

THE KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE READER. Edited by Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014. 464 pp. hardcover, \$99.95; softcover, \$28.95).

Now that the dust has settled following the global explosion of Psy's "Gangnam Style," *The Korean Popular Culture Reader* offers some much-needed critical reflection on a question that has recently made the transition from emergent to dominant: "What happens to Korean popular culture when it becomes a global commodity?" (Youngmin Choe, "Preface," x).

Korean folk culture has a long history, but the jumping off point for this wide-ranging collection of essays is the regional and transnational expansion of Korean popular culture known as *hallyu* or Korean Wave. Periodization of the Korean Wave typically begins with the unanticipated success of the blockbuster film *Shiri* (1999) in Japan and the drama *Winter Sonata* (2002) in Japan and Northeast Asia. Expanded circulation of dramas, films, and music, and the massive profits generated by such circulation, have supported a surge of national pride in South Korea and charges of neo-imperialism from other locations in Asia as the Korean Wave has turned into a flood that threatens to wash away indigenous cultural productions. *The Korean Popular Culture Reader* historicizes the Korean Wave, moving from the Japanese colonial period, through the postwar/postcolonial period, to the neoliberal present, while moving between overlapping geographical scales—transnational, regional, national, local—in order to critically apprehend this new historical situation.

There is no exact translation for the word "popular" in Korean. The words *taejung*, *inki*, and *yuhaeng* come close. In his introduction to the volume, "Indexing Korean Popular Culture," Kyung Hyun Kim points out that "while *taejung* (mass or public) signifies agendas and assumptions that are steeped in democracy, cosmopolitan ideals, and protests that reimagine resistant forms of political collectives, *inki* and *yuhaeng* stand for the very opposite: individualism, crass, market-driven merchandise, and star icons that sometimes belie the interests of the masses" (5). Kim notes that the blurring of the distinction between mass culture and popular culture, between commercial culture and protest culture, is central to the discourse of modernity and thus provides a major problematic for the study of Korean popular culture.

The volume is divided into five sections, each of which constructs a genealogy for a particular popular culture genre: comics/cyberculture, film, sports, popular music, food/travel. Each

section includes an introductory essay that helpfully outlines the major political, historical, and theoretical issues at stake in the section. For example, part four, "Strut, Move and Shake," includes essays on popular music and modernity from the 1930s to the present. All of the essays in this section, from their different historical and methodological angles, engage issues of mimicry, parody, and appropriation. In the introductory essay, Kyung Hyun Kim argues that "it is the deft forms of parody Korean musicians have had to master throughout the twentieth century, marked by Japanese colonialism and U.S. military occupation, that have paved Korean music's path toward its hybrid characteristics, which register loud and clear on contemporary K-pop" (250).

Min Jung Son's essay "Young Musical Love of the 1930s," studies how the genre of Korean popular music known as *yuhaengga* ("music in fashion") appropriated Western musical idioms in order to address local struggles. Son's essay combines content analysis of lyrics, debates over the meaning of the nation in relation to the emergence of this popular musical form, an empirical study of the recording companies that distributed *yuhaengga*, analysis of its reception, and of a live performance. Hyunjoon Shin and Pil Ho Kim's essay "Birth, Death, and Resurrection of Group Sound Rock" examines the origins of Korean rock music, known as Group Sounds (GS), in the U.S. military bases through which rock was disseminated. Tracing the career of artists such as Shin Joong Hyun and bands like Sannullim from the 1960s to the 1980s, Shin and Kim find that, "Thus the U.S. military base, a powerful symbol of American hegemony, turned into an improbable incubator of a fledgling Korean counterculture movement" (276). In "The Popularity of Individualism: The Seo Taiji Phenomenon in the 1990s," Roald Maliangkay reads the music, clothes, dance choreography, and hair styles of Seo Taiji, whose band Seo Taiji and Boys incorporated rap and sampling, thus introducing African American urban culture to large numbers of enthusiastic young Koreans, to the dismay of many parents. Despite the fact that Taiji was a high school dropout, in 1997 the Samsung Economic Research Institute conducted a survey and Taiji was voted Korea's most important cultural product (304). As Maliangkay notes, "The era of the pop idol had arrived" (308).

Stephen Epstein and James Turnbull's "Girls' Generation? Gender, (Dis)Empowerment, and K-pop" critically examines the explosion of public discourse on Korean girl groups since 2007. Through a close reading of lyrics and music videos, Epstein and

Turnbull question the dominant ideology, disseminated by the government and mainstream media, that girl groups support the empowerment of young women. The authors reveal that “the need for entertainment companies to attract attention for their own performers amid the current glut of groups has led to an increased sexualization of music videos, performances, and commercial endorsements” (315). Therefore, the “gender ideologies propagated by such groups as Girls’ Generation, KARA, T-ara, Wonder Girls, Miss-A, 2NE1, 4Minute, and similar ensembles have offered society, and young women in particular, at best a highly ambivalent empowerment” (315).

The Korean Popular Culture Reader includes the work of scholars from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and South Korea, working in literature, art history, history, ethnic studies, anthropology, film studies, musicology and social sciences. Kyung Hyun Kim notes that “there is not yet a substantial branch of even a subfield called ‘Korean Popular Culture Studies’” (12). The editors see this volume as a “first step” toward the establishing of Korean popular culture studies as an academic field. *The Korean Popular Culture Reader* includes only one essay on North Korea, Travis Workman’s “The Partisan, the Worker, and the Hidden Hero: Popular Icons in North Korean Film.” Considering Secretary of State John Kerry recently described North Korea as an “evil, evil place,” I hope we can look forward to future publications on North Korean popular culture that counter the Orientalist framing of North Korea in the U.S. media.

It is exciting to observe the emergence of an academic field in relation to a new historical situation. The move to establish a field of Korean popular culture studies resembles the formation of British cultural studies in the 1960s through research on the politics of postwar mass culture. This past year sadly witnessed the passing of Stuart Hall, but the publication of *The Korean Popular Culture Reader* is a substantial tribute to Hall’s far-reaching legacy.

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RACIAL ASYMMETRIES: ASIAN AMERICAN FICTIONAL WORLDS. By Stephen Hong Sohn. (New York City, New York: New York University Press, 2014. 297 pp. hardcover, \$79; softcover, \$25).

Racial Asymmetries responds to a methodological dilemma which, while by no means unique to Asian American literary studies, re-