smitten by the beautiful boys and girls of the Korean Wave rejected Psy as an aberration to the prevailing K-pop aesthetic. Psy is more like a sumo wrestler than a romantic hero—an unattractive clown, not a heart-stopping romantic idol. I see the limited impact of “Gangnam Style” in Japan—perhaps the only OECD country where the song failed to go viral—as a window through which to view contemporary Japanese culture. In particular, I stress the persistent gender divide in lifestyles and tastes in Japan and their manifestations in divergent pop culture preferences. To go viral in Japan, one must capture the youth market, the core of the popular music industry. Failing to ignite the ground zero of pop-music trends or the core of K-pop fans (after South Korea, K-pop is most popular in Japan, probably the only country where Psy had some foreign fans before “Gangnam Style”), “Gangnam Style” did not become a major hit there. This fact is symptomatic of a powerful trend toward insularity and involution in contemporary Japanese culture and society.

Almost halfway around the world, Nissim Otmazgin and Irina Lyan consider the contiguous communities of K-pop fans in Israel and Palestine. Although geographically and culturally distant from South Korea—very few K-pop fans from Israel or Palestine have ever visited South Korea—they forge enthusiastic networks primarily via the Internet. Both fan groups view themselves as cultural missionaries, disseminating a foreign cultural phenomenon to their friends and coethnics. Whereas Jewish Israeli K-pop fans tend to view themselves as being outside of the Israeli mainstream, Arabic Palestinian enthusiasts see themselves as part of the

larger pan-Arabic sphere. K-pop is relatively exotic to the former group, but serves as a means of reaching out to the wider world for the latter. Not surprising for two spatially close but politically distant groups, the two fan communities have limited contact with each other, despite their shared musical interest.

From Israel and Palestine, we move to Austria. Pointing to the generally increasing popularity of K-pop throughout Europe, Sang-yeon Sung focuses on Austria, the heartland of European classical music, which she characterizes as musically “conservative.” Like their Middle Eastern counterparts, few Austrian fans have been to South Korea, but they constitute a small but growing (and undoubtedly enthusiastic) fandom that is intimately intertwined with the global reaches of the Internet. Sung delineates an impressive array of activities and events related to K-pop, ranging from fan gatherings to karaoke performances and even a live audition called “Austria’s Next K-pop Star.” Conscious of their own musical heritage, the Austrian fans of K-pop—like their Middle Eastern counterparts—seek to serve as cultural missionaries for K-pop in their homeland and in Europe more broadly.

Finally, Ingyu Oh and Hyo-Jung Lee take us back to the birthplace of K-pop. Beginning with a brief history of South Korean popular music, they outline the emergence and development of export-oriented K-pop. They point not only to government policy and commercial interests that contributed to the new cultural industry of K-pop but to social and cultural changes that rendered pop-music stardom into a desirable and prestigious pursuit. As we have learned from the previous case studies, the Internet and other new technologies are critical for any adequate analysis of the globalization of K-pop. As Oh and Lee remind us, the far-flung appeal of K-pop cannot be understood merely by analyzing its attraction to foreign fans; we need to consider it as not only a cultural phenomenon but also a political-economic entity.

Some skeptical readers may wonder whether “Gangnam Style” is an outlier or K-pop a flash in the pan. Their suspicions may well be right. However, whereas an astute observer a half century ago may have seen the possibility of South Korea’s development as a dynamic economy or a democratic polity—although I don’t know of any sober Western social scientist who did—no one could have foreseen the global virality of “Gangnam Style” or conceived that South Korean popular music would find fans in Israel or Austria. Indeed, even by the mid-1990s, I don’t think anyone anticipated that South Korean popular culture would have adherents at all outside of the Korean peninsula (or, more accurately, beyond South Korea). As Samuel Johnson

said, it is a bit like “a dog’s walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.” Whatever the future of K-pop or the Korean Wave, the early twenty-first century brought the emergence of a new cultural phenomenon that demanded our attention not only as a thing in itself but also as part of larger changes in our globalizing world, whether the explosive impact of the Internet or the unpredictable taste of pop-music listeners.

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Notes

- 1 This woman seems to have been unduly influenced by Psy’s address at the nearby Oxford Union on November 7, 2012. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=2f99cTgT5mg, accessed December 10, 2013.
- 2 This is certainly the case at the University of California, Berkeley, for the academic year 2013–2014.

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