

## POLITICS, PARODIES, AND THE PARADOX OF PSY'S 'GANGNAM STYLE'

KEITH HOWARD\*

### ABSTRACT

In 2012, 'Gangnam Style' occasioned large flash mobs, three of the early ones taking place in Pasadena, Times Square in New York, and Sydney, Australia. Today, Psy, the singer of 'Gangnam Style', is regularly talked about as having brought K-pop to the world beyond East and Southeast Asia, and Korean tourism chiefs are actively planning a Korean Wave street in Gangnam, the district of Seoul lampooned by the song. But, 'Gangnam Style' has proved challenging to K-pop fans, who have resisted its gender stereotyping, its comic framing, and its simple dance moves that subsume the aesthetics of movement under a sequence of locations and action vignettes. At the same time, foreign success has given the song, and its singer, legitimacy in Korea so much so that, despite lyrics and video images that critique modern urban life and caricature the misogynistic failures of its protagonist, Psy headlined the inauguration celebrations of Korea's incoming president, Park Geun-hye, in February 2013. This paper explores the song, its reception and critique by fans and others, and notes how, in an ultimate paradox that reflects the age of social media and the individualization of consumerism, the parodies the song spawned across the globe enabled Koreans to celebrate its success while ignoring its message.

**Keywords:** Korean Wave, K-pop, popular music, parody, mimesis, consumerism, social media, Gangnam Style, Psy.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2012, 'Gangnam Style' occasioned large flash mobs, three of the early ones taking place in Pasadena, Times Square in New York, and Sydney, Australia. Wikipedia lists additional flash mobs in October and November 2012 that each attracted between 12,000 and 20,000 participants in Seoul, Sulawesi, Milan, Paris and Rome. Psy (Park Jae-sang), the singer of 'Gangnam Style' has, not surprisingly, regularly been talked about as bringing K-pop to the world beyond East and Southeast Asia. He is said to have reinvigorated pop production, as having

---

\* Professor, The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.  
E-mail: [kh@soas.ac.uk](mailto:kh@soas.ac.uk)

succeeded abroad where others had failed. Certainly, Psy achieved massive international success: the song topped the charts in more than 30 countries, and by a large margin broke records on YouTube. The original video was the first to record one billion YouTube views, and by the end of May 2014 it had notched up two billion views; if consumers had watched the video only once, albeit in an imaginary world, this would mean that more than 25% of the global population had been reached.

'Gangnam Style' has, however, proved challenging to K-pop fans, who have resisted its gender stereotyping, its comic framing, and its simple dance moves that subsume the aesthetics of movement beneath a sequence of locations and action vignettes. This seems paradoxical, if not counter-intuitive. However, in my teaching of K-pop, and in every recent guest seminar I have given on K-pop in Denmark, Germany, Britain and the United States, I have observed the same reluctance by students and audiences to embrace the song. Is it wise, then, that a number of my Korean Studies' colleagues celebrate 'Gangnam Style' with their own parodies, and utilize the song's lyrics in Korean language classes?

While the 'podgy comic singer and long-legged beauties' (as the *Korea Times* put it in an article titled 'Korea's "soft power" quest' on 5 December 2012) generated a 'sudden attractiveness or sarcastic humor of an actor's culture' (Nye & Kim, 2013, 33), it was overseas fame that gave 'Gangnam Style' legitimacy back in Korea. Abroad, the paradox of the song, as both representing and sitting distant from contemporary K-pop, began to brew in the early days following the release of the song's video on YouTube on 15 July 2012. One of the first parodies of it was contributed by the duo behind the 'EatYourKimchi' website, Simon and Martina Stawski. Copying many of the video ideas but providing a new soundtrack, this was uploaded to YouTube on 23 July 2012<sup>1</sup>. Barely six weeks later, on 3 September, the 'EatYourKimchi' duo announced on an Al-Jazeera television program that 'Gangnam Style' should not be associated with K-pop, and that while Psy deserved his popularity abroad for the song, it should not be thought of as part of Korean Wave<sup>2</sup>.

This paper explores the song. I reflect on my own experiences as I have observed the evolution of K-pop in recent years, and as K-pop has moved beyond the accounts given in my 2006 edited text, *Korean Pop Music: Riding the Wave*. That volume, the first comprehensive account of Korean pop music in English, today seems to inhabit a different planet to 'Gangnam Style'. I also reflect on the plethora of recent and competing accounts of both K-pop and 'Gangnam Style'. In unpacking the paradox that is Psy's – if not K-pop's – most successful song, I find how the parodies it has spawned across the globe have enabled Koreans, including

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.eatyourkimchi.com/tag/psy/> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrPETRPniZM> (last accessed 25 August 2014).

<sup>2</sup> 'The Stream: K-Pop Diplomacy', broadcast on 3 September 2012. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYt813fDWTw> (accessed 25 April 2014).

Park Geun-Hye as the incoming South Korean president, to celebrate its success while ignoring its message. The song's ultimate paradox, then, is that as a paramount reflection of our current age of social media and the individualization of consumerism, the song's success has come from it being stripped of its identity – as a video, as a song with meaningful lyrics, and as something uniquely Korean.

### PRESIDENT PARK AND THE PODGY PSY

'Gangnam Style' was most famously performed at the inauguration of Park Geun-hye as the incoming president of the Republic of Korea in February 2013. As a parody of modern urban life in Seoul with its hidden realities, and because the song marks its protagonist out as a failure, the inauguration performance marked the most counter-intuitive aspect of the song's history. Had anybody working on the inauguration of the daughter of the general-turned-president Park Chung Hee considered the video images? Had they bothered to listen to the lyrics? Maybe we can forgive the most prominent English lyric element, 'Hey, sexy lady!' but surely not the first verse:

*Najenŭn ttasaroun in 'ganjŏgin yŏja,  
Kŏp'i hanjan ũi yŏyurŭl anŭn p'umgyŏk innŭn yŏja,  
Pami omyŏn shimjangi ttŭgŏwŏjinŭn yŏja,  
Kŭrŏn panjŏn innŭn yŏja...*

A girl who is warm and humanly during the day,  
A classy girl who knows how to enjoy the freedom of a cup of coffee,  
A girl whose heart gets hotter when night comes,  
A girl with that kind of twist...

To those who remembered recent Korean history, this verse in no way matched the image of Park Geun-hye. In her youth, she had stepped up to the podium as de facto first lady after the assassination of her mother in August 1974 by a Korean resident of Japan on orders reputedly issued by North Korean leader Kim Il Sung. To many, then, she was indelibly linked to her father's autocratic and oppressive regime. She had cultivated an image of her life as one of sacrifice for the country: she had never married, almost unheard of among women of her generation she had studied electronic engineering at university in order to help the development of Korea's industry, and she had been left with a prominent facial scar after an attack in 2006 while campaigning. Her political ambitions had been challenged many times, citing her 'imperial' and 'queen-like' persona. And, in 2012, her successful presidential bid maintained a shift to the political right that had begun with her predecessor as president, the conservative Lee Myung-bak.

Across the world, harnessing pop culture has proved to be an attractive proposition for many political campaigns. However, history has a habit of

repeating itself, and when an older generation of politicians attempts to tap in to the music of a younger generation, there are many dangers. Rarely do political strategists give the long-term implications sufficient consideration. To give two examples, D. Ream's 'Things Can Only Get Better' was chosen by Tony Blair as the song for his 1997 campaign in Britain, and George W. Bush ran with Tom Petty's 'I Won't Back Down'. Both songs proved useful on the campaign trail, since they offered pertinent reflections on the claimed shortcomings of administrations Blair and Bush hoped to replace. But both offered plenty of ammunition to detractors once both leaders had settled into office and began to be seen in the cold light of the morning after—or, rather, the many mornings after their election success. 'Gangnam Style' ought to occupy different territory to D: Ream and Tom Petty, since it makes no political points that can be interpreted as reflections on leaders previous or current. Neither does it reflect anything in the identity of the leader it was used to celebrate, a matter that points to a second common use of pop culture: as part of a strategy to enable politicians to appeal to youth constituencies. Here too, great care needs to be taken. One recent example of the possible pitfalls is offered in what *The Telegraph* cited on 21 April 2013 as the 'imbecilic, bum note' 'Koningslied', a song put together for the accession of Willem-Alexander to the Dutch throne. This failed abysmally to capture people's hearts, not least because it was too distant from any pop canon recognizable from the last decade or so.

Why, then, given these observations, and knowing that K-pop fans had not universally embraced 'Gangnam Style', was it considered an appropriate song with which to celebrate Park Geun-hye's inauguration? The answer has to be found beyond the lyrics, beyond the messages portrayed through visual imagery, and beyond the song's musical style. Its performance at the inauguration can best be analyzed in terms of a potentialized mimetic power, as a kind of reverse Saidian Orientalism. In this understanding, the fame of the song in Korea was by the time of the inauguration based more on the parodies made of it beyond the borders of the Korean peninsula than on the original music video. Many of the parodies recast locations, individuals, and activities, and in so doing they dismantled the architecture of life in Korea. The result was that the literal meaning of the lyrics, and the intention of the original video's scenes and vignettes, could be ignored.

'Gangnam Style' broadly fits Theodor Adorno's theorizing about pop music. Back in the 1940s, he decried the culture industry for having 'synthetic, planned methods of turning out profits' through 'formulaic songs' (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972). Adorno's approach has been echoed by scholars such as Steve Chapple & Reebee Garofalo (1977), Dave Harker (1980) and Peter Manuel (1988), who variously and collectively have discussed the pop industry as being an 'assembly line' based on 'pre-masticated formulae' that 'colonizes leisure'. 'Gangnam Style' is constructed using formulae, and can be allied to other recent assembly-line productions such as Los del Río's 'Macarena', LMFAO's 'Sexy and I Know It' or

any of the 'Harlem Shakes'. All of these focus on visual and movement elements, in a way that relegates the lyrics to a supporting role; they are designed for video and, in the contemporary world, for Internet dissemination. 'Gangnam Style' is also formulaic in terms of its lyrics, which seem to revisit an earlier time in Korean pop history. It can be considered alongside Byeon Jin Seop's '*Hüimang sahang*/Wish List', which was Number 5 in the Music Box charts on 9 February 1990 at a time when nobody outside the country knew that Korea had a local pop chart. Byeon's song includes the following:

*Ch'öng pajiga chal öllinün yöja,  
Pabül manhi mögödo pae annaonün yöja,  
Nae yegiga chaemiöpsödo usöjunün yöja,  
Nan kürön yöjaga chohtöra...*

The woman who looks good in blue jeans,  
The woman who, although she eats lots, never gets a stomach that sticks out,  
The woman who laughs at all my stories even when she's not interested in them,  
That's the woman who is good for me...

Byeon's song title has sometimes been translated as 'Wishful Thinking'; my use of 'Wish List' dates from the time that my Korean language teacher at Yonsei University used the song with the class I was attending to practice our translation skills – much as Korean language teachers in the last few years have used the lyrics of 'Gangnam Style'.

'Wish List', however, was 25 years ago. It worked in the conservative era that preceded democratization proper in Korea, and appealed to parents more than to their teenage children, and to a media that was not yet vigilant about possible copyright infringement<sup>3</sup>. In 1990, I had just begun to research Korean pop music, and I quickly discovered that the song was controversial among its intended teenage audience; in fact, it arguably never actually gained a significant teenage fan base, because it failed to match teenage ideas about relationships and love. The song was about an ideal woman, a woman that could only be dreamt about. In the song, the male protagonist got his come-uppance when the woman of his dreams responded, saying – slowing the tempo down and modulating the song up a tone – that she could only be seen with a guy as great as the woman he had described.

The parallels with 'Gangnam Style' are highly tempting. Psy, similarly, singularly fails in his attempts to attract the girls, not least as he sings how he might seem calm but gets completely crazy when the 'right time' comes, and how he has ideas rather than muscles. These are not the lyrics and not the image – given the 36-year-old Psy here singing his eighteenth single, the opening track on his sixth album – that we have come to expect from recent K-pop. In reality, then, 'Gangnam Style' is evocative of a previous era.

<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding that Korea signed up to international copyright conventions in 1985, 'Wish List' includes the famous piano line from George Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue', written in 1924.

### SEXUAL POLITICS AND K-POP

The popularity of ‘Gangnam Style’ was such that it held on to top spot in almost every domestic Korean music chart from its release in July 2012 until Psy stopped his official promotion activities in February 2013. On the KBS Music Bank K-Chart, it took the top spot for 16 consecutive weeks through to January 2013, based on digital streaming and downloads. Still, it was very different from much contemporary K-pop production. The overt sexuality of singers has, for example, increased markedly since rippling muscles were made a feature of K-Pop males by the dancing duo CLON in the 1990s (Howard, 2013). By 2014, the Asian male body was epitomized by Gary in his ‘Shower Later/*Chogŭm itta shawŏhae*’ and by the heavy rock of YB’s cover of ‘Cigarette Girl.’ In both, not to pull any punches, Asian males entwine with white, Euro-American and sexually provocative muses<sup>4</sup>. None of this sits well against the podgy Psy. Neither does Psy match the made-up, surgically enhanced, alternative metrosexuality that has made inroads into K-Pop with, say, BEAST’s 2010 track ‘Breath/*Sum*,’ or, before this with Rain – a ‘man’s body with a boy’s face,’ or ‘an angelic face and a killer body’ (Shin, 2009, cited in Youna Kim, 2013, 20). Curiously, though, by featuring strong male Korean stars, ‘Shower Later’ and ‘Cigarette Girl’ subvert the gender stereotyping that has existed in the West for several centuries, in which Asian female sexuality is celebrated but the Asian male is perceived to be weak and sexually non-threatening. These stereotypes are witnessed in Paul Gauguin’s canvasses or in the much-cited critique by Edward Said of Gustave Flaubert and Richard Burton, for their association of ‘the Orient [with] the freedom of licentious sex’ (1978, 190).

These same stereotypes are constantly spoon-fed to grateful American consumers by the entertainment media (Wu, 2002; Prasso, 2005; Jung, 2013). ‘Gangnam Style’ doesn’t seek to subvert them, but returns us to the same outdated images. Indeed, Psy takes on a much more mundane masculinity than contemporary mainstream K-pop. In the song’s video, his rotund physique contrasts with the toned bodies of the exercising girls he might just get lucky with, and with Hyuna pole-dancing on a subway train; while the lyrics allude to girls who are conservative on the outside but passionate inside, the video portrays the opposite. ‘Ironically’, writes Eun-Young Jung, emphasizing this same point, ‘such entanglements may have partially helped Psy to be successful in the United States, as visual images of Psy... [and] the two male comedians dancing wildly fit with the familiar stereotype of Asian males as sexually unthreatening and comical’ (2013, 107).

That Psy stands as the antithesis of contemporary sexualized K-Pop is not restricted to ‘Gangnam Style’. Almost as if he was trying to ensure that listeners

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=tgfuaDS-S2c>, and <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=DgGTtGnYJRY>.

get the message of gender stereotyping, but in my view also as a reaction to being taken seriously by Park Geun-hye's campaign team, his next single, 'Gentleman,' offered an unmistakably crass representation of the same stereotyping, cast in what *The Guardian* reviewed as 'a fairly standard-issue pop-dance single' (12 April 2013). 'Gentleman', though, arguably attempted to portray a more assertive masculinity, only for this to come across as misogyny, the result of which again reduced any sexual attraction. Hyuna was replaced by Ga-In of Brown Eyed Girls, and it was Ga-In rather than Psy who inhabited the video with a toned body, and who was unmistakably the overtly sexualized partner. She reprised the racy hip-swaying choreography from her group's 'Abracadabra,' in what retrospectively can now be seen as a brief detour on her way to the explicit violent-love 'Fxxk U' released early in 2014 – which in turn, it has been noted, was in its production influenced by China's Jess Lee's 'Suffering'.

Adorno's theory of formulaic pop is, nonetheless, challenged by Psy in his approach to contemporary issues. The failure of the protagonist, and by extension, the emptiness of Korea's consumption culture, mark out 'Gangnam Style', even though it is clear that Park Geun-hye's campaign team used 'Gangnam Style' without referencing its subject matter. Psy had already proved himself to be controversial before 'Gangnam Style', particularly in the 2010 title track to his fifth album, 'Right Now'. This tackled a different but related topic: the anguish of living in non-stop Seoul. While the video depicting the boredom of being stuck in a traffic jam, the Korean government reacted to the song's lyrics. These, it decided, would encourage the youth to commit suicide, by jumping off the top of what since the late 1980s had been the tallest building in Seoul, the 63-storey Hanhwa City building on Yeouido. They slapped an R19 rating on 'Right Now'. This kept it outside the teen-dominated charts, restricting its circulation:

*Namūi ttōgi tō k'ūgo namūi yōjaga yeppūgo naega hanūn mot'ūn'gōōūl  
wōn'ga chom ōsōlp'ūgo,  
Kūrōhtago chugūm sudo kyesok idaero sal sudo sat'uriro tchat'uriro  
norōnosūl ppunigo...  
Right now! 180-do pyōrhae tolgo tolgo chigūmbut'ō mich'yō pollanda,  
Right now! 63 pildingwiro kūrigo kū wiro chigūmbut'ō ttwiō pollanda.*

They say that married women are larger and more pretty, and that the grass is greener on the other side,  
They say everything I do is kind of awkward, right, but does that mean I should die?  
Right now! Turn round and round through 180 degrees, crazy *pollanda*,  
Right now! On the 63 Building and up at the top, I've jumped, *pollanda*.

Yonhap News reported on 20 September 2012 that a campaign was underway to lift the rating after the success of 'Gangnam Style.' The R19 restriction was said to be damaging Psy's ability to emerge as a global superstar, since 'Right Now'

was expected to become a new hit as foreign fans searched online for more Psy tracks. As much as the success of ‘Gangnam Style’ was unanticipated, so it was celebrated, and policies quickly shifted: the government did indeed succumb, and removed the rating from ‘Right Now.’ Again, then, the lyrics and the video images were sidelined as other ends were championed.

### ‘GANGNAM STYLE’: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

As with much K-pop, the lyrics of ‘Gangnam Style’ include a smattering of English that provides decoration to the Korean narrative. The Korean was, of course, not understandable to many foreign consumers, although the Internet resonates with translations, and so the way that the song was consumed abroad relied less on lyrics than on other elements.

‘Can anyone kill Gangnam Style?’ asked *The Guardian* online blog on 14 November 2012. ‘It is the cringe-proof meme, the zombie meme, the meme that knows no shame. Quite possibly, it will be danced by grannies at weddings in 2030 – the twenty-first-century equivalent of the conga line; the new Macarena.’ Why, *Time* magazine asked in October 2012, had the song not died after 57-year-old Eric Schmidt from Google danced to it? Why had it not died after so many others, from the boys of Eton to Madonna, Mayor of London Boris Johnson or the UN’s Ban Ki-moon danced to it? Some suffered as a consequence, and *Time* returned to the song on 3 April 2014, reporting how a policeman in Falmouth, England, one Gary Watts, had been sacked for dancing to the song in an effort to raise money for a dying child. Without doubt, the song was eminently mashable – once, in respect to global pop in the 1970s or 1980s, I would have referenced covers or remixes, but with the exception of ‘London Style’ (to be considered below), to do so hardly accounts for what happened in the parody world of ‘Gangnam Style’. But, not everybody got the joke. Some of the comments on *The Guardian*’s blog summed up a feeling of despair that grew as ‘Gangnam Style’ proved more and more impossible to escape from: ‘Shut up, South Korea!’ ‘I hate the song,’ ‘Of course America is singing the wrong song.’

Internationally, an excerpt of the video first appeared on YouTube on 11 July 2012. The full video was released four days later. The fuse of its explosion was lit by celebrity interest. Robbie Williams mentioned it on his personal blog on 28 July; the next day it was tweeted by rapper T-Pain. On 30 July, Scooter Braun tagged the video, and tweeted to rhetorically ask why he had not already signed Psy: ‘HOW DID I NOT SIGN THIS GUY!?!?!’. Braun’s Raymond Braun Media Group soon concluded a full contract with Psy, placing the Korean alongside others he managed such as Justin Bieber and M.C. Hammer. The tipping point, to use Malcolm Gladwell’s (2000) term, was reached on 1 August, when the blog Daily Beast tagged ‘Gangnam Style’ as the video passed 10,000,000 YouTube views. A



month later, and after Katy Perry had shared the video with her myriad twitter followers, it had notched up 100,000,000 YouTube views. By the end of September, it occupied the second spot on the Billboard chart after an estimated 34,000,000 Americans had listened to it on radio. Experiencing 'Gangnam Style' was, though, facilitated by social media more than radio, where its attraction came from its visual elements (dance, location, costume, action) as much as or more than the aural (song and lyrics). In this respect, it shifts our understanding of what the music industry is, away from the aural products celebrated by organizations such as the International Federation of Phonographic Industries (IFPI) and protected through copyright legislation, towards the individualized content that social media brings to today's youth. Indeed, Psy lamented on BBC1 Radio on 5 October 2012: 'The problem is that my music video is more popular than I am.'

The distinction between commercialization and individualization reveals much about why 'Gangnam Style' was not what fans of K-Pop wanted. In a survey of Thai teens I conducted in February 2014 that I reported to the Third International Hallyu Workshop in Seoul on 7 March 2014, I asked about 'Gangnam Style'. Responses included: 'It's in trend, but I don't like it'; 'The tune is catchy, but in the end it is not good to listen to, something more to enjoy when watching the music videos'; 'Very catchy, but too commercial'; 'Too mainstream'; 'It was great until it went viral. Then it got annoying because it was everywhere'; 'The composition is catchy, but when I looked up the meaning of the lyrics I didn't like it much.' The respondents to my survey comprised Thai teenagers who were studying Thai classical music and dance. They were not necessarily K-pop fans, but their reactions matched what I have now found repeated in each lecture and seminar I have given since 'Gangnam Style' exploded into our consciousness: in each presentation, my offer to play the 'Gangnam Style' video at the end has been met with a resounding 'No!' from K-Pop fans in my audiences.

At issue here is the fact that fans abroad see K-pop as an Indie culture, a sub-culture that is in some ways separate from the standard fare of Euro-American pop. It may typically be 'bubble-gum' pop, but fans abroad do not want to be told that it repackages the 1980s and 1990s boy bands and girl bands of Europe and America. This was clear in the 3 September 2012 Al-Jazeera program, 'The Stream: K-Pop Diplomacy.' As the program aired two tweets came in: 'I don't want it to get popular and famous, I dislike the hype [of fame];' 'I want to protect K-pop from the rest of the world.' Indie culture provides individualization: its fans elect to be different, to choose music that they feel they identify with; they regard it as their right not to follow the mainstream and not to absorb what the profit-driven recorded music industry feeds them.

To position 'Gangnam Style' in terms of its video images rather than its lyrics still accepts that it occupies different territory to the norms of contemporary K-pop. In its more recent iteration, commonly referred to as part of a second Korean Wave (K-Wave 2), K-pop has moved to tightly framed dance

choreographies. In doing so, its nature has changed. It has replaced the acted dramas of, say, g.o.d. (**g**roove **o**ver**d**ose) and H.O.T. (**H**igh **F**ive **o**f **T**eenagers), and the situated locations of the first Korean Wave (K-Wave 1), with blank stages. Today, these blank stages, even when framed as dressing rooms, rehearsal spaces, or urban streets, do not in themselves give any sense of being immutably Korea or Korean. The stages can be positioned within mass culture, within the discourse channeled from Adorno forwards, in a manner that ultimately reduces concentration on the aural. Liew Kai Khiun (2013) usefully explores the shift that has occurred as consumers have moved from ‘sound trackers’ in K-pop’s first iteration (K-Wave 1) for whom CDs and audio files supplemented by music videos provided the content, to ‘dance trackers’ in the second iteration (K-Wave 2). Where pop in K-Wave 1 was circulated largely through satellite and cable television, K-Wave 2 utilizes social networking sites. The shift is revealed in a set of paired attributes (sound tracker/dance tracker): adult/adolescent, text/body, television/YouTube, cognitive/physical, narrative/choreography, soundtrack/dance track, resolution/synchronization, moment/movement, tears/sweat, experience/performance, and so on (Khiun 2013, 168). The blank stages of K-Wave 2 are, in official videos, filled by perfectly choreographed idol groups, each member manicured and pedicured, trimmed and enhanced by plastic surgery, costumed, made-up, and so on. Cover dances enacted by fans mirror these perfect performances and create unofficial video streams, the mirror being literal on official and semi-official pedagogical websites that give single-camera views of the dance. The requirement is that choreography must be replicable (Käng, 2012, 2014<sup>5</sup>), so that the memes create communities of fans, while social networking sites allow an individualized, private mimicry of commercialized, public circulation flows (after Jung & Hirata, 2012).

‘Gangnam Style’ occupies different territory. Its images create a space beyond the lyrics, but in a K-Wave 1 music video way, rather than catering to the dance trackers of K-Wave 2. The memorable elements of the dance in ‘Gangnam Style’ – horse riding, the elevator scene, the yellow-clad comic, and so on – provide enough for celebrities to quickly master a few simple moves, but are insufficient content for a concentrated and satisfying cover dance. The memes, then, fail to harness the enthusiasm of fandom, and this is a further reason why ‘Gangnam Style’ has not been sustained by K-pop’s fans. ‘Gangnam Style’ dance moves were certainly used in remarkable ways, but typically by those with little commitment to K-pop. Hence, the British tabloid newspaper, *The Sun* (16 October 2012), told how washing hands to the song at Northampton General Hospital was promoted as part of its October 2012 Global Handwashing Day. Hence, again, Barbara O’Dair in *Reader’s Digest* reported that the American Council on Exercise estimated that doing the dance would burn between 150 and 200 calories per half-

---

<sup>5</sup> See also ‘The Secret Behind Kpop Choreography,’ at <http://www.allkpop.com/article/2009/09/the-secret-behind-kpop-choreography> (last accessed 25 August 2014).

hour, adding 'I swear it feels like even more'.<sup>6</sup> And, as it became apparent how many of the dance moves cried out to be mimicked by anybody and everybody, so hardened dance contesting K-Pop fans moved away. Again, and as I have already intimated above, some Asian American scholars protested that the portly figure of Psy fed into the stereotype of East Asian men (think, although unfairly, Kim Jong Il in the film *Team America* or, more recently, images of his son, Kim Jong Un). So, not only did the dance fail to woo dedicated K-pop fans, but the stereotypical Psy was not the Big Bang and Rain pin-ups that they wanted to swoon over.

The images presented in the video were, and are, interpreted in different ways inside and outside Korea. Within Korea, they were social satire, highlighting the economic inequalities of the country, and, in an echo of 'Right Now', they shone a light on the shallowness of its highly urbanized life. The images offered multiple levels of the surreal in a way that readily allowed critics to claim absurdity: to Koreans, scenes shot near the western port city of Inch'ŏn suggested something other than the glitzy Gangnam suburbs south of the Han River in the capital, Seoul, and kept up the inside/outside allusion of the lyrics. Again, a very rare bright red Mercedes convertible car was in one scene placed in an apartment basement parking lot that was full of Hyundai and Kia sedans. And, the crudeness of the elevator scene, sunbathing in a sandy playground as kids passed by on their way from apartment to school, and rubbish blowing around all symbolized elements of the contemporary urban culture of consumption cast in cartoon-like ways. Near the opening of the video, Psy is gradually covered in feathers: although overstating the case, being tarred and feathered used to be a public humiliation in feudal Europe, and was infamously revived during the recent conflict in Northern Ireland. In each element, the absurdity mocked the perfection projected by bubble-gum K-Wave 2 pop, focusing in on the façade that we normally encounter in pop videos but, uniquely, not attempting to hide it.

Rather than absurdity, though, the success of 'Gangnam Style' within Korea implies that the visual images needed to be perceived as pastiche: the cultural mores specific to South Korea were recognized as something other than reality in the video, although the same images retained their representation of locality. To Koreans, then, 'Gangnam Style' was, and is, a parody of the excess that has famously characterized the Apkujŏng area of Gangnam since subway line No. 3, with its orange band of color, opened in the 1980s or, alternately, the area populated by the 'orange tribe' who were reported to be so rich they could afford luxurious fruit such as imported oranges while much of Korea was still struggling under the weight of change brought by rapid modernization. Today, the area remains the domain of affluence. It is purportedly home to 60% of Seoul's doctors, amongst them the majority of Korea's plastic surgeons. And it is, according to 'The

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/4591046/Handwash-style-NHS-do-Gangnam-spoof-to-show-people-how-to-wash-their-hands.html> and <http://www.rd.com/recommends/in-case-you-missed-it-gangnam-style-goes-gangbusters/> (last accessed 25 August 2014).

Stream: K-Pop Diplomacy', home to the families of 41% of the 2012 Korean intake to Harvard University.

Outside Korea, the visual images of 'Gangnam Style' did not, and do not, have the same associations. In earlier times, it would have been expected and normal to point out the exoticism presented by both Psy and his song, referencing, typically, Said's Orientalism (Said, 1978). Orientalism has been widely and variously applied to music, good examples being its use as a conceptual framework by many of the authors of chapters in *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1940s* (Clayton & Zon, 2007). Others would be tempted to see Psy as an extension of the model minority notion (after, for example, Lee 1986, Osajima 2005 and Chou 2008). But, neither Orientalism nor the concept of the model majority seems to apply. As a term, 'model minority' was coined to describe Japanese Americans, a minority who had achieved greater success than their numbers would suggest likely when compared with the population average; from Japanese Americans it became part of discussions about other Asian American groups, including Korean Americans. Although the media continues to ascribe ethnic or racial identity, the assumption of difference appears outdated given the prominence of Asian Americans in cultural life, not least in music — be it classical, traditional, jazz, or pop (Wong, 2004; Yoshihara, 2007; Zheng, 2010). Certainly, Psy himself was ready to talk to commentators in English, removing any sense of distance. He was prepared to teach the dance moves to American stars (for which, see below), demonstrating that the moves had no explicit cultural distinctiveness. Parodies of the song also took away distance, replacing everything potentially foreign with the familiar. And, importantly, the images of Seoul presented in the 'Gangnam Style' video were, and are, no longer exotic to foreign audiences: apartment blocks, elevators, stabled horses, underground trains, a red Mercedes, and so on. In fact, some of the images, such as the red Mercedes and the stable, would have been more exotic to the Koreans who lived in those same apartment blocks and rode those same underground trains than they would be to non-Koreans from the affluent Global North. Neither singer nor song, then, mediated West and East; neither mediated ordinariness and otherness.

In discussions of the global success of Japan, scholars have used the term *mukokuseki* to capture the non-assertive, neutral identity of Japanese animation and consumer products (e.g., Honda, 1994; Tsunoyama, 1995; Iwabuchi, 2002). Recent K-pop, likewise, has been critiqued — often in a negative way — as 'de-Koreanized' (Shin, 2009: 513–5) and as a 'culturally odorless ... paradigm of transcultural hybridity' (Jung 2011, 3). The same cannot be said to be strictly true of 'Gangnam Style', since the video and lyrics embedded meaning for Koreans if (but unlike Park Geun-hye's campaign team) they watched and listened. The meaning shifted for non-Korean audiences, where, as a result, 'Gangnam Style' presented a pastiche of a very different nature. It then became *mukokuseki*, as a pastiche of many pop video clichés that were so familiar that understanding the

lyrics became largely irrelevant. Some critics spotted these clichés, and asked whether 'Gangnam Style' marked the beginning of a new attempt by Korean entertainment companies to make a splash worldwide, an effort to market themselves beyond their more established East Asian and Southeast Asian markets. They found ample confirmation when Psy signed to Scooter Braun, limiting the income that would be sent back to Korea for American exposure. Their suspicions were further confirmed when Psy collaborated with New York-based Jill Stuart on fashion, when he performed on the Ellen DeGeneres Show, when he 'taught' Britney Spears how to dance the song's moves, and when he was a guest alongside Taylor Swift on ABC's New Year's Eve show at the end of 2012. When he became the face of Samsung as it marketed Korean white goods to Americans and Europeans, he was seen to have found a way to cash in on the familiarity brought by his YouTube success. He corroborated the Korean government's widely reported policy brief that had it that a dollar spent on K-Pop would return five dollars in exports of cars, televisions and computers.

The video, though, as Arwa Mahdawi in *The Guardian*, 24 September 2012, put it, was 'born to spawn'. By effectively waiving copyright, or at least by not pursuing copyright infringers, Psy ensured that 'Gangnam Style' became, to quote Tim Byron writing in 2012 in *The Vine*,<sup>7</sup> '...a piece of shared currency which can be taken as a known in a world which is increasingly nicheified.' Byron's perspective maps on to Arjun Appadurai's (1996) notion of deterritorialization, where cultural flows are bilateral, enhanced by a shared technology that removes distance, making the local global. Equally, it confirms John Tomlinson's (1999, 2003) notion of reterritorialization, where the impetus towards globalization is counterpointed alongside localizing forces. This goes some way to explaining why success abroad created an argument for why 'Gangnam Style' should feature so prominently in Park Gun-hye's inauguration at home, despite the messages embedded in both its lyrics and its visual images. And, just as Park's campaign team were able to forget the North Korean mocking of the new president in a 'Gangnam Style' parody about her father Park Chung Hee's authoritarian leadership style that was uploaded onto the *uriminzokkiri.com* government website on 18 September 2012, it also gives the context in which so many of the myriad other parodies were able to bypass the messages of the song and its video.

Exactly how many parodies of Psy's song have been produced and uploaded to the Internet is difficult to determine. Typing 'Gangnam Style parodies' into [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) on 25 August 2014 gave 92,300 results, but I suspect this missed many. Parodies used 'Gangnam Style' as a vehicle. Through them, American farmers, Eton schoolboys, firemen, civil servants, computer nerds, politician avatars, Siberian Yeti imitators, and anybody else could project their own selves online. Wikipedia does a good job at this point, listing TV programs, films, sports

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.thevine.com.au/music/news/number-ones-psy-gangnam-style-20121002-250944>.

events, celebrities, and the use of the song in robotics, applications and video games.<sup>8</sup> In an age of social media, rather than the more established views on the mimetic (e.g., De Tarde, 1902; Benjamin, 1968; Fanon, 1952; Taussig, 1993), parodies of ‘Gangnam Style’ function as alternatives to twitter’s 140-characters or selfies; they are made and uploaded to YouTube ‘country-by-country, occupation-by-occupation and school-by-school’ (Ono & Kwon, 2013: 209).

Most of the parodies take away the critical edge of the original and focus on selfhood, imposing a new instant topicality that shares visual elements – locations, dance moves, relationships, and in-jokes – amongst the new country, the new occupation, or the new school. But, to some Koreans abroad locality has needed to be maintained, much as we would expect from the many published studies about cultural diasporas. This was the case with ‘London Style’, a parody co-produced by Kim Mose and Cho Hanbit with Korean, Japanese, and British students that was put online on 16 September 2012. ‘London Style’ mirrored Psy’s imaging and lip-synched his lyrics, but portrayed daily life in London, from coffee shops to the subway, and from Big Ben to Harry Potter’s Platform 9¾ at Kings Cross Station. A follow-up video, in which Cho starred as an improvising pianist, ‘Gangnam Style Piano Tribute,’ took the respectful approach further.<sup>9</sup> Key, then, was that both subsumed the gender stereotyping and lifestyle critique within what were designed to be tributes to Psy. Interviewed by Hyunseok Kwon (2014), Cho commented:

Although our nationalities were different, we found a cultural common group in ‘Gangnam Style’. Because we worked on the video under such a premise, we could communicate together easily and passionately ... We came to talk a lot about Korean culture. I came to know how foreign young people encountered K-Pop and how much they enjoyed it (March 2013).

Still, though, the critical edge in the original was diluted in both of Kim and Cho’s parodies. Fun replaced irony, not least since those involved in ‘London Style’ were equally part of the social networking generation as were those involved in the myriad other parodies. In summary, then, the parodies of the song tended to absorb the inbuilt clichéd pastiche of the original, but then repositioned and reinterpreted the pastiche in a way that divorced it from the original. By doing so, ‘Gangnam Style’ became embedded as part of our deterritorialized contemporary culture. It was also recast and reassembled for mass consumption, starting with a *South Park* Halloween party where GangnamStein replaces Frankenstein (‘A Nightmare on FaceTime’, 2012). It took its place in films such as *This is the End* and the documentary *Linsanity*, both of which were released in 2013. A character from the video, but not the song, danced in *My Little Pony: Equestria Girls* (2013), while the song and a cartoon version of Psy appeared in, and in adverts for, *The Nut Job* (2014). Doubtless, more will come in future years.

<sup>8</sup> en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gangnam\_Style\_in\_popular\_culture (last accessed 25 August 2014).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=IMmyeXeXeK0> and <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=X2ZAFmY2ESM>.

### RITORNELLO

'Gangnam Style' is no longer a video, no longer a song with meaningful lyrics, and no longer something with locality to the Korean peninsula. To conclude, I return to why Psy featured at Park Geun-hye's inauguration in 2013. Locality was still recognized, but it was now reinterpreted in terms of a Korean product that had been successfully implanted around the world. This, after all, had been the aim since the Kim Dae Jung administration began to develop strategies to promote 'Cool Korea' abroad at the end of the twentieth century, and 'Gangnam Style' confirmed the success of such strategies. 'Gangnam Style' contributed to the US\$4 billion that Korean Wave was expected to bring in to the country during 2012, but the reality is that it also did so indirectly, by contributing to offset profits from Korean technology and machinery exports attributable to the prominent place of soft culture abroad. The homespun Psy offered a welcome alternative to harnessing foreign song writers and industry insiders to help sell K-pop abroad (such as will.i.am for 2NE1, Kanye West for JYJ, Japanese song writers for Big Bang, and Dominique Rodriguez for Girls' Generation). And so it was that the international success of 'Gangnam Style' was and continues to be celebrated. But, in the recognition of success, ears and eyes were and are closed, so that the song's knowable lyrics and the video's familiar locations were, and are, simply, ignored. The ultimate paradox, then, is that the success of 'Gangnam Style' removed its identity.

In the future, readers may be able to add a coda to this paper, for the song's success is likely to lead to additional developments at home in Korea. A report in the *Korea Times* on 1 October 2014 noted that foreign tourists to the district of Gangnam shot up from 850,000 in 2012 to more than five million in 2013, purportedly primarily because of the song<sup>10</sup>. A Korean Wave Street may one day become a reality, even if, as Visit Seoul has it<sup>11</sup>, it will be a street that houses the offices of three of the major music-oriented companies, S.M. Entertainment, JYP Entertainment and Cube Entertainment, but not, paradoxically, Psy's YG Entertainment. The street, then, is ironically likely to feature the K-pop of others, rather than be a celebration of 'Gangnam Style'.

---

<sup>10</sup> Available at: [www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2014/10/116\\_165556.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2014/10/116_165556.html) (accessed 1 October 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding efforts to create similar places in Seocho-gu and north of the river... For the Gangnam 'K-pop Road', see: [http://www.visitseoul.net/en/article/article.do?\\_method=view&m=0005001003003&p=&art\\_id=60265&lang=en](http://www.visitseoul.net/en/article/article.do?_method=view&m=0005001003003&p=&art_id=60265&lang=en) (last accessed 16 April 2014).

## REFERENCES

- ADORNO, T. W., HORKHEIMER, M. (1972). The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception. In NOERR, G. S. (ed.). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 94–136.
- APPADURAI, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- BENJAMIN, W. (1968). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In: Arendt, H. (ed.). Zohn, H. (trans.). *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books. 217–251.
- CHAPPLE, S., GAROFALO, R. (1977). *Rock 'n' Roll's Here To Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- CHOU, R. S., FEAGIN, R. J. (2008). *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*. Boulder CO: Paradigm.
- CLAYTON, M., ZON, B. (eds.) (2007). *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1940s: Portrayal of the East*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- DE TARDE, G. (1902). *Le psychologie économique*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- FANON, F. (1952). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Markmann. C. L. (trans.). New York: Grove Press.
- GLADWELL, M. (2000). *The Tipping Point*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- HARKER, D. (1980). *One for the Money: Politics and Popular Song*. London: Hutchinson.
- HONDA, S. (1994). East Asia's middle class tunes into today's Japan. *Japan Echo*. 21(4). 75–79.
- HOWARD, K. (ed.) (2006). *Korean Pop Music: Riding the Wave*. Folkestone: Global Oriental.
- HOWARD, K. (2013). The Foundations of Hallyu–K-Pop's Coming of Age. In: The First International Congress of the World Association for Hallyu Studies. Seoul: Korea University. Available at <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/15929/>.
- IWABUCHI, K. (2002). *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- JUNG, E-Y. (2013). K-pop female idols in the West: racial imaginations and erotic fantasies. In Kim, Y. (ed.), *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*. New York: Routledge. 106–119.
- JUNG, S. (2011). *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- JUNG, S. HIRATA, Y. (2012). Conflicting Desires: K-pop Idol Flows in Japan in the Era of Web 2.0. *Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*. 12 (2). Available at <http://japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol12/iss2/jung.html>.
- KÄNG, D. (2012). Kathoey 'In Trend': Emergent Genderscapes, National Anxieties, and the Re-Signification of Male-Bodied Effeminacy in Thailand. *Asian Studies Review*. 36(4). 475–494.
- KÄNG, D. BYUNG-Chu (2014). Being Fabulous, Becoming Spectacular: Embodied Mimesis, Delayed Authenticity, and Transnational Transgender Personification in Thai K-Pop Cover Dance. Paper presented at the Third International Hallyu Workshop, Korea–Southeast Asia, Seoul, 7 March 2014.
- KHIUN, L. K. (2013). K-pop dance trackers and cover dancers: global cosmopolitanization and local spatialization. In Kim Y. (ed.). *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*. New York: Routledge. 165–181.
- KIM, Y. (2013). Introduction: Korean media in a digital cosmopolitan world. In: Kim Y. (ed.). *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*. New York: Routledge. 1–27.
- KWON, H. (2014). *Cultural Globalization and the Korean Promotion Policy for Music based on Tradition: A Study of the Activation Plan and Its Background*. PhD dissertation. London: SOAS, University of London.
- LEE, S. J. (1996). *Unraveling the 'Model Minority' Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- MANUEL, P. (1988). *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World*. New York: Oxford University Press.



- NYE, J., KIM, Y. (2013). Soft power and the Korean Wave. In: Kim Y. (ed.). *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*. New York: Routledge. 31–42.
- ONO, K. A., KWON, Y. (2013). Re-worlding culture?: YouTube as a K-pop interlocutor. In Kim Y. (ed.). *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*. New York: Routledge. 199–214.
- OSAJIMA, K. (2005). Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s. In. Ono, A. K. (ed.), *A Companion to Asian American Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell. 2015–2025.
- PRASSO, S. (2005). *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, and Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient*. New York: Public Affairs.
- SAID, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- SHIN, H. (2009). Have you ever Seen the Rain? And Who'll Stop the Rain?: The Globalizing Project of Korean Pop (K-Pop). *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. 10 (4). 507–523.
- TAUSSIG, M. (1993). *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. New York: Routledge.
- TOMLINSON, J. (1999). *Globalization and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- TOMLINSON, J. (2003). Globalization and Cultural Identity. In Held, D. McGrew A. (eds.). *The Global Transformations Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 269–277.
- TSUNOYAMA, S. (1995). *Ajian Runessansu*. Tokyo: PHP Kenkyūsho.
- WONG, D. (2004). *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*. New York: Routledge.
- WU, F. (2002). *Yellow: Race in America beyond Black and White*. New York: Basic Books.
- YOSHIHARA, M. (2007). *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- ZHENG, S. (2010). *Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

