



# Historical Perspectives on Korean Pop Culture

Modern Korean Society

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# + 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> century theatrical performance for paid audiences began in London, and later spread to Paris
    - By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century written music was being sold for amateur performance

# + 19<sup>th</sup> 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



# + 20<sup>th</sup> 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
    - 4<sup>th</sup> 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 Nan-yŏng singing “Mokp'o's Tears”





# + Mokpo's Tears--1935



**목포의 눈물**

류일석 작사 손복인 작곡 이난영 노래

사랑의 뱃노래 가물거리며  
 삼천도 파도 굽이 숨어드는데  
 부두에 새아씨 아롱젓은 옷자락  
 이별의 눈물이나 목포의 설움

삼백년 원한 풀은 노적봉 밑에  
 만 자취 완연하다 애달픈 정조  
 유달산 바람도 영산강을 안으니  
 님 그러 우는 마음 목포의 노래

깊은 밤 조각탈은 흘러가는데  
 어찌타 옛 상처가 새로워진가  
 못 우는 민이면 이 마음도 뜨낼 것을  
 항구에 맺는 절개 목포의 사랑

1935년 8월 취임곡



# + 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 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> 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 ūn nunmul iralkka, han sum iralkka”)
  - 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 kwōnbōn schools (kisaeng academies)
- 1930 Kwōn Samch'ōn put together the *Samch'ōn Kagŭktan* inspired by the Japanese Takarazuka all female vaudeville revue
- Yi Nan-yōng sang as one of the *Chōgōri Sisters*
- 1950s Yi Nan-yōng's daughters become the Kim Sisters, who migrated to the US around 1958 and became celebrities in the 1960s

# + Japanese Tinged?

- 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 “pongchak” 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*)

# + Lesson?



- 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 님 가는 정
- Korean folk—Kim Kwangseok c. 1988-1996
  - 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 (chǒng) 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
    - Yōnsama 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 an 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”  
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  - 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 85<sup>th</sup> birthday of Thailand's king 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 (mugukchö̅k)
- Apkujö̅ng 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?