Historical Perspectives on Korean Pop Culture

Modern Korean Society
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November 29, 2016
What makes culture pop?

- Pop culture emerges when song and dance becomes items of commercial reproduction for sale on the market.
  - This requires capitalist development, and the commodification of culture—something that historically has happened since the beginning of the 19th century in the US (and somewhat earlier in England and France, the most developed countries of Europe).

- Before this happened:
  - In Europe folk song and music was produced and consumed by people for their own entertainment.
  - Elite music began with aristocratic patronage:
    - By late 17th century theatrical performance for paid audiences began in London, and later spread to Paris.
    - By the late 18th century written music was being sold for amateur performance.
19\textsuperscript{th} century

- Classical music culture
- Tin Pan Alley music publishing (Stephen Foster, etc.)
- Specific popular musical styles began to be developed by music publishers
  - Sentimental parlor songs
  - Ragtime
20th century

- Age of mechanical reproduction of music and art
  - Player piano rolls cut by famous pianists
  - Development of records and recording industry
    - Initial shellac disks could hold only three minutes of music
    - Pop songs developed as 3-minute songs
  - Pop versus folk
    - Folk—no specific composer, performer playing for small audience of him/herself and family/friends, traditional melodies often repeated again and again
    - Pop—separate lyricists, composers, and singers in 3-minute format for commercial sale
      - Absorbed wide-ranging influences of jazz and classical music

- Movies silent at the beginning of the century but added sound and color in the 1930s, and became important disseminators of style and taste
Characteristics of pop music

- Direct pleasure—dancing or listening
  - Reasonably simple and straightforward
  - Short format
  - Rapid succession of evanescent styles (like fashion) to keep generating interest and sales

- From the 1980s merging of visual and aural culture into a single format

- Rock and Roll
  - Folk-like characteristics—singer/song writers, less sophisticated lyrics and harmonies (compare Cole Porter with the Rolling Stones)
Development of Pop Culture in Korea

- Before popular culture
  - Folksong, and popular folk genre performers
  - Upper class recreational music (written music tradition)
    - Court music
    - P’ansori—mostly learned orally, narrative with song
    - Sanjo—sophisticated improvisational instrumental variations

- Mechanical reproduction
  - Victrola introduced in early 1900s
  - Recordings in Korean from then
Mass market in music

- Didn’t develop in Korea until radio introduced
  - 1927 Seoul JODK came on the air
    - 4th station in the Japanese Empire (after Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya)
    - Government station supported by purchased licences
      - Japanese intent was to broadcast only in Japanese in order to linguistically assimilate the Koreans
      - Problem was the Japanese population was not enough to support the station, and Koreans weren’t interested
  - 1933 Colonial Government established an exclusively Korean language station
  - From then on radios became common in sulchip, tea rooms, and other semi-public places, and they broadcast Korean songs both live, and as a way to sell records
  - Records before had been recordings of popular folk singers, but now true pop songs written for the 3 minute format began to appear
Korea’s first hit pop song—Yi Nanyeong singing “Mokp’o’s Tears”
Mokpo’s Tears--1935
Yuhaengga (ryūkōka) of Empire

- Today this style of song is called trot, but in the 1930s they were just “yuhaengga” popular songs.

- I call them “songs of empire” because this style circulated throughout the Japanese Empire in the 1930s and 1940s.
  - Simple 4/4 beat, pentatonic melody (scale missing the 4th and 7th tones), but harmonized according to Western musical theory (and published according to Western musical notation).
  - Japanese language songs of the time show similar characteristics.
  - Korean performers performed in Korean and Japanese, and famous Japanese performers also came to Korea, and some of them learned to sing in Korean.
  - Korean songs were translated and sung in Japanese (c.f. “Moppo no namida”), and Japanese songs were translated and sung in Korean (cf. “Sul ŭn nunmul یرالککا، han sum یرالککا”).
  - Koga Masao, “king of Japanese song” was raised in Inch’ŏn before moving back to Japan, and Korean folksong influenced his melody.
Chorus line revues

- Introduced from Japan in 1920s
- By the 1930’s this had become a standard part of kwŏnbŏn schools (kisaeng academies)
- 1930 Kwŏn Samch’ŏn put together the Samch’ŏn Kagŭktan inspired by the Japanese Takarazuka all female vaudeville revue
- Yi Nan-yŏng sang as one of the Chŏgŏri Sisters
- 1950s Yi Nan-yŏng’s daughters become the Kim Sisters, who migrated to the US around 1958 and became celebrities in the 1960s
In 1965 in the wake of the normalization treaty with Japan, there was an attempt to suppress these songs as “Japanese-tinged” (waesaek). Broadcast Morals Committee banned “degenerate songs” (t’oep’yehan kayo) in favor of “chanson, canzone, and tango”—and more than half were banned as waesaek?

This is known as the “pongtchak” controversy, because the songs had been rechristened post-liberation.

- Regular beat considered inartistic and “unKorean” (because Korean folksongs often have triple rhythms)

Songs later rechristened “trot”—why “trot”?

- Attributes their characteristics to direct Western influence rather than the West filtered through Japan

Japanese rechristened their songs as “enka” claiming they express a Japanese essence (nihonjin no kokoro)
For both Korea and Japan the cultural history of their pop culture and modernity are important for their national identity.

For Koreans the idea of modernity coming directly from the West is comforting.
- Certain amount of truth—Western recordings were available during the Colonial Period (Classical, jazz), and Hollywood movies were more popular than Japanese among the Korean population at this time.
- But Koreans contributed to trot—it wasn’t fully formed in Japan alone.

For Japanese the idea of something uniquely and essentially Japanese is important for their identity.
- Thus they tend to forget the colonial influences on enka.
After 1945

- 1945-1998 Japanese popular culture banned in South Korea
  - Many people knew Japanese songs and could sing them privately, but public performances were not allowed, nor were Japanese singers allowed to perform in Korea
  - Famous Korean singers like Cho Yong-p’il performed frequently in Japan, and sometimes sang Japanese language songs there

- American song culture flooded into Korea
  - After 1945 the only gigs were for entertaining American troops, so performers like Yi Nan-yŏng, who had always performed in a variety of styles moved into American song styles
  - Yi Nan-yŏng’s daughters formed the groups The Kim Sisters, emigrated to the US, and performed on the Ed Sullivan Show
Korean Pop Styles

- Korean rock—Shin Jung-hyeon (jailed by Park Chung Hee in 1970s)
- Korean country—Mun Hee Oak
  - 가는 남 가는 정
  - 이등병 편지
- Korean Rap—Seo Taiji and Boys 서태지와 아이들 1992-6
  - 난 알아요
- Korean Punk—Crying Nut 1998-
- Korean hip-hop—Rain 2002-
  - First to be noticed in the US around 2006
Hallyu

- 1960s to 1986 screen quota system
  - 1966—6 Korean films and 90 screenings per year
  - 1970 3 films and 30 screenings
  - 1973—more than 1/3 of screenings
  - 1985—more than 2/5 of screenings

- 1986 US Motion Picture Association filed trade suit, and Koreans forced to open up
  - Hollywood 80% of the market by 1994 and US film distributors have offices in Korea
  - 1999 first big budget Korean film *Shiri*

- 1999
  - Korean dramas popular in China
  - 2002 Winter Sonata hit Japan
  - Later Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, India
K-pop exports

As late as 2013 Rain, BoA, or Se7en called “complete flops” in North America

Gangnam Style went viral 2012-13 and became #1 in world
Why popular, Why now? (Youna Kim)

- The pleasures of melodrama
  - Heightened emotions and crises (Youna Kim’s “emotional talk”)
  - Writers and consumers of Korean dramas are mostly female—when women reflect on dramas they reflect about their own lives
  - Not “autonomous ego” of Euro-American drama, but the drama of feelings (chŏng) contextualized in roles and relationships
    - Export—Koreans highly value strong feelings (미운 정, 고은 정), and express these more readily than, say, Japanese or Chinese
    - Yŏnsama good looking and sensitive (in middle-aged Japanese women’s eyes)
    - Feminization of masculinity? 꽃미남? With indirect depictions of love
Psychological Dynamics

- Most psychological theories see fandom as an outlet where fans express their feelings and/or identities (cf. candlelight protests)—i.e. it’s as much about the fan as K-pop

- Extension of the Jungian project?
  - In Jungian psychology people go through an individualization project in adolescence through which they achieve a mature identity as self-actualizing individuals

- Freudian “narcissism of minor difference?”
  - In Freudian psychology children are born loving only themselves (primary narcissism) that abates as they direct attention to outward objects—get identity from idealization of others, and reciprocal love

- Fan clubs in this sense focus on minor differences to create an object of love to which they can demonstrate devotion and create and individual ego
Reflexivity

- In academic culture reflexivity refers to “reflection on the power relations and contexts within which knowledge is produced”

- Everyday reflexivity—”capacity to monitor action and its contents to keep in touch with the grounds of everyday life”
  - Allows one to incorporate new information and to reconstitute and reorganize one’s environment
  - In today’s environment one must cope with rapid change

- Filter for indigenizing Western modernity in Asia by infusing it with Asian (Korean) sensibility
Precarious Individualization

- To what extent do people (women) have control over their lives?
  - Desire for individual identity in a group-oriented society
  - On the one hand, women getting higher education and entering the work force
    - Media and work seem to promote individualization
  - On the other hand there are structural barriers to female independence (*Living on Your Own*), and corporate-oriented (role-based) family structure
    - Hetero-normative marriage, and IMF re-traditionalization of gender roles
Pop Nationalism

- Korea’s position in East Asia gives it resonance
  - Not a superpower like China, Japan, or US so people in East Asia don’t worry about Korean “imperialism”
  - Korea’s tragic 20th century history gives ample scope for depicting political conflict and socio-cultural tensions in melodramatic form
    - Han—pain of enduring injustice and oppression—quite close to the surface in Korea and emotionally depicted
    - Alternative to Western cultural domination?

- Koreans proud of their cultural exports, and the national is actively promoting national branding
  - Self-confidence, pride, inner passion and energy (in successfully achieving modernity)
Diasporic Nationalism

- Transnational connections

- (let’s make more concrete)
  - Korean importation of American and Japanese culture, and indigenization of it
  - Production values of Korean media are close to Hollywood levels (export of animation from US to Japan, to Korea, for example)
  - Koreans wide-ranging activity on the internet
  - Korean diasporic communities—particularly in K-pop the LA Korean-Americans who brought more authentic hip-hop to Korea, but also Korean singers singing enka in Japan
  - Koreans cosmopolitan ability to syndicate deals with a variety of international companies to finance expensive projects
  - Korean Svengali producers (JK entertainment) that train pop-stars in boot-camp style processes to dance like crazy, and sing in Korean, Japanese, English, and Chinese
Government Branding

- K-pop idols showcased by government in both domestic and international contexts

- K-pop idols appointed promotional envoys for both government and business campaigns
  - BoA performed for Rho Mu-hyun and Jinichiro Koizumi in Koizumi’s visit to Seoul June 2004 (after visiting P’yŏngyang)
  - Psy attends the 85th birthday of Thailand’s kin Bhumibol Adulyadej in November 2012
  - Psy dines with Barack Obama during “Christmas in Washington” concert in December 2012
  - Park Keun-hye met with Girls’ Generation and Super Junior at Korea-China friendship concert in June 2013 during state visit to China
Girls’ Generation

- Multiple meanings—“good to think with”—is a signifier endowed with meaning
  - Not an empty signifier (that can mean anything)
    - Youthful attractive femininity built in
    - But other meanings added—always had a Korean flavor unlike Wonder Girls who were trained to be non-national (mugukchŏk)

- Ápkujŏng culture
  - Location of nouveau rich Koreans/orenji-jok, plastic surgery, entertainment, conspicuous consumption
  - The center of Gangnam Style 中心少女时代都市江南 for Chinese people

- Seoul, Tokyo, London, New York
  - “Mr. Taxi”—Tokyo, Seoul, London, New York
    - Message: Seoul is not a backwater of Tokyo, but the gateway to London and New York

- Does this commodification of bodies produce simultaneous narcissism and insecurity that drives the cosmetics and cosmetic surgery business?
  - Anorexia?