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Review Essay

The Perfect Marriage between K-pop and Technology

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Suk-Young Kim. 2018. *K-pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 288 pp.

A life without music is inconceivable. And all kinds of music in the contemporary world, whether performed live or captured digitally, are now closely intertwined with technology, which brings and binds together human and nonhuman subjects. It is this advanced technology that has brought about particular features of "liveness" to music. Suk-Young Kim's *K-pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* takes up K-pop as a case worth exploring. Kim studies "K-pop's liveness as a specific mode of human contact" with reference to historical, social, and cultural factors, claiming that it is through human contact that we feel alive and connected to each other (5).

If a youngster is discovered to have musical talent at an early age, the disciplined process of preparing to become a K-pop artist is extraordinarily strict. Giving up mobile phones, "being uprooted from their families," and learning "foreign languages and impeccable stage manners" are just some of the challenges that aspiring K-pop musicians must face (7). This strict training may be unknown to the public, but in some cases the resulting impeccable presentations are what appeal to and inspire many fans, some of whom find new meaning in their own lives. Kim notes Michael Fuhr's (2016) acknowledgment of the link between the specifics of Korea's sociohistorical contexts that might enable endurance of the stringent training involved in becoming a K-pop artist and its capacity for global reach (Kim 2018, 8). Kim starts with this most intriguing topic.

Interestingly, Kim explores the possibility that the origin of the success of K-pop may be significantly attributed to the *heung* (feeling of excitement) of Korean traditional music. This *heung* might have contributed to K-pop's "liveness and joy," "neighbourhood spirit," and "sense of collective responsibility" (18). K-pop artists see *heung* "as an affective mediator between the self and the other, the local and the global, the past and the present," actively contributing to K-pop's liveness (18). It is possible that Korean *heung* may have a universally appealing dimension that injects joyfulness into the hearts of the audiences. This is a big proposition; a clear counterargument is offered by John Lie (2015), who argues that K-pop lacks artistic or political urge and primarily tends to seek commercial value (14).

Heung is certainly an essential part of the Korean national psyche that prompts, for example, Koreans gathered for a dinner to take turns singing. Such gatherings make the participants "lift their shoulders up and down rhythmically," which Kim sees as "the social aspect of liveness" (19). In this respect, however, I contend that *heung* may not be uniquely Korean, although is an essential feature of much Korean (especially traditional) music. Perhaps, *heung* is a universal feature of musical performance. That is, all fun-oriented, musical performances may have *heung* ingrained in them.

Slightly extending the cultural and traditional roots of K-pop presented in the introduction, in chapter 1 Kim further explores the social, political, and cultural context of K-pop. This is a fruitful effort acknowledging South Korea's highly developed entertainment industry in a global context. Agreeing with Roald Maliangkay (2014), Kim views "the youth of the 1990s as qualitatively different from the previous generation" (30). The social climate prior to the 1990s may have contributed to the highly improved musical standards in that decade, but it was the youth who brought K-pop to worldwide audiences. Here, Kim persuades me that "many of the current TGIF [Twitter, Google, iPhone, Facebook] Generation, constantly glued to their cell phones, tablets, and smart watches, love to implant portable screens in their bodies and never again risk losing their treasured electronic gadgets" (33). The Teletubbies Generation, Kim's term for fans born and raised in the 1990s (32), has the quality to engage in "online group action that produce[s] the classic sense of group liveness" (39). Thus, the Korean TGIF Generation, underpinned by the sociocultural context of Korean society and the technological ability to make "liveness," seems to have mastered the capacity to reach out to global audiences well beyond national and cultural boundaries and attract, even touch, the minds of music fans around the world.

 A persuasive theory seems to emerge but remains not completely resolved in my mind. Kim has discussed a range of Korean sociopolitical contexts of the last two to three decades, to which the development of the TGIF Generation's capacity to achieve global reach may be attributed. Yet, some readers might like to know more about the key influential factors that brought about the worldwide K-pop phenomenon. However, this information might be difficult to glean, because the K-pop phenomenon is the result of numerous intertwined factors that the author illustrates throughout chapter 1, including Google Hangouts, YouTube, and Twitter, which create "near-live interaction between K-pop's producers and consumers" (47). Thus, the "elective affinities" (or compounding) of many Korean-specific and non-Korean factors have come together to produce the K-pop phenomenon, and I doubt if a similar phenomenon could be easily reproduced in the near future. I was much more persuaded by the second half of the chapter, which culminates in the sentence, "Creativity, or a creative economy…is rooted in the flexibly aligned nexus between art and technology, hardware and software" (50). This observation strengthened my desire to read the other chapters.

Much of chapter 2 is based on Kim's own observations of musical performances on Korean television over the last few decades. She is especially interested in the prominent shift to using new technologies as the key platform to provide music to the Internet. Kim's personal experiences make her scholarly argument more

convincing and generate excitement in the reader. For example, her interesting report on "how K-pop idols spend virtually an entire day for what turns out to be less than five minutes of TV time" (64) made me wonder if young people will still be interested in becoming musical K-pop artists after learning of the hard work involved. Or, is the hard work attractive enough to inspire the young and lead them to their own five minutes of fame? Perhaps young people are indeed qualitatively different from the older generation in terms of what they want, as Maliangkay has claimed (cited in Kim 2018, 30).

Kim's long-term commitment to these musical performances—and her observant descriptions of performances in Korea, internationally, and in the cyber world—is impressive. The author's descriptions are vivid and exciting, as if she is reporting the music news live for TV audiences (67). She also shows how passionate fans try to elevate the fame of their favorite performers through volunteer labor on their own time (71). These descriptions make the point that without audience support, K-pop stars will not be born. I found myself wanting to know more about the ins and outs of this free workforce.

The global cultural flow of K-pop has been facilitated by airing performances live in more than one hundred countries around the world, as well as by K-pop singers' performances in major venues, such as the Bercy Stadium in Paris in February 2012 (73). The list has also included the Tokyo Dome, Asia World Arena in Hong Kong, Quinta Vergara in Chile, and, more recently, BTS's performance in London's Wembley Stadium in June 2019. The artists' intercultural competency—for example, singing local songs—creates an immediate rapport with local and global audiences. In addition to the Korean state's tireless efforts to promote the value of K-pop, the global fans' response to K-pop artists' efforts to reach them, such as *After School Club*,[1] has been truly marvelous. Kim explains that staying in touch with the fans through social media is another way to keep them musically engaged (85). The artists' painstaking efforts to reach audiences in such underserved K-pop markets as Djibouti, Siberia, and Sudan is truly impressive. Equally impressive is the author's detailed description of these efforts.

In chapter 3, we are reminded of Psy's success through YouTube, a major avenue for achieving fame. Music videos have carried the sound as well as images of K-pop on YouTube, one of the online platforms in which K-pop industries have made significant investments (94). Kim informs us, "In 2015, an astonishing three hundred hours of video are being uploaded per minute" (95). I can only imagine the competition and struggle for viewers, but K-pop music videos seem to be among the winners in attracting global audiences. What is the secret to their success? The skills and technology used to producing the K-pop music video clips are clearly extraordinary. Kim tells us the approach involves the orchestration of "old and new, local and global, while interweaving both retrospective and anticipatory vectors of cultural modalities" (99). For example, in their performance at Wembley Stadium in June 2019, BTS expressed a desire to work with a reputable British songwriter. In reading *K-pop Live*, I learned that this kind of international collaboration is routine

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[1] *After School Club* is an Internet-based live television show co-hosted by celebrities featuring live-music requests.

practice, as well as a big investment, and is one of the strategies for winning the hearts of global audiences.

In *K-pop Live*, readers learn why and how K-pop enthralls global audiences and why this passion has endured. For example, G-Dragon's "Who You?" music video was carefully choreographed to include one thousand fans. As Kim notes, "the company claimed that excerpts from fan-shot footage would be selected to become part of the music video itself, effectively turning fans from bystanders into proper makers of the video" (116). Are the fans bystanders, audience members, or video makers? Who are *they*? The boundary seems blurred, but we can all see the glass walls separating G-Dragon and his white Lamborghini from his fans—the free laborers, strictly speaking. The thousand bystanders/producers are individually acknowledged in the credits for their contributions to the production of the music video. G-Dragon hops into the Lamborghini and departs, leaving the free laborers behind, but he continues to gain fame and profit after leaving the scene. But what are the bystanders left with or promised? How does the production of "Who You?" compare with the production of the internationally syndicated television show *Big Brother*? Further, who got to be one of the thousand free laborers, bystanders, and "producers"? They were the winners of a competition among the financially contributing VIP members of G-Dragon's fan club (125).

Reading chapter 3, I thought Kim might have exhausted all the avenues for K-pop artists to stay in touch with their audiences and maximize their profits, but there was more to come. Chapter 4 discusses the use of holograms to increase *heung* for live audiences. Further, creative technological products, such as K-pop and Samsung smartphones, have contributed to foreigners' steadily improving perceptions of Korea during the last three decades. Technology not only is used to improve the musical products; it also links the music to audiences, creating a win-win situation for all parties involved. Further, the South Korean government's aggressive support and engagement in the entertainment industry, in conjunction with musical artists and technology such as holograms indicates that the neoliberal state is pleased to dance with holographic stars, and vice versa (145–147).

I have yet to personally enjoy the full benefits of holograms. However, the technology seems to have settled in as part of modern life in general and musical performances in particular. Much of SMTOWN[2] has been built on it, and the K-pop industry is already reaping a significant benefit. Kim explains, "Holograms can perform many actions that the physical body cannot, thus becoming the front line for the full expression of technological possibilities" (154). Thus, while K-pop artists might be on an international tour, or even asleep, musical holograms can continue to perform and interact with the audiences, allowing profits to roll in without a break. Kim comments, "We live in a post-tourist world, where virtual travel is no less valued than actual travel, and the real time encounter between stars and fans over Internet forums is no less immediate than the copresence of the two parties in a large concert area" (158). Are these claims really true? If so, I have yet to catch up with this so-called reality. The author also states, "Hologram performances are the

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[2] SMTOWN is the broader brand name for recording artists under the umbrella of SM Entertainment, a South Korean entertainment company.

first steps taken to envision [the] perfect marriage between the celebrities and technologically constructed bodies" (159); thus the potential functions of this technology, such as offering alternative schooling to young people in their formative years, are endless. One can only imagine the possibilities, as many humans already have closer relationships to technology than to other humans. Indeed, Kim's description of this situation provides much food for thought and raises many questions as to where humanity is headed. Despite my doubts, I must acknowledge that the hologram musical *School Oz* sounds and looks as good as a real performance. How can music lovers *not* be absorbed into virtual reality?

The final chapter develops Kim's persistent inquiry into what makes K-pop "live," the book's primary theme. Her "frantic" but in-depth observation of K-pop artists continues, illustrating what keeps the audiences excited through a continuous injection of *heung* in her own writing. For example, the artist TOP creates and maintains intimacy with each individual audience even at a mega-size performance. Chapter 5 describes this tactic as "'I want to be close to you'—a verbal strategy of establishing intimacy that parallels the visual strategy of making eye contact with the live audience, no matter how far audience members might be seated" (172). However, live performance in K-pop is not limited to live-music performances; it also "references live dance, live chat, and the live bodily presence of stars, which are often more important than the live performance of music" (178). This "liveness" is therefore the result of efforts by not only the artists, but also their audiences.

Ultimately, Kim explicitly discusses the commodification of art, noting that "KCON has become an event that sells the Korean lifestyle itself" (181), and that audiovisual effects can "promote an illusion of intimacy"; "the neoliberal commodification of affect" (183) may or may not be an intended consequence. Chapter 5 provides plenty of recognition of the ways in which affective labor is exploited to "facilitate intimacy between stars and fans while masking the profound alienation between them" (190). Of course, at times, K-pop forges what Kim calls, in her conclusion, the "genuine bonding, contributing to the formation as well as the attenuation of community" (205).

K-pop Live is about a range of sociocultural factors and technological contexts that have given K-pop a fantastic boost. However, we have been reminded (135) and have recently heard a lot about the misconduct of K-pop artists and their management firms, such as YG Entertainment, involving drugs and sex scandals. If the amount of misconduct within K-pop increases, scholars will rush to understand the demise of the once-prosperous K-pop industry. I hope this is not how the future will unfold.

Is much of the painstaking effort by K-pop artists to reach and stay in touch with their audiences about the artists' love for music and care for their fans, or is it just profit making? Kim does not fully explore this question, despite acknowledging the issue in chapter 2 and noting the state's involvement in reproducing "a valuable asset in branding the nation" (90). Yet, perhaps it would be fair to say that the under-exploitation of the profit-making dimension is a strength of this book, which richly elaborates instead on dimensions beyond political economy.

Making music videos cosmopolitan through international collaboration—for example, including participants from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in such

videos as "Twinkle"—is impressive, and these efforts increase their appeal to broader international audiences. Superstars are, Kim writes, "packag[ed]…in a way that will enthral the global marketplace" (106). But I was puzzled by the author's question, "Why would K-pop, whose primary market is in Asia—most notably Japan and China—choose Broadway as a dominating visual icon?" (104). This question would have been legitimate in the 2000s, but perhaps not in the 2018. Isn't K-pop a global phenomenon today?

In closing, I am most impressed by Suk-Young Kim's intimate, cautious, and critical participant observation. Her close attachment to the performances and activities as if she were a "K-pop maniac" in her early twenties adds *heung* to the experience of the reading of the book, but it is also a critical study of contemporary K-pop in general. As Kim discovers through her observation and analysis of K-pop, it has "transformative power to build an affirmative community by making us transcend much cultural difference, political strife, and racial hatred" (206).

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