



K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea

– by John Lie. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014

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K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea, by John Lie. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, 248 pp., US\$ 34.95, ISBN: 9780520283121 (paperback)

Three books in English language focusing on K-pop were published almost within the span of only several months in 2014: Mark James Russell's *K-Pop Now!: the Korean Music Revolution*, Euny Hong's *The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation is Conquering the World Through Pop Culture*, and John Lie's *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*. Though all of these three books bear the emblem of K-pop while trying to capitalize on the latest world music sensation that has transformed Korea's image from a poverty-driven, post-traumatic land to one that is known more for its success with its contemporary popular cultural production, there is only one book that provides both the breadth and depth of information on a phenomenon that is a vital component of today's global culture. Russell's *K-Pop*, which is largely a picture book, reads like a glossy tour guide. Hong's *The Birth of Korean Cool* is a self-deprecating memoir about a Korean American journalist's pained memories of her childhood in South Korea that really has very little to do with the recent phenomenon of Korean popular culture. These two books may have sold way more copies than Lie's academic book, but, this putatively lower sale should not deter *K-Pop* from attracting interest among a broad academic circle.

Lie wears his erudition not too lightly: his incisive analogy between the various musical genres that have appeared and disappeared over the past 100 years or so and the socio-political conditions that have governed South Korea overcomes the deficiencies he may have as a sociologist who lacks training in musicology. He is deft in paying attention to small details such as a delightful observation that K-pop lyrics are much more closer to "ditties than to poems" (p. 147) and in amassing grand remarks that boldly argues that "had Confucianism survived and thrived in South Korea, K-pop would not have been possible" (p. 69). European art and musical terms such as *gesamtkunstwerk* and *intrada con intrepidez* appear in Lie's texts without explaining what their precise utilities are, and often his casual references are from high-brow literary figures such as Gerschom Scholem and Mallarmé.

One of the book's biggest disappointments is its organization. The 30-

page interlude positioned between the two chapters, “How Did We Get Here?” and “Seoul Calling”—while offering illuminating and effervescent historical analysis—serves very little purpose beyond Lie’s impressive knowledge of Korean history and a wistful parody of the title of two of the post-punk anthems from the 1980s by the Talking Heads and the Clash. It is extremely difficult to tell why the book is even divided into two main chapters and several anecdotal essays. This inexplicable arrangement makes it virtually impossible for the readers to navigate the book with seamless pleasure. Finding furthermore several crucial information, for instance, on *Sô T’ae-ji wa Aidül* redundantly appear in both chapters is certainly a little unpleasant.

But it is not really the loosely organized series of essays that baffle the readers. One of the significant arguments that Lie offers is that K-pop underwent a paradigm shift sometime during the turn of the last century. Dancing replaced the balladic nature of Korean music, producing idol syndrome after idol syndrome. The emphasis of visual presentation eventually gave way to what Lie calls “body beautiful” that became “normative for South Korean music stars” (p. 107). During the same phase of paradigm shift, Lie argues that the K-pop impresarios “seized commercial opportunities rather than projecting their artistic vision” (p. 120). Though it is difficult not to agree with Lie that considerations for K-pop are largely decided by market forces and visual criteria rather than by musical integrity, his further suggestion that the K-pop essentially rejects the essence of any Romantic pursuits of an artist by completely “eschew[ing]...the independent musician-artist” cannot be endorsed. Lie is curiously silent on one of the most accomplished idol groups called Bigbang, which has been active since 2006. Its leader G-dragon is inarguably one of the greatest singer-songwriters to have ever graced the center stage of Korean pop world and his fame in other cultural spheres such as art and fashion challenges Lie’s argument that there is no trace of Romantic versatility in K-pop. With all of the members of Bigbang known for their dexterous skills in professions other than donning clumsy costumes and singing bubblegum pop songs, it is difficult to embrace Lie’s view that such musician-artist ambition does not exist in the commercial-leaning K-pop.

Another implausible and almost puzzling argument is interjected when Lie claims that K-pop violates age-old Confucianism’s tenets. Positing K-pop as the anti-thesis of Confucianism is the reason why the term “cultural amnesia” appears as one of the titular subtitles of *K-Pop*. And yet, what Lie fails to

recognize is that Confucianism is perhaps the single-most important reason behind the unique structural underpinning of K-pop that depends on training teenaged boys and girls for years before groups are put together by the heads of entertainment agencies. Emphasis of the collective qualities of the group that molds and pounds individual identities of each of the team members makes you wonder where this tradition of the group emphasis would stem from if it isn't derived from Confucianism. Yes, the visual appearance of K-pop, replete with its risqué wardrobe and sexually suggestive dance moves, may appear un-Confucian and unchaste. However, the ideological spirit that forsakes individualism in the agency-driven structure that relies largely on patriarchal, chaebol-like leadership of the entertainment company founders such as Lee Soo-man, Park Jin-young, and Yang Hyun-suk makes K-pop's spirits closely aligned with neo-Confucianism rather than anti-Confucianism.

In spite of its shortcomings, Lie's *K-Pop* is simply heads and shoulders above any other books or articles published on the subject either in English or, for that matter, even in Korean. Explicit in the book is the problematization of the binary distinction between the author and the academic subject he or she is studying. His nuanced personal life stories weave in and out of the text, providing a layered reading experience. Though they are not always fully answered, questions that Lie asks throughout the book such as "why export this [Korean] music?" (p. 110) or "why [did] J-pop not conquer East Asia in general"? (p. 137) are provocative enough to stimulate further any reader's interest. Lie is uniquely qualified, and this outstanding book ought to be the first material placed on the required reading list for any course that offers a section on K-pop.

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