

KOREAN POP MUSIC RIDING THE WAVE

Edited by

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Introduction

KEITH HOWARD

Korea wave' (also known as 'K-wave') swept Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia at the dawn of the new millennium, beginning in Taiwan and China, then spreading rapidly through eponymous satellite and cable channels. It embraced not just pop music but films, soap operas, fashion, dance and more. Korea had arrived. Waves ebb and flow, and so we might anticipate 'Korea wave' to come and go. Hence, although Korean pop has in some places declined (a 2003 survey by Koichi Iwabuchi found 17.5% of Hong Kong youth and 6.6% of Taiwanese youth favoured Korean pop over Japanese or European and American pop¹), Korean films and TV dramas remain big business throughout the region, with the daily *Korea Times* recently reporting that exports of TV dramas, worth \$18.9 million in 2001, had reached \$71.5 million by 2004. Why Korea? Possibly because, with the explosion of democracy and the abandonment of state censorship that occurred in the early-1990s, Korean popular culture replaced nostalgia and pessimism with active, personal and highly-contemporary reflections on life.

To date, little has been written about Korean popular music. This volume begins to correct matters, providing both a chronological overview of pop from the 1920s to the present day and a set of detailed and specific case studies charting genres, from 'songs in fashion' (*yuhaengga*) and 'new folksongs' (*shin minyo*), through acoustic guitar songs (*t'ong kit'a*) and the 'song movement' (*norae undong*), to rap, punk, music television, Internet sites and more. While we focus primarily on the Republic of Korea (South Korea), we include chapters on pop music in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Region of China and in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), and on 'Korea wave' itself in the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China.

Our starting point has been a desire to make Korean pop known. The accounts of Korean pop in standard works such as *World Music: The Rough Guide* seem inadequate. Hideo Kawakami and Paul Fisher, in the first

edition, tell us that Korea has 'developed economically at a staggering pace, but in terms of popular music there is nothing to match the remarkable contemporary sounds of Indonesia, Okinawa or Japan' (1994: 470). Okon Hwang, one of the authors in this current volume, provides a more balanced account in the second edition, and for the most recent incarnation of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, but both are brief (2000: 164–5; 2001: 814–5 and 818). John Lent's *Asian Popular Culture* (1995) omits Korea, while Chun, Rossiter and Shoemith's *Refashioning Pop Music in Asia* (2004) claims to include Korea but only does so through a single Korean singer active in Japan.

Korean pop music is no minor affair. In 1997, Korea was the thirteenth largest market for recorded music in the world, with domestic sales of 54,651,658 CDs and 155,857,388 cassettes.² By 2002, Korea was the second-largest music market in Asia, with a domestic turnover of \$300 million. SM Entertainment, listed on Korea's KOSDAQ stock market, controlled around seventy stars, amongst them H.O.T., who, starting in 1996, shifted ten million albums in their seven-year existence.³ As *Time* reported:

Teenagers from Tokyo to Taipei swoon over performers such as singer Park Ji Yoon and boy band Shinhwa, buying their CDs and posters and learning Korean so they can sing along . . . 'Korea is the next epicentre of pop culture in Asia', says Jessica Kam, vice president for MTV Networks Asia (*Time*, 29 July 2002).

2002 was when BoA, seventeen at the time, became the first Korean solo artist to have both a debut single and a debut album reach No. 1 in Japan's charts, according to the leading Japanese music guide, *Oricon*. She was still in the limelight in 2004, posing, for instance, with the Japanese prime minister and Korean president in Tokyo, and winning a 'Favourite Korean Artist Award' at the MTV Asia Awards in Singapore. Back in Korea, many groups were idolized: when the house where 'god' – taking their name from an acronym for **Groove OverDose** – lived was burgled in 2001, socks and underwear from the washing machine were stolen, but nothing more.

In autumn 2001, Koreanists, used to being the underdogs in Asian Studies' circles, briefly debated what was happening on their web discussion site. Charles Armstrong (Columbia University) was 'struck by the rampant craze' in Beijing and Vietnam for all things Korean; Sealing Cheng (Oxford University) noted that Korean fashion, movies and TV soaps had been big in Hong Kong for five or more years; George Kallander (Columbia University) noted a similar craze in Mongolia, but for fashion more than pop music; Ross King (University of British Columbia) noted that a large number of Hmong students at an annual summer camp he ran were choosing Korean language lessons over anything else so that they could sing the pop songs they loved. Several scholars noted that Korea had become trendy because it provided what the youth wanted

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throughout the region.⁴ The phenomenon can be partially explained by noting how Korean popular culture catapulted forward during the 1990s, leaving much of the rest of Asia behind as it abandoned conservatism and censorship, diversifying, appropriating, absorbing and innovating. In its fusions, it created an Asian equivalent of European and American pop. Japanese pop, of course, had long had this function throughout the region, but the 1990s was a time for re-examining the Pacific War's legacy, and Korea offered a less-tainted alternative to Japan.

Appropriation suggests something close to imitation, but I in no way mean to privilege Europe or America. It is a danger to note similarity from outside, although it is clear that many of the styles favoured by Korean pop artists during the 1990s, be they hip hop, rap, reggae or punk, have equivalents elsewhere. Many of the articles in this volume nonetheless explore difference; how genres were made Korean. Gloria Lee Pak warns us that the imitation may be superior rather than inferior to the original; certainly, Korean pop is distinct. If this is so, though, then the theoretical constructs with which pop music in Europe and America is evaluated must be critiqued for their usefulness in Korea (and Asia more generally). Often, Asia does not fit the model of youth rebellion, and rap or reggae often do not incorporate the urban street culture with which they are associated elsewhere, although Korean punk, as Stephen Epstein shows in his chapter 'We Are the Punx in Korea', is frequently anti-authoritarian, and Korean skunk bands in general want to be seen as authentically punk. Again, until 'Korea wave' hit, Korea had not joined the 'polylateral' (Taylor 1997) or 'transregional' (Slobin 1993), and global music companies were not heavily invested. All of this, we believe, makes Korean pop a wonderful and instructive music to explore and celebrate.

Returning to scholarship, clearly musicologists and ethnomusicologists have been slow to consider Korean pop music; to be fair, this includes a number of us in this volume. We have been intent on marvelling at Korea's traditions and heritage, wanting to explore the worlds of court, aristocratic and folk music, and (though to a lesser extent) the contemporary manifestations that have evolved from them. There is nothing wrong with doing so. Korean musicologists, too, have tended to adopt a historical approach, creating scientific analyses based on the relatively abundant textual and iconographical documentation that allow us to understand how Korean music – and Korean culture more generally – came to be what it is. This, too, is exactly as it should be, since we readily admit that Korean musicologists have had a remarkable impact within their country, improving the social standing of musicians and ensuring that traditional music is identified by most if not all Koreans as an icon of national identity. However, if popular culture tells us aspects that are valued within the contemporary life of a nation, this does not excuse any relegation of pop music to a backwater. Since the 1980s, some studies have begun to appear within Korea, but they have most commonly emerged from beyond musicology, notably from a new generation of critics educated in the stormy 1970s, at a time when each

university campus was a hive of democratic yearning given expression in the 'song movement'.

I began to think about this volume many years ago. Between 1992 and 1996, I produced in-flight programmes of Korean pop for a number of airlines, checking the charts on a regular basis and avidly collecting. This proved fortuitous, since I began within a few months of the March 1992 debut of Seo Taiji and Boys – a date etched on the minds of Korea's youth as the time when rap arrived. Over the next four years there was, literally, an explosion of local music. In 2000, a popular culture study day organized by the British Association for Korean Studies and a request to edit a supplement on pop music in Asia for the newsletter of the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden allowed me to begin recruiting collaborators. In 2003, Okon Hwang and I chaired two panels on pop music for the Miami conference of the Society for Ethnomusicology on behalf of the Association for Korean Music Research; with the blessing of those who gave papers, the planning for this volume could begin. I wish to thank members of the AKMR and BAKS for their support and encouragement; Beth McKillop of BAKS, and Koen de Ceuster, who as a board member of IIAS persuaded me to develop the supplement on pop, are offered special thanks. I thank each of our thirteen authors for their patience and understanding during the development process.

This volume charts the history of Korean pop music from the 1920s to the present day. Admittedly, because popular culture evolves at such a rapid pace, today's present will forever be in the past; the 'present', then, is 2004. Hopefully, the layout will prove logical, and readers are invited to dip straight in. Chapters 1–10 are arranged, so far as is possible, chronologically in terms of the material that they consider. Chapter 11 explores a different side of popular music culture: noraebang, 'song rooms', favoured meeting places for Koreans that relate not just to karaoke but to the age-old Korean practice of singing together for festivities and entertainment. Chapters 12–15 broaden the brush with which we paint our picture, looking beyond the boundaries of today's South Korea. Finally, Chapters 16–17 explore two recent manifestations: punk and music television.

The story will not end here. South Korea is now the broadband capital of the world, and this is having a serious impact on home-grown pop. Sales of albums are shrinking fast, by over 20 per cent year-on-year between 2002 and 2004. From the stratospheric sales of H.O.T. and other groups in earlier years, the biggest-selling album of 2004 sold barely 500,000 copies. This was Seo Taiji's comeback album, and only eleven albums had sales of more than 100,000 in the first six months of the year.⁵ 'Single albums' with five or less tracks had begun to replace standard albums, halving prices and countering some of the temptation to download, but reducing company profits and musician incomes. Management companies are beginning to feel pressure. BoA had been spotted in sixth grade, and had been manicured and pedicured by her

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managers for five years before her debut,⁶ but this is an expensive way to operate an industry, particularly when only a small percentage of acts make it in the crowded market. Whereas in the mid-1990s pop music was one big democracy, it is now relatively autocratic, and, as was demonstrated in 2002, when systematic corruption was unveiled by Seoul prosecutors, the media and charts need to be courted and massaged by marketing companies to ensure exposure. Marketing is big business; dance and visual imaging are arguably as important as the music itself. The future success of Korean pop, then, is uncertain.

A note on conventions: McCune-Reischauer romanization is used for Korean terms, except personal names, where we retain preferred spellings where known, giving on the first appearance but only where it facilitates cross-checking, McCune-Reischauer equivalents in square brackets. *Shi* rather than *si*. Where a publication is in Korean, McCune-Reischauer is used for titles and authors, with our translations in square brackets. Pinyin is used for Chinese terms and the Hepburn system for Japanese terms. Song titles are given in single parentheses, with Korean first followed by an English translation. Unless otherwise acknowledged, lyrics have been translated by the authors of the chapters in which they occur.

NOTES

- ¹ Reported by Iwabuchi at '*Hallyuwood: Korean Screen Culture Goes Global*', a symposium held at the School of Advanced Study, University of London, on 20 May 2005.
- ² Han'guk yŏngsang ūmban hyŏphoe, 1998: 39 and 43.
- ³ After H.O.T. disbanded in 2003, they retained a loyal fan base in China, as Rowan Pease discovers in Chapter 15.
- ⁴ Korean Studies mailbase discussion list; September–October 2001.
- ⁵ *Korea Herald*, 18 September 2004.
- ⁶ According to an interview in *Korea Times*, 28 July 2004.