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Seo Taiji Syndrome

Rise of Korean Youth and Cultural Transformation through Global Pop Music Styles in the Early 1990s

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As in many other countries, Korea has borrowed a great deal from popular culture of the United States and has been heavily influenced by its global images and values. However, while some forms of global culture are directly imitated by local people, most undergo a degree of transformation in adapting to local issues and values.[1] In the case of Korea's adaptation of global pop music styles during the early 1990s, local youth drew on these styles to serve local social and aesthetic needs, challenging the older generation's overpowering control, particularly the authority of the educational system.

This chapter examines the revolutionary shift in Korean pop music during the early 1990s, articulated with the rise of the so-called *sinsedae* (new generation). This generation comprised those born during the early and mid-1970s and found its representative voice in Seo Taiji, who introduced dance-oriented rap music via hip-hop culture through his mainstream debut song "Nan arayo" (I Know) in 1992.[2] We can argue that Seo Taiji's syntheses of American pop music styles are not just simple, wholesale adoptions, but constitute instead an efficient localization of global lexicons selectively redefined for the needs and sensibilities of Korean youth. Seo Taiji's music has been understood by Korean audiences as an important cultural icon with direct relevance to Korea, rather than an exercise in derivative stylistic imitation. To understand the impact of Seo Taiji's music, it is important to review it in the context of its time and its audience first.

The Political and Social Environment

Fully implemented by President Park Chung Hee (in office: 1963–1979) and enhanced by President Chun Doo Hwan (a.k.a. Chŏn Du-hwan, in office: 1980–1987), the Korean economy grew rapidly, but under a cloud of political repression. As conflicts between the government and the public increased during the mid- and late 1980s, Chun's solution to growing public protest involved using military actions and police suppression under which many civilians were imprisoned and killed (Kim, Yŏng-myŏng 1999, 243–330). In 1987, Chun finally bowed to domestic unrest and international pressure as Korea prepared to host the 1988 Summer Olympics, and announced a change in the constitution to allow free elections. Nevertheless, a former general and Chun's close colleague, Roh Tae Woo (a.k.a. No T'ae-u) assumed power. During

the Roh administration (1988–1993), public protest decreased and Korea entered a transitional period toward a more democratic society, but the oppressive educational system developed in previous decades continued. Korea had evolved its own unique national identity, but one that redefined and sharpened class distinctions based on educational background and achievement (Adams and Gottlieb 1993, 3). Among college graduates, the prestige gained by attending a university was an important mark of social status.[3]

The educational system historically played a crucial role in influencing political behavior and maintaining power in Korea, imposing militaristic rules and conditions (Korean Educational Development Institute 1985, 13). Entrance exams at each level created an enormously competitive environment.[4] Parents believed that the education of their children was their foremost responsibility. Thus, students were placed under tremendous pressure. Teachers employed a "spying system," where students reported on each other and where misconduct or below-average marks brought punishment, creating an atmosphere of paranoia and anxiety. To enhance performance, different classrooms were created such as the "winner's classroom" (*udŭngban*) and "loser's classroom" (*yŏldŭngban*). Communal punishment, established as a method of control during the Japanese colonial period, remained the norm (Seth 2002, 18–32).

In 1993, under the subsequent administration of Kim Young Sam (a.k.a. Kim Yŏng-sam), Korea began to democratize and the educational system also began to change. Violent physical punishment was reduced and students were permitted to apply to more than one university. However, the pressure for students to perform remained pervasive, and a number of students still committed suicide or ran away from home.

The Rise of Korean Youth: *Sinsedae*

In the early 1990s, Korea witnessed the rise of a new generation (*sinsedae*), whose values, lifestyles and mind-set were fundamentally different from the older generation (*kisŏngsedae*), because of growing economic prosperity. *Sinsedae* in a narrow sense refers to those born during the early and mid-1970s who grew up in urban areas watching American TV shows, listening to American popular music, eating American fast food, and consuming American fashion. The *aegis* of the new generation had spread throughout the middle class affluent youth by the early 1990s, and valued individuality over the old Confucian ideology of family and community. The youth had not shared the political conflicts and economic difficulties experienced by the older generation; most had grown up in nuclear families, where busy urban lifestyles displaced traditional Confucian values. The older repressive educational system was not suited for them, and conflict arose as individualism rejected the demands for academic achievement.

By the beginning of the 1990s, Korea's rapidly globalizing marketplace led Korean youth towards the adaptation and imitation of emerging global culture in their own popular culture, filtered through foreign, and especially American, media (Buzo 2002, 165–169). Local singers' imitations of older American pop styles and the sentimental "ballad" style songs were losing their appeal. Since most of the youth were not allowed time for recreation such as sports, listening to music on personal cassette players and watching television served as relief from their daily pressures. As Hosokawa (1984, 166) and Bennett (2000, 34) point out, technology and music became common aspects of many young people's day-to-day existence. This was Korea's first generation with disposable income, and industries began to target them as significant consumers. Pop music, fashion, foods, cosmetics, electronics, and computer games became symbols of the new generation's identity.

The news media sounded an alarm about the negative impact of American pop music after a female junior high school student was trampled by the crowd at an American boy band (New Kids on the Block) concert in Seoul in February 1992. A month later, Seo Taiji formed Seo Taiji and Boys with two backup dancers (Yi Chu-no and Yang Hyŏn-Sŏk) and released the first rap song, "Nan arayo," wearing baggy pants, oversized t-shirts, sunglasses, and baseball hats on backwards. The conservative media immediately criticized the band for their *foreign* music style and ill-mannered stage performance. Seo Taiji's first album is primarily dance-oriented music often supported by light rap sections. Despite bitter remarks from music critics and older pop singers following their first television appearance, the album sold more than 1,500,000 copies and the trio became an instant cultural sensation. Within a few weeks of its release, it challenged mainstream Korean pop, and within four weeks the title song "Nan arayo" topped major music charts (Sin 1997, 32). "Nan arayo" is considered by many to be the first Korean rap song.

Figure 12.1 The Eponymous Debut Album by Seo Taiji and Boys (Bando, BDL-0023, 1992).

Although a few local singers and comedians had earlier attempted to adopt rap to their repertoire, they had failed to gain substantial audience support because they had solely focused on dancing and tended to use many English words.[5]

Unlike the earlier singers, Seo Taiji's careful enunciation of lyrics in Korean was understandable and engaging. His young audience rapidly absorbed the lyrics and imitated the group's break dancing and fashion style, while their elders saw rap as representing a vulgar and dangerous dimension of American Black culture.[6] But Seo's initial adaptation was not strongly reminiscent of the American genre: his childlike face, youthful fashion, playful dancing, and the song's love theme were far from the images and lyrics of African American rap singers. His adaptation of rap was articulated through other musical sounds, images, and messages, and did not directly index African American culture to his Korean listeners, even though analysts would find considerable musical and visual similarities.

Seo's direct relevance to youth, particularly through the two songs released in subsequent albums and discussed below, resulted in masses of teenage fans who worship him as their hero and representative voice. As the new generation became widely associated by the media with Seo Taiji and his socio-cultural impact (the "Seo Taiji Syndrome") the new generation was often described as the "Seo Taiji Generation." His impact on the pop music industry was immense, and mainstream Korean pop literally shifted from slow, sentimental ballad songs toward faster, dance-oriented songs with increased visual focus, allowing a clear distinction to be made between the music of youth and adult audiences. From this point the youth became dominant in the broadcast and marketing of Korean pop (Kang 1995, 64–87).

Kyosil Idea

In 1994, Seo Taiji and Boys released the song "Kyosil Idea" (Classroom Ideology).[7] Along with its heavy metal sounds and shouting/rapping, influenced by the Beastie Boys and others,[8] its provocative message, denouncing the dehumanizing educational system, surprised the entire nation. A number of movies had covered similar ground, including *Haengbogŭn sŏngjŏksuni anijanayo* (Happiness is Not Based on Grade Ranking 1989), among others,[9] but had little social impact. Seo Taiji wanted to bring social change and targeted the educational system:

> Although I left high school to concentrate on music, I hadn't really liked school. I thought it nonsensical that teachers hit students and I would often run away from the classroom when a teacher tried to hit me. Since I could not handle the overload of homework, and since my school did not approve of my interest in music, I decided to leave . . . When I wrote "Kyosil Idea," I wanted to express myself as strongly as possible, because I had been so deeply hurt and unsatisfied about school. I particularly hated the way that so many people wasted their lives just in order to enter university
>
> (quoted in Lee 1999, 158–160 and 175, translated by the author).

Prior to this song, no singer had dared to criticize such basic social institutions so powerfully, and it became a matter of instant concern for the authorities. Violent visual images in the music video and provocative lyrics led to the song being banned from television and radio. Conservative religious figures, educators, and parent groups criticized Seo Taiji and his music as a bad influence. But the government had let the lyrics pass censorship prior to its release (Lee 1999, 102), and many students took its message as a truthful representation.

Figure 12.2 The Third Album by Seo Taiji and Boys (Bando, BDL-0039, 1994), Where "Kyosil Idea" (Classroom Ideology) is Included.

The song can be categorized as metal rap, inspired by the hardcore rap and heavy metal of groups such as the Beastie Boys, Rage Against the Machine, and Cypress Hill, groups favored by Seo Taiji.[10] Efforts to fuse the two genres together tended to focus not on rap's linguistic and rhythmic complexity, but on the intensity achieved by shouting the lyrics with powerful emotion. Seo Taiji commented: "I think rap and metal have a lot in common and ultimately aim at the same thing, expressing strong messages" (quoted in Lee 1999, 169–170, translated by the author). His earlier musical experience as a member of heavy metal group Sinawi was influential, and he had also collaborated with artists on the American and Canadian west coast who exposed him to many different American styles. "Kyosil Idea" was recorded at the Conway Recording Studio in Los Angeles and mixed at the Green House Recording Studio in Vancouver by local engineers.[11]

The text is translated below.[12] Part B describes the uniform classroom atmosphere; students feel that their youth is being wasted. Their school experience is like being in prison; they feel like criminals in the eyes of the system. After a short guitar interlude, part C describes the parental stance: concern that their offspring succeed and be competitive. Part D insists that students change their attitudes to free themselves from misery and urges them to assert themselves, rather than expect the system to change. In the second half, B^1 criticizes parents and describes

Table 12.1 The Lyrics of "Kyosil Idea" (Classroom Ideology)

Section	Part	Line	Text	Time
Intro		1'01"		
Section I	A	1	Enough. Enough. Enough. Enough.	
		2	Enough of that kind of teaching. Enough.	
		3	Already enough. Enough. Already enough. Enough.	1'12"
	B	4	Every morning by 7:30, you put us into a small classroom.	
		5	And force the same things into all nine million children's heads.	
		6	These dark closed classroom walls are swallowing us up.	
		7	My life is too precious to be wasted here.	1'35"
	Guitar Solo			1'46"
	C	8	I will make you more expensive than the kid next to you.	
		9	Step on their heads one by one! You can be more successful.	1'57"
	D	10	Why don't you change instead of wasting your life?	
		11	Why don't you change instead of wishing that others would change?	2'09"
Bridge				2'40"
Section II	A	12	Enough. Enough. Enough. Enough.	
		13	Enough of that kind of teaching. Enough.	
		14	Already enough. Enough. Already enough. Enough.	2'51"
	B'	15	From elementary school to middle school, then to high school,	
		16	To present us in nice wrapping paper,	
		17	They send us to the gift wrapping store,	
		18	They wrap us in wrapping paper called 'college.'	
		19	Think now!	
		20	Hiding behind a college degree, try to act cool.	
		21	These times have passed.	
		22	Be honest! You will know it.	3'15"
	Guitar Solo			3'25"
	C	23	I will make you more expensive than the kid next to you.	
		24	Step on their heads one by one! You can be more successful.	3'37"
	D	25	Why don't you change instead of wasting your life?	
		26	Why don't you change instead of wishing that others would change?	
	D	27	Why don't you change instead of wasting your life?	
		28	Why don't you change instead of wishing that others would change? Ah!	4'06"
	A	29	Enough. Enough. Enough. Enough.	
		30	Enough of that kind of teaching. Enough.	4'18"

the unfortunate truth that success is based on receiving a degree from a top college. There is no need to pretend that they share their parents' goals. Seo attacks the system and urges students to stand up for themselves.

Although the formal and musical styles in "Kyosil Idea" are close to conventional metal rap, musical elements are used to amplify specific messages. Different vocal timbres are used to represent a dialogue between students and parents, coinciding with the song's sectional divisions. In A, Seo Taiji uses regular rapping to express the students' voices, and the chorus echoes, "Enough." In C, he adopts a sarcastic tone, using regular rapping to express parents' voices. The chorus remains silent, suggesting that the parents' wishes are to be ignored. In D, guest vocal An Hŭng-ch'an's extremely low and rough shouting rap augments the powerful message, and he gives the concluding statement, louder and more aggressively than any other part of the song, marking a symbolic triumph for the students.

The song's music video was not distributed commercially, but live concert footage was included in Seo Taiji and Boys' "Goodbye Music Video: [The &]," produced as the group's final presentation in 1996 as they announced they were to disband.[13] This presented a slightly different version of the song. Accompanied by the "Air" from Handel's "Water Music," large TV screens onstage show a clip containing images of textbooks in disarray, desks, and students with drooping heads facing an exam. A silhouette of a teacher shakes a student's shoulders as the word *kongbu* (study) flashes up. The teacher distributes exams; then, in silhouette, he chokes a student's neck and hits him with a stick. Finally, a large iron padlock fastens the school gate, as if it is a jail. Accompanied by a disturbing synthesizer sound, Seo appears on stage dressed in a military-style school uniform, inherited from the Japanese colonial period but remaining standard attire until 1982 and still common since. Behind a pedestal he gives a short speech:

> Every morning by 7:30, you put us into a small classroom and force the same things into all nine million children's heads. Do you realize that you cannot do anything in this dark closed classroom? You are different from me and I am different from you. Why do we have to be the same? Why do you want so much? You have the right to learn what you want. School forces us to follow the same way and to pursue the same goal. In this dark closed classroom, your future is becoming more and more narrow.[14]

The song begins with the guest singer An Hŭng-ch'an, accompanied by his metal band, Crash. Unlike the original version of the song, this live video emphasizes and extends the metal sound and shouting vocals, amplifying the rhythmic and sound intensity.

Come Back Home

In 1995, Seo Taiji introduced Korea to a gangsta rap with his release of "Come Back Home."[15] This sequel to "Kyosil Idea" encourages runaway kids to return home. It is addressed to those who suffered most under the oppressive educational system and parental pressure, but beseeches them through the tough, in-your-face style of gangsta rap not to give up on society.

The song follows the conventions of American West Coast gangsta rap, an edgy sound produced by synthesizer and rhythmic stressed bass, with guitars and drums densely layered. Gangsta rap (a.k.a. hardcore rap, reality rap)[16] developed in the late 1980s, led by NWA, Ice-T, The Geto Boys, 2Pac and Dr. Dre (George 1998, 45–48; Krims 2000, 70–79). "Come Back Home" sounds similar to "I Ain't Goin' Out Like That" on Cypress Hill's 1993 album, *Black*

Figure 12.3 The Fourth Album by Seo Taiji and Boys (Bando, BDCD-028), Where "Come Back Home" is Included.

Sunday,[17] and some Korean music critics claimed Seo Taiji copied it, but there are clear differences. The Cypress Hill song, for example, is largely based on regular rap and only includes subtle timbral change, but "Come Back Home" uses exaggerated "clenching sounds," especially in the solo rap, amplifying different sound/vocal effects between Seo's solos and his band. "I Ain't Goin' Out Like That" has two layers of fundamental metered and equally loud backing sounds—a high-pitched synthesizer and a low bass—and short rhythmic motives stay unchanged throughout. "Come Back Home" alternates the two basic layers with additional layers, manipulating the volume and length of the synthesizer sound, and using it only in parts of the song, while the bass has a less rhythmic and softer short motive, functioning as background while strong drumbeats provide rhythmic continuity. The song divides into parts based on different vocal styles coupled to distinct instrumental textures. There are five features forming

individual sections, A, B, C, D, and E but, unlike "Kyosil Idea," this song is through-composed, with the mix of vocal and instrumental textures creating complexity, except in D.

The lyrics of American gangsta rap often invoke the ghetto realities of violence, misogyny, drugs, rape, and gun culture (George 1998, 23–27). No such extremes can be found in Korean inner-city communities. In "Come Back Home," then, Seo's focus remains on the marginalized youth living through hardships placed upon them by education and by the older generation's

Table 12.2 The Lyrics of "Come Back Home"

Part	Line	Text	Duration
Intro	0'15"		
A	1	What am I trying to find?	
	2	Where am I restlessly wandering?	0'35"
B	3	I see the end of my life, feeling heavy in my heart.	
	4	My life is blocked by my fear for tomorrow.	
	5	After I see myself abandoned day after day.	
	6	I am not there. And, tomorrow is not there, either.	0'56"
C	7	My rage toward this society is getting greater and greater.	
	8	Finally, it turned into disgust. Truths disappear at the tip of the tongue.	1'06"
D	9	You must come back home.	
	10	To warm up the coldness of your heart,	
	11	You must come back home.	
	12	In this harsh life,	
	13	You must come back home.	
	14	To warm up the coldness of your heart,	
	15	You must come back home.	
	16	I will keep trying.	1'26"
C^1	17	One more life is born and parents take charge.	
	18	No love for me. My painful tears have dried up.	
	19	The world is like an empty bubble. Hmm. Look around. Waiting for you.	
	20	Yes, that's enough now. I wish I could fly in the sky.	
	21	Because we are still young and our future is good enough,	
	22	Here! Now wipe the cold tears out and come back home.	1'57"
D	23–30		2'18"
E	31	In the place to be! One, Two, Three.	
	32	In the place to be! In the place to be! In the place to be!	2'43"
B^1	33	Although my exploding heart is driving me crazy,	
	34	Now, I know, (they) loved me.	2'53"
D	35–42		3'15"
A^1	43	You must come back home. What am I (You must come back home.) trying to fine? (You must come back home.)	
	44	Where am I (You must come back home.) restlessly wandering?	3'37"
A^{11}	45	What am I trying to find?	
	46	Where am I restlessly wandering?	3'55"

overshadowing control. The main voice in "Kyosil Idea" is that of students, and, similarly, "Come Back Home" is voiced by a student speaking about the oppressive nature of the system. The text is given above in translation.[18]

Part A portrays the runaway who finds himself completely lost in the world. Part B describes his desperate fear of the future; C expresses his despair. Part D transfers the speaker from the teenager to Seo, and by repeating "you" four times Seo emphasizes his plea to come home, encouraging the teenager to persevere. He moves from the pain that society and parents ignore to expressing hope and encouragement. E appears as a kind of interlude, repeating an English phrase three times—"The place" referring to home. B^1 describes teenage emotions after wandering the streets and realizing there is no place like home out there in the real world. Part A returns but is musically slightly changed. In A^1, the lyrics "You must come back home" are inserted four times, interrupting the text to communicate Seo's message. By alternating the voices of the teenager and himself, Seo expresses support and understanding for runaways, a message more effectively conveyed than in the third person. An example of this dual representation appears as "I" becomes "We" in line 21. Seo was convincing; some runaways were reported who actually returned home.

The music video of "Come Back Home" draws on American gangsta rap conventions, especially with respect to the shooting location. Gangsta rap videos often show the ghetto or are filmed in decaying buildings (Rose 1994, 9–10), and Seo's video is set in an abandoned building and on inner city street corners. It begins as a male teenager runs out of a house after arguing with his father. The teenager wanders the woods, a large backyard, and street corners of the inner city, all juxtaposed with Seo Taiji and Boys along with dancers performing in the abandoned building dressed in typical hip-hop attire. The teenager's distorted face and body gestures express his desperation as he recalls the argument. Suddenly, he is chased by a group of teenagers, thrown to the ground and beaten up. Between these scenes, Seo Taiji and Boys appear in the window of the teenager's house singing. The teenager finally returns home, first looking in from outside on a sunny afternoon. The last scene turns into a ball of light that disappears into Seo's palm, and ends with a close-up of Seo sitting in the abandoned building, smiling. The video faithfully serves the primary theme of the song, contrasting dark and scary street images with the bright and welcoming house. Rather than running away and suffering hardships on the streets, Seo asks runaways to come back and get a future. The message markedly contrasts with the images and texts we would expect in typical African American gangsta rap.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen Seo Taiji's rap music in relation to 1990s youth culture in Korea, showing how global cultural forms have been localized. Seo Taiji's music is not a simple imitation of American pop but an efficient adaptation of styles that are selectively redefined and reproduced to meet the needs of Korean youth. While rap and metal were usually associated with confrontation in America, Seo Taiji's use of these genres ranged from confrontation to supplication. He was not interested in maintaining full musical authenticity by embracing the totality of the ideology behind the idioms, but he took rap and metal as kinds of language that could be used to articulate what he wanted to express. His successful representation of his audience's sensibilities made him a central figure of Korean pop and a highly influential cultural icon for the new generation. He is, then, considered a pioneer.

Since Seo's initial retirement in 1996, there have been changes in Korean hip-hop. Initially, many singers followed his style, extending the market for rap music and hip-hop culture. By the middle of the 1990s, a number of similar boy groups had appeared, dancing with rap music and hip-hop fashion. By the mid-2000s, Korean youth seemed to enjoy hip-hop on a daily basis as local hip-hop scenes, both mainstream and underground, had fully developed and various local hip-hop styles were beginning to gain international fans (presaging Psy's "Gangnam Style" phenomenon of 2012). As Korean society becomes more global, cultural flows to Korea will continue to be adapted to convey important local meanings and values within Korean society and, as they are re-exported, around the globe.

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Notes

1 Birch, Schirato, and Srivastava (2001: 61–62) point out that many Asian countries have borrowed American popular culture but use it "as cultural vehicles for representing and working through local issues and values."
2 On *Seo Taiji and Boys* (Bando Records BDCD-014, 1992). The additional recordings by Seo I have consulted for this chapter are *Seo Taiji and Boys II* (Bando Records BDCD-017, 1993), *Seo Taiji and Boys III* (Bando Records BDCD-023, 1994), *Seo Taiji and Boys IV* (Bando Records BDCD-028, 1995) and *Shidae yugam* (Bando Records BDCD-051, 1996).
3 Kim Kyŏng-il (1999: 256–257) criticizes this social environment in relation to Korea's long historical philosophy of Confucianism, in which power was kept by the elite.
4 Don Adams and Esther E. Gottlieb (1993: 4–31) examine how educational patterns were molded by China during the pre-modern era, Japan during the colonial period, and the United States since World War II.
5 For example, a duet called Ch'ŏriwa Miae used rap, but their audience was much more interested in their lively dancing techniques, and the comedy duo Shik'ŏmŭnssŭ (Blackish) had adopted rap to their minstrel routines (Sŏn 1996: 220–225). For introductory material on Seo Taiji, see http://seotaiji.com.
6 This common perception affected music critics (see Sŏn 1996: 80–84; Lee 1998: 289; Park 2000: 61).
7 Recorded on *Seo Taiji and Boys III* (Bando Records BDCD-023, 1994).
8 For which, see Rubin (1999: 126–127).
9 See further Hŏ 2000: 261 and 269.
10 See Lee (1999: 170). One of the members of Cypress Hill, Bobo, was a percussionist for the Beastie Boys, so it is understandable that Seo's song connects to both groups.
11 The song was produced by Seo Taiji except the drum (Josh Freese) and Scratch (DJ Q-BERT) parts.
12 Translation by the author.
13 We Production V000707, 1996.
14 Translation by the author.
15 Recorded on *Seo Taiji and Boys IV* (Bando Records BDCD-028, 1995).
16 Krims considers reality rap to define a broader category (2000: 70).
17 Ruffhouse/Columbia 53931, 1993.
18 Translation by the author.

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