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Aya Goto-Hirsig

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K-Pop; Defying or Perpetuating Orientalist Stereotypes?

Aya Goto-Hirsig

University of Puget Sound

K-Pop; Defying or Perpetuating Orientalist Stereotypes?

K-Pop's rising global popularity is often touted as the success story of a once peripheral country rising to challenge Western societies' cultural hegemony. However, is K-Pop really an industry overcoming and challenging the West's power structures and deep-rooted Orientalist stereotypes, or rather operating within them? I would argue that due to the embedded nature of Orientalist stereotypes, K-Pop is inevitably largely interpreted and used by Americans in a way which serves to support and perpetuate their Orientalist world views of Western hegemony and superiority, in contrast to Korean otherness. Additionally many entertainment companies within the K-Pop industry are frequently complicit in this orientalization, purposefully perpetuating Orientalist tropes as a way into American markets.

The context within K-Pop was created is important to address. K-Pop as a genre, from its very advent has been largely an economic venture, upon Korea, in tough economic circumstances, needed to create revenue and decided to do so through significant reshaping of and funding of its music industry. This included reorienting a music industry which had always been purely domestically oriented, utilizing a pentatonic scale, and which reflected conservative Confucian values, performers being conservatively dressed and refraining from dance during performances. This clearly lacked appeal to a global audience, so K-Pop was created in complete opposition to this musical tradition, drawing from Western influences to broaden its appeal. This is reflected in its switch to the diatonic scale, pension for synchronized dance routines, and emphasis on nonpolitical, globally accepted and relatable pop topics like romance (Lie, 2012).

K-Pop became a sensation throughout Asian markets, making South Korean entertainment companies eventually turn to the American domestic market as the next step in the 'K-Pop wave.' Success in the American market is often globally seen as the essential goal of an artist and also the make-or-break of one's career, emphasizing America's place as the center of the global music industry. This hegemonic status of American popular culture creates an unequal power dynamic between K-Pop and American consumers, K-Pop being the product to be packaged and sold to America, and the American as the judge of its worth and appeal. This inevitably interplays with the deeply rooted Orientalist stereotypes that colors Americans' views of Asians, meaning that in order for K-Pop artists to succeed in the US, that they often feel forced to "play to these stereotypes in hopes of financial gain, [but] of course, they also become duplicitous in perpetuating them" (Eun-Jung, 2013, 109).

This conscious adherence to American racist stereotypes is evident in K-Pop artists' own self-portrayal when orienting themselves to the American market. Female K-Pop artists, such as BoA and the Wonder Girls, purposefully tried to capitalize on Orientalist stereotypes, clearly using "the dual Western stereotypes of Asian female sexuality: the Dragon Lady kind of aggressive, hyper-sexualized, and evil woman, and the China Doll kind of submissive, docile, and feminine woman" to increase their appeal to Americans (Jung, 2010, p. 220).

The marked difference between the "Korean" and "American" versions created for BoA's Eat You Up music video clearly demonstrates this issue. In the Korean version BoA "wears a casual jacket and baggy pants and dances on the street with a group of young American boys," and "is aggressive and fearless," portraying a powerful yet less sexualized representation of an Asian woman (Jung, 2010, p. 223). However, in the version framed for American markets, "BoA

wears a sexy leather dress, red lipstick, and high- heels and performs suggestive scenes with an American man” (Jung, 2010, p. 223). “This shows her as more hyper-sexualized,” and also as a commodity available for consumption by the white male, which both serve to reinforce Orientalist ideas of the Asian woman who is constantly “available for white men...[and] eager to be dominated (Jung, 2010, p. 224). Additionally, while the Korean version was created by a Korean director, the American version was directed by an American man. This directly gave an American cultural hegemony over this K-Pop artist, allowing him to decide how an Asian female should be best represented in America, an opinion inevitably colored by his experiences with Orientalist frameworks as an American male.

The Wonder Girls are another example of this conscious subscription to Orientalist stereotyping, but in contrast to BoA they adhere to “the conventional China-Doll stereotype that they are ready to serve men with their docile, cute, sexy, vulnerable, and playful attitudes” (Jung, 2010, p. 220). This is evinced through their matching, pastel outfits which have been said to evoke the stereotype of ‘sameness’ among Asians, as well as their sweet and innocent presentation but while still wearing clothing that shows off their figures. And PSY, while many K-Pop fans deny his place in the wider genre of K-Pop, is argued to have reached the level of success that he did in the American music industry, due to adherence to the “weak and sexually non-threatening” and comical stereotype of the Asian man (Howard, 2015, p. 6). This is evident in his music video ‘Gangnam Style,’ in which he dances comically, wears flashy flamboyant outfits and parodies sexuality.

However, despite all of these efforts, K-Pop has still failed to have real success in the American market. While K-Pop’s climbing in popularity among certain demographics, such as

teenage girls, is undeniable, it still has arguably never broken into the mainstream of American music, only two K-Pop songs sung primarily in Korean to ever break into the top 100 of the American iTunes billboard. This is arguably due to the persistence of American Orientalist stereotypes. K-Pop is used as a means to perpetuate them both due to South Korean entertainment company's conscious complicity with these prejudices, but is also because it is inevitably consumed through that lens due to Orientalism's continued prevalence.

One reason for this is the persisting American Orientalist distinction between 'us' and 'them,' causing resistance to K-Pop artists being fully accepted into American mainstream pop culture. Despite K-Pop being far closer to Western than Korean musical traditions, K-Pop artists still find themselves constantly 'othered' and pigeon-holed, their "forever-foreignness" proving an unassailable obstacle (Wu, 2002, p. 32). This connects to American's Orientalist assumption that there is a clear and unbreakable divide between the East and the West, asserting that Korean music must be different. In other words Asian music must have something distinctly Asian about it, and if it does not, that it is inauthentic and a mere inferior imitation of Western music.

This concept of K-Pop's 'copying nature' is frequently visible in American's critiques of the genre, reviewers critiquing the "'imitative' or 'inauthentic' character of Rain's music or Korean pop music in general: John Pareles used the term 'emulation (of pop R&B)' (Pareles 2006) and Bryan Walsh the term 'cloning (of American pop)' (Walsh 2006)" (Shin, 2009, p. 509). This rhetoric of 'imitative,' 'emulation' and 'cloning' all have negative connotations, implying that K-Pop does not have the right to adopt influences from such genres, and that their versions are fake and disingenuous, emphasizing the imagined Occidental claim over such cultural capital as solely theirs. The word 'inauthentic' is also important to acknowledge, as it

implies that K-Pop has a duty to be more ‘authentic,’ evoking the Orientalist idea that Asian and other Oriental countries have more of a duty to remain within the box of and true to their traditional cultures, whereas Western Artists such as ABBA Gold are free to be liberated from their nation’s ‘marker’ as defining trait.

Another critique of Bi Rain’s music by an American critique, wrote ““what is Korean about Korean pop? Nothing – in the melody, the singing style, instrumentation or harmonies. It is all just a rehash of American pop with a little J-pop glam thrown in”” (Shin, 2009, p. 516). This clearly is framing the lack of K-Pop’s connection to traditional Korean music as a shortcoming, rather than the rightful adaptation of different musical elements in an increasingly globalized world, placing Korean music into a box of ‘other.’ Additionally his rhetoric essentializes Asian music, equating K-Pop and J-Pop with one another when they are quite different genres.

This insistent ‘othering’ is also clear from iTunes categorization of all Korean music under the label of K-Pop, making at a generalizing othering mechanism, drawing upon the idea that all things Asian are the same. It also prevents K-Pop from exiting the general world music category, and becoming simply viewed as ‘pop’ in mainstream American music. This is reflected in Bi Rain, one of the most widely celebrated K-Pop stars, lamentation that “I know that there are lots of people who regard me as one of Korean wave star. But what I want to do is get out of Korean Wave” (Shin, 2009, p. 509). He was ultimately largely unsuccessful among many other of the biggest K-Pop stars, whom all “encountered many difficulties trying to break into the US pop music market, in spite of their high-profile collaborations with leading US music companies and producers and their decisions to sing in English and produce music videos intended to play

to American tastes” (Jung, p. 235). Clearly their failures were not due to a lack of effort or financial support, but rather prejudice.

K-Pop is also frequently interpreted through the Orientalist lens as a subversive threat from the outside, creating strong reactions of protectionism from certain Americans. This is specifically evident in Fox News reactions to K-Pop, which tend to ridicule the genre and its artists. Psy became a particular target due to his success, ridicule becoming “the US’ self-defense mechanism to get over the uncomfortable feelings ignited by Psy,” in other words the cognitive dissonance this created with Americans’ Orientalist belief in their own cultural hegemony. (Kwon, 2017, p. 33). On differing occasions Fox News authors described Psy as “extremely dumb,” “hilarious” and a “mockery,” clearly working to take away his credibility as an artist, perpetuating stereotypes about the ineffectual and emasculated Asian male (Kwon, 2017, p. 32).

Fox more directly attacks Psy by invoking an older song he had written which confronted America’s history of repression, with lyrics such as “kill those bleeping Yankees who had been torturing Iraqi captives/Kill those bleeping Yankees who ordered them to torture” (Kwon, 2017, p. 33). Psy was resultantly forced to publicly apologize to the US, demonstrating America’s continued position of power over him despite his commercial success. Fox reacted to the whole affair by claiming that “if war with North Korea breaks out, Psy “would be doing that silly horse trot screaming “Save me America”” (33). This invoking of American military superiority “allows the US to continue down a path of American exceptionalism, reinforcing an ‘America First’ attitude,” reframing Psy from a threat into a weak actor who is ungrateful but dependent upon American might (Kwon, 2017, p. 34).

Some would argue that K-Pop actually serves to deconstruct Orientalist stereotypes, particularly in how it “challenges the representations of asexual and undesirable Asian/American masculinity in the West” (Oh, 2017). However, I would argue that while the challenging of Asian males’ representations of sexuality is present within many fan circles, this process still fetishizes the ‘exoticism’ of the Korean male. Thus “The received global Other is admired and consumed but still distant and other,” and is still a form of Orientalism (Oh, 2017). Stereotypes, whether having positive or negative connotations, still serve to essentialize and box in populations with particular imagined identities which are created and enforced by those in power.

Additionally, some argue that White K-Pop fan’s admiration and commitment to non-White music artists is as an example of transculturalism and the formation of “hybrid identities” outside of the normal dynamics between the East and the West. However, “audiences are empowered to interpret but that this happens in negotiation with uneven media flows that structurally advantage the West,” displaying that one cannot ignore the power dynamics which place the American as the privileged consumer and judge of K-Pop within their own views of the world (Oh, 2017). This connects to the idea of the ‘prosumer,’ wherein “regional audiences are an ‘active’ instead of ‘passive’ audience” and function both “as consumers as well as, importantly, contributors or producers” (Jung, 2010, p. 21). This is demonstrated through the community of White YouTubers who create K-Pop reaction-videos, whose consumption of K-Pop largely reflects “White racial logics that support postracism” (Oh, 2017). These YouTubers tend to emphasize their positive multiculturalism as a product of their fandom and consumption of K-Pop, while advocating “colorblindness, which is linked to postracism, the belief that race should not matter in social relations and that racism no longer substantively shapes life

outcomes” (Oh, 2017). This indicates these White YouTubers’ flexibility in largely controlling the discourse to their own benefit, denying dealing with the unequal power and racial dynamics inherent in the interaction between White consumers and K-Pop which would cause them discomfort and threaten their self-perceived progressive multiculturalism.

Clearly, K-Pop serves to perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes in America, due to their continued prevalence among Americans causing K-Pop to be used and interpreted in a way that preserves them, as well as the K-Pop industry’s concerted efforts to use these conventions in order to break into the American market. This is largely due to the unequal power relationship that continues between Korea and America which is manifested in American pop cultures’ continued global hegemony, allowing Americans to largely be uncontested in their Orientalist world view, and for K-Pop to be forced to mold to Orientalist biases to succeed. While some would argue that K-Pop challenges Americans’ views on Asian males’ sexuality as well as promotes multiculturalism, both of those phenomena occur within an uneven power relationship between the West and the East, serving to further ‘other’ the K-Pop star or forming the discourse for the benefit of these White consumers.

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