

Book Review

JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay: *K-POP – The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry*. New York/ London: Routledge, 2014. vii + 181pp. ISBN 978113 8775961

This edited book is one of the foremost sources on the contemporary phenomenon and development of the Korean popular music industry, known as K-pop. The methodology of cultural criticism is applied to penetrate the neoliberal globalisation of K-pop in Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay have collected diverse testimonies of the transnational K-pop and its fandom feature (connoting active devotion). Although not thematically composed, four of the ten chapters on *K-POP – The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry* attempt to explore the history of the K-pop uniform, the political economy of idols and K-pop spectatorship. The regional quests (the other six chapters) witnessed the impact and challenge of K-pop overseas. The cyber-media of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter were measured for feedback of the digital generations. While there is some controversy on the composition of K-pop as a type of hybridity, the authors argue that ‘augmented entertainment’ is the nature of K-pop’s identity.

The first chapter (pp. 18-34) looks at the origin of K-pop. The visual uniformity in appearance and performance most likely originated from the colonial culture of Korea’s live theatre stages, which was influenced by Japanese entertainment companies in the early 1910s. The *Samch’ ōn kagŭktan* (Three Streams Operetta Group) was depicted as offering “a type of all-female vaudeville” where they titillatingly performed in uniform costumes in the 1930s. The cheeky and seductive uniform tendency was continued through the periods of the post-Korean War and the pro-democracy movement, but girl groups became softer and playful in the late 1990s. Maliangkay concludes that “the uniform K-pop acts have met the needs and expectations of many different audiences over the years” (p. 30).

South Korea’s Neoliberal Restructuring (chapter three: pp. 51-65) examines the entertainment industry of Korea as Samsung, Daewoo, Chil Jedang, SKC, and Hyundai invested in the cultural and creative sector (film, video, TV, and music) in 1995. Inkyu Kang pointed out that the economical aspect of K-pop was contextualised in the reformation of the cultural industry where various concepts of standardisation, rationalisation, and commodification imply “valuable insights into the revolutionised production system of K-pop” (p. 55). The idol stars’ de-individualisation was seen as one of the key consequences for “hyperrationalisation” (p. 56). Meanwhile, the cyber debate over internet vigilantism is considered in the *Dynamics of K-pop Spectatorship* (pp. 133-144) through the case study of rapper/actor Tablo’s academic credentials, which were authentic, but he was accused by online communities as fabricating material evidence of his Sanford degree. Haerin Shin (p. 16) particularly focuses on “how the public’s enjoyment of the witch-hunt was situated on the precarious balance between violation and subscription to social norms based on undefined notions of integrity”. Stephen Epstein (pp. 35-50) discusses the iconic K-pop group, Girl’s Generation who helped “Korea enter the arena of global popular culture”. As K-pop has been leading the so called *Hallyu* 2.0 (the second pulse of the Korean Wave), the girl band delivered the essence of the Korean genre even while performing their music in another language (Japanese).

Chapters four and seven are a regional study of K-pop in Japan. The girl group, S.E.S., was the first group to command major attention of the Japanese media and pop music industry in the 1990s (pp. 116-129). The membership was composed of Korean-American,

zainichi (Japanese of Korean ancestry) girls as well as a native Korean. Bo-A was another figure promoted as a typical J-pop singer in the 2000s. The localisation of Bo-A was the main strategy through the systematic “de-Koreanisation and Japanisation”. Meanwhile, TVXQ (Tohoshinki, 東方神起) struggled for the first two years of their Japan activity (pp. 66-79), but their 16th single, *Purple Line*, became No. 1 on the Oricon weekly sales chart in 2008 (p. 70). The hybridism and the localisation of the K-pop music were depicted through their performance, such as dressing in Japanese costumes, holding a Japanese umbrella, and projecting Japanese digital images in the background. The chapter avers that their localised appearance in public influenced the Japanese fans to resemble the masculinity of TVXQ.

Asian pop music in Australia is discussed in the chapter *Non-Stop K-Pop in Australia* (chapter five: pp. 81-95), with *SBS PopAsia* portrayed as a unique channel. Korean music was dominant there while videos from Japan, Taiwan, China and Vietnam were also introduced. The growth of K-pop’s popularity was related to the glocal strategy in that several K-pop performers were Australian citizens or former residents, such as One Way (Peter and Young Sky), Evol (Hayana), C-Clown (Rome), etc. The Asian-Australian fan groups witnessed not only the establishment of *SBS PopAsia* in multi-cultural communities but also the movement of K-pop into the mainstream culture. *Loyalty Transmission and Cultural Enlisting of K-pop in Latin America* (chapter six: pp. 98-115) describes the arrival of Japanese popular cultures (manga and animation/ drama) and Korean dramas in Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Chile, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Colombia in the 1990s-2000s. JungBong Choi argues that the anthropological configuration where Japan and Korea share similar socio-cultural concepts enabled K-pop to settle down well in Latin America. The language, social organisation, ethical code, fashion, and education of Korean dramas were also familiar through the appearance and performance of K-pop. K-pop cover dance practiced among local fans, was expressed as a “cultural enlisting” that “is the creative addition of cultural phenomena and actions on top of” the given content or style (p. 109).

Psy’s music is construed in the context of a social campaign in Southeast Asia (chapter nine: pp. 146-162) as Gangnam Style “reached first place on the iTunes chart in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand”. The social reaction of Malaysia was interpreted within “the representation, production, and reception of Psy’s fan parody videos”. The result of analysing over 40 Malaysian ‘Gangnam Style’ parodies reflected a middle-class multicultural society contesting racial/ ethnic, gender, religion, politics, and national identity. Likewise, Chinese notions of male beauty were investigated in the last chapter (chapter ten: pp. 164-177). K-pop male beauty was not a major concern for the Yanji young adults (of mainland China). On the other hand, the K-pop fans of Hong Kong extrovertively followed the effeminate type of the K-pop male beauty, alternatively creating a neutral culture between China and Korea. Thus, this book demonstrates that the historical dimension of K-pop was influenced by Japanese popular culture, but the policies of the systematic localisation and de-individualisation were the creative factors of the Korean music industry under the social generalisation of new media. Such a new ideological reading, despite the missing component of the European fandom’s response, is a useful addition to the pioneering work in the field of contemporary popular music.

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