

Book Review

Myoung-Sun Song. 2019. *Hanguk Hip Hop, Global Rap in South Korea*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. ix + 198 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-15696-1 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Hyun Joo Sandy Oh, University of California, Irvine, USA
hyunjoo@uci.edu

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In *Hanguk Hip Hop*, Song takes us behind the scenes in the Korean hip hop and rap industry. Part and parcel of the broader K-pop industry, which as a whole played a vital role in amassing the country's soft power, Song tracks how Korean hip hop became its own distinctive genre. Whilst its genealogy can be traced back to American hip hop, in contemporary times—and especially under the neoliberalization of South Korea—Korean hip hop took root through global trajectories of cross-pollination.

In particular, the formation and production of Korean hip hop is historicized in the following moments: the Japanese and US military presence and the 1997 Asian Debt Crisis (126). More specifically, the debut of Seo Taiji and Boys as rapping, dancing artists is considered pivotal. Stepping into the spotlight with a new soundscape, choreographic aesthetic and message, Seo Taiji and Boys' fame intersected with an economic crisis. Their production fomented a new form of popular culture pitting artists as the pillars in a new export-based model (126).

These are precisely the reasons that Song grounds her analysis in the concept of *buran*, a term for which there is no exact English translation but which is roughly equivalent to anxiety. As Song argues, artists who “had the freedom to choose and create the music they wanted” found themselves positioned in uncharted territory (54). It is understandable then that the artists featured in this project differentiate themselves from “idol rappers—members of K-pop groups that rap—who largely work within a controlled system” (54). In contrast, the featured hip hop artists are those who prove their worth through a neoliberal ethos of self-made stature, innovation, grit, anxiety, and suffering in their quest to make “real” hip hop.

Thus, the four research questions that this study seeks to answer are “1. How does hip hop—as culture and commodity—travel across local, global, and (trans) national boundaries? 2. How is hip hop understood within the

historical, sociocultural, and economic conditions of Korea? 3. How does Korean hip hop define, sustain, and expand itself within and against K-pop? 4. How are race and gender understood and represented within Korean hip hop?" (5).

By taking readers through the industry's history, Song documents the rise of the "Big 3" companies: SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment. Throughout, Song sheds light on modalities of human production from moments of crisis produced by the IMF bailout and beyond. In so doing, public figures such as Jerry.K, Paloalto, The Quiett, Deepflow, Dok2 and San E are lifted from their social media pages, blogs, news media reports, television screens and their music into the global creative economy of which they are crucially a part.

Notwithstanding the particular historical circumstances and the makings of class and cosmopolitan sensibilities that ground the formation of the Korean hip hop industry, these artists coexist with various forms of media and technology across an international frame. Song traces how "tangible forms of music like cassette tapes and CDs from America to Korea, individual bodies to/from America and within Korea, and communities of hip hop listeners" transformed what was once known as "black music" to indigenous forms of expression (2). By tracking the careers of various artists, Song shows how generational angst transformed into intergenerational forms of reciprocity as well as struggle.

The end result is a dynamic reading of celebrity life that probes at human capital production where forms of self-fashioning and self-improvement are harnessed in appreciating one's value. As Song points out, these are some common points of interest with American hip hop that were born out of poverty, suffering and enduring oppression, even if Korean rappers more closely exemplify "middle-class, urban and suburban values" (127). While Korean hip hop might lack lyrics depicting the extreme violence typically found in its American counterpart, anxieties about the future and the overcoming of them through self-made narratives represent victorious claims over economic misfortune.

The story is even more remarkable when we consider the fact that Korean hip hop formed around the same time as the 1992 Los Angeles Riots when, in the words of rapper Naachal from the group Garion, "Koreans' perceptions of black people were the worst. Absolute worst" (15). Through this lens, Song explores not only the tensions existing between Koreans, Korean-Americans and African Americans but also how the US's famed soft power took on a life of its own elsewhere.

In effect, readers are given a tour of technological infrastructure, then and now. Reminiscing about their first encounters with hip hop, older artists

narrate their lives in the 1990s when one friend or family members who sojourned in the US came back with new soundscapes that could be voraciously consumed. Through syncretism, divergent messages, sounds, lyrical content and culture emerge to tell specific stories. As Dok2 states, “I reference my music after American hip hop, but this is not to plagiarize it. We are sharing a global trend” (33).

Dok2’s quote in many ways encapsulates the foundation of this study, shedding light on how hegemonic forms of expression are re-woven. Of salience here is that Song’s analysis does not pivot on “cosmopolitan strivings” like so many previous scholarly works mapping transnational flows (Park and Abelmann 2004). Nor does the study treat Korea as a neocolonial site as a prerequisite. Instead, Song sketches a different web of transnational entanglements that is less about longing to go elsewhere and more about the restlessness of being neither here nor there.

Through artists’ syncretic energy, and innovative interpretation, the use of English can also be understood as more than a “marketing strategy” (35). While there is potential to expand to broader audiences through the use of English, Song explains that “authenticity” is ultimately adjudicated upon an artist’s ability to rap in Korean (36). The craft of storytelling through rap reflects the daily lives and struggles of artists and their generational specific anxieties.

These modalities of production are anchored in two neighborhoods: Hongdae and Sinchon (Chapter 4). The genesis of Korean hip hop can be traced back to these two sites, bringing together a cast of characters who, coming from middle-class backgrounds, had achieved certain levels of education. These factors are crucial in understanding how certain aesthetics, sonic landscapes and fashion sensibilities landed in Korea. It was precisely through the pursuit of life-stage achievements such as study and travel abroad that hip hop made its way back to the peninsula. Diasporic communities where relatives resided in places such as the US, in conjunction with individuals operating with an understanding of English allowing them to grasp the meaningfulness of lyrical content, were key elements in the formation of Korean hip hop. Lastly, consumption of hip hop culture required the financial means to purchase expensive CDs in Sang-A Records branches located in affluent parts of Seoul in the mid- to late 1990s (70–71).

These are not the only dominant trends in the making and sustaining of Korean hip hop. Notably, the vast majority of artists in this book are male—a topic that Song fully investigates in Chapter 6, “Gender and Representation in Korean Hip Hop”. Acknowledging that the prevalence of male artists is standard on a global scale, Song delves deeper as to why these particular characteristics exist in Korea. An examination of female rappers brings together

issues of embodiment, intergenerational familial pacts and socialities shaped by gendered norms to show how artists are produced under different conditions. Documenting a support system that exists between male and female rappers, Song juxtaposes this to the lives of male rappers who often live and produce together (158). For female rappers, personal ties override more professional ones. In sum, advantages are produced for male rappers and unequal institutional modes of production arise. At its worst, the results can be unruly, with sensationalized media portrayals of female rapstars mired in “catfights” rather than negotiating professional entanglements that emerge as one rises to the top (166).

In conclusion, these issues are ultimately located at the nexuses of Korea’s geopolitical history, economic crisis and the subjective experience of *buran* (anxiety). The tracking of *Hanguk Hip Hop* brings together a number of theories and examinations including but not limited to the semiotics of sound, linguistic anthropological theory, technology, mass mediation and circulation, urban geography, identity, gender, and intergenerational reciprocity—to name but a few. It is a refreshing account of human capital production in a country that extolled the virtues of being a “creative economy”, in the wake of the 1997 IMF crisis. This book will be most appropriate to assign to classes dealing with pop culture, K-pop, gender and human capital. While the book offers theoretical insights, it does so in a remarkably grounded approach that makes for a fun and, ultimately, entertaining read.

Reference

- Park, So Jin and Nancy Abelmann. 2004. “Class and Cosmopolitan Striving: Mothers’ Management of English Education in South Korea”. *Anthropological Quarterly* 77/4: 645–72. <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2004.0063>